

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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CUBA

INTERNET ACCESS AS A NEW ENGINE FOR SOCIAL MOBILISATION IN CUBA



RedesAyuda

David Aragort

<https://redesayuda.org/>

Introduction

In recent years, Cuba has experienced a progressive expansion of internet access among its citizens, partially motivated by economic reasons. However, the connection with the rest of the world has caused deep changes in society, and has presented a great challenge for its rulers, who have historically relied on censorship and isolation to maintain control and power. With greater access to information, people have been able to question the “truth” transmitted by the country’s traditional media and have also been able to compare their living conditions to those found in other countries.

For this reason, the regime has tried to control the activities of its citizens on the internet through blocking, filtering, throttling, new laws and threats. These, however, have not been enough to stop civil society organisations from connecting with a large diaspora that seeks political changes and an expansion of civil rights and liberties in the country, turning the internet into one of the main triggers of the biggest demonstrations that the country has seen in recent decades.

The ground is now laid for a new era of activism on securing the right to internet access in the country, largely due to the pro-democracy demonstrations that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, calling for humanitarian aid to enter the country, and for regime change.

Internet access in Cuba: A story that has just begun

Public access to the internet in Cuba is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was not until 2013 that the country had access to high-speed internet through the submarine cable ALBA-1,¹ which allows download speeds up to 3,000 times faster than those that had been available until then.² The commissioning of ALBA-1 prompted the Cuban regime to open more than 100 internet cafés owned by the state, charging

the equivalent of USD 4.5 per hour for using the internet³ – an extremely high price considering the average monthly salary in Cuba.

In 2015, as a result of the rapprochement between the government of Barack Obama and the Cuban regime, and the latter’s promises to improve internet access for citizens, the decision was made to temporarily reduce prices in these internet cafés by more than 50%.⁴ While this was a significant improvement, it was still prohibitive for most Cubans. That same year, the regime announced its plans to establish 35 Wi-Fi hotspots in public spaces on the island.⁵ In 2016, a spokesperson for the Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba (ETECSA), the state company that maintains the monopoly of telecommunications in the country, announced plans to bring broadband internet to homes and businesses.⁶

The most significant step came in 2018, when ETECSA began offering its users internet connections on their mobile phones through a 3G network, even though this service continued to be prohibitive for most of the country’s inhabitants, as mobile data packages were priced at USD 7 for 600 MB and USD 30 for 4 GB.⁷ In 2019, another step in favour of internet access was taken through the legalisation of private Wi-Fi networks. However, the owners of these networks are not able to sell access to them, maintaining ETECSA’s telecommunications monopoly on the island.⁸ That same year, ETECSA began to operate its 4G/LTE network.⁹

¹ <https://www.submarinecablemap.com/submarine-cable/alba-1>

² Frank, M. (2013, 22 January). Cuba’s mystery fiber-optic Internet cable stirs to life. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-internet-idUSBRE9oL13o2013o122>

³ Oppmann, P. (2013, 6 August). Internet access now a reality for some Cubans, but not cheap at \$4.50 an hour. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/05/world/americas/cuba-online-access>

⁴ Associated Press. (2015, 18 February). Cuba Cuts the Price of Internet Access. *NBC News*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/cuba-cuts-price-internet-access-n3085991>

⁵ Trotta, D. (2015, 18 June). Cuba to create first Wi-Fi signals for the public at large. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/cuba-internet-idINKBNoOY2EY2o15o618>

⁶ Weissenstein, M. (2016, 1 February). Cuba says it will launch broadband home internet project. *Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/article/8d87e43964ab46d197289b257fbd3ff9>

⁷ Reid, D. (2018, 5 December). Cuba to roll out mobile internet for the first time. *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/05/cuba-to-roll-out-mobile-internet-for-the-first-time.html>

⁸ Marsh, S. (2019, 29 May). Cuba legalizes private Wi-Fi networks in bid to boost connectivity. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-internet/cuba-legalizes-private-wi-fi-networks-in-bid-to-boost-connectivity-idUSKCN1SZ2UD>

⁹ Cubadebate. (2019, 14 October). Cuba avanza en la habilitación de la tecnología 4G/LTE. *Cubadebate*. <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2019/10/14/cuba-avanza-en-la-habilitacion-de-la-tecnologia-4g-lte>

A joint investigation between the organisations CONNECTAS and YucaByte argued that one of the main reasons why the Cuban regime has been so interested in increasing internet access is economic, since revenues from exports of “telecommunications, transmission and supply of information” are among the main three categories of services exports in the country, being only surpassed by those related to “social services and human health”¹⁰ and “accommodation, supply of food and beverages”. This can be explained in part by the migration of approximately 14% of the country’s total population, who, in order to keep in communication with their relatives, must send mobile top-ups from abroad to the state telecommunications monopoly ETECSA.¹¹

Censored almost from its inception

In addition to access barriers related to infrastructure and connectivity, the internet in Cuba has been partially censored since its inception – a reality that is not limited to the internet, since almost all the traditional media are controlled by the state.¹²

It is known that since at least 2016, ETECSA has been filtering text messages that contain some keywords that are uncomfortable for the regime, such as “freedom” or “human rights”.¹³ In 2017, an investigation revealed that access to at least 41 websites was being blocked from the Wi-Fi hotspots that Cuba had installed in certain public spaces. These blocks were mainly aimed at independent media outlets and pro-democracy and human rights websites.¹⁴ Two years later, during the 2019 constitutional referendum, several websites belonging to independent media outlets were blocked. In this case, the evidence showed that the techniques used to block the websites were more sophisticated than those documented years before.¹⁵

In 2019, the regime also approved Decree Law 370, which was criticised by many civil society organisations for representing a threat to freedoms on the

internet.¹⁶ That same year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in which it “calls on the Cuban Government to stop imposing online censorship and to stop blocking internet sites and restricting access to information.”¹⁷

Pandemic, repression and social media as a tool

The advances in internet connectivity in Cuba occurred before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that during the quarantine, Cubans had some means to stay connected that they did not have previously. However, this caused the regime to increase its efforts to try to silence dissenting voices on digital platforms, both through the temporary interruption of internet service to certain individuals and through harassment and arbitrary arrests.¹⁸ The internet nevertheless also allowed civil society organisations and activists to show the reality of the country and express their discontent despite not being able to leave their homes. An example of this was the case of Denis Solís, a rapper and member of the San Isidro Movement who, days before being arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned, broadcast the moment in which an official harassed him inside his residence live on his Facebook account.¹⁹

The San Isidro Movement is a group of Cuban artists and intellectuals who fight for an expansion of civil rights and liberties in Cuba. Days after Solís’ arrest, several members of the group decided to start a hunger and thirst strike at its headquarters in Havana to demand the release of their colleague, but the strike ended on the night of 26 November 2020, when state security forces raided the headquarters and arrested them.²⁰ While this was happening, ETECSA partially blocked access to some social media platforms and instant messaging applications such as Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. Just a few days later, a new partial

10 For example, in the past Venezuela and Cuba had an agreement where Venezuela had to pay with oil for the services of Cuban doctors sent there.

11 Borrero Batista, D. (2022, 2 February). ETECSA, el negocio cubano inmune al embargo. *CONNECTAS*. <https://www.connectas.org/etecsa-negocio-cubano-inmune-al-embargo>

12 BBC News. (2018, 13 March). Cuba profile - Media. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19578348>

13 Frank, M. (2016, 5 September). Cuba government filtering mobile text messages, dissidents say. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-censorship-idUSKCN11B265>

14 Xynou, M., Filastò, A., & Basso, S. (2017). *Measuring Internet Censorship in Cuba's ParkNets*. OONI. <https://ooni.org/post/cuba-internet-censorship-2017>

15 Pérez Pujol, E., Filastò, A., & Xynou, M. (2019, 26 February). Cuba blocks independent media amid 2019 constitutional referendum. *OONI*. <https://ooni.org/post/cuba-referendum>

16 Access Now. (2020, 17 June). Statement: International support for the petition to declare Decree-Law 370 unconstitutional in Cuba. <https://www.accessnow.org/statement-international-support-for-the-petition-to-declare-decree-law-370-unconstitutional-in-cuba>; Reporters Without Borders. (2020, 6 May). Cuba and its Decree Law 370: annihilating freedom of expression on the Internet. <https://rsf.org/en/news/cuba-and-its-decree-law-370-annihilating-freedom-expression-internet>

17 European Parliament. (2019, 28 November). Resolution (EU) 2019/2929 of 28 November 2019 on Cuba, the case of José Daniel Ferrer. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0073_EN.pdf

18 Mattiace, T. (2020, 19 October). Cuba's Government Targets Social Media Influencers. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/19/cubas-government-targets-social-media-influencers>

19 <https://www.facebook.com/denis.solisgonzalez.5/videos/790464094872551>

20 BBC. (2020, 27 November). Cuban police raid HQ of dissident San Isidro Movement. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-55098876>

blocking of Twitter and Facebook was reported, coinciding with calls for demonstrations on the occasion of Human Rights Day.²¹

A month earlier, international organisations had made a public call to ETECSA and asked the company to guarantee internet access on the island, as well as to be transparent and explicit about the reasons behind the apparent blocking of Telegram and some virtual private network (VPN) services, and to fix any disruptions that could be affecting the quality of service.²² However, over the following months, there was an increase in reports of selective cuts of mobile phone and internet services for journalists and activists.²³ This practice has apparently been increasing because, unlike the blocking of websites, it is harder to verify and has less collateral impact on the public in general.

2021, a turning point

The expansion of internet access made it possible to connect activists in Cuba with those who have had to go into exile. This was evidenced by the #SOSCuba campaign, which sought to pressure the Cuban regime into allowing humanitarian aid into the country amid the health crisis that the province of Matanzas was going through due to the high increase in COVID-19 cases. As in many other provinces, its health care centres had collapsed and there was a shortage of medicines, food and hygiene products.²⁴

But the health crisis caused by the pandemic is not the only reason why discontent with the regime has increased. According to the director of YucaByte, Norges Rodríguez, because the expansion of internet access has meant that people who previously did not have access to alternative sources of information now have it, many citizens have begun to realise that the regime is largely to blame for the deep economic crisis that has been exacerbated by the pandemic, rather than an “external enemy”, as the authorities claim.²⁵

In February 2021, the song “*Patria y Vida*” (Homeland and Life) was released, which featured

internationally recognised Cuban artists and one of the members of the San Isidro Movement, Maykel Osorbo. It quickly went viral inside and outside of Cuba, becoming an anthem for the fight for human rights and freedom in the country. The song won two Latin Grammy Awards, including Song of the Year;²⁶ but while it was reaping this success, Osorbo was serving six months in prison after being arrested in May 2021, accused of “resistance” and “contempt”.²⁷

Opposition political activist Manuel Cuesta Morúa believes that one of the reasons why the repression against Osorbo and others like him was so strong is because “they brought together [people from the] younger sectors and from the culture sector, where symbols, [a] new language and images are created that drive the intellectual debate of ideas.”²⁸ Although there are no figures on the distribution of internet use by age groups in Cuba, in 2021 people between 18 and 34 years old made up more than half of adult internet users globally.²⁹ This means it is likely that young people are also the most active on the internet in Cuba.

Before the demonstrations of July 2021, there were at least two internet disruptions in Cuba in the same year. The first of them was partial and occurred on 27 January 2021,³⁰ coinciding with a demonstration called by a group of artists and journalists outside the Cuban Ministry of Culture,³¹ while the second took place on 12 February 2021 and, according to ETECSA, was due to a “technical interruption” that affected not only access to the internet but all of the country’s international communications services.³²

Knowing the history of internet censorship in Cuba, it is not surprising that when thousands of citizens took to the streets across the country to

21 NetBlocks. (2020, 30 November). Social media disrupted in Cuba amid protests for artistic freedom. <https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-disrupted-in-cuba-amid-protests-for-artistic-freedom-aAwrqa8M>

22 Access Now. (2020, 5 November). Telegram blocked in Cuba? Civil society demands answers. <https://www.accessnow.org/telegram-blocked-in-cuba-civil-society-demands-answers>

23 Committee to Protect Journalists. (2021, 4 March). Staff of Cuban press freedom group ICLEP lose internet service, fear targeted disruption. <https://cpj.org/?p=86767>

24 EFE. (2021, 10 July). Crece la campaña para pedir un corredor humanitario de ayuda a Cuba. *EFE*. <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/crece-la-campana-para-pedir-un-corredor-humanitario-de-ayuda-a-cuba/20000013-4583410>

25 Interview with YucaByte director Norges Rodríguez, 3 February 2022.

26 Reuters. (2021, 19 December). Cuba protest anthem ‘Patria y Vida’ wins Latin Grammy Song of the Year. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/cuba-protest-anthem-patria-y-vida-wins-latin-grammy-song-year-2021-11-19>

27 Al Jazeera. (2021, 3 June). Cuba criticised over rapper jailed for ‘resistance’. *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/3/cuba-criticised-over-rapper-jailed-for-resistance>

28 Interview with the vice president of the Council for the Democratic Transition in Cuba, Manuel Cuesta Morúa, 10 February 2022.

29 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272365/age-distribution-of-internet-users-worldwide>

30 Madory, D. [@dougmadory]. (2021, 27 January). According to @Kentikinc data, there was a significant drop in internet traffic from #Cuba today for a little more than two hours [tweet]. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/DougMadory/status/1354581571840389127>

31 Committee to Protect Journalists. (2021, 29 January). Cuban internet access cut amid free expression protest; journalist harassed. <https://cpj.org/?p=79558>

32 Frank, M. (2021, 12 February). Cuba loses phone, internet connections for about 90 minutes. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/cuba-loses-phone-internet-connections-about-90-minutes-2021-02-12>

demonstrate on 11 July 2021, the response was to block access to social media platforms and instant messaging applications such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram³³ and Signal.³⁴ However, it also meant that this time Cubans were prepared to circumvent censorship using tools like VPNs. As a result, the government had to completely cut off internet access throughout the country³⁵ to stop the spread of images and videos of the demonstrations that were being broadcast and shared with the world almost instantly.

While taking this measure, the regime was also calling on its supporters and security forces to confront protesters in the streets,³⁶ resulting in one person being killed and hundreds more detained.³⁷ Months later, Cuba acknowledged having detained and prosecuted more than 700 people, including 55 minors.³⁸

The disruptions and blockades continued during the following days³⁹ and evidence was found that ETECSA may have tried to throttle the internet to prevent its effective use in the country.⁴⁰ On 15 July 2021, almost a million and a half users from Cuba connected to the Psiphon network,⁴¹ a well-known free VPN provider. In response, ETECSA began filtering SMS containing keywords such as

“Psiphon” or “VPN”,⁴² and that same day the United States government announced that they would evaluate alternatives to try to restore internet access in Cuba.⁴³

Less than a month after the demonstrations, the regime approved Decree Law 35, which establishes greater controls over the activities of Cubans on the internet and threatens to further increase censorship and self-censorship in the country.⁴⁴ For Cuban journalist Camila Acosta, this legislation is a way of intimidating people and, although to date no case is known in which it has been used, she says that the regime has used other mechanisms to fine citizens for criticism of the government, or even for sharing third-party content that criticises the government on social media.⁴⁵

Looking to the future

Although in 2021 the political change that the citizens of Cuba expected did not occur, the historic demonstrations were a clear example of the potential for transformation and mobilisation that the internet has in society and, therefore, the threat it represents to authoritarianism in Cuba in the long term.

While Venezuela, Myanmar and more recently Kazakhstan have shown that citizen mobilisation is not the only element necessary to achieve a transition to democracy, in Cuba it did at least have some impact.

Days after the demonstrations, the regime announced a temporary lifting of some restrictions related to the amount of food and medicine that travellers entering the country can carry.⁴⁶ It also allowed the entry of humanitarian aid, although only from allied countries such as Russia, Mexico and Bolivia.⁴⁷

33 NetBlocks. (2021, 12 July). Social media restricted in Cuba amid widening anti-government protests. <https://netblocks.org/reports/social-media-restricted-in-cuba-amid-widening-anti-government-protests-QAdrmwyl>

34 Xynou, M., & Filastò, A. (2021, 21 October). How countries attempt to block Signal Private Messenger App around the world. *OONI*. <https://ooni.org/post/2021-how-signal-private-messenger-blocked-around-the-world/#cuba>

35 Madory, D. (2021, 16 July). Internet Disruptions in Cuba Following Widespread Protests. *Kentik*. <https://www.kentik.com/analysis/internet-disruptions-in-cuba-following-widespread-protests>

36 Perrett, C. (2021, 12 July). Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel called on supporters to fight in the streets as anti-government protests grow. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/cuban-president-fight-in-the-streets-amid-protests-2021-7>

37 Phillips, T., & Agustin, E. (2021, 13 July). Cuba protests: one man killed and more than 100 missing in historic unrest. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/13/cuba-protests-activists-journalists-protesters-detained>

38 BBC. (2022, 26 January). Cuba says more than 700 charged over anti-government protests. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-60124600>

39 Madory, D. (2021, 17 July). Another Internet Disruption in Cuba Following Week of Protests. *Kentik*. <https://www.kentik.com/analysis/another-internet-disruption-in-cuba-following-week-of-protests>

40 Madory, D. (@dougmadory). (2021, 4 August). Based on @kentikinc performance measurements to Cuba, there was increased latency and packet loss for three distinct periods in late July [tweet]. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/DougMadory/status/142306783682675078>

41 Psiphon Inc. (@psiphoninc). (2021, 16 July). Update: Yesterday 1.389 Million daily unique users accessed the open web from Cuba through the Psiphon Network [tweet]. *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/PsiphonInc/status/1416069807301185537>

42 14ymedio. (2021, 15 July). El monopolio cubano Etecsa censura los SMS con las palabras “Psiphon” y “VPN”. *14ymedio*. https://www.14ymedio.com/cuba/monopolio-cubano-Etecsa-censura-SMS-Psiphon-VPN_0_3131086865.html

43 Shepardson, D. (2021, 15 July). U.S. reviewing whether it can help restore internet access in Cuba - Biden. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-reviewing-whether-it-can-help-restore-internet-access-cuba-2021-07-15>

44 Marsh, S. (2021, 19 August). New Cuban decree tightens controls on social media, sparking outrage. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/new-cuban-decree-tightens-controls-social-media-sparking-outrage-2021-08-18>

45 Interview with Cubanet journalist and Havana correspondent for the ABC newspaper Camila Acosta, 7 February 2022.

46 Marsh, S., & Acosta, N. (2021, 15 July). Cuba lifts food, medicine customs restrictions after protests. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/cuba-lifts-food-medicine-customs-restrictions-after-protests-2021-07-15>

47 Marsh, S. (2021, 30 July). Cuba receives food, medicine donations from allies to ease crisis. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/cuba-receives-food-medicine-donations-allies-ease-crisis-2021-07-31>

Cuban cyber activism has also not ceased. Proof of this is the call to boycott the San Remo Festival⁴⁸ that is being organised by the Cuban regime at the same time that it is carrying out mass trials against hundreds of protesters, and also the international campaign in rejection of these trials.⁴⁹

Action steps

The following action steps need to be taken to support open access to the internet in Cuba:

- Democratic governments of the world must look for ways to encourage the expansion of internet access in Cuba. For example, this can be done through conditioning trade agreements on a real commitment and actions by the Cuban government to provide reliable and quality access to its citizens.
- Civil society organisations outside of Cuba need to help find technical alternatives that allow keeping access to the internet in the event of government censorship such as that seen in July of 2021. In particular, an alternative to the Psi-phon network needs to be found so that access is not limited to a single point of access, which could be targeted by ETECSA.
- Donors should support the work of non-profit organisations that monitor internet censorship in Cuba so that evidence of this censorship can be built.
- Digital rights organisations in the region must train grassroots activists and journalists in Cuba to circumvent internet censorship and collect evidence of website and digital platform blocking using open tools like OONI Probe.⁵⁰
- Civil society organisations must continue to pressure multilateral organisations to reject censorship and internet shutdowns as a method of repressing citizens across the world.

⁴⁸ Deutsche Welle. (2022, 10 January). Controversia política ilegal San Remo Music Awards Cuba. *Deutsche Welle*. <https://p.dw.com/p/46mcy>

⁴⁹ Kurmanaev, A., & Lopez, O. (2022, 14 January). Mass Trials in Cuba Deepen Its Harshes Crackdown in Decades. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/14/world/americas/cuba-mass-trials-crackdown.html>

⁵⁰ <https://ooni.org>

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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2021-2022 Report
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