

Kcho: "We should not be afraid of the Internet"

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No one is asking: "Who are you?, What are you doing?, or why are you on the internet? It is just a matter of logging in as guest user, and enter the password.

Cuba's internet thirst is so voracious that, given the chance, some boys have been connected for 16 consecutive hours. Others have been surfing the internet all night long.

Alexis Leyva, Kcho, opened a 24-hour internet access via Wi-Fi to those who visit "Kcho Romerillo Studio, Laboratory for Art". This place is now the first hotspot in Cuba where you can find free and wireless internet. The artist shares his personal ADSL connection at 2 Mgb/s, granted by the Ministry of Culture, with all users who visit the project on daily basis. Few weeks after the start of the initiative, the project averages 150 visitors daily.

"We should not be afraid of internet. We should open it. We are in Cuba, not in North Africa (he is referring to the Arab Springs). We Cubans are mambises. Someone comes to invade our country and people go outside to defend it, like they do with their moms", Kcho explained to rule out fears.

"Cyberspace does exist and we must know to use it to defend ourselves of all that crap written about us out there. The first thing to fight against that crap is the password: '*Aqui no se rinde nadie* (No one surrenders here)'. And this is a powerful message".

Leyva says people can visit any page without restriction. All depends on the connection speed. Of course, it varies according to the number of users connected simultaneously. "There are web pages forbidden, but it happens because of the U.S. blockade. We are providing free access here", the artist confirmed.

Before the question on the cost of connectivity, the creator admitted it is expensive but it is also worthy. “The Revolution provided me free education and it was way more expensive. My work pays this Wi-Fi, this service. The number is not important. Cuba gave me the tools to overcome any obstacle, face any tasks, and be useful. I was raised with that purpose.

“In today’s Cuba, it is more important to do this than buying a house at the beach (we can do that now). A man is happy with a house to live in. There are people living with less. Life is short, and we should not pass away without trying to send a good message. If there is a thing you learn in Cuba, it is to share what you have”.

Despite free and open access to internet is grabbing headlines now, the library Juan Almeida Bosque (belonging to this cultural center) already offered the service since 2013. Large queues were organized from Tuesday to Sunday —6:00am-9:00pm— to get internet access.

In this first chatroom, a woman, saleswoman at the Comodoro Hotel’s toy shop, after visiting the laboratory for months, found her sister who had flown to Europe ten years ago and the family did not know about her.

These stories of reunion, closeness, are very familiar at Kcho Romerillo Studio. The Wi-Fi experience, regardless of being short, could be seen as the future of a computerized Cuba. It also reveals that visitors’ main goal is to communicate with their families and friends abroad.

ROMERILLO: MORE THAN A FREE WI-FI

Amanda opens her laptop, logs in as a guest user 4 and writes the password “*aquinoserindenadie*”. She studies at ENA (National School of Arts) and visits every day the studio to chat with her father who is not living here in Cuba.

“It was tough to pay 5 cuc for each card. I could do it twice in a month. What Kcho has done is something awesome. He is bringing families together”.

Do you know why the password?

The password got my attention the first time I logged in, and then I asked. A woman who works here told me it was a phrase said by Almeida in a battle after the Granma landing.

Are you here only for the Internet?

Normally, yes. But the connection is not always good and then I enter the library and enjoy the gallery. I also talked to other boys.

I believe this is the goal of Romerillo, to make young people come closer to art, history. Romerillo is more than a free Wi-Fi.

“The Wi-Fi is just another tool to bring people closer to culture, education. It also deserves credit to exhibit Wilfredo Lam’s biggest dish since it had never been exhibited before. It is true some are here because of the Wi-Fi, but you cannot leave here talking only about it,” Leysi Rubio, project’s spokeswoman, says.

Kcho Romerillo Studio, Laboratory for the Arts’ building started in 2012 in a complex and unstable neighborhood, located west of the capital. Twelve blocs, which were six large garbage dumps, have been subjected to a cleaning and drainage process.

Then, it began the work in common areas like parks, the cultural center, and then it was open the Laboratory for the Arts as a completion point.

According to Kcho, data from the Ministry of the Interior points out that the crime rate in Romerillo dramatically dropped in Havana in one year. And perhaps this project is essential in this fact, as the project is useful and generates social development.

Good intentions are changing the neighborhood. Romerillo seemed to be destined to violence and conflicts years ago. It was labeled as a "socially complex neighborhood". Romerillo is nowadays the first place with open and free access to internet, a place where art plays an important role in today's changes. This neighborhood is redefining itself. We hope many things can be learned from Romerillo's experience.

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