

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

*Focus on access to online information and knowledge
– advancing human rights and democracy*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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*Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued
intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.*

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Introduction

Unsettling the “information society”...

Alan Finlay

Most of the country reports that follow, from countries as diverse as Mexico, Cameroon, Iraq, Japan and the Netherlands, have one thing in common: they show that the “information society” – especially conceived of as a democratic space of engagement – is never really secured. Instead it involves what the Foundation for Media Alternatives (Philippines) describes as a “continuing tug-of-war between the forces of authoritarianism and democratisation.”

This “tug-of-war” is seen on several fronts, whether in the cultural and religious censorship of more conservative states, the curtailing of basic freedoms in the “war on global terrorism”, or the “copyright wars”, where restrictive global copyright regimes and trade practices override the nuances of local copyright freedoms and access to information rights.

It is generally felt in the reactionary backlash to what has been the more open territory of the online sphere. For instance, Pangea (Spain) describes “a growing perception among several social sectors that while the internet revolution was initially positive... the online world is becoming a wild territory that needs to be drastically limited to protect everyone.” Depending where you are coming from, this “wild territory” has a number of inhabitants: terrorists, pirates and propagandists, stalkers and child abductors, paedophiles and pornographers, even activists. A kind of virtual soapbox, it permits the problematic: hate speech, blasphemy, character assassination, copyright theft, and the darker dealings of fraud, do-it-yourself bomb kits, and (for some) rap, disco, and dance. Which means that while it provokes legitimate concerns about rights and safeties that any society faces, it also provides ample cannon fodder that can be used to shut society down.

One of the ways that society is being shut down is through copyright regimes – and these reports suggest that it is uncertain who, in the end, is winning the copyright wars. Despite moves towards open access licensing, Wolf Ludwig (Switzerland) points out that there are worrying counter-actions:

Initiatives launched in neighbouring Germany, such as the Heidelberg Appeal, [encourage] scientists to abuse their author’s rights and to exclude their work from search engines like Google, thereby undermining open and public access.

Asia holds a light on many issues the rest of the world will confront in the future, and shows that vigilance from the civil society advocate is crucial. The Institute for InfoSociomics

at Tama University (Japan) describes how concerns such as the safety of children online can impact negatively on content freedoms generally. Meanwhile, the Korean Progressive Network Jinbonet (South Korea) finds that control of the internet can have “a seriously chilling effect on the general public.”

Where the will to implement freedom of information policies does not exist, the capacity to restrict access to information seems in abundance. LaNeta shows that in Mexico the inhibitors of the information society are perennial: “...political control, market monopolies in communication media and [information and communications technologies], and pressures exerted by the country’s powerful organised crime syndicates.” At the same time, Anat Ben-David and Sam Bahour describe how in the occupied Palestinian territory, a divided society means a divided information society:

Although PaTel is the same company that provides internet connectivity both in Gaza and the West Bank... websites with content related to pornography, dating, sex education, gay and lesbian information and other religions [besides Islam] remain accessible in the West Bank, but are inaccessible from Gaza.

One of the lessons of these reports is that e-government does not mean democracy. As reports such as those by Diplo-Foundation (Morocco) and Colnodo (Colombia) suggest, e-government implies *efficiency*, and some e-government initiatives are primarily about “doing business” with the “citizen-as-client”. This to the extent that the Swiss government portal ch.ch is described as the country’s “electronic business card”. An e-government programme might entail accountability, transparency and citizen voice; however, it might also mask the absence of these.

Cooperative Sulá Batsú (Costa Rica) captures what seems to be a phenomenon in many countries: the “institutionalisation” of the online citizen. This is a phenomenon that goes beyond e-government programmes, and points to the *expectations* of the public regarding the ability to access online services, the increasing efficacy of online advocacy (compared to, for instance, street protests or doorstopping), and online political campaigning during elections. Bytes for All (Pakistan) tells us that: “[m]ore than any formal platform or organisation, the blogosphere has probably amounted to the strongest form of global activism.” Meanwhile the Institute for InfoSociomics says that Japan’s policy on the “advanced use of ICTs” aims to get “80% of the population to appreciate the role of ICTs in resolving social problems by 2010.”

But this has a dark side. KICTANet points out how the same ICT platforms were used in Kenya’s recent elections

to “spread messages of ethnic hatred, intimidation and calls to violence.” Bureaucratic alienation can also be felt at the other end of a government call centre line as much as in the echoing corridors of administrative power.

Overall the reports show that building an information society based on human rights is dependent on (at least) access to infrastructure, political will, solid legislation, participation, political and economic stability, and the availability of skills (see, for instance, the report by Alaa Aldin Jawad Kadhemi Al-Radhi on Iraq’s reconstruction, and the need for the “return of Iraqi expats and displaced intellectuals”). Not one of these factors alone will suffice.

While Ahmad El Sharif (Syria) describes a thirst for self-expression, social networking, and accessing information online – discussion forums in Syria “cover topics as diverse as society, religion, science, politics, and health and beauty” – Bytes for All (Pakistan) stresses the need for *reliable* local content. An informed citizen is a properly informed one, and beyond the benefits of local content (which it calls “kosher” content), how does one develop a sense of trust in information? Wikipedia is one way. However, as Bytes for All puts it:

The fundamental brilliance of user-generated content is also its most troubling flaw: if you have poor quality data being used to generate content, the resultant quality of the published content will be just as poor.

A case is also made for mobile phones. Over 90% of Colombians own a mobile phone. Despite this, mobile phones have not been used to spread public information, such as crop prices and weather warnings. Instead, what is called a “disruptive technology” earlier on in this publication has been “colonised” by advertisers and other commercial interests. Given the ubiquity of mobile phones, any access initiative has to consider the potential of a mobile strategy.

ZaMirNET (Croatia) builds a convincing argument for the differently abled. Its perspective is unequivocal: “Information access is even more important for people with disabilities because most have mobility impairments and are more dependent on the use of ICTs... If web accessibility is not achieved, many people are at risk of being partially or totally excluded from the information society.” One could just as easily say “excluded from society.” It prompts the need for more projects and funding to be geared towards the differently abled. Few reports addressed this crucial area, and few projects are widely visible in the field.

Ironically, the terrain of “access to information” has knowledge barriers in itself: it has pockets of specialisation beyond the everyday discussions of most people. This has the unfortunate consequence that while we are talking about

fundamental rights (such as freedom of expression, the right to participate, the freedom to learn and to know), these discussions are often hidden from the purview of the person in the street. They are, for instance, seldom brought succinctly to the public’s attention by the mainstream media.

This is a challenge for civil society activists – both in terms of getting a workable knowledge of the issues at hand for themselves, but also when engaging others, whether to raise awareness, to demand, or to persuade. It is hoped that at least some of the advocacy work that lies ahead is demystified in these reports.

As was the case in last year’s GISWatch, the country reports are framed by regional reports: from North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Europe, and South Asia. Rich regional comparisons are invited, and a context for country-level concerns and tensions suggested.

The value of a publication like this – to cast shadows, illuminate differences, pockets of challenges and changes – is once again highlighted in the reports collected here. Thank you to the authors for their time and, in a number of instances, courage in writing them.

Read them and be informed. ■

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy*. It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

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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