

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION

Focus on freedom of expression and association online



This edition of Global Information Society Watch is dedicated to the people of the Arab revolutions whose courage in the face of violence and repression reminded the world that people working together for change have the power to claim the rights they are entitled to.

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COSTA RICA

ICTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN COSTA RICA



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Introduction

The Costa Rica report for GISWatch 2011 is based on a global problem: the exploitation of natural resources by international companies in the poorest countries in the world. At the moment, natural resources are scarce and very valuable. At the same time, they are often located in remote regions where the most excluded social groups are situated. Natural resources have been part of the culture and daily life of the communities living in these geographical locations.

Excluded populations have fewer opportunities for education, health, employment and other social rights. As a consequence, these social groups have fewer opportunities to access information and to voice their feelings and visions. They suffer an important information gap, which is partly the result of the digital divide.

In addition, there is a disconnect between rural areas and urban areas. Decisions as to the exploitation of natural resources by international companies are made in the urban areas and are implemented in the rural areas after no consultation with communities, and no information to support their implementation or regarding their social and economic consequences.

Social movements against mining

Cutris in San Carlos is situated on the northern Costa Rican border. This is a protected rainforest area and is the habitat of endangered species such as yellow almond trees, green macaws and manatees. Despite this restriction, in 2008 the former government, led by Oscar Arias, gave the Canadian Infinito Gold Company the concession for mining gold in over 300 hectares of this region in order to extract one million tons over ten years. The opencast mining operation – known as the Crucitas gold mining project – would have created an 85-metre pit and provoked serious environmental impacts.

Amongst other things, the mining operations were to involve the use of cyanide, a highly toxic substance which would be transported by land and

by sea, creating dangers not only for Costa Rica but for the entire region along the transport route. The health of families and workers was expected to be seriously impacted by the mine, while technical studies demonstrated the inevitable danger for aquifers.

Different expert studies from institutions like the University of Costa Rica and national and international environmental organisations like AIDA¹ also showed the environmental, economic and social dangers posed by the Crucitas mining project. The Arias government, despite having promoted its “Peace With Nature” programme, declared the project to be in the public interest and of national importance.

The Infinito Gold Company has always disputed arguments related to the environmental consequences of the mining operation. They counter-argued that the project would generate employment in a region where people do not have any other opportunities and promised to reforest the devastated area. They never accepted the danger of the opencast mining.

This case is relevant because despite the declaration of public interest, the government’s support and the important investment made by the Canadian Infinito Gold Company to promote the project, a social resistance movement at the national level has halted the Crucitas gold mining operation. An Administrative Court has not only annulled the concession granted to the Infinito Gold Company, but has also ordered it to pay for environmental damage already caused. Furthermore, it recommended putting now ex-president Arias on trial for declaring the project in the public interest despite the fact that it would have a negative impact on the environment and people. Subsequently, the Costa Rican government has declared a moratorium on all proposed opencast mining. This was an important success for popular movements in the country.

The role of ICTs in environmental struggles

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) – in particular social networks, email and mobile phones – have played a very important role in

¹ www.aidambiental.org

this social resistance movement. They facilitate the dissemination of citizen information, popular mobilisation and communication between multiple and diverse social groups.

The Cutris-San Carlos story shows four key elements that characterised the role of ICTs in the environmental social resistance movement:

New media versus traditional media

The Infinito Gold Company made a substantial investment in a campaign to promote the benefits of gold exploitation in Crucitas. It used television, radio and newspapers in this campaign. It also set up an Infinito website² connected to social networks – but could not generate active participation on the site.

In contrast, social groups working against mining in Crucitas did not have enough resources to use the mass media. Instead they used social networks, email lists and mobile phones to express their disagreement and mobilise public opposition. There is 43.7%³ internet penetration in Costa Rica, while 34.28%⁴ of the population are social network users, as compared to 95% television and 99% radio penetration.⁵ Despite this, the social mobilisation using comparatively low-cost ICTs was successful. By July 2010, 70% of Costa Ricans were well informed about the potential hazards of opencast mining in Crucitas and were against the project.

The information shared on these networks was developed and updated constantly by citizens, without control or restriction. Very often it was more significant and effective than the information produced by traditional media. It became so influential that traditional large-scale media tried to “infiltrate” social networks, looking for up-to-date information provided by social movements and circulated amongst their networks.

Online-offline links

There is a reciprocal relationship between online and offline activities. Social resistance is based on a permanent cycle where digital activities influence local actions and citizen action is followed up online. Innovative strategies and solutions, collective decisions and collaborative analysis in digital spaces used in local actions constitute the power of social resistance.

One good example is “La Marcha por la Vida” (The March for Life),⁶ a walk from Crucitas to San

José in July and San José to Crucitas in August (some 200 kilometres each way). The objective was to inform and protest. The march was conceived and popularised using Facebook, YouTube and email. It began with only 45 people but participation grew during the march itself and through using the internet. In the end it achieved national media coverage and was followed daily on Facebook, creating a “virtual march” with many expressions of support both online and offline.

Graphics, videos, photos and relevant documents were uploaded to digital spaces, some later printed on t-shirts and stickers, and used to inform live discussions and video forums, amongst other actions. Community activities were also popularised using videos, photos and audio uploaded to the internet, creating an online-offline dynamic which is crucial in creating a popular movement.

Bridging the urban-rural gap

One importance of ICTs is their ability to connect rural and urban populations, specifically when it comes to environmental protests. In general there is a significant social gap between rural and urban areas including a wide digital divide. Despite this divide, the protection of environmental resources connects rural and urban interests, and ICTs strengthen the communication of information between organisations and people in both locations.

Bloque Verde (Green Bloc),⁷ an environmental organisation, uploaded examples of urban culture, such as dance, music and graffiti, expressing concerns about natural resource exploitation and the threats to rural life. At the same time, rural communities voiced their visions using digital audio and images on platforms such as Fuera de Crucitas (Get Out of Crucitas),⁸ an active digital space created by the community in San Carlos. The result was a continuous exchange of knowledge and information between people with a common cause in rural and urban areas.

Mix of voices for information transparency

Another key role of ICTs during the Crucitas social resistance was to provide the Costa Rican people with varying and different information from diverse actors with multiple opinions: studies from academia, manifestos from civil society, political discussions from the Legislative Assembly, international agreements signed by the country, the position of the Infinito Company, as well as the rural community’s opinion.

² www.infinito.co.cr

³ www.internetworldstats.com/am/cr.htm

⁴ www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/costa-rica

⁵ www.conicit.go.cr/documentos/costaricadigital.pdf

⁶ www.fueradecrucitas.blogspot.com

⁷ www.bloqueverde.blogspot.com

⁸ www.fueradecrucitas.blogspot.com

This included blogs such as “Ni una sola mina” (Not A Single Mine),⁹ which guaranteed information transparency and diversity for citizen decision making. Environmental organisations and the cultural sector also played an “infomediation” role, translating into different languages and choosing appropriate media to better communicate between social actors and regions.

The viral effect of ICTs also favours disclosure at the international level. The process was, as a result, followed by various international media (albatv.org, laprensa.com, elnuevodiario.com), observatory institutes (conflictosmineros.net) and environmental organisations (humboldt.org.ni), mostly in Latin America.

This role was crucial in demonstrating the importance of information sharing in allowing citizens to make informed decisions.

Conclusion

- The use of social networks by itself does not define a social movement as inclusive and democratic, nor does it guarantee successful results.
- Traditional media are losing their power to connect with the public.
- ICTs promote new communication and information processes and through these can encourage new forms of organisation and ways to produce knowledge. The essential part is the spirit and the power of organising without organisations.¹⁰
- Mixed voices, multiple sources of knowledge and diverse information are basic conditions for an informed public, a new interest in political participation and solid community decision making. ICTs are playing a key role in facilitating these conditions.
- Social resistance is based on a combination of online and offline spaces, interaction between different geographical areas and exchange through different social actors with different languages. Infomediation and infomediators are key to facilitate communication in communities of diversity.

Action steps

- Create open spaces with appropriate ICTs to connect with popular movements in a meaningful way.
- Prioritise infomediary roles to connect multiple sources of knowledge.
- Remember offline spaces – not everything happens in the digital space.
- Develop citizen capacities to use ICTs.
- Prioritise digital audio, video and images for meaningful public impact.
- Follow your collective feelings and do not centralise processes – be open to any opinion and information. ■

⁹ www.niunasolamina.blogspot.com

¹⁰ Shirky, C. (2008) *Here Comes Everybody*, The Penguin Press.

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

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THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

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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