

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

The Netherlands is a small European country with more than 16 million inhabitants and a high population density. It is a welfare state with relatively high taxes and a fairly even income distribution. In past decades the undressing of the welfare state has been substantial, giving way to a stronger involvement of private enterprises and a withdrawal of the state in many domains. Income inequity has increased over the past decades.

The Dutch are well known for their tolerant and liberal values and attach a high value to freedom of expression. Recently, however, this freedom has been contested, suggesting an ambivalence in Dutch society. This was illustrated by reactions to the release of the movie *Fitna*¹ by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders. A majority of the population say that the freedom of expression should be protected more strongly than it is now. On the other hand most also agree with the statement that this freedom should not imply that people get hurt in their religious feelings.²

Digitisation of Dutch society has been rapid and substantial. A vast majority of people (85%) have internet connections, most of them broadband (80%), making the Netherlands one of the leading countries worldwide in broadband penetration.³ The spread of the (broadband) internet is virtually complete, especially amongst families with children: at the end of 2005 almost every family had a broadband internet connection. More than half (55%) of the country's teenagers have a personal computer (PC) in their own room.⁴

In recent years, the Dutch have begun spending more time on the internet at the expense of time spent watching television, listening to the radio and reading printed media. However, newspapers are also read on the internet, while listening to the radio and watching television via the internet have become more popular in recent years. This convergence of media has led to the same content being offered across different channels. The merging of radio, television, telephony and internet services is also happening in mobile media.⁵

Policy environment

In the Netherlands, access to online information is not only supported by a high diffusion of internet connections, but also by many organisations, businesses and (increasingly) citizens providing online content. Moreover, the Dutch government contributes to a high quality of available information, supports the European Safer Internet Programme and is in favour of net neutrality, the principle of letting all internet traffic flow equally and impartially, without discrimination.⁶

The government bears some responsibility for internet safety, taking a leading role compared to industry and schools. In 2008 the government, in collaboration with business, started the programme *Digivaardig & Digibewust*, the Dutch programme promoting e-awareness, e-inclusion and e-skills. This programme aims at the e-inclusion of all Dutch people by promoting safe internet use and media literacy.

In line with the liberal values in Dutch society the government is committed to the freedom of expression in the online environment, as elsewhere, as long as these expressions stay within the limits of what is legally acceptable (see the section on the legislative environment below). This also holds for the protection of privacy on the net. Although there is fairly little concern among citizens about threats to their privacy, the data protection law is available to penalise the abuse of personal information.

The Dutch government is seeking to use ICT tools to reduce administrative burdens and improve service delivery. Internationally, the Netherlands is at the forefront in these tasks. In line with the traditional Dutch focus on participative and inclusive government, featuring broad citizen consultation and involvement, the Netherlands has developed ambitious programmes and activities that aim to increase user take-up of e-services.⁷ In order for citizens to reach a fast, efficient and customer-focused government, policy is directed towards the development of a basic infrastructure, which includes electronic access to the government, e-authentication, basic registration and services (e.g., applying for a passport). However, the take-up of e-services is rather slow, partly due to insufficient skills of the Dutch, and also due to a lack of user orientation in e-government services.⁸

1 According to Wikipedia, "the film shows selected excerpts from Suras of the Qur'an, interspersed with media clips and newspaper clippings showing or describing acts of violence and/or hatred by Muslims." [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fitna_(film))

2 SCP (2009) *Continu onderzoek burgerperspectieven*, kwartaalbericht 2009/1, SCP, The Hague.

3 CBS (2006) *De digitale economie 2006*, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, Voorburg/Heerlen.

4 Duimel, M. and de Haan, J. (2007) *Nieuwe links in het gezin. De digitale leefwereld van tieners en de rol van hun ouders*, SCP, The Hague.

5 De Haan, J. and Adolfsen, A. (2008) *De virtuele cultuurbezoeker; publieke belangstelling voor cultuurwebsites*, SCP, The Hague.

6 Lange, P. (2008) Net neutrality, in Finlay, A. (ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2008*, APC, Hivos and ITeM, p. 17-19. www.giswatch.org/gisw2008

7 OECD (2007) *e-Government Studies Netherlands*, OECD Publishing, Bedfordshire.

8 Van Deursen, A., Van Dijk, J. and Ebbens, W. (2006) Why E-government Usage Lags Behind: Explaining the gap between potential and actual usage of electronic public services in the Netherlands, *Lecture notes in Computer Science*, 4084, p. 269-280.

Legislative environment

In the Netherlands a broad range of laws cover a number of topics regarding safety in the information technology society. There is no specific law covering the right to access information. This is part of the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and the freedom to gather information. The following legislation is relevant to information and communications technology (ICT) security and to protecting the rights and privacy of the individual in the digital media:

- The Data Protection Law (*Wet Bescherming Persoonsgegevens*) is the main piece of legislation that governs the protection of personal data. It provides a way in which individuals can enforce the control of information about themselves.
- The Intellectual Property Law protects owners who are granted certain exclusive rights to a variety of intangible assets, such as musical, literary and artistic works; ideas, discoveries and inventions; and words, phrases, symbols and designs. Common types of intellectual property include copyrights, trademarks, patents, industrial design rights and trade secrets. Copyright (*Auteurswet*) in the Netherlands has been internationally standardised, lasting between 50 to 100 years from the author's death, or a shorter period for anonymous or corporate authorship.
- The Telecommunication Law (*Telecomwet*) regulates telecommunication. This legislation promotes the best possible organisation and operation of the market for electronic communications, and includes a strong consumer orientation. The law is also relevant in cases such as the prohibition against unsolicited digital advertising.
- The implementation of the European Commission e-Commerce Directive (the basic legal framework for electronic commerce in the Internal Market) is part of the Civil Code. This directive applies specifically to information on suppliers of commercial services and the establishment of electronic contracts.
- Felonies such as sexual offences are penalised by the Criminal Code. Images (or a carrier of these images) of sexual behaviour by minors (people aged under eighteen) can be punished with imprisonment of four to six years maximum or a heavy financial fine.

Access to online cultural education

In Dutch schools the pupil-computer ratio in primary and secondary education was approximately seven pupils per computer in 2006/2007, and 87% (primary education) to 95% (secondary education) of all computers are connected to the internet. Today schools focus on the improvement of the quality of ICT infrastructure, on substantive digital applications, on online educational materials and on supporting teachers in their use of technology.⁹

Culture is a field which lends itself particularly well to the development of educational services. The Netherlands is one of the leading countries in the digitisation of cultural materials. Projects aim at creating, managing and improving access to digital content, collection management (i.e., managing digitised images of paintings in databases with metadata), regulating intellectual property issues and creating standards.¹⁰

More and more digitised material is becoming available which can be used to create interesting educational applications. Important organisations in the use of ICT in education are *Kennisnet/ICT op school* (Knowledge Network/ICT at school), SURFnet, *Erfgoed Actueel* (the Netherlands Institute for Heritage) and Waag Society.¹¹ *Kennisnet/ICT op school* and SURFnet are responsible for infrastructure and also jointly develop internet applications aimed at innovation in Dutch education. *Cultuur en School* and *Erfgoed Actueel* are specifically concerned with cultural education, with a view to encouraging interest in art and cultural heritage and raising historical awareness. Waag Society also plays a pioneering role as a centre of expertise on culture and ICTs. It gathers and disseminates knowledge on the use of ICTs for cultural education purposes, and on developing innovative applications for education.

Several projects aim at increasing the digital accessibility of cultural heritage in education. The *Cultuurplein* ("culture square") portal¹² contains a great deal of background information on art and culture. The site aims to be the central hub for everything that has to do with culture and education in the Netherlands, and seeks to support teachers and cultural institutions in integrating cultural activities into teaching practice. By providing advice to teachers (including the sharing of knowledge) and promoting expertise at cultural institutions, the site aims to encourage the use of digital technology.

The *Kennisnet* portal¹³ offers a wide range of educational information and teaching packs for both teachers and pupils. Information on architecture and design has been made accessible for education and applications are being developed that are designed to bring pupils into contact with documentary and other film genres in an active way. Cultural heritage is also presented to pupils in an exciting and playful way; archaeological information, for example, shows pupils how people used to live, from prehistoric times up to and including the Middle Ages.

Education is becoming an increasingly important focus for archives, which are developing supplementary digital teaching material and digital teaching packs. Although museums have always developed numerous educational activities, for the time being they offer relatively few digital teaching packs. Several projects by the Naturalis natural

9 Kennisnet (2007) *Vier in balans monitor 2007*, Kennisnet/ICT op school, Zoetermeer.

10 De Haan, J., Mast, R., Varekamp, M. and Janssen, S. (2006) *Bezoek onze site; over de digitalisering van het culturele aanbod*, SCP, The Hague.

11 www.waag.org

12 www.cultuurplein.nl

13 www.kennisnet.nl

history museum show a possible way forward. The *Geheugen van Nederland* (Memories of the Netherlands) project also makes cultural heritage from archives, museums and libraries accessible for education, including via online lessons. Libraries, for their part, compile packs on individual subjects which are dovetailed to the core objectives of educational targets. These packs provide information on all sorts of topics in the form of links to websites, articles and film clips.

Film and video are of great value in education, and exploring the didactic potential of streaming media should make wider application possible in the future. The Teleblik project makes thousands of hours of streamed content from the public broadcasters accessible for education. The public service broadcaster itself is a major content provider for children.¹⁴ Commercial broadcasters, with websites like Jetix,¹⁵ also provide a lot of content that can be used for education.

The growing amount of cultural content on the internet is giving rise to new questions in relation to digital applications in education. Does the available material match the existing curricula? Do teachers have enough time, energy and knowledge to incorporate this material into their lessons? Do pupils manage to navigate their way through this material? The general impression, which is not supported by any systematic research, is that not much material is coded to be used within specific educational programmes, that teachers lack sufficient time, energy and knowledge, and that pupils are easily satisfied with the first results of their query on Google.

New trends

A strong new trend is the rise of Web 2.0, a collection of applications that share the potential of social interaction. These applications give users the possibility to add information to the web. They will no longer be merely consumers of digital content, but also producers. Users become authors themselves.

This trend has led to a substantive deepening of existing internet use and means that people will begin making use of various kinds of different content. Because the content created by users is not constrained to textual information, audiovisual information is added in increasing amounts to the web as music and self-made film clips are shared with others.

In the Netherlands the social networking site Hyves¹⁶ has attracted many people, in particular the youth. As is the case elsewhere in the world, Twitter is the latest fashion in information exchange.

Web 2.0 also creates opportunities for musicians and other artists to offer (trailers of) their music and other forms of creative expression on the net. MySpace is currently a popular website in the Netherlands, where large numbers of users maintain weblogs and profiles.

The expansion of social networking sites, as well as of online worlds – such as World of Warcraft¹⁷ and Second Life¹⁸ – leads to an increasing need for management of all the different identities people have to deal with. Identity management is nowadays especially relevant for young people in the Netherlands. Banking, shopping and dealing with the government online means there is a need for reliable authentication devices. At the same time, the use of virtual identities, nicknames and avatars in online worlds, forums and games, begs for safety regulations.

Another but related trend is the improvement of media literacy. In the Netherlands media literacy is often called “media wisdom”, which refers to the skills, attitudes and mentality that citizens and organisations need to be aware, critical and active in a highly mediatised world.¹⁹ Most Dutch media education initiatives are directed at the internet and audiovisual media. However, the converging of different media platforms makes it hard to distinguish separate media. TV, mobile and internet are converging, and virtual worlds and “real” worlds also seem to be merging.

Action steps

Some of the main issues that need special attention are:

- *Media literacy:* In October 2006 the Dutch cabinet stressed the importance of this topic and saw the need for a centre of media expertise and a code of conduct for the media. The centre was established in May 2008. Many different organisations are involved in activities that aim to achieve the goal of increasing media literacy.
- *Identity management:* Due to a combination of technological and social developments we can see an increasing convergence of new technologies and services. Steps need to be taken in order to support the identity management of citizens and to increase their sense of online security.
- *Improved internet safety:* Cyber bullying, cyber crime (hacking, phishing, viruses, etc.) and inappropriate and illegal content are prolific. Good organisations and campaigns have already been established. However, this is an ongoing task and there is still work to be done. ■

14 See, for example: www.zapp.nl

15 www.jetix.nl

16 www.hyves.nl

17 www.worldofwarcraft.com

18 secondlife.com

19 Raad voor Cultuur (2005) *Mediawijsheid, de ontwikkeling van nieuw burgerschap*, Raad voor Cultuur, The Hague.

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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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2009 Report

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