

Cuba allows rare free public Wi-Fi at Havana cultural center

March 12 2015, by Andrea Rodriguez



Adonis Ortiz chats with his father, who lives in the U.S., using a free Wi-Fi network at a center run by famed artist Kcho, in Havana, Cuba, Wednesday, March 11, 2015. Dozens of youths from around the city flock daily to the center. Kcho's spokeswoman said state telecom Etecsa approved the move in a small but unprecedented loosening of Cuba's strict Internet regulations. (AP Photo/Desmond Boylan)

Cuba has allowed the launch of the island's first known free, public

Internet service at a Havana cultural center that quietly began offering open Wi-Fi in recent weeks.

Dozens of youths have been flocking each day to the center run by famed artist Kcho, whose spokeswoman said state telecom Etecsa approved the move in a small but unprecedented loosening of Cuba's strict Internet regulations.

The service is slow compared with what Internet users are accustomed to in much of the world. But connectivity-starved islanders said it's a boon that lets them access Facebook, read news of the world and communicate with friends and family overseas.

"I come as often as I can," said Adonis Ortiz, a 20-year-old sporting a gold chain and an American-flag bandanna around his neck. He was video-chatting with his father in the United States, whom he last saw in person nine years ago.

"Thanks to this service I can talk to him," Ortiz said.

Kcho has close ties to the Cuban government: Fidel Castro last appeared in public at the opening of the arts center in January 2014. He said Thursday that the Wi-Fi comes from his personal Internet connection, authorized through the Ministry of Culture, with a speed of 2 mbps.



People use a free Wi-Fi network at a center run by famed artist Kcho, in Havana, Cuba, Wednesday, March 11, 2015. Dozens of youths from around the city flock daily to the center. Kcho's spokeswoman said state telecom Etecsa approved the move in a small but unprecedented loosening of Cuba's strict Internet regulations. (AP Photo/Desmond Boylan)

He declined to reveal how much he pays, but ADSL service at that bandwidth generally runs around \$900 a month in Cuba.

The artist said he opened up the hotspot to encourage Cubans to connect and familiarize themselves with the Internet.

"This is an unusual thing, and it's only possible through the will to do it and absorb the costs," Kcho told The Associated Press. "It is expensive, but the benefit is tremendous. ... I have something that is great and powerful. I can share it, and I am doing so."

In the courtyard of his cultural center in western Havana, tech-savvy Millennials lounged in wicker chairs beneath a white canopy, tapping away on laptops and tablets. More were glued to smartphones as they sat on the sidewalk outside.

A sign on the exterior wall announced the password: a famous 1956 shout by revolutionary figure Juan Almeida that translates as, "Here, nobody surrenders!"



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Cuba has some of the lowest connectivity rates on the planet, with dial-

up accounts closely restricted and at-home broadband almost unheard of except in the case of foreigners who pay hundreds of dollars a month for the service in a country where the average salary is around \$20 a month.

The country's Internet capability was greatly boosted by the completion of an undersea fiber-optic cable from Venezuela that came online in January 2013.

Authorities say Cuba must prioritize its bandwidth for uses that are deemed to benefit society, such as schools and workplaces. Critics say government prohibitions are the main obstacle to access, although the state has gradually been loosening some controls.



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Authorities have opened hundreds of Internet salons where an hour online costs \$4.50, at speeds far lower than those at Kcho's studio. A 2014 report by Akamai Technologies found average Internet connectivity speeds around 10.5 mbps in the United States and 23.6 mbps in world leader South Korea. Globally, the average was about 3.9 mbps.

With dozens of users at any given time, the signal strength of Kcho's Wi-Fi gets diluted. One user said he sometimes swings by in the middle of the night when nobody else is around and finds it to be unbelievably fast.



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People stand in front of a center run by famed artist Kcho, to use the free Wi-Fi network, in Havana, Cuba, Wednesday, March 11, 2015. Dozens of youths from around the city flock daily to the center. Kcho's spokeswoman said state telecom Etecsa approved the move in a small but unprecedented loosening of Cuba's strict Internet regulations. (AP Photo/Desmond Boylan)

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