

Google activates company's first servers in Cuba

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The servers will only speed up access for existing users, but can internet-based programs like this eventually lead to greater freedoms for Cuban citizens?



Desmond Boylan/AP/File

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Caption



• **Weston Williams**

Staff | @westonwolf359

APRIL 28, 2017 —On Thursday, Google activated a line of caching servers in Cuba, becoming the first foreign company with the ability to provide online content in the country. The new servers will help speed up internet access for the small percentage of Cuba's population that are internet users, and could lay a groundwork for future web expansion in the isolated nation.

Cuba has had some form of internet access since the 1990s, but the use of the internet is heavily restricted in the country. Government censorship, combined with prohibitively high prices for many residents, has kept the vast majority of the population offline in the ensuing decades. But with the resumption of diplomatic relations with the United States, Cuba may be on track to join the rest of the digital world – though widespread change will have to happen before the shift can be completed.

"The lack of connectivity in Cuba is part of a deliberate government strategy to control the flow of information and whose ultimate end is to maintain the one-party system," says Stephen Clark, a professor of Spanish at California State University, Channel Islands.

Dr. Clark, who has visited and written about Cuba on a number of occasions, tells The Christian Science Monitor in an email that improved internet programs like this could lead to some challenges to the authoritarian status quo. But, he adds, many Cubans already have an access to a semi-legal, offline "internet" in the form of a weekly downloaded package, which is circulated with flash drives across the country. This stream of non-Cuban media, while not the same as totally free internet access, has yet to form the backbone of any earth-shattering freedom movements.

"Whether increased internet access can make Cuba a freer society is a different question altogether," Clark says. "To answer this question, the case of Venezuela is illustrative: Venezuela is one of the most wired countries in Latin America, but its government is the most repressive after Cuba.... Venezuelan citizens and opposition leaders freely use the internet to regularly denounce the repression, but things have only gotten worse in terms of the society becoming less and less free ever over the last 20 years."



And while the new Google servers will speed up access to things like YouTube videos, it will not be able to circumvent censorship, or even expand the small percentage of internet users in the country by themselves. Instead, the servers are designed to reduce load-times for extant users. The devices work by storing copies of frequently viewed media like YouTube videos, allowing them to be viewed much more quickly than they would on servers located farther away in other countries. Currently, Cuba gets most of its internet through an underwater cable from Venezuela, which makes connection speeds very slow.

"Right now, it's cumbersome to access the Internet in Cuba, even in a big metropolitan area like Havana – and forget about the countryside," Mark Grabowski, an an associate

professor of Internet Law and Ethics at Adelphi University on Long Island, tells the Monitor via email. "Typically, to get online, you have to buy a card from a street vendor, and it has a code that gives you internet access for an hour. These cards are relatively expensive – perhaps \$2 or \$3, which is a lot in a country where the average person makes the equivalent of \$25 per month. Then you must find one of the rare hot spots to login with your card. And, of course, you need some sort of device, like a smart phone or laptop, that will allow you to get online. To put it in perspective, I had easier and more access to the internet when I lived in Cairo, Egypt, in 1998 than I did when I visited Havana last year."

And even if non-Cuban tech companies like Google begin to move in over the next few years, limited, censored internet likely won't change any time soon. However, the resumption of diplomatic relations with the US could mean that freer internet is in the cards for Cuba – but even so, a freer Cuba might not necessarily result, says sociologist Jen Schradie, a researcher at the Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse, France.

"The problem with relying on the internet as a path to a freer society is that it gives technological tools too much credit," she tells the Monitor in an email.

Dr. Schradie argues that social class, economic standing, and other factors influence the flow of media in any country, even in places like the US that have unbounded internet access. Access to the greater world of online media could open many Cubans' eyes to alternative forms of government and interact with a large portion of the world that they have been unable to engage with for decades, but palpable change will have to come about by tackling social problems the old-fashioned way, she says.

"I would hope that if more Cubans are online that they would share their stories publicly to the world about what life is like for them, such as their relatively high rates of medical care and public education, so that we could have a real dialogue online, rather than the limited information and stereotypes that Americans get about Cuba, such as the pre-revolution old cars or political restrictions," Schradie adds. "It would also be great if Cubans heard directly from the American people, rather than government information from either Cuba or [the US government]."