GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

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

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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

SYRIA

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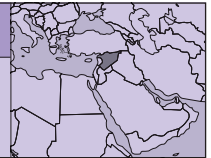
Introduction

There has been sustained growth in internet penetration in Syria over the past few years.[1] In the pursuit of realising the goals of its national information and communications technologies (ICTs) strategy, the Syrian government eased its regulations on internet service providers (ISPs), and granted several licences for private ISPs. However, the newly licensed ISPs can only operate within the network infrastructure of the incumbent telecommunications operator, the Syrian Telecommunications Establishment (STE). This effectively means that private ISPs cannot have their own international links to the global internet backbone, and are restricted to the access provided by STE. Such an arrangement gives STE the upper hand in controlling the market in the whole country.

It is important to note that the growth in internet penetration has primarily happened in dial-up access to the internet through the public switched telephone network. Very few broadband connections are available (only 5,600 lines as of September 2007),[2] and the costs associated with high-speed internet access are an additional barrier to its adoption.

Syria still needs to leverage the internet as a viable means for access to knowledge and information. More than half of the population is below the age of nineteen, and unemployment among the youth reached 19% in 2006.[3] However, the extent to which the country is moving towards an inclusive knowledge-based economy is arguably negligible.

Slow pace of policy reform

In 2004, the Syrian government adopted a national strategy for ICTs.[4] The strategy aims to develop the country's infrastructure and regulatory environment to foster the development of a knowledge-based society and to support Syria's development agenda. Content and access to information comprise a significant part of the national strategy. The government intends to increase the population's access to information and local content as a means to develop and sustain its human capital.

Several initiatives have been conceived to achieve this goal. Some fall within the scope of the ICT strategy, while others have been initiated by local and regional organisations and partnerships. These include one called ICT4Dev that provides internet access through telecentres,[5] a national ICT dissemination programme[6] aimed at building computer literacy and promoting information technology,[7] and a United Nations (UN)-supported ICT programme aimed at socioeconomic development generally.[8] This last programme strives to leverage the potential of ICTs for human development by creating an enabling environment that consists of access centres, relevant local content, policy advice and capacity building.

The implementation of the national ICT strategy seems to be lagging behind its original schedule, particularly in the area of policy reform with regards to access to information. For instance, the country's intellectual property policy still needs to adapt to the changes in the global environment. No provisions exist in the current system for alternative licensing (such as that found in the free and open source software movement and Creative Commons). The enforcement of existing copyright laws also remains weak, and an awareness of intellectual property issues among the population is still very low.

The national strategy also ignores aspects of freedom of expression and citizen participation, although the Syrian Constitution clearly indicates that freedom of expression is protected by law. Apart from a brief mention of the recommendations in the UN's Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society,[9] no explicit provisions are formulated to protect online expression, and no clear policies are documented to guide the government's approach to online censorship. This results in censorship decisions being made without explicit justification. For example, access to the popular blogging platform Blogger is blocked in the country, and until recently, the online free encyclopaedia Wikipedia was blocked as well.

Shifting legislation

Arab governments are embarking on a concerted effort to harmonise their media publishing laws across the Arab League. Such a move is expected to affect online media and

1   Arab Advisors Group (2005) Syria's Internet market: Brighter times ahead, 10 July. www.arabadvisors.com/Pressers/presser-100705.htm

2   Internet World Stats (2007) *Usage and Population Statistics - Middle East*. www.internetworldstats.com/middle.htm

3   Kabbani, N. and Kamel, N. (2007) Youth Exclusion in Syria, paper presented at the Workshop on Youth Exclusion in the Middle East: Towards New Knowledge and Solutions, Dubai, 23-24 February 2007.

4   Ministry of Communications and Technology in Syria (2004) *ICT Strategy for Economic and Social Development of Syria*. www.moct.gov.sy/servers/gallery/20050126-052419.pdf

5   Arabic News (2004) A new Syrian experience in ITC4DEV, 31 March. www.arabicnews.com/ansub/Daily/Day/040331/2004033102.html

6   The programme consists of opening computing facilities at secondary schools in all cities to the public for a token fee and carrying out introductory courses on the use of personal computers.

7   Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) (2007) *National Profile of the Information Society in the Syrian Arab Republic*. www.escwa.un.org/wsis/reports/docs/Syria-07-E.pdf

8   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2008) *Strategic ICT Programme for Social and Economic Development*. www.undp.org.sy/index.php/our-work/business-for-development-/62-strategic-ict-programme-for-social-and-economic-development

9   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2003) *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a Knowledge Society*. www.arab-hdr.org/publications/other/ahdr/ahdr2003e.pdf

citizen journalism, and is considered by many to be a significant setback to freedom of expression in the region. It will constitute an obstacle in building an inclusive and equitable knowledge society.[10]

Online publishing and content creation in Syria is treated as an extension of offline media, and because of this is governed by the same publishing law – even though the government is trying to amend the law to include online publishing specifically. The publishing law as it now stands is known for its restrictive provisions with regards to open criticism. These restrictions, however, are mostly applied to issues and topics that are perceived to pose a threat to national security, or those that contain explicit political material. Other topics, such as science and technology, education and knowledge, are encouraged and supported.

Despite the government's efforts to improve its legislative environment to facilitate citizens' online access to government, specific laws to protect privacy and the confidentiality of electronically transmitted information have yet to be passed. In fact, Syria lags significantly behind in the laws measured by the World Economic Forum's ICT index, ranking 127th among 134 countries.[11]

Bureaucracy and lack of transparency still constitute a major challenge to any viable e-government initiative. Syria was featured among the lowest-ranking countries with regards to e-government readiness by the UN Global E-Government Readiness Report 2004.[12] The country's rank on the e-participation index in 2004 was 186th out of 191 countries. This can be attributed to several reasons, including low levels of trust between citizens and the government, particularly in relation to service delivery, and the high cost of internet access.

Stimulating the information society

With the challenges facing Syria in its development agenda, access to information becomes the cornerstone in promoting the growth of intellectual and human capital in the country. Leveraging the potential afforded by the internet can enable Syria to address the inability of its educational system to meet the requirements of the new job market. At the same time, an informed and intellectual population is more likely to participate in the public debate, and find viable solutions to the social, economic and environmental challenges facing their society.

Arguably, despite its potential, an increase in internet penetration has had little impact on democracy and freedom of expression. Hardly any cases can be cited in which access to information has been effectively leveraged to improve human rights and democracy in the country.

While several attempts have been made to widen access to ICTs and stimulate the creation of local and relevant content, these attempts have had limited impact. This has been because they were not conceived within the context of a broader plan to empower citizens to leverage the information revolution and proactively participate in the global information society.

Providing appropriate infrastructure and equipment cannot in itself address the challenges of access to information. The increasing costs associated with accessing and using copyrighted materials complicate the situation even further, particularly when the resources available are strained by many competing development priorities. Syria should strike the critical balance between enabling its citizens to utilise the vast information resources available on the web through infrastructure roll-out, while creating the appropriate incentive structure to promote content-based industries and ecosystems.

Reforms of the current intellectual property regime will play a critical role in increasing access to information in the country. These reforms should leverage the available alternatives to traditional copyright that have been developed globally. The reforms should also be accompanied by a more effective enforcement structure in order to increase awareness of the importance of intellectual property and reduce the staggering piracy levels in the country.

A modern, balanced and properly enforced intellectual property regime will foster the growth of content and knowledge-based industries, without blocking access to information through excessively restrictive legislation. The country stands a good chance to become a vibrant knowledge-based economy as evident from its success in the book publishing and media production sectors. However, in order for Syria to capitalise on its distinctive capabilities in the knowledge economy in a rapidly changing global internet marketplace, the telecom market should also be liberalised to enable competition and to develop the country's communications infrastructure to satisfy the requirements of media-rich Web 2.0 applications.

Until recently, the telecom sector has been perceived by the government as a revenue-generating investment. This view has to change to one that considers telecoms in general, and the internet particularly, as an enabler for a knowledge-based economy that inherently has higher value-added potential than many other sectors. This shift will ease the burden placed on the government to create jobs for its booming population by stimulating and rewarding entrepreneurship in an industry that is based on intellectual capital and has, compared to expensive infrastructural roll-out, fewer requirements for financial investment.

Another area that requires careful consideration relates to restrictions on online publishing. Excessive restrictions on online expression can hinder the growth of an in-country media industry, particularly with the global nature of the internet, in which online organisations can operate from anywhere on the globe.

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10 Houssien, M. (2008) Journalists' Fears of the Media Principles Charter, *Zahrira News Network ZNN* www.zahrira.net/?p=4578

11 World Economic Forum (2009) *Global Information Technology Report 2008-2009.* www.insead.edu/v1/gitr/wef/main/analysis/showdatatable.cfm?vno=2.27&countryid=615

12 United Nations (2004) *Global E-Government Readiness Report 2004: Towards Access for Opportunity.* unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan019207.pdf

Clear and well-publicised policies regarding the country's stance towards censorship will mandate that every censorship decision be duly justified in light of these policies. Effective mechanisms should also be implemented to enable people to inquire about and challenge specific censorship decisions.

New trends

Several developments in internet technologies are driving change in the way people are interacting with information on the web and with each other globally, and Syria is no exception. Most prominent of these developments is the growth of Web 2.0 (also called the "read-write web") in which the internet user is no longer a passive consumer of online information, but an active participant in online content creation and a member of a content-sharing community.

Despite the scarce availability of broadband internet access, Syrians are joining social networking websites in droves. By March 2008, Facebook, one of the world's largest social networking sites, which is officially blocked in the country, had 34,351 Syrian users.[13] They utilise several proxy software tools to mask the communications with the blocked site and bypass the government's filtering measures.

Many Syrian bloggers write regularly on a wide range of topics, including technology, current affairs, art and science. These bloggers seem to, however, substitute blocked blogging sites, which are popular, with less visible alternatives hosted abroad. This has the unfortunate consequence of diluting the visibility and popularity of Syrian blogs. The use of micro-blogging websites (like Twitter) is also on the rise.

Predictably, with the large number of Syrian internet users on the social web, these sites are becoming effective tools for mobilisation. A recent example is the use of Facebook in a campaign to boycott the mobile providers in the country for one day in protest against high tariffs and charges.

Another notable trend is the high utilisation of online discussion forums as platforms for expression and dialogue. Existing discussion forums cover topics as diverse as society, religion, science, politics, and health and beauty. Access to these forums usually requires users to register and log on, which makes them difficult to index by search engines unless the forum moderators want to explicitly allow it. This reduces the odds of the site being blocked by the government.

Actions steps

The following steps are necessary to free the information society in Syria:

- Reform intellectual property laws and regulations and consider incorporating emerging alternatives to traditional copyright regimes. Institute appropriate mechanisms for their enforcement.

- Clearly expose the policies that govern censorship of online materials and content, and implement mechanisms for inquiring about and challenging the censorship decisions.

- Adopt policies that foster competition in the telecom market in order to improve the country's telecom infrastructure.

- Reframe the telecom sector as an enabler of a knowledge-based economy and entrepreneurship rather than an income-generating investment.

- Increase transparency in governmental transactions in order to build trust between the citizen and the government and foster participation in any new e-government initiatives. ▪

13 Baillargeon, E. (2008) March 2008 Facebook statistics. inlogicalbearer.
    blogspot.com/2008/03/march-2008-facebook-statistics.html

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).