

A brief history of Washington's digital war against Cuba



Cuban journalist Rosa Miriam Elizalde reads her report before the Conference at the Vietnam-Cuba Seminar

By: Rosa Miriam Elizalde

Only once, as far as we know, has the United States government publicly admitted that it has been the one to boycott Cuba's access to the Internet. In November 2022, the Department of Justice recommended to the Federal Communications Commission the denial of a permit for the island to link up to the submarine cable that interconnects the Caribbean countries with the American continent.

The argument was ridiculous. It alleged the supposed danger of Cuba's relations with other foreign adversaries such as China or Russia, which could use the island as a gateway to hack the American network.

The Arcos-1 network, which runs 32 kilometers from Havana and has been active for more than two decades, connects 24 Internet anchor points in 15 countries on the continent, most of which have long had fluid relations with foreign adversaries that keep Washington awake at night.

No one connects to the Internet by invoking magic words. At least three conditions are required: the telecommunications network, the computers or electronic equipment that will communicate with their peers around the world, and a culture of using these technologies.

If you live on an island, you need more than anywhere else submarine cables to link up to continental networks. In fact, 99 percent of data traffic around the world, land or not, navigates through underwater cables, most of them optical fiber, which add up to more than a million kilometers.

The Internet was conceived as a network where information travels through alternative paths, to guarantee the vitality of the circulation of data. Its birth is due to the order issued in 1962 by President John Kennedy, after the so-called October Crisis or Missile Crisis that showed the vulnerability of unidirectional command and control systems in the event of a nuclear attack. However, the redundancy of the network today has more limitations than when the Internet emerged, because almost all fiber optic cables lead to the United States, where the backbone of the network of networks is located.

This unbalanced structure of the cables that make up the Internet means that any information transmitted from Latin America to Europe, even if it is sent from a service in Patagonia and from local servers, almost always passes through the NAP of the Americas, located in Miami. In addition, the large fiber optic pipes that cross the oceans are owned by a handful of corporations linked to intelligence services, as shown in his revelations by former U.S. intelligence agent Edward Snowden.

Therefore, it is not Cuba that has a long and documented tradition of hacking, spying and controlling the Internet. In fact, a joint research report published in September 2023 by China's National Computer Virus Emergency Response Center and the Internet security company Qihoo 360 Technology accuses the U.S. National Security Agency of having directed more than 10,000 cyberattacks against China, with the theft of 140 gigabytes of relevant data.

It is impossible to prove that Cuba is a cybersecurity threat under these conditions. What is relevant here is that the Department of Justice admits for the first time, through a bureaucratic recommendation, that Washington prevents connection to the submarine cable, so perhaps one day they will recognize that among their many blockades to the island there is also the impossibility of acquiring computer technology and the enormous difficulties in accessing digital services.

It is worth reviewing the main milestones of the United States' digital war against Cuba, to understand the twisted core of this story. While Europe and most Latin American countries began connecting to the Internet in the mid-1980s, Cuba was subjected for more than a decade to a “route filtering” policy by the National Science Foundation (NSF) that blocked links to and from the island in the United States.

During the “Special Period” – the crisis that followed the collapse of socialist processes in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s – the situation changed dramatically. The United States calculated that socialism in Cuba had its days numbered and opted for a “digital glasnost”, with a pipeline of US propaganda that would facilitate the desired regime change in Cuba that Washington has been betting on for more than 60 years.

Since 1996, thanks to a regulation known as the Torricelli Law or the Cuban Democracy Law, the island's connection to the Internet has been possible, but only to access information content, because there are leonine limits to the services that a Cuban user can enjoy. The Democratic and Republican administrations maintained these policies, although Donald Trump applied a “maximum pressure” strategy to suffocate the Cuban economy, which has been maintained by the government of Joseph Biden. Both presidents have encouraged segments of the Cuban far right in the United States, who actively participated in the creation of private and public groups on Facebook, the most popular platform on the island, to poison the national public agenda.

It has been documented that these groups incited the protests of July 2021 in Cuba, the most massive that can be remembered in the Caribbean country. American researcher Alan Macleod infiltrated one of these groups and proved that the main instigators of the riots in San Antonio de los Baños, the city where the revolts began, reside in Florida. “The participation of foreign citizens in Cuba’s internal affairs is at a level that can hardly be conceived in the United States,” Macleod wrote in MintPress News in October 2021.

Any researcher can find enough evidence of the role of the US government in the #SOSCuba campaign, which generated thousands of retweets in the days leading up to and during the protests on July 11, 2021. It was initiated and amplified by operators linked to organizations that receive funding from the federal government. From January 2017 to September 2021, at least 54 groups that operated programs in Cuba have been documented as receiving funding from the State Department, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), or the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). These programs last from one to three years and the amounts range from half a million to 16 million dollars. The White House continually boasts of its efforts to identify, recruit, train, finance and deploy people and organizations that drive political change within the island.

Today, 7.5 million Cubans (more than 70 percent of the population) are connected to the Internet, but they cannot view Google Earth, use the Zoom videoconferencing system, download free Microsoft software, shop on Amazon, or acquire international domains that appear to favor tourism to the island, to mention some of the more than 200 blocked services and applications. When Internet providers detect access from Cuba, these companies, whether in California, Madrid, Paris or Toronto, act as a funnel and warn that the user is connecting from a “prohibited country.”

As part of its policy for “regime change” in Cuba, the United States government, in full bipartisan alignment, has intensified in recent years the use of information manipulation techniques in correspondence with the rapid deployment of the new communication paradigm, the dominance it exercises over global algorithmic platforms and the identification of opportunities and weaknesses in Cuban society during the transition process towards the digital scenario.

It has prioritized the allocation of financial, technological and human resources for subversive purposes and has adopted measures in the normative framework of the blockade to facilitate the deployment of the communication component in the unconventional war against Cuba, all of which increasingly reinforces the characteristic instruments of cognitive warfare, according to the conceptual denomination developed

by academic, military and political sectors.

Meanwhile, Cuban authorities have become aware of the colossal challenge that this new scenario represents for national security and defense, and have therefore called for greater political and communication mobilization and for the cohesive action of the State and all the people to counteract it.

Therefore, the public statement by the Department of Justice that clearly states that it is the United States government that prevents the island from connecting to the Arcos-1 network that links the Caribbean countries is almost welcome. Perhaps in this way Washington will be encouraged to recognize that it has been and continues to be the number one enemy of Cubans' access to the Internet.

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(Taken from Cubaperiodistas)

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