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Introduction

The internet, and particularly its role in combating censorship and encouraging public awareness and engagement, is still very much a work in progress in Vanuatu. While for many countries the challenge is how best to leverage the internet as a tool for social justice, the primary challenge for Vanuatu is simply to ensure access to information technology of any kind. That said, internet and related technologies have already begun to make their influence felt in a number of meaningful ways.

With a tiny population of barely 250,000 people dispersed across a 1,000-km-long archipelago of mountainous volcanic islands, Vanuatu faces significant challenges in developing and maintaining even a basic telecommunications infrastructure. While it lags significantly behind much of the developed world, its progress compares well with neighbouring Melanesian nations, including the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

With the breaking of the local telecommunications monopoly in 2008, it became clear that Vanuatu recognised that technological development was one development area in which it could achieve significant social and economic benefits. Following the introduction of competition into the telecommunications market, mobile penetration rates jumped from barely 8% of the population to well over 60%.¹ In its 2011 annual report, the Telecommunications and Radio Communications Regulator² states that telecoms revenues have more than doubled in the same time period. The social effects of this radical transformation have been tracked in a series of surveys conducted by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy.³

In spite of significant improvements, internet access outside of Vanuatu's two main municipal centres (Port Vila, the capital and Luganville, on Espiritu Santo island) remains effectively non-existent. The primary obstacle is cost; at present, Vanuatu relies exclusively on satellite communications for internet access, resulting in monthly bandwidth fees in the

thousands of US dollars per megabit for uncontented – ie. internet service provider (ISP)-grade – traffic. The result for consumers is internet connection fees that are an order of magnitude greater than one might see in developed markets.

Likewise, environmental factors make the operation of communications networks uniquely difficult. Vanuatu's geographical location means that it experiences hurricanes annually, as well as frequent earthquakes, three of which measured in excess of seven on the Richter scale in the last two years.

Notwithstanding these hurdles, a simplified licensing process has led to the establishment of numerous retail ISPs. Prices remain high, but they have fallen drastically since 2008. Both Telecom Vanuatu Ltd (TVL)⁴ and Digicel Vanuatu (Vanuatu's two telephone carriers) now offer 2G or 3G+ services on their mobile networks. Others offer residential Wi-Fi services at relatively competitive rates.

Nonetheless, the internet remains out of reach for most Vanuatu residents. Computer hardware and internet service prices are still too high for the average wage earner (let alone the cash-poor majority). Compounding this issue, reliable electrical power is largely unavailable on most islands.

The mobile internet revolution therefore offers significant promise to Vanuatu's unconnected majority – and the prospect of ubiquitous connectivity via low-power, rechargeable devices is a compelling one.

Many of the recent improvements in access to electronic communications are directly attributable to the government of Vanuatu's commitment to universal access. In spite of months of turbulence and changes of leadership in its typically fractious political landscape, the government has nonetheless held a largely steady course. Its national information and communications technology (ICT) policy, which has "ICT for all" as its core principle, is currently undergoing an extensive review which should be completed by early 2013.

Strategic challenges

The process of building a competitive and open market has not been without challenges. Both TVL and Digicel have at times contested decisions made by the

1 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanuatu

2 trr.vu

3 www.pacificpolicy.org

4 tv.l.vu

5 www.digicelvanuatu.com

independent regulator, and disputes have on occasion risen to the political level. An attempt to suspend the telecoms regulator⁶ by the minister of Infrastructure and Public Utilities in early 2012 was followed quickly by the transfer of authority over telecommunications to the Prime Minister's Office (this move had been in the works for some months prior to this event). In assuming control over ICT development, the prime minister created the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO), responsible for policy development as well as managing the government's own e-government network, a new backbone network linking all government offices and provincial centres.

Among the OGCIO's first priorities is the oversight of a private sector-led project to establish a submarine fibre optic cable link between Vanuatu and neighbouring Fiji, which sits astride the trans-Pacific Southern Cross Cable. The cost of the undertaking relative to Vanuatu's tiny economy has been the cause of some contention concerning who will ultimately bear the burden of capitalising it, but the government remains intent on seeing the project to fruition even if, as the prime minister has stated, they need to explore a "plan B".

Both mobile telecommunications companies have at times complained that the government's Universal Access Policy (UAP) – and particularly the requirement that they contribute a percentage of net income to the UAP fund – is too heavy a burden to bear in so small a market. Contention over payments to the fund led the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), which had promised matching funds, to suspend its contributions until the controversy could be resolved. The government intends to review the UAP in the coming months but stresses that its commitment to universal access remains unchanged. There is every reason to believe that it is sincere in this regard.

In an interview during the preparation of this report, government CIO Fred Samuel stated that the coming years would see significant government investment in putting public information online. A report⁷ jointly authored by UNESCO, the OECD and the Internet Society indicates that this is a key element in improving usefulness and reducing costs in local internet

with Vanuatu's political establishment. While Ni-Vanuatu (i.e. indigenous citizens) have accessed online as quickly as cost and access will allow, their political elite is largely absent. Only one political party⁹ in the nation has its own website.

This may be changing, however. In August, both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition participated in back-to-back "Face to Face" events¹⁰ facilitated by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy,¹¹ in which members of the public asked questions directly to the leaders. This public meeting used the newly built e-government network to connect all six provincial headquarters to the event, making it the first truly national political event in the country's history. Since then, more candidates and members of parliament have begun to appear in online forums.

The enthusiasm with which Ni-Vanuatu have embraced internet communications is best illustrated in the growth of the Yumi Toktok Street ("Straight Talk")¹² Facebook group³. In the course of a few short months its membership has risen from a few hundred to over 9,600 at the time this report was being prepared. This number represents the vast majority of internet users in the nation.

Notably, Yumi Toktok Street membership outnumbers Papua New Guinea's Sharp Talk Facebook group, which was the subject of intense media attention¹⁵ as the country underwent a series of parliamentary and constitutional contortions during a protracted political leadership fight. Such numbers are reflective of a phenomenon peculiar to Vanuatu society: the ability to unite even in the face of striking differences of opinion and belief.

The tone in this group has at times been boisterous, sometimes downright rancorous. Its atmosphere contrasts sharply with some of the more highly moderated (and notably, less popular) social media groups. Commentary, especially among the Ni-Vanuatu youth, displays a great deal of anger, impatience and disaffection with Vanuatu's political scene, which is universally regarded as fundamentally corrupt. When a photograph was posted to the group, allegedly showing the minister of Infrastructure and Public Utilities

A growing appetite for dialogue

The rate of internet use among urban dwellers is growing significantly, and with it comes a vast – and to date, largely unquenched – thirst for dialogue.

6 www.dailypost.vu/content/todays-dailypost-newspaper-monday-27-february-2012

7 www.pacificpolicy.org/blog/2012/06/30/the-cuckoos-egg-sharing-the-communications-wealth-in-the-pacific

8 www.internetsociety.org/localcontent

9 www.graonmojastis.org

10 www.pacificpolicy.org/blog/2012/08/22/facing-the-nation

11 Full disclosure: The author of this report is employed by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy and participated in this Face to Face event.

12 www.facebook.com/groups/yumitoktok

13 A partial list of Vanuatu-centric social media resources is maintained by the Vanuatu IT Users Society: vito.org.vu/socialize

14 www.facebook.com/groups/Sharptalk

15 www.pmc.aut.ac.nz/articles/social-media-activism-png-plays-role-political-upheaval

emerging from a nightclub in the early morning hours, shirtless and drunk, 722 comments followed, few of them complimentary

Issues discussed include not only domestic politics and quality of life issues, but numerous postings concerning Melanesian brethren, particularly the situation in West Papua. Since independence, Vanuatu has advocated for the liberation of West Papua from Indonesian rule. The issue recently threatened to become a flashpoint when Prime Minister Sato Kilman, having expelled the Australian Federal Police in a diplomatic tiff, enlisted the support of the Indonesian government. Images and video footage of protesters being arrested in Port Vila for their opposition to this move generated angry online protestations of support. Photos and footage documenting political and human rights abuses in West Papua are a common feature on Yumi Toktok Street

Likewise, the publication online and in print of the identities of three Indonesian "investors" who allegedly entered the country illegally with the assistance of the prime minister's first political advisor (or PA) caused such an uproar that the prime minister was forced into a quick *volte-face* that led to the expulsion of the three on the next available flight

Members of Vanuatu's political and power establishment appeared initially to have been caught off guard by this outpouring of concern, commentary and newfound political awareness. Following comments strongly critical of the Vanuatu Police Force (widely believed to be ineffectual), members of the force "invited" several members of the public to the police station to explain their Facebook comments. These acts were of course quickly documented online

Social media are demonstrating their ability to accelerate the flow of news and information throughout an already tightly knit and chatty society (a phenomenon known locally as the "coconut wireless"). In July, an anonymously sourced report emerged online, concerning alleged abuses of privilege by management and senior staff of the Vanuatu National Provident Fund. The website was subsequently taken down by its creator due to concerns for the security and safety of those involved. Discussion on the topic on Facebook was heated and voluminous,⁶ culminating in an impromptu demonstration outside the Fund's headquarters. Subsequent public meetings and media reports largely refuted the initial accusations, but an independent audit of the Fund was nonetheless commissioned by Minister of Finance Moana Carcasses Kalosil. Indeed, this event marked Moana's

entry into the online dialogue, wherein he responded directly to many commentators

The relationship between Vanuatu's print and electronic media is an interesting one. Each seems to reinforce the other. Due to its relatively low cost and ready availability, many Vanuatu residents continue to rely on the newspaper to provide authoritative news and information. Ni-Vanuatu, accustomed as they are to the rapid and often unreliable spread of information through the traditional "coconut wireless", are sometimes slow to accept the veracity of online reportage. Vanuatu's small but effective journalistic establishment has managed to maintain its reputation for integrity and telling truth to power

When the news of the three Indonesians' illegal entry into the country (mentioned above) broke online and then in print, there was no formal online response from the government. The political advisor who was alleged to have facilitated their entry did, however, issue a warning to the *Daily Post* newspaper that he was seeking legal counsel in preparation for a defamation case

If the trend continues as it has, it is likely that, rather than subverting the printed media, Vanuatu's online social media will continue to play a complementary role. Both traditional and new media seem to reinforce one another, with print media providing essential fact-checking and investigative work and new media providing a means of accelerating and broadening the flow of information, as well as providing an invaluable forum in which the long-neglected voices of average Ni-Vanuatu can at last be heard

The island village goes digital

Vanuatu's entry into the online world provides a fascinating case study in the effects of traditional discourse and social constructs on development

Marshall McLuhan's now-clichéd image of a global village was a pessimistic, almost despairing vision. A flickering, glowing screen replaced the campfire at the centre of the human experience, but those huddled around it, seeking meaning in its seductive gaze, were as brutish and unreflective as he imagined early man to be

McLuhan's despairing metaphor was wrong in one critical regard: the people sitting around the village campfire are not nearly the simpletons he imagined. Dozens of case studies in Vanuatu demonstrate that even in a society with only the most rudimentary technology, people show ingenuity, perspicacity and intelligence. Given access to mobile telecommunications, they grasp the initiative, improving their lives in significant ways

16 www.facebook.com/groups/yumitoktok/search/?query=vnpf

Vanuatu's online coming-of-age story is, so far, a positive one. While recent developments only highlight just how far it has yet to go, the benefits are nonetheless noticeable and significant. Most important of all is the fact that Vanuatu society has managed to maintain some of its most salutary characteristics while coping with what for many is a leap straight from a world without automation into the information age.

But communalist societies can sometimes indulge in collective behaviour considered unacceptable in Western societies. Respect for privacy and individual rights are often secondary considerations. During the Vanuatu National Provident imbroglio, private pictures of the Fund manager were posted online and at least one literally incendiary graphic appeared: a Photoshopped image of the Fund headquarters in flames. A small but significant minority of commenters openly advocated an attack on the building itself. The overwhelming majority, however, strongly advocated adherence to the rule of law.

Action steps

- Vanuatu's primary challenge remains achieving even a modicum of access for the majority of the largely rural population. This will be a core component of the upcoming national ICT policy.
- Development of infrastructure and information management plans to embrace and enhance the Chinese-funded government network are already underway. The first fruits of this effort have already begun to appear.
- Steps taken to protect the integrity of the independent regulator and to elevate the role of the government chief information officer have allowed them to prioritise universal access to the internet and to tackle issues related to open government and improved public dialogue. These include initiatives related to local content best practices, improved management of the .vu top-level domain as a public resource, and community-led advocacy concerning public dialogue online.