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.

Global Information Society Watch 2011

Sida

LEBANON

BROADBAND AS A HUMAN RIGHT IN LEBANON
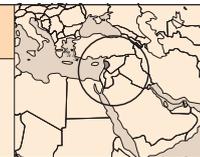
Mireille Raad

Introduction

As one of the few countries in the Middle East enjoying a relative degree of freedom of speech on the internet,[1] but suffering from an unbearably slow connection, the installation of a high-capacity submarine internet cable called IMEWE[2] could not have come soon enough.

According to Net Index,[3] Lebanon ranks as the fifth slowest country in the world with an average speed of 0.59 Mbps per user. The entire international bandwidth for the country is only 2.5 Gbps. This low bandwidth creates overbooking and does not allow a committed download rate. End-users are instead provided with a "best effort" connection, limited by a fair usage policy of 3Gb/month.

Prices are unreasonably high (see Table 1). Internet service providers (ISPs) pay a 1,200% [4] tax rate. There is no law to organise infrastructure or duct sharing, so each ISP has the additional cost of providing connectivity to end-users. The direct impact is that users in remote areas do not have internet access or have to rely on the monopoly of local, illegal "internet cable" providers.

In other words, a typical Lebanese user pays high fees for very slow internet and does not actually get what he/she paid for due to the high number of users sharing the low international bandwidth.

Cadmus and Berytar/Aletar are the two fibre-optic cables tasked with keeping Lebanon connected to the world, and both are more than sixteen years old. There is no internal fibre backbone connecting all the different cities. An internet exchange point[5] was recently launched in Beirut, but it cannot service more than 20% of the market.[6]

1   opennet.net/research/profiles/lebanon
2   IMEWE is an internet submarine cable with 3.84 Tbps capacity; Lebanon benefits from 120 Gbps. imewecable.com
3   www.netindex.com
4   ISPs buy the international internet feed (E1s) from the Ministry of Telecommunications at USD 2,700 + USD 800 local loop – while the cost for the ministry is USD 300.
5   An internet exchange point is a place where ISPs interconnect to create a local loop.
6   Ogero, a state-owned operator, controls an 80% market share and refuses to connect to the Beirut Internet Exchange (BIX), so the BIX cannot service more than 20% of the users.

Services like 3G are still not available to internet users in Lebanon, even though they were commercially introduced ten years ago. There is a kind of monopoly established by Ogero, a state-owned operator, which controls an 80% market share, while the other twenty ISPs combined have only 20%.

Economic and legislative context

With the internet situation being so desperate, one might believe that all troubles would have disappeared after a 3.84 Tbps cable reached Lebanese shores. Lebanon can use 120 Gbps of this cable, a sizeable increase from the current 2.5 Gbps. However, due to political bickering, legislative fights, the absence of a cabinet for long durations, and corruption, this cable remains inactive.

The Lebanese economy is suffering from a crushing USD 60-billion debt. The debt/GDP ratio is approximately 150.7%.[7] According to a study by the World Bank, internet penetration can affect the Lebanese economy in the following ways:

- 1.38% GDP increase per year for every 10% increase in internet penetration
- 0.25% increase in jobs for every 1 percentage point increase in penetration
- USD 90 million per year for every 10% increase.[8]

In July 2002, the Lebanese Telecommunication Act[9] was set to create three main players in the telecom sector:

- The Ministry of Telecommunications
- Telecom Regulatory Authority (TRA)
- Liban Telecom

The ministry sets the visions and strategic goals for the telecom sector, the TRA conducts research and develops roadmaps to achieve those goals, and Liban Telecom was to be the implementer. However, Liban Telecom was not formed for political reasons. Instead the ministry outsourced all the operations to Ogero (Organisme de Gestion et d'Exploitation de l'ex Radio Orient), which was established in

7   CIA World Factbook: goo.gl/25k3v
8   www.infodev.org/en/Article.454.html
9   The Lebanese Telecommunication Act is available at: www.ontornet.org/sources/TelecommunicationsLaw.pdf

TABLE 1.			
Price and service comparison			
Service packages available in Lebanon		Typical triple-play service packages	
Residential			
Download	0.25 Mbps	Download	8 Mbps
Upload	0.064 Mbps	Upload	4 Mbps
Poor quality cable TV		100+ video channels including High Definition	
Very low usage of fixed voice services (mobile prices not included and VoIP is banned)		Unlimited VoIP	
USD 55/month		USD 40/month	
Business			
Download	2 Mbps	Download	10 Mbps
Upload	2 Mbps	Upload	10 Mbps
No video conferencing, VoIP is banned		High-speed internet access via video conference, 100+ video channels including High Definition, unlimited VoIP calls	
USD 4,000/month		USD 500/month	

1972. Ogero is 100% owned by the state and acts under the supervision of the minister.[10]

Instead of collaboration, the three institutions have launched many lawsuits against each other, and there have been numerous media scandals.

Campaigning for broadband

13 December 2010 was the expected launch date for the 13,000-kilometre IMEWE cable that runs between India and France, providing Lebanon with 120 Gbps international bandwidth. Eager Lebanese internet users were excitedly waiting – but instead, the IMEWE consortium, which controls the supply, cancelled the launch because of a dispute between the Telecoms Ministry headed by Charbel Nahas and Ogero.

Minister Nahas had sent a letter to the IMEWE consortium to inform them of the ministry's decision to deprive Ogero of its responsibilities on the IMEWE project, including the launching event. Nahas complained that Ogero informed him about the event only ten days in advance, and that Ogero did not provide regular reports about project progress.[11]

On the other hand, Ogero criticised the minister of telecommunications for wanting to deprive the body of its privileges. It said that the IMEWE consortium gave Ogero the authorisation to prepare for the launch event because of the company's professionalism and high credibility. Ogero also expressed its surprise at the ministry's decision to isolate it instead of rewarding it for its efforts and claimed it had been sending reports about the project progress.

After signing a Broadband Manifesto[12] launched by the IT sector in previous years with no response from Lebanese authorities, frustrated Lebanese users launched three online campaigns to raise awareness and share updates about the IMEWE cable, and to exert pressure for its activation.

The three campaigns are:

- Flip the Switch
- Lebanese Want Fast Internet
- OntorNet (Arabic dialect for "wait for the internet")

All three campaigns used social media as their launching platform to reach their target audience. Local and international media, both traditional and new media, took an interest in the story and the efforts of the activists.

The social media strategy used included:

- Flip the Switch: Facebook group[13] and blog[14]
- Lebanese Want Fast Internet: Facebook page[15] and Facebook ads
- OntorNet: viral video campaign,[16] Facebook page,[17] Twitter community,[18] offline workshops, blog[19] with online presentation and infographics.

10 www.ogero.gov.lb/Published/EN/profile.html

11 www.yalibnan.com/2010/12/14/imewe-cable-launches-its-commercial-operation

12 www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=16011607127

13 www.facebook.com/groups/fliptheswitch

14 fliptheswitch.info

15 www.facebook.com/fastlebanon

16 www.youtube.com/user/ontornet

17 www.facebook.com/OntorNet

18 twitter.com/#!/search?q=%23ontornet

19 blog.ontornet.org

Due to the mounting pressure, and in response to the buzz created on the subject, two different telecom ministers and TRA personnel met with representatives from the Flip the Switch and OntorNet campaigns. OntorNet relied on the online community to crowdsource questions, live-tweeted during the meetings to get live feedback. It released audio recordings of the meetings to allow for more transparency and to hold the people in charge responsible for their statements and promises.

Following these campaigns, there was more awareness of the reasons behind the struggling telecom sector and the communication between the telecom minister and online community became direct. As a result, ministerial plans for broadband in Lebanon became more transparent. Those plans include the launch of 3G services by the end of September 2011 and activation of 10 Gbps out of the 120 Gbps of the IMEWE cable.

Social and political impact

The above story suggests the importance of good and affordable internet connectivity, and its huge social and financial impact. With the Arab Spring and revolutions being shared online, activists in Lebanon are feeling helpless not being able to broadcast their opinions and take on events that directly affect their own country.

For example, during the events that started on 25 January in Egypt, with Egyptians suffering from censorship and internet blackouts, activists in Lebanon who happened to have friends and contacts living a few hours away in Cairo could not use Tor[20] to relay traffic for fellow activists or upload videos and footage they got hold of. Pushing content online was hard, and generating/translating Arabic content that proved to be crucial was near impossible.

This showed the Lebanese that they are actually suffering from a subtle and worse form of censorship.

Business impact

The business impact is reflected in lost opportunities for innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship ideas and services. E-commerce and online businesses have problems running their operations from Lebanon, and have great difficulty getting their users to rely on the web as their favourite way of shopping and doing things.

The country is also suffering a brain drain of highly educated people seeking to further their

careers, often in neighbouring countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which happens to have a 98% internet penetration rate.

Since information and communications technologies (ICTs) are involved in every single business process, a bad ICT sector weakens the whole economy, and causes a great loss in business productivity due to the wasting of thousands of hours or the inability to make use of some services.

Lebanon is also missing out on chances for social inclusion for poor and remote areas. Better access to information, e-education and e-government are greatly needed.

Conclusion

ICTs are powerful tools to disseminate information and trigger change. Access to the internet is becoming a human right, not merely an "accident". However, censorship can happen in many forms: censoring content, implementing black lists, bad internet connectivity, and, eventually, pulling the internet "kill switch".

One of the most dangerous aspects of control over the internet is the government monopoly over the expensive fibre-optic networks, licences and infrastructure. In Lebanon the government was late in investing in infrastructure, which set the country ten years back in time in terms of tech.

Another conclusion we can draw is that, sadly, Moore's Law does not apply to legal innovation: the disparities between technology and legislation are likely to become even greater, and we need an increasingly tech-savvy judiciary to be able to have a deep understanding of the issues at stake, and write laws that are not too rigid or too easy to break.

Action steps

The following action steps are suggested for ICT activists in Lebanon. Hopefully they will also prove in handy for others:

- **Lobby for a local Internet Governance Forum** It is crucial for members of civil society, companies and lawmakers to get together at least once a year and discuss ICT challenges and issues. Even if no formal decisions come out of such meetings, it is important to have the discussion and bring people together from different backgrounds and sectors.

- **Create groups and collectives around digital challenges** Technical innovation moves too fast and tends to be complex by default. It is important to have hacker spaces, groups and collectives of geeks and non-tech people alike to raise awareness, share knowledge and pioneer

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20 www.torproject.org

the use of technology in innovative projects with social impact. These groups help in the capacity building of new skills that are not being taught in formal education yet, and become crucial to having a leading country in the ICT field.

- **Get decision makers involved with social media** Luring decision makers into actual involvement with social media can be a powerful tool for communication and creating pressure. However, due to the usually huge amount of followers, many assign a PR company to handle their accounts.

- **Beware of "slacktivism"** It is easy to get fooled into a false "feel good" sense about social issues without actually achieving measurable and concrete effects. Raising awareness should not turn into ranting out on social media or spamming.

- **Learn to go anonymous** Article 19 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights[21] states, "Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference," and "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice." A quick look on the internet will tell you that billions of dollars are spent on monitoring and censoring tools around the world, and that governments and intelligence agencies are information hungry. Activists should never shy away from learning the tech skills that will allow them to protect their inalienable human right to privacy and freedom of expression. ■

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21 secure.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/wiki/International_Covenant_
on_Civil_and_Political_Rights

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:

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA Prisoners are using the internet to protest living conditions and demand respect for their rights.

TORTURE IN INDONESIA The torture of two West Papuan farmers was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the internet. The video spread to well-known human rights sites sparking public outrage and a formal investigation by the authorities.

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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