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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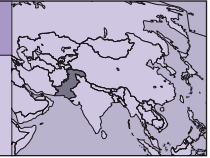
Introduction

It was the early 1990s when the internet began crawling through Pakistan. By 2002, Science and Telecom Minister Atta ur Rahman and his team had brought almost 800 sites online across the country. In the late 1990s, the Sustainable Development Networking Programme (SDNP) – an initiative funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – also helped government agencies, academia and civil society organisations publish their content online. Simultaneously, plans to make computers available through leasing options and the launch of PakSat-1[1] both had a strong influence on establishing access points for the Pakistani population. This domino effect continued with the deregulation of the telecom sector a year later (in 2003), and today more than 50% of Pakistan's population has access to at least one or another form of connectivity.[2]

Access to information, as in most developing countries, has traditionally been dependent on the broadcast and print media. However, a Google and Blogspot ban in 2006,[3] and the Pakistan Electronic Media Ban affecting broadcasters in the emergency of 2007, allowed new media in Pakistan to really prove its mettle.

When the government unplugged the news channels on 3 November 2007, Pakistani audiences quickly transformed the internet into their primary and, at the time, only source for information. The trend of accessing information quickly paved ways into creating content, sparking a revolution in citizen journalism, blogging and a general culture of collaborative content generation.

Investment in infrastructure and capacity building to create a connected country has been consistent in Pakistan, and Pakistanis have been very quick to embrace the open culture of user-generated content and sharing it online, mostly targeting audiences living in large urban areas with better access. However, limited internet penetration in remote areas of the country and an even lower level of broadband penetration have not provided larger spenders with the requisite evidence to support a business model that entails a full content migration onto the web. The problem has been creating "useful information" on a consistent level, which can match or, in some cases, further grow audience demands.

Policy environment

There are no coherent policies on the issue of accessing online information. Pakistan's existing, stale and unimplemented information technology (IT) policy also does not

have any specific guidance on this. However, given recent socio-political and socioeconomic developments, intentionally or unintentionally, the government has been trying to block the development of digital content in the country.

After a very successful mass movement by lawyers, civil society and the general public in Pakistan pushing for an independent judiciary in the country, the power of online activism was obvious. It was actually the web – social networking websites and mobile digital content – that drove the movement to success and kept it well organised. This movement hurt the country's then-dictator, President Pervez Musharraf, badly, paving the way for general elections in 2008. But now, given the mass action, and the new media revolution in 2006 and 2007, even the democratically elected government is frightened of the people's power in cyberspace.

Countering this fear, recently a new presidential ordinance called the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance was announced.[4] This ordinance is extremely draconian; it puts significant stumbling blocks in the way of freedom of expression and censors open political debate. It was issued by the president of Pakistan without consulting the parliament or prime minister and/or his cabinet. Since it still does not have the approval of the parliament, there is a high level of disarray among government functionaries and law enforcement agencies regarding its implementation. The other problematic issue is the lack of clear guidance and very weak capacity to implement it. Pakistan's civil society and the ICT business community are working hard to get the legislation repealed and people's rights restored. If such policy practices continue, the development of content will be affected very negatively.

After Google, Facebook and YouTube are the two top websites visited by Pakistani internet users.[5] Civil rights groups now increasingly organise their debates and events on Facebook, while YouTube is extensively used to showcase the advocacy and rights work being carried out on different issues. However, the government sporadically blocks these websites, mostly on the pretext of harmful content being published. The content tagged as harmful is usually anti-Islamic and blasphemous content. However, the reasons behind these blocks have always been political. For example, recently the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority blocked six different websites that contained pictures of the governor of Punjab and his family, content it called blasphemous.[6]

Pakistan's Copyright Ordinance was promulgated in 1962. This ordinance is still in force, but offers no guidance

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1   Pakistan's national communications satellite.

2   www.pta.gov.pk

3   en.wikinews.org/wiki/Blogspot_ban_lifted_in_Pakistan

4   preview.tinyurl.com/nz3hka

5   www.alexa.com

6   pakistanictpolicy.bytesforall.net/?q=node/160

for online/digital content generation. No specific mention is made regarding the form of the material/content that falls under the ordinance.[7]

Turbulent times, but local content remains the challenge

While Pakistan has been going through a highly tumultuous and unstable political period, the administration's crackdown on information has been just as turbulent and aggressive. This, however, is something that will eventually be resolved: short of unplugging the entire economy from the World Wide Web, there is really no way to truly block access to information.

A greater matter of concern is that regardless of the situation, there seems to be a serious dearth of relevant localised content (i.e., in Urdu or other regional languages). The fundamental brilliance of user-generated content is also its most troubling flaw: if you have poor quality data being used to generate content, the resultant quality of the published content will be just as poor. If we take a look at the kind of content that is being created by the online community in Pakistan, most "reliable" blogs and news sites access much of their primary data from an authentic source – either an eyewitness account or an event or incident that has been documented by a credible source. Blog posts are then built on these sources. So there is clear attention to the quality and credibility of content. However, these sites are in the minority.

There have been essentially two kinds of online content producers: those that create content as a revenue source, and those that create content for the sake of documenting an event. For instance, this is the case when it comes to some technology blogs or regurgitated and repackaged news. However, the audience is not local. One of the main reasons for targeting an audience outside the local boundaries is to increase the advertising that comes as a result.

Local content, or what is often referred to as the "kosher content", does not generate as much revenue through advertising unless there is local sponsorship to take it forward. As a result, the majority of people who produce local content help document a tangible record of the field they are dedicated to.

Pushing global?

6.2 billion. That is your global audience – and each one of those 6.2 billion have access to some kind of information "push" device, be it television, radio, internet or mobile phone. But a few thousand news television channels running syndicated content powered by a handful of corporate media houses does not amount to much of a say for grassroots communities. How does anyone know what makes those communities unique? This is precisely why it is essential for people to represent themselves, and why the internet is so important: whether through having a voice on online community platforms, or building online reservoirs of cultural content, the internet is crucial, and can even be used by others to pull content for their own use. In this way, local communities can "push global", rather than being the passive recipients of other people's information.

In Pakistan, Geo Television, Dawn News and Samaa Television are probably the only three networks that are looking at the concept of citizen journalism. Of the three, only Samaa has acquired an integrated solution (by seenreport.com) which has enabled its reach and news aggregation to be merged with its web presence. Radio stations, which traditionally share a much more personal relationship with their audience, have barely explored the web. However, with gradually increasing bandwidth and growing faith in the penetration of the web, there has been chatter amongst various mainstream media outfits trying to set up internet radio or internet protocol-based television. This area is something that should see more interest in the next two years.

The government's lacklustre, almost failing interest in trying to use the country's rich cultural heritage to rejuvenate a more balanced image of the country continues to surprise the public. There are a number of wikis, blogs and groups across social networking sites that aggregate and generate content about the historic wealth of Pakistan, and a privately funded project called the Citizens Archive of Pakistan[8] is one initiative that helps to aggregate this information. The project gathers and aggregates audio and video podcasts of people who lived through the days of Pakistan's independence.

As suggested, the web is probably the most democratic medium of communication because it not only allows for the average citizen to voice an opinion, but also has the power to archive this opinion in such a way that others can access and evaluate it. This process also offers a way of holding authorities and mainstream media houses accountable, amongst others. Today, when a government official is interviewed on television, many websites will also try to make the clip available online just so that the public can comment on it. Stories that break on international news websites receive comments and feedback from the Pakistani public. For the first time, the world is able to read and hear the "other side of the story".

More than any formal platform or organisation, the blogosphere has probably amounted to the strongest form of global activism. Through social networking websites, blogs and micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter, the push of local, on-the-ground news and opinions is finding its way into international chatter. The participants in this social media play the role of a virtual militia and are not only active in ensuring that the audience has a chance to be exposed to both sides of the story, but also in helping the community give voice to its perspective.

One of the greatest criticisms of web culture has been the fact that minimal content is available in local languages or dialects. According to many, this is one of the major hurdles that has held back the proliferation of the internet. New

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7   A detailed report on Pakistan's intellectual property regime is available at: a2knetwork.org/reports2009/pakistan

8   citizensarchive.org

media has been tackling this criticism to a certain extent by making low-bandwidth audio or video available in local languages. Add this to Google's transliteration services extending to Urdu as well as other dialects, and the critique should quickly fade away. Easy access to Urdu for the development of content will certainly help to increase the number of people who use the web interactively to access information.

Progress and stability will hopefully soon enter Pakistan's mainstream economy. It is only a matter of time before they do. The dynamic creation, documentation and archiving of content, however, is not something that will simply begin to take place. For this, the effort has to be made, and the resources and talent mobilised. By the time the economy settles down into a bullish run, the relevant content should be in place to report it… live and streaming!

New trends

There are a number of new trends which are emerging through the inspiration of open source platforms. Free application programming interfaces (APIs), which enable developers to create applications using existing software, along with other collaborative technologies allowing innovative ways of making money online, are all helping youngsters to look at the web as a more feasible opportunity where their passion can also be economically sustainable.

The number of Pakistanis who wish to venture into setting up their own businesses has increased multi-fold in the past three years. The era of "just talk" is slowly transforming towards a more action-oriented entrepreneurship, and start-up companies are being formed to take advantage of the opportunity of the web. Progress is slow but will pick up pace with the passage of time.

Being virgin territory for most companies, a number of change agents are positioning themselves to fill a critical void of translating "web-speak" into tangible business terms, creating a whole new innovative economy.

There is also an increasing trend towards social entrepreneurship. With the spotlight on Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus from Bangladesh, socially responsible start-ups are taking shape. This has also fuelled an increase in the number of people working in the ICT for development arena.

With the trend of collaboration growing, an increase in the number of people to drive the open ecosystem, the availability of multiple technology platforms and an increase in connectivity options, information is slowly being made accessible through converged media. Taking advantage of the increased mobile penetration in the country, applications are being developed which can open up access between mobile phones, the internet and electronic media. Youngsters, who are more adept at envisioning the future of converging technologies, are helping telcos and corporations see the benefits of convergence. (Their skill was seen during the recent mass action for an independent judiciary.)

Media convergence has started happening, and in the near future, we will see an increasing number of television channels turning to the web and its users to help them gather and create content. This has also given a boost to the blogosphere and citizen journalism. The playing field in the media may not be level, but the web and its open culture and ability to increase access to information have definitely made headway towards a diversity of views.

Action steps

- *More education:* Realising how truly democratic the web is, the recent Electronic Crimes Ordinance has created a great deal of confusion amongst the population. More than anything, the policy papers that circulate amongst the parliament lobbies emphasise their lacklustre understanding of any interactive electronic media. If the policy makers are illiterate on this subject, the subsequent policy or legislation will reflect the confusion… and it does.

- *Privacy and intellectual property:* Privacy and intellectual property rights are two areas that are already high on the lists of several advocacy groups. With the number of individuals generating content online, the need for an effective intellectual property regime is greater than ever.

- *Official documentation of the "good data":* There have to be official reservoirs of reliable data that can be tapped into for regular, updated information, facts and figures. The official government portal on Pakistan began to be one such site; but the interest in generating a layer of credible facts appeared to diminish. Except for a handful of blogs and perhaps a few ICT forums, there are very few websites where accountable, tangible information is available for extrapolation.

- *Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance:* The recent introduction of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance 2009 and its draconian provisions are disincentives for the use of digital content and tools by people. This ordinance should be repealed immediately.

- *Revised IT policy:* The new IT policy should have distinct provisions and guidelines for online content generation and its effective use. ▪

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).