Cuba Intercambio: Cultural and Information Exchange for Cuba

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Abstract

In Cuba, information has been tightly controlled for more than 50 years and people are eager to access content long out of reach. Based on research findings from early 2015, this study explores crowdsourced information retrieval and cultural exchange for people living in regions with low Internet access, specifically Cuba. We discuss the deployment of Cuba Intercambio, an interactive, crowdsourced system designed to meet Cuban's information needs during this time of potential change as well as serve as a type of cultural exchange between Cubans and those living outside of Cuba.

Author Keywords

ICTD; social media; Facebook; Cuba; social computing

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces: Web–based interaction

Introduction

In a country where information was tightly controlled for over 50 years, people are eager to access content long out of reach. In December 2014, the United States and Cuba announced that they intend to normalize relations [1,10]. One potential consequence may be greatly increased access to the Internet for Cuban citizens. However, to date, Cubans' Internet use is still

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greatly restricted by access limitations and slow network speeds [4].

Considering the potential for change and the unique space that Cuba represents, we are deploying a prototype (Cuba Intercambio) that seeks to serve the information needs of Cubans at this time. Through this work, we are also interested in increasing the dialogue between Cubans and those living outside of Cuba. What follows is a brief overview of findings from research conducted in early 2015, which lays the foundation for Cuba Intercambio. We describe the deployment of Cuba Intercambio and, finally, end with questions that we hope to explore through this research.

Background

Cuba has been called the second most isolated country in the world, partially due to its tightly controlled Internet [11]. Reasons for this Internet stagnation include lack of resources, the US embargo against Cuba, and the Cuban government's fear of implications of the freedom of information [5,8]. Cuba was removed from the US state sponsors of terror list in May 2015, and formal diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba were established in July 2015 [3]. This will presumably yield significant growth in Internet access for Cuban citizens [1]. However, consistent blocks exist to Internet access, including policy restrictions, surveillance, high costs and lack of resources. Even with more Internet penetration across the island, little has changed for most Cubans seeking information beyond state-controlled sources [2,8]. The Cuban government continues to repress individuals and groups who criticize the government or call for basic human rights [5]. Despite impediments to open communication online, Cubans are eager to communicate with one another, as well as the rest of the world [4].

Previous Research

This work is grounded in findings from research conducted in early 2015 on Internet and social media use by early adopters living in Cuba [4]. We explored Cubans' access limitations and the activities they do online, as well as what Internet access means to them. We conducted interviews with 12 Cuban Internet users and observed their social media use. Our findings suggest that access limitations and slow network speeds greatly restrict Cubans' Internet use. To counter these limitations, Cubans are collaborative, often conducting online research and posting photos for friends with less access.

Current Internet penetration is estimated between 5 to 25%, with only 5% of the population having full access. The rest have limited access that includes a national e-mail system, pro-government websites, and some other services [9]. Cubans with email access often do not have web access. It is more common to have access to email than to the wider Internet.

Participants reported Facebook as the most popular social networking site as well as website. In a context in which most people do not have consistent access to any kind of communications technology including telephone, intermittent access to Facebook is used for basic communication for both work and socializing. Participants with lower access reported that they rely on others to help maintain their Facebook presence, highlighting the importance of collaborative use of Internet tools.

Cuba Intercambio

Based on our previous findings, at the time of this writing we are deploying a crowd-sourced information system called Cuba Intercambio. Our research has shown that Cubans are eager to access information from outside their country but are limited by restrictions such as content blocks, high access costs, and time limitations. Access to email is more widespread than access to the Internet more generally. As we have shown, Cubans are already using collaborative methods to access and share information.

Drawing from these findings, we have developed an online group that encourages exchanges between individuals living in Cuba and the rest of the world. Cubans may send information requests to volunteers living outside of Cuba. We envision a combination of crowdsourced information retrieval and cultural exchange. We found that Cubans are eager to show outsiders what life is like in Cuba. Consequently, the information service will be two-way, allowing people outside Cuba to ask questions of Cuban citizens. Making the system two-way will also help keep implicit power relationships more nearly equal, fostering a spirit of mutual respect and desire for increased understanding.

How it Works
To build an initial version, we are prototyping with existing technologies [6] using a combination of a Facebook group and email in order to allow Cubans with email access to more easily retrieve information through a network of people living outside of Cuba who have access to high-speed Internet and non-censored content. For this pilot study, we have created an email address that people can email with a search query (for example: 'when is the next lunar eclipse?'). We then post the anonymous requests to the Cuba Intercambio Facebook group. Members of the group field the request by running Internet searches and copying the results to the posts on the Facebook group. We then respond to the original requester via email with the group's responses. It is also possible for people in Cuba to ask questions directly to the Facebook group.

Further, people outside of Cuba will be able to ask Cubans with access to Facebook about daily life in Cuba, tips for travel to Cuba, etc. We hope to encourage a cross-cultural dialogue.

Accessibility is a key goal. We aim is to make the system workable with the Internet access Cubans have now, and scale gracefully to remain useful if/when their access increases. We expect the information retrieval aspect of our group to be useful for only a short period of time, after which more Cubans will have direct Internet access. In addition to providing our participants with information, we also aim to build relationships between Cubans and participants outside Cuba. By observing the activity in the group, we will gain insights into the ways in which information access via the Internet can affect the culture and beliefs of a literate but isolated population.

Methods
Throughout this study, we will collect usage data for each user of the Facebook group as well as those that email the system. Using ethnographic and anthropological methodology as a foundation, we will also conduct semi-structured interviews and participant-observation with users of our group.

Open Questions

Through this study, we are interested in exploring several open questions, including:

- What types of information do Cubans seek through Cuba Intercambio?
- What power issues arise from a system like Cuba Intercambio? Does a two-way communication aspect help to mitigate these power issues?
- How does information access via the Internet affect the culture and beliefs of our participants?

Conclusion

We have presented a new method for meeting Cuban's information needs. Based on research using user-centered design, we developed Cuba Intercambio by taking into account the contexts, interests and needs as reported to us by participants. We are aware that complex issues exist surrounding cultural and value differences, power balances, and political tensions. Through the continual examinations of our own subjectivity [7], iterative design that includes our participants as co-designers, and input from other researchers, we seek to explore these issues in hopes that our participants may benefit from our research.

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