

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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ECUADOR

THE RESCUE OF A PRESIDENT: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INFORMING AND MOBILISING CITIZENS IN NATIONAL CRISES



IMAGINAR

Rossana Flores and Hugo Carrión
www.imaginar.org

Introduction

Since October 2008, when the new Ecuadorian Constitution was passed, the country has been undergoing significant changes in its legislative framework. In May 2009, the National Assembly (formerly the Congress) filed 293 new laws or legal amendments; and 24 months later, 68 of these new laws or amendments had been passed.

The new legislation has made changes in different areas, such as education, justice, citizens' participation, and public administration. One of the laws passed on 29 September 2010 was the Organic Law on Government Services which homologated the administration of the national police and army with that of the civil public administration.

The inadequate and insufficient dissemination of the contents of the law, in addition to the poor interpretation of the new laws by one sector of the police and army, led to police protests that initially seemed to be focused on the issue of wages, but that ended with the Ecuadorian president's kidnapping and an attempted coup. The results of the police protests that took place on Thursday 30 September, now called "30S" by the media, were unfortunate: eight casualties including policemen, soldiers and civilians. The national police's image was completely shattered and democracy staggered at a time when it seemed the phantom of presidential downfalls and moves to overthrow the government had finally been banished from Ecuador.

During the protests, information and communications technologies (ICTs) played a key role as alternative communication channels by transmitting the course of events live and encouraging citizen mobilisation.

Regulatory context

One of the main achievements in the new Constitution is the incorporation of the right for all Ecuadorians have to access to ICTs, as enshrined in Article 16. A debate on communication, freedom of expression, and the ownership of the media was held by the National Constituent Assembly, after

which the Communications Law was declared a priority law that was to be issued immediately. Two years later, however, the debate is stagnant due to completely different positions on key matters.

On one hand, the national government claims the citizens' right to be informed. This administration is known for its extensive use of quite efficient government communication strategies, including a radio programme that is broadcast each Saturday where the president talks about his activities. The presidency also uses Facebook efficiently and a Twitter account with around 70,000 followers, making it the fourth most popular account in Ecuador, sharing honours with showbiz stars, singers and sportscasters. Furthermore, for the first time in our country, so-called public media has been created – one public television channel, one public radio station, and one public news agency.

On the other hand, the opposition and groups that object to the government's communication work, amongst other things, oppose government advertising, believing it is disproportionate compared to other advertising on media channels. They also object to the government's control of both public media and private media channels that were seized due to unpaid debts they held with several state banks. According to the opposition, the private media outlets now in the hands of pro-government administrators, which they call "confiscated media", have unbalanced the communications equilibrium in the country.

Police protests erupt...

On 30 September 2010 Ecuador lived an unprecedented episode in favour of democracy. Thousands of citizens filled the streets to protect the constitutional order by ensuring the will of the electorate who had voted for President Rafael Correa.

Since its return to democracy in 1978, Ecuador has lived through several incidents of political instability that have ended in overthrowing constitutionally elected presidents. From 1997 to 2006 Ecuador had seven presidents, excluding a fleeting triumvirate in 2000. These periods of instability have taken place after massive demonstrations by citizens who sought fundamental change in the country's political management. Back in 2003, a citizen movement called "Los Forajidos" (The

Outlaws), protesting with the cry of “All leave!”, not only demanded that ex-President Lucio Gutiérrez step down, but that all appointed politicians vacate their positions, showing the little credibility the political class enjoyed.

Since 2006, after the election of Correa, Ecuador has experienced stability. This in spite of the changes made by the establishment of the Constituent Assembly with full powers to issue a new Constitution, as well as the passing of a significant number of laws, many of which affect private interests in many sectors. After almost four years in office, Correa still enjoys a historic general admiration of the people.

The police protests erupted after the passing of the new Organic Law on Government Services. This law eliminated all bonuses and additional benefits for all government employees, including the police and the military. On the morning of 30 September 2010 the media reported on a police strike that was taking place in Regimiento Quito, the National Police headquarters in the capital of Ecuador, where the strikers refused to work until the law passed the night before was revoked.

Immediately after learning about the strike, Correa went to the police headquarters to talk to the demonstrators and, in his words, share the advantages of the law. When he arrived, however, they greeted him with insults which led to a heated speech by Correa, after which he decided to leave, since no dialogue was possible. The demonstrators blocked his exit and the situation turned violent: live images transmitted scenes of aggression against the president, who started asphyxiating when tear gas was used, before he was taken to the police hospital which is next to the police headquarters.

Confusion reigned in the country while the news reported on thefts, looting and chaos throughout the country after almost the entire public forces decided to join the strike. The police who guarded the National Assembly had taken over the building and stopped members from entering. The runway of Mariscal Sucre Airport in Quito had also been blocked by some members of the air force. The people's attention, however, was focused on the news on the president's situation.

Around noon, Correa made a phone call to the public radio station and reported a coup against his government, and that he had been kidnapped and was unable to leave the hospital. “Policemen are trying to get into my room; if something happens to me, [I send] my endless love to my country and my family, wherever they are,” he said. After these words, thousands of citizens gathered around the

hospital and the Presidential Palace where the ministers and other public officials were organising the president's rescue, as declared by Minister of Foreign Affairs Ricardo Patiño. The people, however, were violently and disproportionately attacked by the police when they tried to reach Regimiento Quito.

Early in the afternoon, Correa electronically signed Executive Decree No. 488, which declared a state of exception,¹ and issued a world press release explaining the situation in the country. This resulted in international support. After the decree was issued, the government started an indefinite and uninterrupted national TV and radio transmission, and interrupted private radio and TV broadcasting to unify all the media around the official reports of the situation. The decree also authorised the armed forces' mobilisation to protect citizen security.

Police demands and violence rose while the president refused to revoke the approved amendments. The Chief of the Armed Forces Joint Command, General Ernesto González, as well as the high military command, reiterated their support to the president, promised to restore the country's stability, and requested the approved law's revision. However, official information sources disregarded the armed forces' demands for the law to be revised.

Throughout the day, politicians opposing the government disseminated statements supporting the insurgents. The opposing members of the Assembly met in a hotel and demanded amnesty for the rebels. Counter-government demonstrators, gathered around the public media building, demanded that their points of view be published.

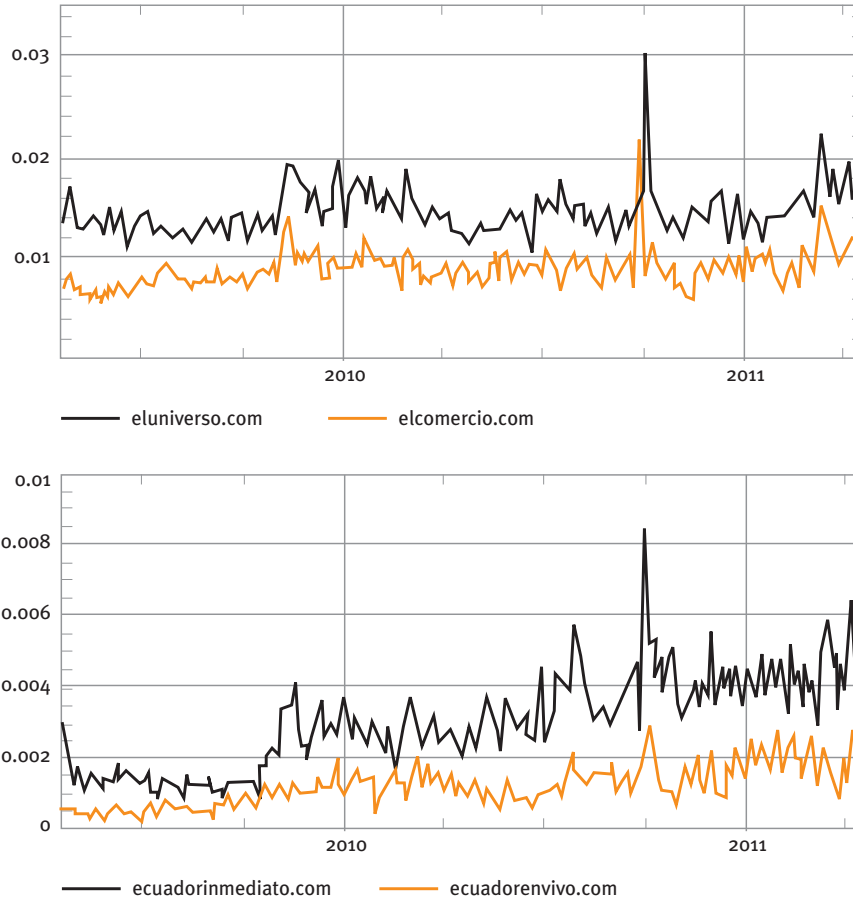
The national broadcasting of official news was interrupted at approximately 8:00 p.m. and the private media started transmitting the impressive military assault executed in the environs of the police hospital, during which the police and the army clashed. Correa was rescued by an elite army group, the Special Operations Group (GEO), and an elite police group, the Intervention and Rescue Group (GIR). Live TV broadcasts showed the president's convoy being fired upon.

Some minutes later, from the Carondelet Presidential Palace, Correa addressed the citizens who had gathered in Plaza de la Independencia with a speech describing that date as “one of the saddest” in his life and “without a doubt the saddest in his almost four years in office.”

¹ The state of exception restricts some civil rights, such as the free movement of persons, etc.

FIGURE 1.

Daily reach of leading online publications (percentages)



The role of ICTs during the uprising

ICTs played a decisive role in this specific affair by democratising access to information. The events were transmitted by traditional means, such as radio and TV, but also by the country's major online newspapers, which experienced a surge in traffic (as high as three times the normal). Most of their websites crashed and were inaccessible during the entire day. The online newspaper *ecuadorinmediato.com* turned out to be a special case – it quickly modified its format and was able to keep transmitting information. Other newspapers, such as *Hoy* and *El Comercio*, could only publish through Twitter because their conventional sites were no longer operating.

The graphs in Figure 1 illustrate the online traffic for the main digital publications. The peak corresponds to 30 September, when the highest

rates in access to the internet in recent years were recorded.

The journalists and citizens who were inside the hospital used Twitter to report the events in detail. According to the Twitter 2010 Year in Review report,² one #30S tweet from the Presidency was fifth amongst the ten most “popular” tweets of the microblogging network worldwide. The Presidency's official Twitter account³ reported on the “30S” events, while hashtag #30S described the police crisis, becoming a hot topic and trend on Twitter that Thursday.⁴ It is worth noting that the Presidency's Twitter account is fourth among the country's most viewed accounts, with 70,000 followers (as of April 2011).

2 yearinreview.Twitter.com/powerful-tweets

3 Twitter.com/Presidencia_Ec

4 Trending topics are the most popular keywords used in Twitter at a given moment.

The debate shifted to other social networks, including Facebook. According to statistics, around 3.5 million Ecuadorians were Facebook members in August 2011 (i.e. around 25% of the population) – for every one internet user, one is a Facebook member.⁵

Mobile telephony kept relatives and friends informed and up to date concerning incidents that were taking place in different areas of the country. As would be expected, journalists also transmitted information to their respective media outlets using mobile phones – many of these journalists and camera people were assaulted by the police.

The electronically signed presidential decree authorised the armed forces' mobilisation and the control of information broadcast within the country, while private channels transmitted the news overseas via the internet, and this situation influenced the national chain's interruption.

The government's use of ICTs enabled it to neutralise a potential coup and to secure international support and solidarity. By means of social networks, the citizens mobilised to defend democracy. The information sought through the internet and the government's national chain fractured the monopoly that the traditional media had held in similar situations internationally in the past.

Conclusions

Society is unquestionably influenced by the people's access to new technologies. Although internet penetration in Ecuador is still low, it is significantly higher than it was five years ago – in 2006 it was below 5%, and by March 2011 this percentage had increased to four times that number.

The combined use of ICTs enabled the presence of more than one information channel. Through mobile technology, access to internet and social networks the citizens became information and news producers, which gave rise to a new type of journalism that some sectors have called citizen, social or participative journalism.

On the other hand, state regulations on the traditional media do not always include the new technologies where coverage and dissemination potential exceeds the national scope and opens the possibility of accessing plural and diverse information. Real-time updating of information generated by citizens and independent journalists is an invaluable source that secures the citizens' right to such access.

An innovative element was the government's use of ICTs in times of crisis which facilitated its decision making in the most decisive moments. The executive decree's electronic signature, mobile communication during the president's kidnapping, and the Presidency's communication through Twitter were fundamental in keeping the country informed and reaching a solution to the conflict.

Something that seems less innovative, but which was clear on 30 September, is that social networks and SMS are used to organise even more than to share media-related information. Once again, these technologies facilitated the citizens' immediate mobilisation.

Action steps

- Recommend that the government strive to increase broadband internet penetration as a way to access the means of communication and information.
- Implement ways of direct communication through the existing platforms between the leaders and the public and – along with this – recommend that the access of public officials and authorities to social networks not be restricted by means of technological tricks or administrative provisions. A proper understanding of the benefits of social technology and adequate training could lead to the creative use of this technology in favour of democracy and participation.
- Keep internet, social networks and other web applications away from the regulations that govern traditional media; and, in turn, promote neutrality in the network and its contents as an essential principle of the rights to communication.
- Establish social control mechanisms for the management and accountability of the information generated by the media and the government.
- Recommend that the media develop contingency plans for high information demand and increased traffic in particular crisis situations to insure the provision of continuous services.
- Promote the development of ethical codes and principles for the exercise of citizen journalism as a way to insure information quality, accuracy and veracity. ■

⁵ According to Ministry of Telecommunications statistics, internet penetration in Ecuador is 20%.

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

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THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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