

Google, Cuba sign deal allowing fast access to company data

December 12 2016, by Michael Weissenstein



Backdropped by a poster of the late Cuban leader Fidel Castro, Mayra Arevich Marin, president of state telecom monopoly Etecsa, and Google chairman Eric Schmidt, wait for the start of a signing ceremony, in Havana, Cuba, Monday, Dec. 12, 2016. Google and the Cuban government signed a deal Monday allowing the internet giant to provide faster access to its data by installing servers on the island that will store much of the company's most popular content. Storing Google data in Cuba eliminates the long distances that signals must travel from the island through Venezuela to the nearest Google server. (AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa)

Google and the Cuban government have signed a deal allowing the internet giant to provide faster access to its data by installing servers on the island that will store much of the company's most popular content.

Storing Google data in Cuba eliminates the long distances that signals must travel from the island through Venezuela to the nearest Google server. More than a half century after cutting virtually all economic ties with Cuba, the U.S. has no direct data link to the island.

The deal removes one of the many obstacles to a normal internet in Cuba, which suffers from some of the world's most limited and expensive access. Home connections remain illegal for most Cubans and the government charges the equivalent of a month's average salary for 10 hours of access to public WiFi spots with speeds frequently too slow to download files or watch streaming video.

The agreement does not affect Cuba's antiquated communications infrastructure or broaden public access to the internet, but it could make Google websites like YouTube or Gmail up to 10 times faster for users inside Cuba. Content hosted by other companies will not be affected.

Neither Google chairman Eric Schmidt, nor Cuban officials, spoke to the press after the Monday signing ceremony in Havana.



Google chairman Eric Schmidt and Mayra Arevich Marin, president of state telecom monopoly Etecsa, sign an agreement in Havana, Cuba, Monday, Dec. 12, 2016. Google and the Cuban government signed a deal Monday allowing the internet giant to provide faster access to its data by installing servers on the island that will store much of the company's most popular content. Storing Google data in Cuba eliminates the long distances that signals must travel from the island through Venezuela to the nearest Google server. (AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa)

In a blog post, Marian Croak, Google's vice president for access strategy and emerging markets, and Brett Perlmutter, head of strategy and operations for Google Cuba and the lead negotiator of the deal, said, "Cubans who already have access to the internet and want to use our services can expect to see an improvement."

Cuban officials appear to be accelerating their approvals of deals with U.S. companies in an attempt to build momentum behind U.S.-Cuba normalization before President-elect Donald Trump takes office next

month. The Google pact was announced less than a week after Cuba gave three U.S. cruise companies permission to begin sailing to the island next year. Officials familiar with the negotiations say other deals, including one with General Electric, are in the works.

The U.S. and Cuba have struck a series of bilateral deals on issues ranging from environmental protection to direct mail since the declaration of detente on Dec. 17, 2014, but business ties have failed to keep pace. The Cuban government has blamed the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba. Many U.S. businesses say Cuba has been moving on most proposals so slowly that some suspect the government has been deliberately limiting the development of economic ties.

The Google program could provide ammunition for U.S. advocates of closer ties with Cuba. Both pro-detente forces and those arguing for a hard line on President Raul Castro's single-party government have been pushing for Cubans to have better access to information.

If the Google deal proves to truly improve internet access for a significant number of Cubans, it ties information access to U.S.-Cuban detente in a way that could prove politically difficult to undo for anti-Castro officials in the incoming Trump administration.

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