

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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The views expressed in this publication are those of the individual authors and not necessarily those of APC or Hivos

Printed in Goa, India
by Dog Ears Books & Printing

Global Information Society Watch
Published by APC and Hivos
South Africa
2011

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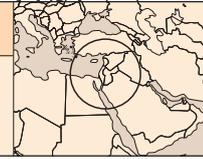
ISSN: 2225-4625
APC-201111-CIPP-R-EN-PDF-0105
ISBN: 978-92-95096-14-1

APC and Hivos would like to thank the Swedish International Cooperation Agency (Sida) for its support for Global Information Society Watch 2011.



OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORY

USING THE INTERNET FOR POLICY INCLUSION



Applied Information Management (AIM)

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Introduction

The critical nature of the telecommunications sector, globally, regionally and within any specific country, has been the focus of many economic development experts. Palestine and the surrounding region are not excluded from the seriousness involved in ensuring that proper and affordable telecommunications services are deployed. Customers expect the growing complexity inherent in the world of telecommunications to be completely transparent and not to interfere for even a split second with the quality of services being provided, despite the content being communicated over the networks – a daunting task in a region where autocratic, police state regimes thrive.

This enormous task assumes, first and foremost, that all citizens of a country are within reach of the provision of telecommunications services, as individuals, households and organisations. A fact of the matter is that as the role and importance of telecommunications grows, the social and political consequences that the least-developed countries face, such as a widening digital divide between the global North and global South or between the rich and poor, are a serious matter for the world community given that the ramifications of such divides impact far beyond the borders of any single state. While the telecommunications sector is leading the privatisation effort in most countries, the ball is easily lost between profit-only-oriented private operators, marginalised public sector administrations and the lack of enforceable regulations – at least in the Middle East.

Working towards transparent and free policy discussions

Addressing this dynamic of how to deal with developing an information and communications and technology (ICT) sector – namely how to contribute

to, and hold accountable, the policy-making mechanisms – was the impetus for technology activists in the Palestinian technology sector to organise what has become a thriving online venue called the Information Technology Special Interest Group, better known as ITSIG.

ITSIG is a simple, subscription-based, electronic mailing list that was established by a handful of Palestinians who returned to Palestine in the early 1990s to contribute to building the information technology sector. As a virtual discussion group, it has no legal status. The list has no commercial interests whatsoever – something ITSIG is proud of as we witness the rapid consumerism engulfing our nascent marketplace. ITSIG is possibly the first and only, effective and free Palestinian discussion forum available in Palestine, and has proven itself a beacon of virtual freedom of speech.

The emerging state of Palestine, similar to many least-developed countries, entered the realm of telecommunications under the assumption that it would be able to leap-frog into an industry that is developing at a rapid pace. Reality – if based on the Palestine example so far – has shown that countries with historically poor infrastructure are prone to make the same mistakes and live the same growing pains as those markets that are now well developed. While the developing world falls into the same potholes that developed countries have hit during their development, thousands of communities are missing a window of opportunity to catch up with the rest of the world, while they wait hoping that the needed infrastructure will allow them to become producers – and not merely consumers – in the world of information technology.

The development of participatory-based national economic and social policies has not been the strong point of the region's nation-states. A lack of public due diligence creates a downward momentum in the need to understand problems in full and create scenarios supported by professional analysis. Telecommunications is a long-term project for any country and is inherently related to the issue of national security. Since security in the developing world is frequently inordinately sensitive to a country's political stability, the issue of future-oriented progressive policy development in the sector often falls victim to "larger" political concerns.

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Another complicating factor is that the lack of freedom of speech, press and assembly in the region causes slower development of services, since customer feedback for demand of new services is rarely articulated in a transparent and obvious way. In Palestine, specifically, this was caused due to the Israeli military occupation that outlawed the use of faxes or modems through the 1980s, let alone allowing those under occupation to participate in how the sector's infrastructure was being developed. However, similar instances arose in just about every other state in the region, causing self-imposed delays in the country's IT technical and human resource development.

Bottom line, be it due to foreign military occupation or governments that are non-representative of their peoples, it is only a matter of time before technology is employed to bypass the restrictions placed on participatory policy making. For Palestine, a prime example was the establishment of ITSIG in the early 1990s.

The ITSIG online forum is dedicated to information technology in Palestine in the broadest sense. It did not take long before it was clear in the sector that ITSIG provided the only true free and open venue for stakeholders of the ICT community to participate in every aspect of the development of the ICT sector in Palestine.

The objectives of the group are:

- To raise ICT awareness in the Palestinian community
- To bridge the geographic gap between ICT professionals in Palestine and in the diaspora and promote transfer of know-how
- To educate and engage policy makers in ICT-related issues and developments, locally, regionally and internationally
- To provide a venue for due diligence on policy and strategy related to ICTs in Palestine
- To create awareness of local, regional and global development of telecommunications and infrastructure, ICT services (e.g. banking, marketing, telemedicine, industry, public services, etc.), technical ICT issues, legal and regulatory frameworks, and standards
- To promote ICT regulation/deregulation and policies to protect citizen and consumer rights, privacy and accessibility
- To contribute to human resource development and education.

Over the last two decades or so, several hundred subscribers have been privy to a wide range of

free and open discussions, sometimes technical, sometimes humorous and many times heated. The mailing list is part and parcel of the policy making in the sector – albeit an informal contributor. From ministers to CEOs, new graduates and diaspora professionals, the diversity of the subscriber base is impressive, with conversations educated and informed. Today the group has over 1,000 active subscribers, which is impressive given the small size of Palestine and its ICT sector.

Although the group has three moderators who keep its nuts and bolts in operation, the discussion posts are unmoderated, meaning any subscriber can post a message which is immediately emailed to all group subscribers. More recently, an associated ITSIG group was also created on the LinkedIn professional online social networking service following the same policy of being unmoderated.

ITSIG is not open to the public; only subscribers are able to make direct postings to the group. One may subscribe to the group at mail.itsig.org/maillist/subscribe.html. After moderators verify that the request was made by a real person, the system will automatically add you to the list of subscribers, and then you can post to the group by emailing general@itsig.org.

The group has publicly available and documented rules governing acceptable behaviour or etiquette. For the most part, subscribers remain within the boundaries of these rules without the need for guidance or moderation, which attests to the professionalism of the subscriber base and the mature level of discussion.

At times, given the volatile political situation we live in, the group is used to disseminate broader political or economic news. The group's etiquette allows for this as long as it is not abused and the non-IT messages are marked in the subject line with "(Non-IT)" in order for subscribers to ignore these if desired.

Hosting for ITSIG was historically donated by a national internet service provider (ISP) and the procurement of equipment made possible through a private sector donation. Group moderators recently moved hosting to an independent location and have automated the subscription process due to the growing administrative burden that accompanied the success of the group.

Over the years, a few powerful players, sometimes government officials and at other times corporate players, have threatened to take legal action against ITSIG. The host of the ITSIG servers was also threatened at times. Other incidents, following heated policy discussions or corporate accountability debates, found some participants receiving

death threats. Speculation is that behind many of these threats were the very entrenched economic interests which reach into the political echelons in the country, and which could not fathom that there exists an open platform where their actions could be critiqued unedited. In a sector that is unhealthily wealthy this should be expected and the safeguard to sustaining the platform is the integrity of the subscribers.

Once all was said and done, however, all of these negative reactions fizzled out and it was proven in practice that the conscious decision to keep the technology more low-tech than high-tech, and the organisational setup loose and volunteer-based, rather than a legal entity, safeguarded the forum to the benefit of sector development.

Stakeholders in the ICT sector are virtually everyone, even those who do not have access to telecommunications services – for the lack of interaction with telecommunications is very real grounds for further backwardness and economic repression. In a region which is hyper-centralised, both in government and business, using technology to open the doors of development is key.

Key lessons

Two key lessons in the experience of ITSIG are that:

- Deployment of technology tools does not necessarily mean adding complexity. ITSIG, by design, remains to this day a simple mailing list and has proven that this is sufficient to concretely contribute to policy and other discussions.
- Deployment of technology, as we are seeing and reading about across the Middle East, is not a new phenomenon when used to force the downfall of governments, albeit refreshing when this happens; prior to the internet, faxes were the new weapon on the block, and before that, television, and before that, radio, and before that, the printing press, etc. Using technological platforms connects sector stakeholders and moves society from being observers to being actively involved and informed.

In light of this, it may be worthwhile to note major categories of stakeholders in any sector, and a few of their characteristics:

Users Individuals and businesses; geographically dispersed; difficult to collectively leverage their interests; increasingly demanding needs based either on technological developments or successful commercial marketing techniques.

Suppliers/operators Profit-oriented; competing globally for foreign investment; little incentive to introduce latest technology; shrewd business practices (vs. static government practices); short-term strategy; lack of national interest component in their planning; weak or no sense of social justice.

Governments Unable to keep pace with technology; lack of funds to invest; lack of management required to compete in a global market; motivated by short-term gains.

Bringing these stakeholders into a unified strategy and securing all of their justified interests may be the most difficult aspect of all. Nevertheless, these stakeholders are always present in every country, so finding a framework to bring harmony is a must. Opening up the discussions around policy issues is a perfect starting point. ITSIG did just that for Palestine's ICT sector.

Action steps

- Empower civil society organisations or even motivated groups of individuals on how to employ cost-effective technology.
- Palestine's diverse and fragmented population, due to its political reality, showed the value of using technology to link physically separated parts of a population; this is key to bringing the maximum number of vested interest parties into a policy discussion.
- ITSIG's flexibility to allow both English and Arabic to be used allows for language to be less of a barrier for those knowing only Arabic. It is imperative that the region's discussions be in its own language if the discussion is not to become an elitists' silo.
- Stakeholder clusters, be it a country's ICT sector, education sector, healthcare sector or any other sector or sub-sector, should be active participants in the discussion of their sector's development.
- The region's issues are too similar to limit the discussion to individual countries. Because of this cross-border venues linked by the use of technology should be sought out. ■

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).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

2011 Report

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