GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008

Focus on access to infrastructure

Global Information Society Watch
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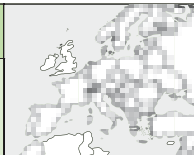
Introduction

With a total of 7.5 million inhabitants, Switzerland ranks among the smaller countries in Europe. It is comparable to the municipality of London (7.5 million). It is a federalist country composed of 26 cantons (FSO, 2008) with a high degree of autonomy. It is also subdivided in four linguistic and cultural areas: a Swiss-German part (5.1 million inhabitants), a Swiss-French part (1.8 million), a Swiss-Italian part (325,000) and a Reto-Romanic part (35,000). Political consensus between these cultural areas is difficult and mostly time consuming.

For this survey basic data was collected from the Federal Office of Communication (OFCOM), the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO) and the Federal Delegate for Informatics. There is a great variety of material on issues regarding the development and state of the national information society from different sources (governmental as well as non-governmental). The federal government announced its first strategy on the information society in 1998 – a strategy which has been perceived by some stakeholders as "ambitious". It was revised in January 2006 (OFCOM, 2006), but was still criticised by civil society members as "too pragmatic, without any visionary approach" (Ludwig, 2006). The government played a proactive role in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process between 2002 and 2005, with Switzerland hosting the first summit in December 2003 in Geneva. Switzerland was among the few countries at the time to include civil society in its governmental delegation (at least during the Geneva phase).

The challenge and economic potential of information and communications technologies (ICTs) were realised in the late 1990s, and the enormous expectations that surrounded them were dumped with the dot.com crash that followed the first hype of the "New Economy". To better assess the economic and social importance and implications of ICTs, the FSO started to systematically collect, verify and publish data over the years. The FSO conducted a survey called Use of Internet in Households in Switzerland in 2004. For the first time it used the model questionnaire (Community Survey on ICT Usage) that is recommended by the European Union's (EU) statistic authorities (Eurostat) to improve the comparability of indicators and results in a broader European context. Special emphasis was laid on access to technologies and levels of usage in Swiss households (for family members from the age of fifteen upwards). The results were published in 2006 (FSO, 2006). According to Yves Froidevaux, scientific collaborator at the FSO, additional and complementary data is regularly collected

by private internet research institutions like WEMF/REMP,[1] NET-Metrix[2] and IGEM/Publica Data AG.[3] The next FSO survey is expected to take place in 2010.

The data and indicators collected for this report have been verified by other sources, including stakeholders from government, business and civil society in Switzerland. Several interviews were conducted with government officials, civil society actors and experts from the Swiss Academy of Engineering Science (SATW).[4] The main goal of the report was to establish if there were differences and potential contradictions between national strategies, action plans, indicators, and the various intentions of stakeholders, and the realities on the ground regarding the implementation of the information society in Switzerland. Our questionnaire emphasised access to infrastructure, the digital divide, and the exclusion of marginalised groups.

Country situation

Switzerland is known to be a wealthy country with a comparatively good technical infrastructure that covers most of the country. Its ranking in the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development's (UNCTAD) Digital Divide Report: ICT Diffusion Index 2005 (UNCTAD, 2006) ranged from position 14 in 1997, to 5 in 2001, to 7 in 2004.

In the second half of the 1990s, mobile telephony in Switzerland saw considerable growth. A boom in mobile applications, combined with advancements in internet technologies, had an impact on the national infrastructure. While the number of lines connected to the public switched telephone network (PSTN) increased continuously until 1995, mobile technology has taken over. Analogue technologies were slowly but steadily replaced by integrated services digital network (ISDN) technologies (FSO, 2007).

Physical access to technology

In 2005, more than 62% of internet users had access to the internet via broadband technologies: 1.7 million Swiss were subscribed to a broadband connection, which signifies a penetration rate of 23 subscribers per 100 inhabitants. According to these figures, Switzerland ranges above Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (an average of 13.6 per 100 inhabitants) but behind countries like Korea, the Netherlands and Denmark,

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1 www.remp.ch/de/internet/index.php

2 www.net-metrix.ch

3 www.publicadata.ch

4 www.satw.ch

where more than 25% of the population have access via broadband (FSO, 2007).

In 2006, about 71.8% of the population over fourteen years of age claimed to have used the internet at least once over the last six months. These people constitute a so-called "largest user circle". In the same time frame, about 48.3% of the people interviewed stated that they used the internet daily or almost daily ("heavy users"). About 12.3% said they used the internet several times per week ("medium users"). These last two groups make up an "inner circle".

In 1997 only 7% of the population used the internet on a regular basis. This increased to 57.3% in 2005 and 60.6% in 2006 (FSO, 2007).

Other indicators show an increase in household expenditure on ICT hardware and services: on average CHF 294 per month – roughly the same amount in USD – or 3.8% of total household expenditure in 2004 (FSO, 2007).

According to the latest findings of NET-Metrix-Base (2008), about 77% of the population over fourteen used the internet in the last six months. In comparison with neighbouring German-speaking countries Austria (69%) and Germany (63%), Switzerland is leading in terms of online penetration (NET-Metrix-Base, 2008). But this tells only part of the story. Distinctions regarding access and usage are still evident at a second glance. The FSO's 2004 household survey reaches three significant conclusions:

- There is a large discrepancy in internet access between households due to disparities of income and education. As both variables are closely linked to each other, a lack of skills is a fundamental reason for differences in internet usage.

- Age, gender and education are key variables in the digital divide. The typical internet user is young and male, with a higher level of education. The use of the internet is increasing amongst previously excluded groups generally. However, the digital divide still persists, and is even intensifying for people with low incomes and lower levels of education. This broadening divide is observed on the European level as well (Demunter, 2005).

- A considerable number of households with a computer are still not connected to the internet and do not want to be connected. This is related to high internet access costs and a lack of skills.

Human capacity and training

In the course of the 1990s, more and more young people entered ICT professions and studied ICTs at high school and university. But since 2004 there has been a remarkable backlash in the field (FSO, 2007). There are now fewer ICT professionals recruited per year (2,500 graduates) compared to the number retiring (more than double). Experts blame a "lack of consistent effort in the teaching curriculum" or observe a "lousy reputation of ICT professionals." Measures to change this are being taken, but may take years to show results. Outsourcing ICT needs is now common for Swiss businesses (NZZ Online, 2007a).

E-accessibility and e-usability

Disparities in access are not based on culture or language, but follow well-known socioeconomic distinctions like age, gender, income and education. For instance, the fact that access in the Swiss-Italian part (Ticino) differs from other linguistic regions is seen to be because of regional age structures rather than due to factors of language (or even income). Other vulnerable groups who lack digital integration are people with disabilities, single-parent families or those with immigrant backgrounds.

The Access For All Foundation argues that technologies help to reduce barriers but create new ones at the same time.[5] The foundation is dedicated to overcoming these barriers, and considers itself a link between the government, ICT industry and disadvantaged people, including those with disabilities. It is also the independent certification office for accessible websites in Switzerland. Accessibility standards in compliance with those of the World Wide Web Consortium have been developed and are available. However, according to a recent survey submitted by the foundation, many official websites for cantons and municipalities still do not cater for people with disabilities. Among the better ones are those of the federal government and its offices (NZZ Online, 2007b).

The share of older adults aged 50 and over who use the internet on a regular basis – so-called "silver surfers" – is still remarkably low: only 37% belong to the "inner circle", according to the WEMF/REMP figures for 2006.[6] The Swiss Council of Seniors (SSR)[7] describes this situation as a "ticking time bomb" (NZZ Online, 2007b).

Legal and regulatory framework

The Swiss telecom market has been increasingly liberalised over the last few years. Besides the incumbent Swisscom, which traditionally had a dominant market position, there are several other private enterprises in the fixed-line and mobile sectors with growing market shares. Some observers argue that the recent liberalisation of the so-called "last mile" – previously controlled by Swisscom – may stimulate further competition in the ICT market and improve access options. But this argument is not shared by all actors among civil society. Some of them fear a decrease in public services in peripheral and mountainous areas of the country.

Action steps

Good infrastructure (high-speed broadband) and increased access for the majority of the Swiss population in the various parts of the country are evident. However, access to and use of the internet and online services differ depending on age, gender, income and education, as well as among people with disabilities.

5   www.access-for-all.ch

6   www.remp.ch/de/internet/index.php

7   www.ssr-csa.ch

Key concerns for recent governmental strategy are improvements in the field of e-health[8] and e-government.[9] The FSO has also launched a network dealing with digital integration in Switzerland (OFCOM, 2007). The national Communication Commission has begun promoting fibre-to-the-home (FTTH) technology, which has yet to impact on access for enterprises and end-users (OFCOM, 2008).

Based on a national strategy (OFCOM, 2006), the Swiss government has launched a number of projects over the last few years, like Schools to the Net, which aims to install PCs in schools. However, this has been hampered by a lack of complementary training programmes for teachers (Ludwig, 2006).

Despite these and other initiatives, civil society actors raise concerns about open access, open standards, privacy and data protection, security and trust, child pornography, violence on mobile devices, internet literacy, intellectual property abuses and open licensing models (or the development of a legal framework for the public commons, such as Creative Commons licensing).

Some observers note a "lack of coordination at different levels" or "dispersion of efforts" in the government, especially given the federal political structure of the country. As suggested, coordination, political consensus and implementation at different levels, as well as across Switzerland's different linguistic areas, are often perceived as difficult, time consuming and ineffective. Compared with more centralistic neighbouring countries like France or Austria, Switzerland is traditionally familiar with splendid procedures of consultation in almost all fields of society. Reaching consensus among its different interest groups is a parameter of national politics and still considered a pillar of national identity – and once a decision is taken it is largely approved and broadly accepted.

For OFCOM, the WSIS process was a milestone in multilateral diplomacy. The Swiss delegates continue to promote the multi-stakeholder approach, and the continued participation of civil society and business in international organisations such as the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) (OFCOM, 2006).

Comunica-ch and other civil society actors recommend the improvement of monitoring structures dealing with the information society, and the creation of a national observatory made up of different stakeholders.

There are several multi-stakeholder initiatives from academia and business (such as the National Year of Informatics 2008) that promote a coherent implementation of the national strategy on the information society. There are also plans to create discussion forums like the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) on the national or regional levels to enhance cooperation among stakeholders and to foster common projects on emerging issues of the information society. The European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG) can be a model for such efforts. ∎

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8 www.bakom.admin.ch/themen/infosociety/01689/index.html?lang=de

9 www.efd.admin.ch/dokumentation/grundlagenpapiere/01106/index.html?lang=de

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WEMF/REMP: www.remp.ch/de/internet/index.php

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008 is the second in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH or **GISWatch** has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of information and communication 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 2008** *focuses on access to infrastructure* and includes several thematic reports dealing with key access issues, an analysis of where global institutions stand on the access debate, a report looking at the state of indicators and access, six regional reports and 38 country reports.

GISWatch 2008 is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) and the Third World Institute (ITeM).

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2008 Report
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