

# Internet in Cuba only for the rich—or resourceful

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With their smartphones and tablet computers, they look much like young people anywhere in the world.

But these Cubans have to go to extremes just to get an Internet connection and somehow get around the strict control of the Communist authorities.

In the capital Havana, clusters of young Cubans can be spotted at weekends in groups near hotels, embassies and business centers in a desperate attempt to get online—somehow.

"Some people capture wireless signals after getting the codes from friends who work here, but I know there are others who manage to crack passwords with special software," one computer enthusiast said, speaking on condition of anonymity at the foot of an office block.

Lurking down a small street abutting a hotel, another strategy is at work. Several youngsters tap away furiously on their devices—they are online thanks to a shared connection courtesy of a classmate posted at hotel reception.

Suffice it to say that in Cuba, wireless signals—or failing that, any Internet connection—are highly coveted.

They are under strict control, reserved for companies, universities and institutions. A privileged few—journalists, artists and doctors, in

particular—are entitled to a particular connection. And that's it.

## **Prohibitive prices**

In 2013, only 3.4 percent of Cuban households were connected to the Internet, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which rates the connectivity of countries.

Since June last year, the Cuban authorities have gone a small way to affording the island's 11.3 million population a rare chance to access the Internet, opening about 100 centers for the public to get online.

But at \$4.5 per hour, rates are prohibitively expensive in a country where the average monthly wage is around \$20.

Previously, only hotels could offer the Internet to the public, but again with a prohibitive rate of up to \$10 an hour that only foreign visitors could afford.

The state telecommunications service provider, ETECSA, does not offer mobile Internet to its customers, while the 3G network is only for foreign visitors using roaming and offers often patchy performance.

ETECSA has now allowed subscribers to access their mail from their smartphones, but it only applies to the domain @nauta.cu. The company has also opened a service to send pictures from phones to any email address.

They are minor concessions in a country where foreign-branded smartphones are increasingly visible.

## **'Among most restrictive'**

"Cuba remains one of the most restrictive countries in the world in terms of Internet freedom," Sanja Tatic Kelly, project director for Freedom on the Net, at the American NGO Freedom House, told AFP.

"Rather than relying on the technically sophisticated filtering and blocking used by other repressive regimes, the Cuban government limits users' access to information primarily via lack of technology and prohibitive costs," she said.

The Cuban authorities do censor certain websites—press and blogs that are against the Castro leadership, pornography and Skype—but Tatic Kelly noted: "The total number of blocked websites is relatively small when compared to many other authoritarian states like China, Iran or Saudi Arabia."

The more tech-savvy Cubans have found a way around that too, downloading software that can hide their IP addresses to avoid detection and mislead snooping eyes into thinking they are surfing the net in another country.

For those who are less tech-smart, they can always rely on the "paquete"—USB sticks packed with pirated films, TV shows, pop music and games and sold on the black market for a few US dollars.

Cuba's rulers say they need to keep a tight rein on the Internet to protect the island from cyberattacks.

Over 18 months, Havana has been the victim of cyberattacks from thousands of addresses registered in over 150 countries, according to deputy minister of communications Wilfredo Gonzalez.

That brooks no argument with Tatic Kelly.

"Cuba does not register as one of the leading countries experiencing cyberattacks," she said, citing data from online security experts Kaspersky Lab, which ranks Cuba 199th in terms of countries hit with counterattacks.

At number one, the most targeted, is Russia, it says, with the United States third.

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