

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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ALGERIA

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Introduction

Bordered by six countries in North Africa, the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria is the second-largest country on the African continent and the eleventh-largest in the world in terms of land area. It has suffered from a decade of terrorism across its vast territory, posing a challenge for the Algerian government to balance the fight against extremism with the development of the national economy.

Algeria has a population of more than 34 million (69.5% aged 15 to 64 years) with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of USD 3,968 in 2007. The hydrocarbon sector has helped the country to decrease its external debt to less than 5% and begin to build a national infrastructure.

In this context, information and communications technologies (ICTs) offer a real opportunity for Algeria: an opportunity to spur development across the country's immense territory, an opportunity for the youth to participate in national growth, and an opportunity to make the ICT sector the second-biggest after the hydrocarbon sector.

Policy environment

The implementation and management of Algerian national ICT policy has been mandated to the Ministry of Posts, Information Technology and Communications (MPTIC). The first important policy drafted was in 2000 with the creation of the regulatory authority for post and telecommunications (ARPT), and the split of Algeria Posts and Telecommunications into two companies, one of them becoming the incumbent telecom operator Algeria Telecom (AT).

The ARPT is in charge of regulating postal services and the telecommunications sector. This includes promoting competition in the latter. It is also responsible for the procedures for the allocation of operating licences and defines the rules on pricing for the services provided to the public. It ensures that the licence conditions are implemented and that the telecommunications infrastructure is shared.

In 2005, the MPTIC was assisted by a United States (US)-funded project, the Internets Network Global Internet Policy Initiative (GIPI). This project aimed to assist policy and regulatory actions needed to address the identified constraints on access to and use of the internet in Algeria.

At that time, the MPTIC and ARPT had been focusing on important policy and regulatory decisions aimed at liberalising the telecommunications sector in order to expand internet access.

In addition to the MPTIC and ARPT, the Ministry of Higher Education has also played an important role in the ICT field, especially through the Scientific and Technical Information Research Centre (CERIST), which functioned

as the only internet service provider (ISP) before market liberalisation.

In 2006, Algeria scored only 0.35 on the UN E-Government Readiness Index, with a mere 1.1 personal computers and 0.59 broadband subscribers per 100 people. Since then, however, liberalisation has created a competitive market in Algeria, increasing the total number of telephone subscribers (mobile and fixed telephony) to more than 30 million from 1.4 million in 2002. There are now 71 ISPs and eleven providers of voice over internet protocol (VoIP) services.

Several key initiatives have been launched to enhance access to online information itself:

- *Ousratic*: The Ousratic initiative, with its slogan of "a computer for every family", aims to increase the penetration of computers in households by offering people loans for their purchase. The government has also lowered the value added tax (VAT) on computers from 17% to 7%.
- *Academic Research Network (ARN)*: This is an education project that aims to interconnect academic and research institutions all over Algeria. The network offers high-speed internet access, and currently connects more than 75 institutions.
- *Virtual Library for Human and Social Sciences*: This initiative involves 30 Algerian university libraries offering access to specialised information related to human and social sciences.
- *Internet for All initiative*: For an average cost of USD 1 per hour for internet connectivity, the goal of this initiative is to popularise the use of the internet by the general public through cybercafés. Recently an old building in Sétif was transformed into a modern cybercafé with 200 terminals and a virtual link to the Mediathèque de Paris library.
- *Cyber Park*: This initiative involves the creation of cyber parks as IT nodes with high employment potential and the capacity to provide technological support and expertise to the industrial sector. Recently a cyber park project was launched in the Sidi Abdellah region.
- *Wikaya Net*: This is a portal dedicated to the spread of information related to cyber security. Amongst other things, it offers alerts about viruses and worms.
- *Web Review*: This initiative is being developed by the Information Science Division of CERIST. It offers access in full text or abstract mode to scientific articles from different fields.

Legislative environment

The Algerian Constitution protects the rights and liberties of the country's citizens by guaranteeing fundamental human and citizens' rights and liberties; freedom of creed and opinion; freedom of trade and industry; and freedom of intellectual, artistic and scientific innovation. It also states that no publication can be seized without warrant, and guarantees the privacy of correspondence and communication, freedom of expression, and equal access to education and professional training.

Legislation dealing with freedom of speech was set up by Law 90-07 of 3 April 1990. The law abolished the state monopoly on the information industry by permitting the creation of several independent newspapers.

Because of the law, Algeria is considered one of the most free Arab countries in the region. However, this freedom needs to be qualified. The law also states that each journalist proven guilty of insulting the president of the republic, the army, the national assembly or other state institutions shall be sentenced for up to two years in jail.

Concerning online content, Decree 98-257 of 25 August 1998 states that ISPs are responsible for all published content hosted on their servers and are also responsible for monitoring content that is considered "contrary to public order and morality".

Algerian legislation has even incorporated the concept of "digital content" through an amendment to the criminal code. It now considers insult or defamation to include writing, drawings or speech, radio and television broadcasts or any electronic means (including computers and the internet).

It is important to note that up until now there have been no online content censorship cases reported in Algeria.

Accessing information: Projects and initiatives to bridge the information divide

The Algerian geography includes the huge Sahara Desert and two significant mountain ranges. As a result, most infrastructure (including the internet) is concentrated in urban areas. Non-urban areas have little access to information by virtue of the fact that they are not even connected to the network.

The Algerian socio-cultural environment is another barrier to accessing information, especially due to the mistrust of technology. This mistrust is encouraged by incidents such as pornography being viewed by students in cybercafés.

A further key barrier to accessing content involves the difficulty of getting access to the information. Information related to economic opportunities at national or local level, as well as to administrative procedures, may exist online on government agency websites, but citizens are neither informed nor encouraged to use the internet as a formal and official source of information.

During the legislative election in 2007, the Ministry of Interior launched an initiative to try to deal with these problems. A bilingual (Arab/French) website was set up that helped voters access information related to the election

process.¹ It allowed users to download documents such as the constitution, laws and other legal texts related to the election. It also included a guide for the electorate, as well as information about political parties participating in the election and about voting centres. One of the goals of this website was to inform Algerians residing abroad about the voting process. The traditional media also encouraged the use of the site.

Concerning ICTs in education, a convention was recently signed by the Ministry of Solidarity with Hess, a US corporation with a branch in Algeria, to provide internet access to eighteen schools for people with visual impairment, and to build a central library offering content in audio format in three languages, Arabic, English and French.

Health information and content is an area in Algeria that needs improvement so that it can reach underserved areas and citizens. A Health Algeria network has already been established and the Algerian government reports that several initiatives to promote and enable ICTs in the health sector have been undertaken. The medical and scientific communities have been given online access to international medical and social science journals since 1999. The Ministry of Health has also introduced an official Health Portal to promote access to electronic health content developed by the Ministry.

It is worthwhile noting that a regulatory policy that protects the privacy and security of individual patient data should be implemented as part of any e-health strategy.

New trends

Algerian Communications Minister Hamid Bessalah recently revealed a new strategic plan for developing ICTs in the country.² The e-Algeria 2013 initiative is supposed to accelerate ICT use in the country, including the government's application of technology to increase access to government information. This strategy is the result of the deliberations of a so-called "e-committee" headed by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.³ It follows the rapid growth of mobile telecommunication services in Algeria, but not internet and broadband services.

The e-Algeria strategy is based on several goals: boosting the use of ICTs in public administration and businesses; developing incentive mechanisms and measures to give citizens access to ICT equipment and networks; stimulating the development of the digital economy; strengthening high and very high speed telecommunication infrastructure; developing human capacities; strengthening research, development and innovation; updating the national legal framework; recognising the value of international cooperation; and establishing e-monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

As far as the use of Web 2.0 tools goes, this is still considered a new phenomenon in Algeria. The blogosphere is small and made up of bloggers living in France and elsewhere

1 www.legislatives2007.dz

2 *Algérie Entreprise* (2008) Interview with Mr. Hamid Bessalah, Minister of MPTIC, 30 December.

3 *El-Djazair* (2009) E-Algérie 2013: une économie numérique, 11 February.

in Europe. YouTube is considered more popular, and used to express individual opinions on political issues and to describe or capture social issues. Algerian youth use mobile phones to record videos which are posted onto YouTube, and friends are then encouraged to visit the website.

Another new trend encouraging access to information is the use of mobile phones for internet access. Recently the mobile service provider Mobilis introduced Mobiconnect, allowing users to connect to the internet through their mobile accounts.

Action steps

Key action steps that need to be taken in Algeria are:

- Advocating for broadband internet infrastructure that can offer more reliable and cheaper access to Algerian citizens.
- Advocating for a national content strategy based on encouraging the private sector and individuals to create more and more relevant content (e.g., text, audio, video).
- Setting up a national cyber security agency to encourage the private sector and especially the financial sector to create more virtual services (e.g., e-banking, e-commerce). ■

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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).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2009 Report

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