

## Business

# Mobile Net: Cuba's new revolution

## Many now wonder how they ever lived without it

**HAVANA:** Since arriving in Cuba just two years ago, mobile Internet has revolutionized life here - helping people find food, fuel and even medicine amid crippling shortages, and helping them organize protests in a country where waving a placard can land you in deep trouble. Many in the Americas' only communist-ruled state now wonder how they ever lived without it.

On the WhatsApp group Red Solidaria (Solidarity network), questions about basic necessities abound: "Flour please??" "Has anyone seen toilet paper??" or even "Does anyone know where to find milk??" Other online groups allow people to sell or exchange hard-to-come-by products: one user who goes by Gaby is looking to swap shower gel for toilet paper and soft drinks, while Leo is offering cooking oil and soap in exchange for baby food.

Yet more online groups see people rely on the tenacity of product scouts. On a platform called Que hay? (What is there?), photos of toothpaste, soap and cheese are uploaded from a supermarket by a user who had queued for four hours just to get in. "There's a lot of stuff here," the patient patron, Wendy, advises other would-be clients, some of whom thank her for sharing the intel.

Up until Dec 2018, when mobile internet first arrived, Cubans wishing to use the Internet had to find one of several dozen Wi-Fi hotspots in public parks or squares, and pay dearly for an unreliable connection. And even that initial access only became possible in 2015. Today, with most people now using 4G service, more than a third of all Cubans - some 4.2 million of the is-

land nation's 11.2 million inhabitants - are surfing the web from their smartphones.

"It seems so natural to us today, but sometimes I stop and think that two years ago, we didn't have it, and I think: 'How was that possible?'" said Marta Deus. For the 32-year-old, the internet opened the door to entrepreneurship.

### A 'revolution'

Since July, Deus has run an Internet and mobile app-based home delivery company named Mandao - a first for Cuba. Already, Mandao's delivery bikes and their bright yellow cooler bags are ubiquitous on the streets of Havana, delivering some 100 meals daily from 70 client restaurants - a business model significantly boosted when city dwellers were ordered to stay home to quell the spread of the coronavirus.

Mobile Internet "has been a complete revolution," Deus said. Apart from food and tips on where to find gasoline, some online groups are dedicated to helping people find medications, which are in constant short supply. "It is much easier today to find someone who has what you need: without these groups, this would have been impossible. It would have been a matter of luck," said Ricardo Torres, an economist at the University of Havana.

The sea change in Internet use in Cuba also has yielded new outlets for recreation and making friends. Yasser Gonzalez, 35, wanted to organize a group of cycling enthusiasts. He says thanks to Facebook access, he started organizing events. The first major ride through Havana came in 2015... with four bikers taking part.



HAVANA: Cuban Yasser Gonzalez uses his cell phone to connect to the Internet at the Malecon on Nov 24, 2020. — AFP

Now, more than 100 people show up for monthly rides.

And it's not just riders who check out his Facebook page. One day, he got a message from a city government employee about plans for a new bike trail along the Malecon, which lines the coast in Havana. "I can now sometimes join meetings at which they discuss city infrastructure plans," Gonzalez told AFP.

Of course, there are downsides too - the

government can see what's going on in the public groups. Authorities in Havana canceled one of Gonzalez's cycling events in October, officially because of the pandemic. "How can they cancel an event that we can really demonstrate is safe for people?" he asked. Gonzalez tweeted directly at Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel about the event. A few days later, he was questioned by police, who he said warned him not to pursue the issue. — AFP

### News in brief

#### PSA sales slump on virus hit

**PARIS:** France's PSA, in the process of merging with Fiat Chrysler, said yesterday its 2020 sales plunged 27.8 percent to 2.5 million vehicles as the coronavirus pandemic shut down economies worldwide. Sales in Europe, its main market, were down 29.7 percent at 2.1 million, while in China they plunged nearly 58 percent to 45,965 vehicles, continuing a rapid decline from 740,000 in 2014. PSA, which groups the Peugeot, Citroen, DS, Opel and Vauxhall brands, said the pandemic had boosted online sales and it expected to sell 100,000 vehicles this way in 2021, up from 40,000 last year. — AFP

#### Norwegian drops long-haul

**OSLO:** Norwegian Air Shuttle, a pioneer in low-cost long-haul flights, said yesterday it would drop long distance routes and focus on Europe as it tries to restructure and avoid bankruptcy. "The board today presented the company's new business plan based on a simpler structure and a network of European routes with no long-haul," Norwegian said in a statement, adding at a press conference that the move would affect more than 2,000 jobs. — AFP

## Tech show offers transport solutions for COVID world

**WASHINGTON:** The global pandemic has put the brakes on a number of mobility trends, prompting the transportation industry to rethink strategy. New options on display at the all-digital 2021 Consumer Electronics Show underscore the changes in mobility during the global health crisis, with more personal vehicle use and less emphasis on sharing.

Interest in electric vehicles meanwhile has accelerated in the wake of the stunning growth of Tesla, with many parts of the world seeing increased adoption. And more options are being offered for personal "micromobility" and delivery amid the surge in online commerce. General Motors offered its vision at CES this week, unveiling a new BrightDrop brand of electric delivery vans along with previews of its newer Bolt, Cadillac and Hummer electric vehicles.

"Before the pandemic, shared mobility was the name of the game," said Axel Schmidt, global auto analyst with Accenture. "Covid-19 has put the brakes on this." The vehicles shown at CES appeared to be taking a page out of Tesla's book by touting performance and design features. The GMC Hummer EV set to start production this year features powerful acceleration, hands-free driving and "crab walk" mode which can navigate difficult terrain by turning its wheels up to 10 degrees.

"It has a crazy amount of power and celebrates the performance

possibilities of electric propulsion," said GM engineer Aaron Pfau of the mega-truck. Audi meanwhile flaunted its concept high-performance RS e-tron GT sports car, which can accelerate to 100 km per hour in around three seconds. It represents "the future of electric high-performance cars," Audi's Michael Loehe said in a CES streamed presentation. Schmidt of Accenture said that electric car drivers "are surprised by the power and performance."

Additionally, the electric powertrain allows for more design flexibility "so you have different space concepts" in a vehicle. Schmidt said autonomous driving, a feature at CES in previous years, has taken a back seat as the technology is refined. Autonomous driving - whose goals have been pushed back amid technical challenges - is still in an "evolutionary" period, according to Schmidt and unlikely to go mainstream in the next few years.

### Micromobility still hot

So-called "micromobility" meanwhile remained a hot topic with the showcasing of the Segway Ninebot smart electric bike and a presentation from Italian bike-sharing startup Vaimoo, which uses artificial intelligence and geolocation to keep the two-wheelers available where needed. Cake, the Swedish e-bike maker, unveiled an electric food delivery box to keep meals hot or cold for the fast-growing trend during the pandemic. The temperature-controlled box from Sweden's Dometic is designed for the Cake-made bikes and is expected to launch later this year. The companies said global food deliveries have already increased by 60 percent from 2017, and are likely to grow further in the coming years. While the pandemic has shifted transport trends - with many people avoiding mass transit and shared rides - a big question is how long these changes will last, according to Schmidt. — AFP