Web developers gather for 'Hackathon for Cuba' (Update)

January 31 2014, by Christine Armario

In this Thursday, Jan. 30, 2014 photo, web developer Jose Pimienta is shown in Miami. Pimienta will participate in the first "Hackathon for Cuba," hosted by Roots of Hope, in Miami, bringing together web developers, programmers and others to brainstorm ways to help improve connectivity on the island. Cuba is considered the least connected country in the Western hemisphere. Last year, authorities opened more than 100 cyber-cafes around the island, but the price of $4.50 an hour is still exorbitant for the average Cuban making $20 a month. (AP Photo)

Technology experts are gathering to brainstorm ways to improve access to the Internet and information in Cuba, considered one of the least connected countries in the Western hemisphere.

The "Hackathon for Cuba" began Friday in Miami.

Cuban dissident and online activist Yoani Sanchez is expected to deliver opening remarks at a reception via Skype.

"The primary purpose is to design solutions that help Cubans break down or circumvent barriers they face in communication with each other or with the outside world," said Natalia Martinez, chief innovation and technology officer at Roots of Hope, the nonprofit organization putting together the event.

"The secondary purpose is to create an inclusive and action-oriented conversation around the impact of technology in Cuba, one that involves Cubans from different waves of immigration, different industries," she said.

On Saturday, computer programmers and others will develop ideas for smartphone applications that could be used to address the challenges citizens face on the communist island: censorship, limited access to cellphones and the Internet, and expensive service.

Cuba routinely blocks Internet pages that it finds objectionable, such as the home page of the Ladies in White dissident group and U.S. government-funded news broadcaster Radio and TV Marti. Critics of President Raul Castro accused the government of withholding access to control the people.

According to the U.N.'s International Telecommunications Union, roughly 26 percent of Cubans reported using the Internet in 2012. That

was up from just under 4 percent a decade before.

In this Thursday, Jan. 30, 2014 photo, web developer Jose Pimienta is shown working on his computer in Miami. Pimienta will participate in the first "Hackathon for Cuba," hosted by Roots of Hope, in Miami, bringing together web developers, programmers and others to brainstorm ways to help improve connectivity on the island. Cuba is considered the least connected country in the Western hemisphere. Last year, authorities opened more than 100 cyber-cafes around the island, but the price of $4.50 an hour is still exorbitant for the average Cuban making $20 a month. (AP Photo)

"One main challenge is that the Cuban government seems deeply ambivalent about the Internet," said Emily Parker, a former State Department policy adviser and author of the upcoming book, "Now I Know Who My Comrades Are," a portrait of Internet activists in China, Cuba and Russia.

"Authorities know Web access is necessary for economic 'modernization,' but also recognize that the spread of the Internet would threaten their control over the population," Parker said.

The Cuban government has taken some steps to increase access during the past year. In June, authorities opened more than 100 Internet cafes around the island. However, the $4.50 an hour fee made it too expensive for most Cubans who earn an average $20 a month salary.

Cuban bloggers like Sanchez have found ways to get across the digital roadblocks, such as saving posts to flash drives and publishing them through an Internet connection at an embassy or hotel.

"They don't have many readers on the island, but they can connect to the rest of the world," Parker said. "They tell the stories that Cuba's official media outlets don't report."

"Hackathons" have sprung up around America to tackle issues ranging from gun violence to immigration. In November, journalists, activists and tech experts in 20 U.S. and Latin American cities got together in 48-hour meet-ups to produce apps, websites and programs to help migrants and those who research and assist them.

Jose Pimienta, 25, is one of the developers taking part in the event. Pimienta arrived from Cuba five years ago and developed Vinylfy, a social network for record collectors, with a friend. The duo won $22,000 for their creation at SuperConf, a gathering for web developers and designer in Miami.

"We'll be helping our friends and family in the island to have more access to information," Pimienta said.

Roots of Hope organized the event in conjunction with the John S. and

James L. Knight Foundation. Roots of Hope is a network of students and young professionals aiming to empower youth on the island. Among their initiatives is a drive to collect and send cellphones to Cuba. More than 500 have been sent so far.

Martinez said the purpose of the hackathon is to "build solutions that are specific to the Cuban context and that adhere to the legal framework of both the U.S. and Cuba."

She acknowledged the specific challenges in crafting tech solutions for Cuba.

"It will be of the utmost importance to be able to design technological solutions that keep in mind a context that has a set of different obstacles and limitations than the ones we face when thinking about technology and innovation," she said. "That said, Cubans are increasingly coming into the digital age and programming and design in the island is complex, developed, and growing."

More information: www.rootsofhope.org/hack

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