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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2009

APC   Hivos

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Global Information Society Watch
Published by APC and Hivos
2009

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

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Introduction

It is important to highlight four major milestones that took place in 2009 and marked the course of the development of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in Costa Rica.

First, national elections will be held on February 2010, which means that 2009 is an election year. As in many other countries, during election year it is common to review campaign promises and see whether the governing party has fulfilled them or not. Some of these promises had to do with the ICT sector.

At the same time, ICTs serve a key role for the two most important political parties that will participate in the 2010 elections. Both use technology for their campaigning. For example, during the year the candidates who will run for office in 2010 are elected for each political party. All running candidates used social networks, blogs and micro blogging (e.g., Twitter) to interact with the citizens.

Another important issue to highlight is that 2009 is effectively the beginning of an open, liberalised telecommunications sector. Until now, a state institution – *Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad* (ICE) – had the monopoly over all telecommunication services, but important changes were made this year in order to prepare for competition.

Finally, 2009 also stands out as a time when ICTs have been used as a citizen space for alternative media and other kinds of information gathering and sharing. It has become evident that social movements are developing capacities and using web tools strategically to consolidate their actions. These online advocacy processes were learned mainly during the referendum on the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), but are being adopted by social groups for different struggles; for example, in the case of open pit mining in Crucitas or the fight for water in Sardinal.

Policy environment

The year 2009 is all about strengthening the information society policies that were promised for the 2006-2010 period by the government, among them:

E-government: In this period, which ends in 2010, an Intersectorial Commission and a Secretariat on Digital Government were created by decree.[1] Their main goal is to plan the country's e-government agenda for the next decade, integrating short-term, medium-term and long-term actions. However, this goal has not been met. The 2008 Report on the Information Society[2] states that "this project has lacked the necessary high-level political leadership that would have allowed advancing towards

this goal."[3] The low level of priority this important project had during this government period has made it difficult to carry out strategic actions related to digital government.

Short-term actions have been carried out, with support from other institutions (such as the Bank of Costa Rica) and from other governments (for example, Korea). Some of the most important are the possibility of issuing passports and driver's licences at banks, the improvement of state procurement, training in digital government and teleworking pilots.

Digital signatures: In 2009, for the first time, a digital signature certificate was established. The system is not yet available to the general public or institutions. During this period the "root authority" was established – by an agreement between the Ministry of Science and Technology (MICIT) and the Central Bank – which will digitally sign the certificates for the certifying authorities, who will in turn certify the end-users.

Digital inclusion: In the digital inclusion programme the two most important initiatives promoted by MICIT during this government period are the *Centros Comunitarios Inteligentes* or Intelligent Community Centres (CECI) and the digital cities.

- *CECI:* By 2009, 200 CECIs had been launched throughout the whole country.[4] CECIs are spaces offering access to ICTs, most of them consisting of six computers with connectivity. They are set up in partnership with local organisations (municipalities, churches, libraries, development associations, high schools, sport councils, amongst others) to provide services for communities with few opportunities to access ICTs. For the time being, they only offer access. There are no social appropriation processes that could guarantee their future sustainability. In this sense, there is a risk of repeating the mistakes of previous initiatives (e.g., those by Communication without Borders and telecentres, among others) where large investments were made in projects that quickly disappeared.

- *Digital cities:* In 2009, programmes were being developed in four Costa Rican cities, based on AHCIET's[5] model of digital cities: Los Santos, Cartago, Grecia and Alajuela. This initiative is still in the process of being consolidated, including securing inter-institutional agreements and establishing online services, mainly from the local and national government.

Legislative environment

The legal framework for 2009 was focused on the liberalisation of the telecommunications market. It is important to

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1   www.gobiernofacil.go.cr

2   www.prosic.ucr.ac.cr

3   www.prosic.ucr.ac.cr

4   www.micit.go.cr

5   www.ahciet.net

remember that this sector was a state monopoly until the adoption of the free trade agreement with the United States (US), CAFTA, which opened the door to private competition.

In the GISWatch 2008 Costa Rica country report,[6] some important regulatory changes were already mentioned; legislation continues to be approved and implemented in 2009. Besides the General Telecommunications Law and the Law to Strengthen the Public Entities of the Telecommunication Sector that were already discussed last year, there is the development of the National Telecommunications Plan and the creation of the National Telecommunications Fund (FONATEL) and the telecommunications regulator (SUTEL).

It is interesting to mention three key initiatives that came up for discussion in the period, regarding intellectual property, telework and the use of free and open source software in state institutions. Although these initiatives are not yet approved, they have generated discussion and created expectations amongst the Costa Rican population, organisations and institutions.

Chapter 15 of CAFTA includes new regulations for intellectual property rights legislation. Regarding ICTs, this year there have been discussions specifically relating to the right to copy software and digital texts, audio and video. The scope of this legislation is yet to be determined, in a country where copying digital material is common practice, as in many Latin American countries.[7]

Telework is being promoted, as well as the regulations that allow this type of labour, focusing mainly on implementing telework in public institutions. Several pilots have been carried out, and the necessary regulations are being developed. The government has yet to ask for input from the public on the issue, which would include issues like international telework and the consequences it might have for the rights of Costa Rican workers.

At the beginning of the year there was important discussion in Congress regarding the use of free and open source software within state institutions, and the issue of technological neutrality in the state was put forward. This would allow free and open source options to be considered on equal grounds to proprietary solutions.[8]

Citizen communication versus active citizenship

In terms of human rights and democracy, ICTs are beginning to play an important role in Costa Rica. Two aspects stand out. This year marks a turning point between what public institutions offer digitally and the expectations citizens have. A similar turning point has been reached in the acceptance of the single vision of social phenomena presented by the mainstream media: citizens each day use ICTs more and more to express positions that are diverse and alternative to the predominant culture. Costa Rica has particular conditions that allow ICTs to play such an important role, among them: good connectivity and coverage (according to ICE branch company RACSA, 40% of the population has internet access),[9] low-cost mobile telephony and low levels of illiteracy (less than 7%).

Article 28 of the Political Constitution of Costa Rica guarantees freedom of speech and Article 46 of the Constitution establishes every citizen's right to receive truthful and adequate information. Nevertheless, on an everyday level, the legislation tends more to protect the communication corporations and their media than citizens' freedom of speech. There are several national mass media outlets, but they are not diverse; instead, they monopolise information and serve the interests and opinions of a single social group. According to one observer: "In Costa Rica the mass media work like a non-elected system of political repression."[10]

In this context, ICTs have become tools for open and diverse alternative media that play a crucial role in disseminating information from different sources. According to the Freedom of Expression Observatory,[11] in Costa Rica there is "little access for the public to voice their opinion about current events through the mass media and a growing use of ICTs to share opinions without intermediaries."

Mass media have begun to incorporate different ICT tools into their publishing and broadcasting activities (24 of the 101 newspapers, 50 of the 146 registered radio stations and 15 of the 69 television broadcasters)[12] without modifying their editorial line or developing new ways of producing information. New media, such as internet-based radio (15 stations) or online newspapers (23) have started to appear, and have become popular.

On the other hand, many organisations and social movements are setting up blogs to disseminate their actions and integrate citizens' opinions and proposals. In these blogs there is use of digital video and audio and mobile messaging for mobilisation and organising actions.[13] The use of electronic mailing lists is supporting local organisational processes, integrating a great diversity of stakeholders at the municipal level in a year when municipal governments will be elected.

Infomediaries have also become important – that is, the role carried out by people and organisations that can access digital resources online and offer them as information resources to populations that, for different reasons, cannot access the virtual space or do not view it as a priority. This function entails translating the language, format and communication media of the downloaded resources. Likewise, these infomediaries capture the information and knowledge produced locally and upload it, making it visible and valuable in the digital space. These processes mean populations without connectivity can also influence online content, and benefit from it as well.

6   www.giswatch.org

7   BSA and IDC (2008) *Global Software Piracy Study*. global.bsa.org/globalpiracy2008/index.html

8   Villegas, J. (2009) MEP descarta adquirir 'software' libre y compra nuevas licencias de Microsoft, *La Nación*, 16 May. www.nacion.com/ln_ee/2009/mayo/16/pais1964943.html

9   www.racsa.co.cr

10 Fumero Paniagua, G. (2006) *El estado solidario frente a la globalización: Debate sobre el TLC y el ICE*, Zeta Servicios Gráficos, San José.

11 Observatorio de la Libertad de Expresión (2008) *Informe al país: El derecho a la información en Costa Rica*, Editorial Juricentro, San José.

12 www.prosic.ucr.ac.cr

13 For example, see: fueradecrucitas.blogspot.com

Young people who are part of social movements have a key role in this process, since they can combine their high level of ICT appropriation with the advocacy actions of a grassroots group or community.[14] In this way, videos that are shared through YouTube are also screened in a community using a DVD player; cartoons that are in a blog end up being published in the local paper; posters or banners published online are then used in stickers or printed on T-shirts.

It is evident that ICTs play a crucial role as alternative media, not only by promoting citizens' rights to information, but also by strengthening participatory processes and creating a more informed and active citizenry. As a result, mainstream mass media are being questioned, and little by little new sources of information are established, enabling citizens to incorporate new perspectives in their decision-making and organisation processes. At the same time ICTs are strongly identified as tools to position issues and/or to make oneself more visible. For the next period of government, one would expect the use of ICTs to be stronger, not only for accessing alternative information, but also as a means of citizen communication that makes visible multiple and diverse voices, including one's own.

State institutions have been making an effort to use ICTs as a means of providing information to and communicating with the citizenry. For the 2008-2009 period there was an evaluation of how this initiative was working,[15] based on analysing the quality of the means of communication, the information provided and the interaction. According to this analysis, seventeen of the 22 state (i.e., national government) institutional websites have improved their performance this year in terms of providing information and services to the population. However, it is important to point out that the one-way information vision still prevails (from the institution to the citizens) and it is oriented towards making institutional processes more efficient, rather than favouring citizen participation in social auditing processes, in monitoring government performance, or tapping into the needs and demands of the population (citizens to institution).

In the public sector, ICTs are thought of as a valuable space to provide information,[16] which is in itself an important advance. But there is still a long road to travel in order for ICTs to become a space to interact with citizens, or for citizens to participate in the definition of a public institution's mission and work.

The use of ICTs by local governments to stimulate two-way communication is low. Some of them have established services like online tax collection or payment for municipal services. But there is still a lot of room to use these tools for an integral active exercise of citizenship.

New trends

Among the new trends it is important to highlight:

- *The development of ICT use in local governments:* This area has not been explored in depth in Costa Rica. So far the emphasis has been placed on using ICTs to strengthen the municipality's management processes, which has happened predominantly in the local governments that have the most resources. The use of ICTs is likely to be expanded to poorer municipalities around the country.

- *Telework:* Telework seems to be a new trend that will develop with greater strength in Costa Rica in the coming years, not only in state institutions, but also in the private sector and at the international level.

- *Mobile telephony:* The commercial competition in telecommunications will make mobile services available that Costa Ricans cannot currently access, such as third generation telephony. This will make a difference, and it remains to be seen what consequences it will have for the country.

- *ICTs as a means of citizen information and communication:* Another trend that one would expect to see strengthened is the use of ICTs as alternative media for citizens. This is especially true if the mass media continue to be owned and run by the same economic and political stakeholders.

Action steps

To build citizenship, organisations with a social vision of ICTs should strengthen the use of these tools within social movements and their own organisations, and encourage social entrepreneurship.

Alternative visions of copyright should be promoted, so that they go beyond intellectual property registrars, and contribute to the collective creation of knowledge. These should tap into local and popular knowledge, giving it value, making it visible, and protecting it from misuse by third parties.

It is important to understand ICTs as a space for creating knowledge collectively and also as a space to build an active, organised, diverse and participatory citizenry. The vision of ICTs as a one-way space only meant to offer information to the population does not foster inclusive processes. It is all about taking advantage of the fact that online digital technologies are two-way streets, unlike other more traditional information and communication spaces. This recommendation applies to both web-based spaces and mobile telephony, which can both be used as means for citizen information and communication. ∎

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14 For example, see: www.norteenlinea.com

15 www.incae.edu

16 For example, the four most important sections in websites are contact information, general information, institutional publications and activities.

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).