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How Cuba is boosting access to the Internet

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Cuba has lagged behind many Latin American countries in access to the Internet due to technological limitations, U.S. sanctions that restrict its connectivity and lack of financial resources to develop the proper infrastructure.

The situation is changing rapidly. Last year over 4 million Cubans out of a total population of 11 million used the Internet.

Havana is promoting a nationwide plan to equip homes, universities, medical institutions and local government offices with Internet access, and has multiplied the number of public Wi-Fi spots.

The Cuban government is footing the bill for these projects to ensure access is equitable, affordable and widespread.

New initiatives are underway at several state institutions to encourage safe use of the Internet, promote knowledge and culture, and make the lives of Cubans easier.

The Ministry of Public Health, for example, is in the process of computerizing patients' medical records and other administrative areas.

"To achieve that we have to plan and develop the technological infrastructure and the training of human resources. That is what we are doing in this first stage of this process," said Deputy Minister of Public Health Marcia Cobas.

Today, all Cuban health professionals have access to Infomed, one of the most visited sites in the country. The web portal hosts 669 medical sites and receives around 12 million visits a year by Cuban medical personnel on the island and abroad.

A new network called "Cuba Coopera," designed especially for the more than 49,000 Cuban medical professionals working in 63 countries, aims to provide information about the island and direct contact with their family members.

Meanwhile, the Education Ministry opened a site called "Cuba Educa," which provides educational content for students, teachers and parents.

Official figures show that more than 10,600 educational institutions, about 150,000 teachers and 2 million students now have access to computer labs.

Linked to "Cuba Educa" is another site where students can consult and query teachers about different subjects.

"Cuban educational professionals answer the students' questions live and in a quick manner. Through this new technology we are expanding the educational spectrum in the country," said Rolando Forneiro, Cuban deputy minister of education.

E-commerce is also benefiting from the latest technological development. State-run company Artex operates the websites "Soy Cubano" and "Mall Cubano," which make various products available for purchase internationally.

Cuba's state recording company Egrem has developed a mobile application in which users pay a 1-U.S.-dollar fee to download as many as 80 songs by contemporary Cuban artists.

The Culture Ministry now wants to expand online ticket purchase services for cultural shows, concerts and performances at theaters around the nation.

"We must have a contemporary vision of these hi-tech issues ..." said Fernando Rojas, the deputy minister of culture, "especially for young people who are eager to have quick and easy access to our cultural content."

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