



GOING ONLINE IN CUBA : Internet under surveillance

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“I tested the Cuban Internet for you”

Story of a freelance journalist's trip to Cuba from 14 August to 13 September

Foreign officials attending the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Havana from 11 to 16 September must have thought surfing the Internet in Cuba was as much fun as sipping a mojito on one of its white-sand beaches. No waiting in line, a half or a third of the usual tariff, and no identity checks at the entrance to the Internet cafes in the big Havana hotels. In fact, the “business centres” in all of the luxury hotels made it much easier to access the Internet during the week-long summit.

Network administrators at the Inglaterra, one of the capital's most emblematic hotels, even suggested that users should erase their surfing history and cookies* at the end of each session. Who would have guessed that a few days earlier, the receptionist at this hotel's Internet cafe systematically demanded each user's name and passport number? As for the Hotel Habana Libre, it reduced its Internet usage rate from 9 to 3 dollars an hour. What a pity the summit did not last longer, at least for tourists and foreign journalists like myself – the only people allowed into the top hotels.

The Cubans have to get by with the few Correos de Cuba, the public Internet cafes. Tourists may have to wait for a few minutes in a soft armchair with a strawberry and chocolate ice-cream at the Hotel Inglaterra, but Cubans have to spend half an hour or 45 minutes jammed against each other in a line at the nearest Correo de Cuba, just 30 metres away at the foot of the Capitol building. A security guard at the entrance offered to “resolve the problem of the line” for me. A lot of things can be fixed with a bit of money here. I declined, and three quarters of an hour later I arrived in front of one of its seven or eight computers. They did not ask me for my passport. Just my name (I gave my first name) and my country of origin. The young people at the front desk were not very particular.

The connection costs 4.50 dollars an hour, about half the average monthly wage. This means Cubans usually opt for the “national” Internet for 1.50 dollars an hour, consisting of just an e-mail connection. It allows you to send messages within Cuba or abroad, but not to surf the Internet. And “la conexión es super lenta” (the connection is extremely slow), as a sign posted at the entrance to the Correo de Cuba on Obispo Street, in Old Havana, openly admits. With the “international” connection, you are lucky if you can read three e-mails and three stories on Google News in one hour. Most of the time (but not always, it is a bit haphazard), typing www.google.fr will just yield news about Cuba – a mix of reports from *Granma* (the Communist Party newspaper) and *Prensa Latina* (the official news agency).

But the picture is not that black. At the Correos de Cuba and the hotels, you have access to practically all news websites such as lemonde.fr, bbc.com, *El Nuevo Herald* (a Miami-based Spanish-language daily) and even to dissident sites. This is also the case for government employees with a computer and Internet access.

“I haven't opened *Granma* for years,” says Luis, who works for the culture ministry. “I get my news from Google and the *BBC* website and I have never had any problem getting to websites operated by government opponents. In fact, of all the news stories I wanted to read on the Internet, only one has been blocked. It was in *El Diario Montañas* and was headlined “And when Fidel is no longer there, what will happen?” The story appeared on screen but then an error message appeared after a few seconds. I manage to read something like, ‘Restricted access... mis-configuration.’ I panicked and closed the page. But nothing more came of it.”

* Small files which some websites write to your computer's hard drive when you visit them. They allow the sites to gather information about their visitors and are often viewed as a violation of the privacy of Internet users.

Going online in Cuba :

Internet under surveillance

As a freelance journalist with no press visa (they were almost systematically denied at the time of the Non-Aligned summit), e-mailing turned out to be the most dangerous Internet activity for me. I first got into a cold sweat in Viñales, a small touristic town in the western province of Pinar del Río, where Internet access was only available on a single computer (the second one was not working) in a small room behind a tourism agency. I opened an e-mail message from a member of the Reporters Without Borders staff containing the contact details of Cuba's leading dissidents. It had asterisks and other punctuation marks between the letters of key words so that the government's software would not recognise them. But this precaution turned out to me insufficient. I just had time to read the addresses and phone numbers of three dissidents before an unfriendly error message appeared on screen: "This programme will close down in a few seconds for state security reasons." Woops! Luckily I had not been asked for my passport number at the entrance.

The second times was in the very chic NH Parque Central hotel where an Internet connection costs no less than 12 dollars an hour. I was on my own in an air-conditioned room using MS Word to write an article for the Belgian daily *Le Soir*. I had got into the habit of writing my stories normally, without changing sensitive words such as Castro, revolution or dissidents until the moment I sent them by e-mail. Then I would replace them with such harmless-sounding

words as Fanfan, marmalade and relatives, and I would send the key for deciphering them by SMS. But this time the error message "This programme will close down in a few seconds etc..." flashed on my screen. I just had time to type Ctrl A (Select All) and Ctrl C (Copy) before Word shut down. But I was able to paste my text into an e-mail message which I sent to myself. And I never set foot in the NH Parque Central again.

Thereafter, I took every kind of possible and imaginable precaution. I even used an e-mail address created by Reporters Without Borders. I would write systematically-encoded articles that I would leave in its "Draft" folder without sending them. Then someone in France would go to the same e-mail address, remove my stories from the "Draft" folder, and send them to the newspapers they were meant for.

We do not know the strategies and methods used by the Cuban police, not in detail at least. Internet surveillance seems to be to be fairly haphazard, with the level of vigilance varying from hotel to hotel, and from computer to computer. But one should take great care, and use very means possible to avoid getting into trouble and being expelled. I was lucky enough to be able to fly home on the scheduled date, without spending any time in a police station. The mesh of the net turned out to be sufficiently loose to let a little fish like me get through.

Claire Voeux

Cuba's way of controlling the Internet

Going online in Cuba : Internet under surveillance

With less than 2 per cent of the population online, Cuba is one of the world's most backward countries as regards Internet usage. The worst off by far in Latin America and with a thirteenth of Costa Rica's usage, it is down there with Uganda or Sri Lanka. This is quite surprising in a country that boasts one of the highest levels of education in the world. The authorities blame this disastrous situation on the US trade embargo, which supposedly prevents them from getting the equipment they need for Internet development. In particular, they say they are unable to use underwater fibre optic cable to connect to the Internet outside Cuba and are therefore reduced to using costly and less effective satellite links.

This may indeed explain the slowness of the Cuban Internet and the endless lines outside Internet cafes. But in no way does it justify the system of control and surveillance that has been put in place by the authorities. In a country where the media are under the government's thumb, preventing independent reports and information from circulating online has naturally become a priority.

An investigation carried out by Reporters Without Borders revealed that the Cuban government uses several mechanisms to ensure that the Internet is not used in a "counter-revolutionary" fashion. Firstly, the government has more or less banned private Internet connections. To visit websites or check their e-mail, Cubans have to use public access points such as Internet cafes, universities and "Youth computing centers" where it is easier to monitor their activity. Then, the Cuban police has installed software on all computers in Internet cafes and big hotels that triggers an alert message when "subversive" key-words are noticed.

The regime also ensures that there is no Internet access for its political opponents and independent journalists, for whom reaching news media abroad is an ordeal. The government also counts on self-censorship. In Cuba, you can get a 20-year prison sentence for writing a few

"counter-revolutionary" articles for foreign websites, and a five-year one just for connecting with the Internet in an illegal manner. Few people dare to defy the state censorship and take such a risk.

Internet controlled from the moment it appeared

The government passed a law as soon as the Internet appeared in Cuba. Decree-Law 209, adopted in June 1996 and entitled "Access from the Republic of Cuba to the Global Computer Network," says that the Internet cannot be used "in violation of Cuban society's moral principles or the country's laws" and that e-mail messages must not "jeopardise national security." If Cubans want Internet access they must obtain accreditation. To get this, they must provide a "valid reason" and sign a user contract with restrictive conditions. As with a telephone line, they must be approved by ETEC SA, the country's sole telecommunications operator, and by a local commission linked to the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution that evaluates each applicant's merits.

Decree-Law 209 says access is granted "under regulations giving priority to entities and institutions likely to contribute to the nation's life and development." Aside from foreign companies and embassies, the categories of people who can hope to meet this requirement are political leaders, senior officials, intellectuals, academics, doctors, government researchers and journalists, the senior staff of export-oriented cultural companies or computer technology companies, and the Catholic hierarchy.

An information technology and communications ministry was created on 13 January 2000 to "regulate, direct, supervise and control Cuban policy as regards communications technology, information technology, telecommunications, computer networks, broadcasting, the radio spectrum, postal services and the electronics industry."

Permission to buy a computer

It is forbidden to buy any computer equipment without express permission from the authorities. Although difficult, it is possible to assemble a computer from parts bought on the black market but the prices are prohibitive. The state owns nearly all computers on the island. As a result, Cuba has one of the world's lowest levels of computer ownership – 3.3 per 100 inhabitants, the same rate as Togo (source: the International Telecommunication Union, 2005). And even if a Cuban managed to acquire a computer on the black market or through a foreign contact, he would not be able to connect to the Internet or get an international phone line without government permission. In other words, it is virtually impossible to connect to the Internet from home.

Messages blocked in Internet cafes for reasons of “state security”

Cuban Internet cafes offer two kinds of online connection: a “national” one that just lets you use an e-mail service operated by the government, and an “international” one that give access to the entire Internet. The overwhelming majority of Cuban can only access the first one, which costs 1.20 euros an hour, and cannot afford the 4 euros an hour needed to surf the Internet, as this is about a third of the average monthly wage. So the “international” connection is essentially for tourists, who can either use the local Internet cafes – Correos de Cuba – or connect from any of Cuba's many luxury hotels.

There is hardly any censorship of the Internet in Internet cafes. Tests carried out by Reporters Without Borders showed that most Cuban opposition websites and the sites of international human rights organisations can be accessed using the “international” network. In China, filtering for key-words makes it impossible to access webpages containing “subversive” words. But, by testing a series of banned terms in Internet cafes, Reporters Without Borders was able to establish that no such filtering system has been installed in Cuba.

On the other hand, Internet cafes are closely watched. Users have to give their name and address

at the door. If they write something containing suspect key-words, such as the name of a known dissident, a pop-up message appears saying the document has been blocked for “state security” reasons. Then the application – word processor or browser – that was used to write the text is automatically closed. So it seems that a programme installed in all Internet cafes automatically detects banned content.

Political dissidents and independent journalists are not usually allowed into Internet cafes, so many of them use the 20 or so computers that have been placed at their disposal in the US interests section in Havana (a de facto embassy in the absence of formal diplomatic relations). But a single visit inside this building suffices to be considered an “enemy of the revolution.” So it is not really an option for everyone.



Queue to get into an Internet café

Black market and the hunt for illegal Internet users

Because of all these restrictions, a black market has emerged in which people who are authorised to connect to the Internet rent their connection codes for use at certain times of the day in exchange for a monthly payment of about 30 dollars. The authorities go after those operating this black market. La *Nueva Cuba* website reported that five students were barred from their university for reselling its connection codes and creating chat forums on US servers. The site even posted a video shot in Cuba, dated 17 February, in which university officials are seen announcing to an auditorium what sanctions were taken against the students. One of the officials says illegal Internet use is punishable by five years in prison. He also says, “the war against the enemies of the revolution is being played out on several fronts, including the Internet.” A professor finally

announces that the five young connection-code traffickers – none of whom was politically active – would not be able to resume their studies for several years.

Some Cubans, especially independent journalists and political dissidents, connect to the Internet using the computers of foreign residents. But the police are trying to put a stop to this, often summoning these “foreign friends” and threatening them with expulsion.

El Coco’s fight for unrestricted Internet access for all Cubans

Guillermo “El Coco” Fariñas, the head of the independent *Cubanac n Press* agency, began a hunger strike in February to press his demand for all Cubans to have unrestricted Internet access. He was forcibly hospitalized and put on a drip to put an end to his protest, which was attracting the attention of the international media.

“El Coco” says he is ready to die for his people’s right to news and information. He has been kept in an intensive care unit since 20 August because of kidney and heart problems. The authorities offered him “restricted” Internet access but he refused, insisting that he would not be able to work properly as a journalist if all the information was filtered by the government.

Founded in 2003, *Cubanac n* is the most important of the news agencies created by the new generation of independent journalists. But none of the 17 reporters who write for *Cubanac n* has the right to use the Internet or a fax machine to send their dispatches abroad, where they are published. They usually have to dictate their entire reports by making collect calls from public phones with very high tariffs for international calls.

Journalists imprisoned for articles they wrote for the Internet

A total of 24 independent journalists are currently detained in Cuba. They are serving sentences of up to 27 years in prison. The prosecu-

tion cases against them consisted for the most part of references to their Internet activity, especially the fact that they wrote for websites based in the United States.

- Héctor Maseda Gutiérrez, journalist, was accused inter alia of writing stories for the *Cubanet* news website and receiving money from *Cubanet*. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

- Adolfo Fernández Sainz, journalist, was accused inter alia of writing “counter-revolutionary” articles for the *www.nuevaprensa.org* website so that they could be “used directly or indirectly by the US government to continue its policy of aggression towards Cuba.” He was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

- Julio César Gálvez Rodríguez, journalist, was accused inter alia of receiving money from websites such as *Cubanet* and *Encuentro en la Red* and of surfing the Internet at the US interests section. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Telecom Italia, Cuban telecom shareholder

The Italian company Telecom Italia owns 29.3 per cent of ETEC SA, Cuba’s sole telecommunications operator, with the Cuban state owning the rest. ETEC SA has complete control of Cuba’s Internet and is used by the government to monitor online activity and track political dissidents. When the journalists arrested in March 2003 were tried, the Cuban operator provided reports that were used to claim that they used the Internet in a “counter-revolutionary” manner.

Reporters Without Borders wrote to the chairman of the Telecom Italia board in March 2004 to point out the consequences of his company’s participation in ETEC SA. We asked him “to intervene to try to change the Cuban regime’s policies towards the Internet and to request the release of imprisoned journalists.” The company wrote back explaining that it could not pull out of Cuba for financial reasons but claiming that it did not directly participate in the surveillance and control of the Internet in Cuba.

Possible cooperation with China in surveillance of electronic communication

China and Cuba have stepped up economic cooperation since President Hu Jintao's visit in November 2004, following which a Chinese official said China would participate in developing the Cuban telecommunications sector.

As China is already suspected of selling its Internet surveillance technology and expertise to several countries with authoritarian regimes, such as Zimbabwe and Belarus, this kind of cooperation probably exists with Cuba, too. The US-based website *Cubanet* reported in January 2005 that Chinese experts had installed "electronic spying equipment" in Santa Clara province in cooperation with ETEC SA.



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Cuba is on the Reporters Without Borders list of 15 "Internet enemies"

Reporters Without Borders is staging an online protest on 7-8 November 2006 "24 Hours Against Internet Censorship." Campaign with us at www.rsf.org