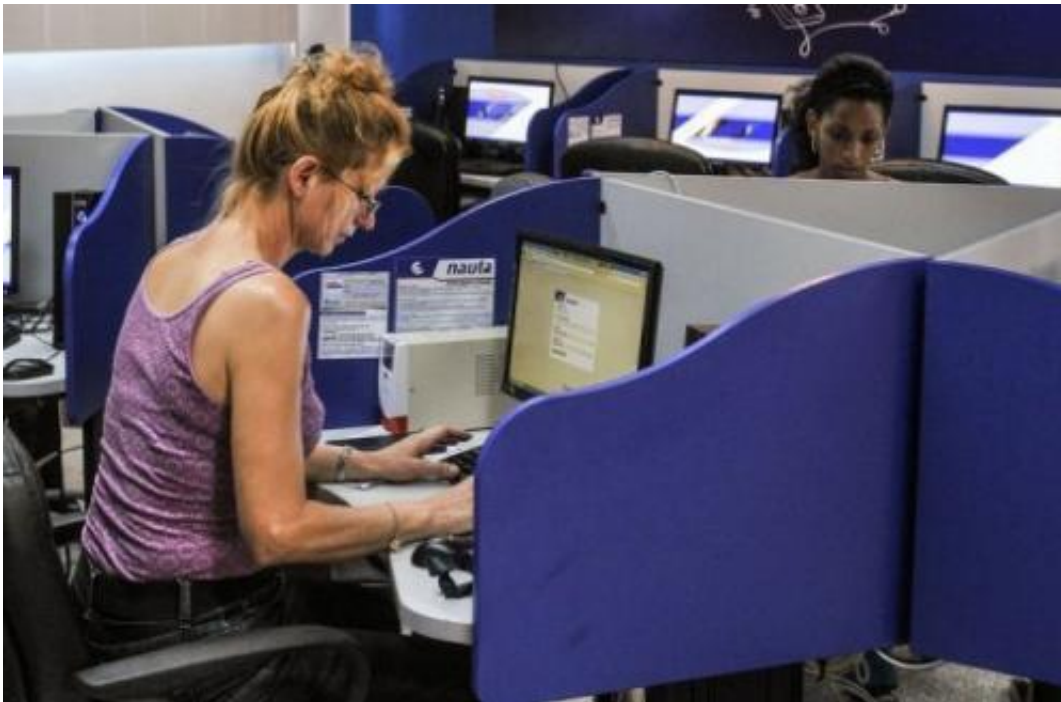


# Pricey but worth it: Cubans finally surf the Web

June 28 2013, by Rigoberto Diaz

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People use the internet at a cybercafe in Havana on June 21, 2013. With only doctors, journalists and certain other professionals able to connect from home, Cuba has one of the lowest numbers of Web users in all of Latin America: just 2.6 million in 2011, out of a population of 11.1 million.

Cuban teacher Nancy Garcia would love to surf the Web at home. But since that is restricted in this communist country, she now logs on from new hotspots—at a price few can afford.

"I don't stay long so as not to throw money out the window," said the 53-year-old as she checked her email near the Havana waterfront at one of the island's 118 new public access Internet points, open for several weeks now.

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With few other options, Garcia and hundreds like her have been flocking to the new government-created hotspots to check email, connect to social media and browse websites. That's if they can pay for it.

At the cost of \$4.50 an hour, down from \$6 previously, the Internet remains out of reach for most Cubans whose monthly salary barely scratches the \$20 mark.

"There will always be those who can afford to pay but there will always be more who can't," said Garcia, who previously trekked to one of the city's hotels to go online, forking out over \$10 an hour for a painfully slow connection.

"It's incredibly expensive," agreed Deisy Perez, an actress and owner of a private restaurant who came to see if she could order audio and video material for her establishment.

"Today I took a look at what's on offer, on another day I'll do some advertising for the restaurant," she said. "But I have to be quick, it's just too costly."

Authorities say their goal is to provide home Web access. But despite the switching on of an undersea fiber-optic cable from Venezuela to replace

costly satellite hookups, the government has said it is forced to "prioritize" it for "social use" purposes, with universities, companies and research centers given preference.

Recently, a senior official insisted that limited access was due to "technological and financial" considerations.

Dissidents, however, claim the government's goal has been to control access to information and that restricting Internet access is just another form of censorship in a country where all media outlets are state-controlled.

At the public access point frequented by Garcia and Perez, located in the landmark FOCSA skyscraper, turnout is steady.

"There's a good crowd, more than I had expected," said manager Dilia Ortega, who oversees the nine terminals.

"Sometimes there's a line," she noted, adding that "clients are satisfied."

Since succeeding his brother Fidel in 2006, Cuban President Raul Castro has allowed citizens to own a laptop and a cell phone, although here too, cost keeps the poor—most of the population—from partaking in this privilege.

"We're moving forward," said Perez as she took a breather from her online shopping. "But even as more and more people have access to new technologies, there are still many more Cubans who don't even know it exists."

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