Local Bloggers Make Their Mark on Web

SAM JACOBY | OCTOBER 26, 2007

Part two in a two-part series on the Internet in Nicaragua

Seven years ago there was only one Internet café in Granada. Today there are more than 20.

In the popular beach town of San Juandel Sur, there are just as many people surfing the Web in downtown cyber cafés as there are surfing the waves. And in more rural regions like Estelí, cyber cafés are sprouting up on blocks where once there were only shops selling animal feed and cowboy boots.

"We have all the cyber cafés that we can handle," says Nicaraguan Web guru Alvaro Berroteran.

With Internet cafés popping up in more and more neighborhoods across the country, a growing number of Nicaraguans are logging onto the social-networking and blogging Web sites that have proven so successful in other parts of the world. The popular online friend network www.Hi5.com lists some 52,000 Nicaraguans with personal profile pages.

Others are going online for news and research, to stay in contact with family members living abroad, or simply to blog. Berroteran, owner of a Web-hosting firm and the administrator of a popular list of Nicaraguan blogs, is enjoying the surge in online activity.

"I started putting together a list of Nicaraguan blogs as a side project,"Berroteran says. "I thought maybe there would be a hundred, two hundreds blogs. Now it's too much work. There are literally thousands and new ones that show up every day."

Nicaraguan blogs range from the personal – a university student complaining about class and schoolwork – to the ambitious and deliberately controversial, like **Barricada.com.ni,** a blog on politics and current events.

Rodrigo Peñalba, 26, a Web designer and administrator in Managua, started the Barricada site last year, snagging the politically charged domain name from the defunct official Sandinista newspaper of the 1980s.

Peñalba describes Barricada.com.ni as a "collective blog of anonymous writers." The site lists hundreds of contributors, all under pseudonym.

Though generally left-leaning, it has become a vocal outlet for opinions from all points of view. A recent post solicited aid for those left homeless by Hurricane Felix, and another

ridiculed the politicized Nicaraguan court system.

Barricada's active online community leaves Peñalba free to focus on his main project, **www.MarcaAcme.com**, an elaborately designed Web portal devoted to Nicaraguan art and literature. On the blog, Peñalba lists events, posts reviews, articles, and interviews from artists and writers from all over Central America.

Peñalba began the site three years ago and it now averages 40,000 hits a month. That is impressive in a country with barely 5 million residents, only a small portion of whom are online. Peñalba, however, is quick to note that the site reaches a far wider audience.

"Only about half of the visitors are from Nicaragua," Peñalba says. "A lot are from Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Chile, Argentina. The United States as well."

MarcaAcme.com is part of a growing network of Nicaraguan Web sites that are catapulting the country into the broader Central American digital community. The rest of the world is paying attention.

"We're a niche space," Peñalba says. "But it's a niche that's growing."

Clearing Cyber Hurdles

As quickly as the country's online presence is expanding, significant hurdles – both economic and cultural – remain.

"It's difficult for Nicaragua to have a deep relationship with the Internet," Berroteran says."60% of the population is poor; they are thinking about feeding their families, not about going online."

Even as Nicaraguan Web sites and portals proliferate, many of the most active users live abroad.

"There is a community of Nicaraguans online in Miami; they blog more and they post more," Peñalba says. "Internet is cheaper, faster, and easier to find in the United States."

The cost of Internet access in Nicaragua is high compared to even its close neighbors. "In Costa Rica, a good connection costs $10 a month," Peñabla says. "Here, for half the speed, it costs $40. That is a huge block to development. Huge."

Colin Maclay, managing director of the BerkmanCenter for Internet and Technology at HarvardLawSchool, says, "Achieving a critical mass of relevant content services is even harder when serving a hard market" like Nicaragua's. The problems, he explained in an e-mail, can be related to power, cost, lack of habit and literacy.

An Internet connection is only half of the equation. Expensive computer hardware and software is also necessary.

That may soon change. Advocates of open-source software are hard at work in promoting Linux – a free competitor to Microsoft's Windows – as a low-cost alternative for small businesses and private homes.

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"People are too poor to buy new equipment," says Leandro Gómez, the contact manager of Ubuntu Nicaragua, an opensource software advocacy group. "Schools don't have the money, businesses don't have the money. Free software is a great opportunity to bring resources to places that cannot afford them."

Norman García teaches a class on the Linux operating system at the private Institute of Computing and Systems in Managua, one of the few offered outside of universities.

"A license for Windows costs $180, Microsoft Office is another $200, you can spend $500 or $600 on licenses alone," he says. "We want to show that there is an alternative, there is another option with zero cost."

He notes that only the government, which has a long-standing contract with Microsoft, and the large businesses use legally licensed software.

"For students, for small businesses, it's impossible to afford," García says. Gómez and García are also working on a program to reuse discarded computers, installing them with lightweight versions of Linux.

"We're hoping to set them up in high schools, in public places where kids can use the computers," Gómez says.

Little by little, Nicaragua is lurching into the digital age.

"We're maybe 10, 15 years behind," Peñalba says. "But we're getting there."

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