

# Cubans try out new public Internet centers

June 4 2013, by Andrea Rodriguez

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Eduardo Navarrete, 53, creates his first Yahoo account at a branch of the state-run telecommunications company, ETECSA, in Havana, Cuba, Tuesday, June 4, 2013. The Cuban government announced it would provide access to the Internet at more than 100 hotspots beginning Tuesday. To date full international access was limited to hotels and in a few special cases, foreign firms. (AP Photo/Franklin Reyes)

(AP)—Cubans lined up Tuesday to try out computers newly wired to the World Wide Web as authorities began offering Internet at more than 100 public access points around the island.

It's part of a gradual technological opening by the Communist-run government, which has long restricted many kinds of communication. But with an hour on the computer costing around one-fifth the average monthly wage, the new service will likely remain inaccessible to many islanders.

"This is a great opportunity. A minimal one for now, but it exists," said Ariel Valdes, a 38-year-old artist who was one of the first to grab a mouse at a center in Old Havana.

Despite a steady morning drizzle, business was brisk and people filled a dozen cubicles painted in the deep blue of the state telecom company Etecsa, which is offering the service.

Some signed up for permanent accounts, which offer an associated [email address](#). Others went with the pay-as-you-go option, and loaded foreign-hosted sites such as Yahoo! on their screens.

"For us, this is a service that opens doors to the Internet and to a lot of information that was a little difficult to reach before," said Alberto Tamargo, a 33-year-old dentist.

Just 2.9 percent of islanders reported accessing the Web, according to the most recent government figures available. However, outside analysts say the true number is probably around 5 percent to 10 percent accounting for black-market sales of dial-up minutes.

For most [Cubans](#) who go online through work or school accounts, doing so means accessing an intranet of locally hosted and curated sites.

Tamargo, who has been on the intranet for years, said he planned to use the new service to communicate with colleagues in other countries and for research purposes.



A flyer announcing the latest internet service providers and user fees, is taped to an office window of the state-run telecommunications company, ETECSA, in Havana, Cuba, Tuesday, June 4, 2013. The Cuban government announced it would provide access to the Internet at more than 100 hotspots beginning Tuesday. To date full international access was limited to hotels and in a few special cases, foreign firms. (AP Photo/Franklin Reyes)

He and many others will no doubt try to avoid idle surfing.

At \$4.50 an hour the service will be prohibitively expensive for any Cubans who don't have a source of income beyond state salaries that average about \$20 a month, though they also receive a variety of subsidized goods and services.

"Let's hope they expand it and lower the price a little, Valdes said.

Like others, he compared it to Havana's recent experience rolling out cellphone service to regular Cubans.

When islanders were first allowed to possess cellphones, in 2008, it cost \$100 to open an account. Today it's \$15, and some 1.3 million people have gone mobile, according to 2011 statistics.

Cuba blocks some Internet pages it finds objectionable for sexual or political content, such as the website of U.S. government-funded news broadcaster Marti, which is specifically intended for a Cuban audience. Other examples include Revolico.com, a Craigslist-style classified ad web page, and the home page of the Ladies in White dissident group.



A customer, right, purchases Internet access at a branch office of the state-run telecommunications company, ETECSA, in Havana, Cuba, Tuesday, June 4, 2013. The Cuban government announced it would provide access to the Internet at more than 100 hotspots beginning Tuesday. To date full international access was limited to hotels and in a few special cases, foreign firms. (AP

Photo/Franklin Reyes)

Home Internet accounts continue to be rare and restricted to a small minority of people on the island. Spotty Wi-Fi is also available at tourist hotels catering to foreigners, for about \$8 an hour.

The Internet is a highly politicized issue in Cuba. Critics of President Raul Castro's government accuse it of withholding access in an attempt to control the people.

Havana insists the problem is technical, saying it doesn't have the infrastructure to support widespread domestic Internet access and must prioritize usage considered to be in the public interest.

"I don't think this is a political or ideological problem," Tamargo said of the decision to set up public cyber-centers but hold off on home access. "This is the Cuban way of doing it. It seems adequate."

After last week's announcement that the 118 cyber-salons would launch the service, Wilfredo Gonzalez, vice minister of communications, said authorities envision making wireless Internet available to mobile devices in "a relatively near future."

The cyber-centers also offer access to the domestic Intranet for 60 cents an hour, and charge \$1.50 per hour to check international email.

Cuban officials have said the centers are made possible by the island's first fiber-optic undersea cable connection to the outside world that was strung from Venezuela two years ago and started carrying data traffic in January of this year.

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