GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008

Focus on access to infrastructure

Global Information Society Watch
2008

Global Information Society Watch 2008

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

oneworld-platform for southeast europe (owpsee) foundation
Valentina Pellizzer
www.oneworldsee.org
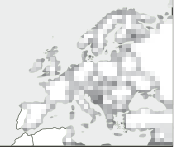
Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a small and complex environment where it is hard to implement reform any time it may affect the state. The simple fact that the state is based on collective or group rights more than on individual rights has its implications. It creates a sense of parallel and mutually obstructing realities. On one hand there are the declarations and agreements signed during national and regional conferences by government representatives, and on the other there is everyday life, which happens in a very disharmonious environment, where reforms are on standby or are applied partially, or have to pass through very invasive processes to comply with the political will and power of the three national communities (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) and their governing parties.

Because of this, the information and communications technology (ICT) policy environment is deadlocked by tensions around two bodies, the Agency for Development of the Information Society (AIS) and the Academic and Research Network (BIHARNET), both of which should be bodies operating at the state level.[1] However, the AIS has still not been officially established, after several proposals were rejected. A draft law is now waiting for parliamentary approval. The situation is more complex for the academic research network. BIHARNET, which was formally registered at the state level but is seen to be part of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (i.e., one of the two national entities), is almost frozen by opposing veto powers held by the two main nationalities sharing power: Bosniaks and Croats. At the same time, another academic and research network, SARNET in the Republika Srpska, acts on its own, and is in regional and international partnerships with other academic networks.

In this context, the growing use of the country's top-level domain (.ba) could be seen as a glimmer in the dark: a sign that Bosnia and Herzegovina could be seen, at least from a search engine point of view, as a united country. Currently the number of websites registered on the domain is 8,958. It is important to mention that while it was very common a few years ago to find public institutions with extensions like .net,[2] .org and .com., today we see an increase in the use of the .ba domain, especially at the municipalities level (e.g., www.opstinaderventa.ba, www.lukavac.ba). A change in approach is also visible in Republika Srpska, where the .ba domain appears together with the sub-domain .rs.[3]

Capacity: Do people understand how to use technology?

According to the eSEE [South-East Europe] Plus Matrix, as of June 2008 internet penetration in Bosnia and Herzegovina was 20%, with broadband services standing at 6%.

The relevance and importance of ICTs is something that citizens are learning. The integration of technology requires investment and strategic decision-making. In this regard, the commitment of Bosnia and Herzegovina is difficult to read. Even if it is true that almost 90% of schools have a computer lab, only 10% of them have broadband access. Pupils start learning about technology only in high school and there is no common curriculum for the whole country.

Looking at social networking, such as blogs or forum activities, we could say that people are getting more familiar with these. Last winter a civic movement successfully convened more than 10,000 people in Sarajevo using the power of the internet. For three months people protested by posting messages on blogs, forums and mailing lists, and using short messaging service (SMS), amongst similar tools.

Blogger.ba hosts more than 70,000 different blogs. Another portal, Bljesak,[4] has more than 3,162 users for a total of 8,835 themes. Also widely used is the portal Banjaluka-live, with 2,016 members and more than 1,785 themes, even if the majority of them are still to do with entertainment or social networking. This year events made clear that blogs and forums are becoming the alternative and direct voice of the citizens. This voice is not always progressive, but it still reflects the need for communication and for having spaces for discussion.

---

1 Bosnia and Herzegovina encompasses two entities with their own governments and parliaments: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. There is also one internationally supervised district, the Brcko District. This system of government was established by the Dayton Peace Agreement to guarantee the representation of the country's three major groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats), with each having a veto on anything that goes against what is defined as "the vital interest of the constituent people".

2 The official website of the parliament of the Republika Srpska is www.narodnaskupstinars.net, which still uses the .net domain as a top-level domain. The same is true of the official website of the Republika Srpska (www.vladars.net).

3 As it is not a state, the Republika Srpska does not have its own internet domain name and its institutions prefer not to use the Bosnia Herzegovina top-level domain (.ba) – or indeed any other single top-level domain – and opt instead for a composite (e.g., www.rs.ba).

4 www.bljesak.info is one of the main portals run from Mostar.

Relevant content: Is there locally relevant content, especially in terms of language?

Content production can be roughly divided into three sectors: private sector content, civil society content, and public institution or official websites (Bosnia and Herzegovina has fourteen different levels of administration, so there is great potential for online content).

In all three sectors the issue of local content involves a cross-cutting issue: language. In Bosnia and Herzegovina there are three languages – Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian – and two alphabets (Latin and Cyrillic). At the same time, English is used at state level.

The question of language use, more than a language issue per se, reflects the nationalistic poison that is all around. Language is used to divide instead of bridging the divide. In fact, the languages are not so different that users cannot understand and actively participate regardless of the official language of the website. Very few sites are able to cover all the languages, because this requires time and resources and does not offer any real additional value. But the issue of online languages remains a potential trap that can be used at any time to split public opinion. Few are the groups who articulate their position around languages and content from an inclusive perspective, and elaborate and produce critical and alternative content.

Forums offer online spaces where people confront each other regardless of language. However, there remains a percentage of people who choose to register themselves as users with what they feel as "their" portals, reproducing in the virtual world the same nationalistic divisions of the real one.

Trust: Do people have confidence in the technology they use?

In the last year the use of technology has increased, while reflection on privacy, security and issues such as cyber crime remains very low. Bosnia and Herzegovina is still a country where the majority of computers have pirated software, and where it is possible to buy illegal copies of movies and cracked software on the main streets. The level of online public and commercial services is still low. The majority of public sites do not go further than offering downloadable forms, which need to be filled in and brought to the respective offices.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently defining laws and regulations regarding security, privacy and cyber crime, on its path towards European Union (EU) integration. In this regard it is following the world trend around security and public interest versus individual rights. What is missing is a public debate with spaces and opportunity for citizens to analyse the alternatives.

In the last two years the internet in Bosnia and Herzegovina has increasingly offered alternative information (via online media, forums, bloggers, internet radio, etc.). Anyone who can access an internet café, or has internet access at work or university, is potentially a content producer. All these spaces are providing alternative content which is very often opposite to the mainstream discourse. The fact that there is no debate around online laws and regulations could carry a cost in terms of freedom of expression. In a country organised around collective rights, content is under constant threat of censorship (e.g., there is a hate speech case related to the first Queer Festival in Sarajevo, which is happening during Ramadan).[5]

For a transitional state like Bosnia and Herzegovina, issues related to internet privacy, security and cyber crime are still far away from general concern and are often seen as something that experts need to discuss and find solutions to. This leads to strange events, such as a public official easily obtaining the real names of forum users who were publicly criticising her behaviour and revealing them during a TV show.

Action steps

If we look at the developmental trends in Bosnia and Herzegovina around the implementation of an ICT strategy, we have to say that public institutions have failed. While Bosnia and Herzegovina was the first country from the Western Balkans to approve an ICT strategy, it now lags behind countries such as Serbia and Macedonia.

The current focus at the state level is e-government, which means developing internal infrastructure for public institutions, and a more interactive and inclusive management of their services. When it comes to the education sector, the mosaic becomes more fragmented and splits into small pieces. In the overall process, citizens or civil society actors are not considered stakeholders, but more or less beneficiaries.

The nature of the internet is making citizens realise that there is a technology that can be used which is connected worldwide. But around the use and abuse of ICTs, and their dissemination, there is still no critical mass.

A critical focal point is developing around content production. State officials have mostly left the online space to be dominated by hate speech – such as the attack on the Sarajevo Queer Festival – without taking any steps to address and implement the country's anti-discrimination law. The regulatory agency has also not issued any fines. This shows clearly that the issue of content and privacy, when it comes to individual rights, will require citizens to either stand up and take responsibility, or silence their diversity. ▪

---

5   Many publications, including the popular *SAFF* and *Dnevni Avaz,* have used derogatory language in relation to lesbian and gay people. They have called for the organisers of the festival to be lynched, stoned, doused with petrol or expelled from the country. Death threats have been issued on the internet against individual gay rights activists. Appeals have also been made to the public to disrupt the festival (Amnesty International press release, 19 September 2008).

References

eSEE Plus Matrix: www.eseeinitiative.org

Omerovi, S. and Bambura, I. (2004) *Public Relations in Service of Local Governance: A Step Further. The analysis of capacities and needs of 11 BiH municipalities in the field of public relations.* Sarajevo: Mediacentar. Available at: www.soros.org.ba/docs_ lokalna_uprava/public_relations_in_service_of_local_governance. doc

Regular monitoring of the following websites and portals:

www.sarajevo-x.com[6]

bljesak.info

mladi.info

www.bhtelecom.ba/portal.html

www.monitor.ba

www.ngo.ba

www.pincom.info

www.banjalukalive.com

www.cafe.ba

efm.ba/portal

radio202.ba/loc

www.oiabih.info/ba/informira/web_portal/index.shtml

www.radiosarajevo.ba

24sata.info

info.ba

bih-x.com

www.blogger.ba[7]

www.bljesak.info[8]

Forums from Bosnia and Herzegovina:

s14.invisionfree.com/SELONACELNIKOV_FORUM

www.kostajnica.com/discus/index.html

forum.prijedor.com/index.php

forumi.gradiska.com/index.php

forum.rskoming.net/index.php

forum.blic.net/index.php

www.banjalukalive.com/forum/index.php

forum.teol.net

www.banjaluka.rs.ba/forum

forum.mrkonjic-grad.com

www.celinac.org/forumi/index.php

www.kotorvaros.rs.ba/forum/index.php

www.teslic.info/index2.php?option=com_forum

srpskikupres.com/v-web/bulletin/bb/index.php

www.modrica.com/forum/forum_topi ... ID=36&PN=1

www.bijeljina.com/modules/newbb

www.lopare.net/forum/index.php

www.phpbber.com/phpbb/?mforum=ugljevikb

www.zvornik.info/diskusije

www.srpskosarajevo.com/forum

forum.sarajevo-rs.com

www.24casa.com/forum

www.elitesecurity.org

www.benchmark.co.yu/forum/index.php

www.mycity.co.yu/phpbb

forum.krstarica.com/index.php

manastir-lepavina.org/forum

www.pravoslavac.net/razgovori/index.php

www.sarajevo-x.com/forum

moforaja.com/board.php

www.mostarskaraja.com/board.php

www.forum.hr/index.php

www.index.hr/forum/default.aspx

www.iskon.hr/forum/index.jspa

---

6 One of the most visited online magazines in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

7 The main blogger community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, powered by sarajevo-x.com.

8 Internet magazine and forum.

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).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2008 Report
www.GISWatch.org