

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2009

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



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND HUMANIST INSTITUTE FOR COOPERATION WITH DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (Hivos)

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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Introduction

The number of internet users in Colombia trebled between 2006 and 2009 – from 13.2% of the population in June 2006 to 26.9% in December 2007 to 40% in March 2009.¹ According to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission's (CRT) most recent report, Colombia is ranked among the top countries in Latin America in terms of internet access, behind only Chile and Argentina.²

These positive access statistics are borne out by other reports. According to the consultancy firm Everis, which carried out a study to find out the level of growth of internet access across the world, only nine countries of the 44 surveyed increased the number of users at a 40% annual rate or more. Four of these countries are in Latin America: Brazil, Colombia, Cuba and Paraguay. Colombia has a good ranking, with an average annual growth higher than 40%.³

According to a World Economic Forum report on connectivity, Colombia is above the world's average on the connectivity index,⁴ while the Economist Intelligence Unit says that the country jumped from 58th place in 2008 to 52nd in 2009 in an e-preparedness index which measures information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and preparedness among 70 countries around the world.⁵

The CRT report also says that for every 100 households in Colombia, 23 owned a computer. This is due in part to the value-added tax (VAT) exemption that has encouraged the supply and demand of computers in the country. The establishment of 1,669 new Compartel telecentres in educational institutions is also expected to increase access to ICTs, while broadband access will encourage the production of content.

Policy and legislative environment

In recent years, the Colombian government has made a remarkable effort to include ICTs in its plans and policies. In 2008 there was a big step forward with the introduction of national and regional strategies to boost access to ICTs at the community level.

Over the last two years, the ICT Ministry has been promoting an initiative called Digital Territories in eighteen departments and sixteen municipalities. With this initiative the government aims to combine efforts by local

governments and private companies to improve access to ICTs. One of the key challenges is to produce and offer relevant information at the local level.

ICT Act 1341 of 30 July 2009 has been passed by Congress and approved by the president. Its main objectives are to develop guidelines for ICT roll-out and to promote the access, use and ownership of ICTs. The Act also aims to protect users' rights and regulate the sector through the Superintendency of Industry and Commerce, the National Radio Spectrum Agency and the CRT.

The Act stipulates that both the government and private companies should act as service providers when it comes to ICTs and content development in the public sector (e.g., for education). It highlights the efficient use of the existing infrastructure and resources, and stipulates that ICT service providers will continue to contribute to the existing ICT Fund used for ICT development in under-served areas. It also promotes technological and software neutrality. However, this will be limited by existing agreements between the government and software development companies.

In order to ensure access to ICTs in the most deprived urban and rural areas, the government will implement comprehensive educational initiatives and improve access to infrastructure. These initiatives are essential in those areas not covered by private companies.

According to the CRT, out of every 100 Colombians, 91 own a mobile phone. Despite this fact, mobile phones have not been used to spread relevant information. Currently only commercial information (including advertisements) are posted by private companies. But content related to, for example, crop prices and early warning weather forecasts are not provided, and this is a missed opportunity.

Given the increase in the number of unsolicited text messages on mobile phones, the CRT submitted a proposal to create a national register where users could subscribe their mobile phone number and request to be excluded from receiving unwanted short message service (SMS) and multimedia messaging service (MMS) messages.

Access to information provided by the national government

E-government programme

An e-government strategy,⁶ ratified by the ICT Act, aims to build a more efficient, transparent and participatory government, providing better services to its citizens and the private

1 www.internetworldstats.com

2 Telecommunications Regulatory Commission (CRT) (2009) Connectivity Quarterly Report, No. 15, May. www.crt.gov.co

3 www.everis.com

4 World Economic Forum (2008) The Global Competitiveness Report 2008-2009, World Economic Forum, Geneva.

5 Economist Intelligence Unit, E-readiness rankings 2009. www.eiu.com

6 Information on Colombian e-government initiatives was provided by an interview with Alejandro Barrera, the e-government coordinator at Colnodo, and an interview with Communications Minister Maria del Rosario Guerra, available at the Colombia ICT policy portal: cmsi.colnodo.apc.org/entrevista.shtml?x=3598

sector through ICTs. One core principle of the strategy is to consider the citizens as clients of the public administration who deserve good and efficient service that saves them time and money.

The strategy is a gradual process, with the implementation of several phases of differing complexity:

- *Online information phase:* Governments set up websites in order to post information about their administration, plans and work online. Although most of the municipalities in Colombia have websites, it is a challenge to get them to update the information needed in order to move into the next phase.
- *Online interaction phase:* Public institutions, the general public and the private sector receive information, particularly after making enquiries. This is also a challenge given that the municipalities should have staff available to answer these enquiries at specific times during office hours.
- *Online transactions:* Products and services are offered online. Presently there is an information system that offers 1,500 application forms for civil documents, 100 of which can be processed online.
- *Online services phase:* Public institutions change the way they deliver their services according to what the citizens need, using over-the-counter virtual windows (a virtual office that integrates different government services related to the same process into one access point) and the government intranet. This is one of the most complex phases because it requires an overhaul of how the system currently operates. It involves looking at processes and setting up quality management systems, and includes an institutional cultural change amongst civil servants as far as service delivery is concerned.
- *Democracy online:* Citizens participate actively in the decision-making process and in the definition and evaluation of public policy.

The goal is to complete these phases by 2010 for the national bodies, and by 2012 for territorial bodies.

Government services are currently provided via portals, among them:

- The Colombian government portal,⁷ which provides information, services and processes of public institutions for the general public and private companies, as well as civil servants.
- The online tenders portal,⁸ which is the electronic system for public contracts and provides information on how to respond to government tenders.
- The municipalities portals, some 1,067 sites where general information is provided.

- Sector services, where specific services from different public bodies are provided online (e.g., enquiries about transport fines, payment of income tax, national insurance, etc.).

Information Network for the Agricultural Sector (Agronet)

Agronet⁹ is a network promoted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and is supported by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The network provides information and knowledge on new techniques for sustainable food security and for the diversification of crops in order to improve productivity and opportunities in the market. This information is aimed at both policy makers and stakeholders in the agricultural chain – particularly small producers. Agronet also has alliances with several actors in order to integrate other systems of information into the network and expand the content offered.

Portal Colombia Aprende

Colombia Aprende (“Colombia Learns”)¹⁰ is an education portal set up by the Ministry of Education to provide information and knowledge to teachers, families, researchers and other users. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) considers it one of the three best educational portals in Latin America and the Caribbean. The content is distributed at many levels: nursery, primary and secondary schools and at the higher education level. Unfortunately the website, like many of the government websites, does not compile data on users. This could be quite useful in finding out about the relevance of the information offered, and ways to improve it.

Virtual SENA

The National Learning Service (*Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje, SENA*)¹¹ provides free vocational training to all citizens and in all economic areas in order to improve their job opportunities.

SENA has national coverage and is widely recognised, given the opportunities it provides to people living in isolated rural areas who otherwise would not have any access to education. SENA also supports small enterprises with training, support and tutoring. A few years ago, SENA set up Virtual SENA in order to promote the use of ICTs in education. SENA has a wide range of free online courses – more than 400 courses – some of them linking to other organisations. SENA will soon offer courses on digital television to promote digital content. In 2008 Virtual SENA offered 2,135,758 places in its courses. For 2009 the goal is 3,000,000 places.

7 www.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co

8 www.contratos.gov.co

9 www.agronet.gov.co

10 www.colombiaprende.edu.co

11 www.sena.edu.co

Other information services

Noteworthy examples include virtual libraries such as the Luis Angel Arango Library¹² and the National Library of Colombia;¹³ museums like the National Museum¹⁴ and the *Museo del Oro* (Gold Museum);¹⁵ and national resources and research centres like Corpoica.¹⁶

The initiative *Expreso Colombia* (“a country that lives its culture”), recently launched by the Ministry of Culture, is a virtual space to broadcast and promote cultural events such as carnivals, fairs, folklore celebrations, etc. The audiovisual materials will be broadcasted using the latest ICT technologies. The goal of this programme is to make the content produced accessible to all.

Other initiatives by the national government related to the production and dissemination of content are digital terrestrial television (including a digital television network) and the issuing of 102 commercial radio licences and 150 community radio licences. As a result of the latter, at the end of 2009 there will be more than 1,600 radio stations all over the country. It is expected that the government will set up quality control standards in order to guarantee the quality and relevance of content.

New trends

The Korean government will provide Colombia with credit for USD 10 million in order to launch an ICT training centre. One of the key issues at the centre will be digital content. Universities and research and development centres will be invited to submit proposals for training curricula.

The Colombian government will receive advice from Korean consultants about technology trends, policies that promote digital content, as well as next-generation networks. After the digital industry in Colombia has been analysed, the consultants will recommend guidelines for a public policy to promote digital content in the country.

Another development is worth highlighting. Since the arrival of the internet in Colombia, the .co domain administrator has been the University of the Andes. However, there has been a change, and the new administrator is a temporary association of national and international private companies. With this change, the government is expecting to increase the 26,300 new .co domains added per year to 500,000.

Action steps

The ICT Act offers important possibilities for promoting the production and dissemination of content. However, it is important to see how citizens will have the opportunity to participate. It is necessary to decentralise the production and dissemination of information with training programmes so that people are able to produce their own content. Access to information needs to be democratised, and in doing so issues such as Creative Commons as an alternative to traditional copyright will need to be addressed.

It is also necessary to promote the use of the services, procedures and information provided by the e-government programme, so that citizens can take advantage of these resources and save both time and money.

Finally, it is important to motivate civil society organisations to monitor the government regarding ICT policy and practices, including e-content as it emerges in the policy arena. ■

12 www.lablaa.org

13 www.bibliotecanacional.gov.co

14 www.museonacional.gov.co

15 www.banrep.org/museo/eng/home.htm

16 www.corpoica.org.co

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).

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2009 Report

www.GISWatch.org

