

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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2009

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Swedish International Cooperation Agency (Sida)
Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)

Printed by

MONOCROMO

Printed in Uruguay

Edición hecha al amparo del Art. 79 de la Ley 13.349
Dep. Legal 350401

Global Information Society Watch

Published by APC and Hivos

2009

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ISBN 92-95049-73-X

APC-200911-CIPP-R-EN-P-0065

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

APC and Hivos would like to thank the Swedish International Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) for their support for Global Information Society Watch 2009. SDC is contributing to building participation in Latin America and the Caribbean and Sida in Africa.



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CONGO, REPUBLIC OF

AZUR Développement
Roméo Mbengou and Sylvie Niombo
www.azurdev.org



Introduction

The introduction of democracy in the Republic of Congo following a national conference in 1991 made it possible to work towards the recognition of freedom of expression and access to information as a right. Earlier legislation (from 1991) and the 2002 Constitution guarantee the principle of freedom of expression.

Access to information is also guaranteed by these earlier laws and the 2002 Constitution, and to some extent the issue of access to information is provided for in legislation dealing with freedom of information and communication passed on 12 November 2001. However, Congolese content on the internet remains weak because of several difficulties, one of them being the lack of implementation of the national information and communications technology (ICT) strategy.

Access to online information: Policies, legislation and trends

In a country where telecommunications infrastructure is insufficient, the legislative environment also suffers given that access to ICTs for the population remains limited. To date there is no specific legislation covering online content. This means, for instance, that it is difficult to offer protection to users, such as children, even though these protections exist in press codes (2001).

Article 4 of the 12 November 2001 Law on Freedom of Information and Communication stipulates that “access to information is a right... as is freedom of ideas and opinion. The right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas... within the limitations fixed by the present law, is guaranteed.” This law resulted in massive growth in the media industry in Congo, including some 40 print publications, eighteen radio stations and ten television stations.¹

While the law does not specifically mention online content, it does say that general laws applicable off line to written and audiovisual media are relevant to online communication (Article 173). The law (Article 180) also describes the responsibilities of internet service providers (ISPs). They are responsible for the websites hosted, but are exempt from liability if any contravention of the law lies with a user. However, ISPs may be liable for databases hosted on their servers. Nevertheless, this law has little relevance given that the majority of Congolese websites are hosted on foreign servers, generally in the West.

Article 184 of the law recommends that online information be monitored and that a structure responsible for this be set up. However, this has not yet happened. If this structure

was set up, it would make it possible for the government to manage the .cg country-code domain, which at the moment it cannot do, and would facilitate the entry of Congo into the information age.

Government

In 2004, an e-government project supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) aimed to promote access to public information in Congo using ICTs. An Information Unit, under the Ministry of Planning and Economic Integration, was set up, and an intranet developed. Amongst other things, the e-government initiative enabled members of parliament to access information via an information centre.² There were also efforts to develop information websites for ministries within the framework of this project.

Another initiative, the Congo-Site portal,³ which includes several interactive tools, became one of the first government information sources. Amongst other things, the Ministries for Primary and Secondary Education now publish the results of state examinations on the site, making it possible for thousands of candidates to download the results of their examinations cheaply and efficiently.

An e-employment project aims to train unemployed youth and students who are looking for work using ICTs. The project was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Employment, the National Office of Employment, the UNDP and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Employment information and information on training courses is also available on the National Office of Employment and Labour's website.⁴

A national strategy for the development of ICTs that was formulated with the support of the UNDP in 2004 has not yet been implemented. As a result, brakes have effectively been put on the production of local content.

Private sector

Several private sector information sources are available. These include trade and investment information (on the Congo-Site portal), information about professional organisations and unions such as Unicongo,⁵ and the Reperenet website,⁶ which publishes information on job opportunities, real estate, products and business-related software. Maigat-radingcongo.com (under construction) is geared to be an

2 www.cg.undp.org/news.aspx?newsID=226

3 www.congo-siteportail.info

4 www.onemocongo.org

5 www.unicongo.org

6 www.reperenet.com

1 IREX (2007) Media Sustainability Index (MSI) Africa 2006-2007. www.irex.org/programs/MSI_Africa/rc-fr.asp#3

online retail trading site, while CongoProx Immo⁷ offers real estate products and services.

Media

Very few newspapers are published online. Those that are include *Dépêches de Brazzaville*,⁸ *Semaine Africaine*,⁹ and *Le Choc*.¹⁰ As for audiovisual media, only Congolese national television can be followed online.¹¹

Civil society

Civil society organisations publish information on various subjects on the internet through websites and blogs. Civil society organisations work with local communities to promote ICTs, to build capacity and to make it possible for a greater number of people to benefit from the advantages of the internet.

AZUR Development,¹² the Committee for the Promotion of ICTs in Congo (COPTIC), the African Centre for Complementary Schooling, University and the Promotion of Education (CACSUP),¹³ the PRATIC Association,¹⁴ and the Network of Community Telecentres of Congo¹⁵ are among the most active in the promotion of ICTs in the country.

Among the many examples of civil society information projects, it is now possible to take online courses in one of the national languages, Lingala.¹⁶

Culture

On the cultural side, Congolese writers manage websites and blogs. One example is the website of Congolese novelist Alain Mabanckou.¹⁷ It is also possible to find information on the Pan African Festival of Music,¹⁸ organised by the Ministry for Culture and Arts.

The Congolese diaspora has made efforts to put Congolese cultural content online; those abroad are generally more equipped technically and financially than the Congolese in Congo.

ICTs and politics

Politicians also make considerable use of ICTs – the internet in particular. During the election in July 2009, websites, blogs and videos (sometimes on YouTube) were used by political parties in cyber information wars. Because of this,

it was a challenge for citizens to determine the veracity of online information and the reliability of the information sources.

Difficulties accessing online information in Congo

Besides the failure to implement the national ICT strategy, other challenges that have resulted in a lack of online content in the Congo include:

- *A lack of capacity:* Professional webmaster training is hard to come by, and little information exists. The largest university of the country, Marien Ngouabi University, still does not have a course specialising in computer science.
- *High costs:* On average, in Congo, internet access of 128 kilobits per second (kbps) costs about XAF 150,000 (USD 300) a month – that is to say, ten times the wages of the average Congolese worker. Website hosting also requires money, as does maintaining a website with regular updates. Website hosting also remains a headache, especially because the .cg domain is managed by someone outside the country. Many civil society organisations rely on blogs and other free platforms.
- *Lack of an ICT culture:* Even when financial and human capacity exists, there is little understanding of the importance of internet content.
- *Limited access to the internet:* The low number of web surfers in the country is a factor when deciding whether or not to produce online information. The internet penetration rate in Congo is very low – only 0.03%.¹⁹ At the same time, while there are 250 cybercafés in the country, they are mainly in the cities of Brazzaville, Pointe-Noire, Dolisie, Owando, Nkayi and Ouessou. The quality and speed of the connection also remain poor. With around XAF 500 (USD 1) it is possible to surf for one hour in Brazzaville and Point-Noire. In other localities, however, one would need at least XAF 1,000 (USD 2) to do so. Internet access is of such poor quality in the country that students in Brazzaville have little choice but to connect via the Digital Campus set up by the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, a global network of French-speaking higher education and research institutions based in Montreal, Canada. Connectivity at the Campus is through satellite.²⁰
- *High cost of building websites:* This has resulted in many ministries still storing all their information in hard copy. Offices are filled with files, and there are long queues to access information.
- *A weak culture of free software use:* There is almost no promotion of free and open source software or platforms that help with the creation of online content.

7 www.congoprox-immo.com

8 www.brazzaville-adiac.com

9 www.semaineafricaine.com

10 www.sosolecoq.net

11 congo-siteportail.info/pages/Journal-de-20h-de-la-Television-Nationale_ap1448142.html

12 www.azurdev.org

13 www.eces-ecole.org/statuts.html

14 www.congo-reflexionntic2008.com

15 www.telecentrescongo.org

16 lingalaenligne.ifrance.com

17 www.alainmabanckou.net

18 www.fespam.org

19 PRATIC (2009) Mémorandum sur les TIC au Congo. www.congo-reflexionntic2008.com

20 www.cg.refer.org

- *Low interest among donors in projects aimed at increasing access to the internet: Civil society organisations have trouble finding funds for their projects.*
- *A lack of regulations governing online content.*

New trends to improve access to online information

Current trends in the direction of increased access to online information in the Congo have been marked by the government's move to connect to optical fibre and efforts to finalise the national ICT strategy. The telecommunications regulatory framework is also being revised in negotiation with the World Bank.

The arrival of internet connectivity on mobile phones through services offered by three telephony companies (GSM Zain, MTN and Warid) has the potential to increase access to the internet. While this remains expensive, the multiple uses that can result from it should be explored now. The role of civil society organisations in the popularisation of mobile internet access remains crucial.

Action steps

Government

- Develop a specific regulatory framework that supports content creation and access to online information.
- Give internet access to all educational institutions, public administrations and research centres.
- Support the capacity development of civil servants and the general population in the use of the internet.
- Accelerate the deployment of optical fibre to improve internet connectivity.

International organisations

- Support initiatives aimed at creating online content and increasing access to online information.
- Support initiatives that create capacity and help citizens acquire ICT equipment.

Civil society

- Popularise information and communication technologies through training.
- Contribute to the reduction of the digital divide in Congo by integrating the needs of women and girls in projects.

Concrete actions by all the stakeholders are required so that the Congolese can become producers and consumers of useful content on the internet. It is necessary for these actions to be supported by the government and international organisations. ■

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).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2009 Report

www.GISWatch.org

