

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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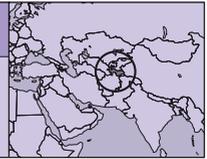


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TAJIKISTAN

Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA)
Asomudin Atoev
www.ispa.tj



Introduction

Tajikistan ratified a law on the right to access information on 18 June 2008. It was the second state in Central Asia that adopted such a law, based on international standards and a model law by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Considering the mountainous geography of this landlocked country, together with the ubiquity of mobile phones, mobile technology seems the most effective way to implement the law.

The first mobile operator, TajikTel, launched in 1996. It reached about 3,000 users only, covering Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, and a few towns around it. The number of operators competing in the market today is nine, with at least four of them covering about 90% of the country. By the end of 2008, the operators provided services to over 3.2 million users, according to the Ministry of Transport and Communications. Operators have been competing in deploying mobile technologies such as global system for mobile (GSM) and third- and fourth-generation (3G, 4G) technologies, as well as a newly created mobile technology called WMNT (which is based on WiMAX).

However, the use of mobile tools as a means of accessing information has not yet been explored as actively as mobile technologies have been deployed. Last July, research showed growth in the percentage of state agencies with websites from 3% in 2007 to 6.1% in 2008.¹ But none of the websites are compatible with wireless access protocol (WAP), which would allow state information to be accessed via a mobile device. If we consider the growth of the mobile telephony market in 2008 (60%), which provides services to about 47% of the population, then it is obvious that there is a need to focus on mobile technology to deliver government services. In comparison, the internet market grew about 14% in 2008, covering merely 7% of population.² It should be mentioned that these are official figures (from the State Service on Regulation and Supervision of Information and Communications), which are lower than those calculated by the Public Fund Civil Internet Policy Initiative (CIPI) and the Internet Service Providers Association (ISPA), which show between 10% and 12% of the population as active internet users.

Policy environment

A state policy on the information society, ratified on 30 April 2008, aims to promote the political, socioeconomic and cultural development of the country as well as to improve its

international image. It consists of a set of political, economic, socio-cultural and administrative measures focused on ensuring the constitutional rights of citizens to access information. The long-term strategic goal of the policy is the development of a democratic information society in the country and its integration with the global information society.

This strategic goal is similar to the goal of the state strategy on information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D), an e-strategy which, along with the other legislation, provides the legal platform for the information society policy. The e-strategy in its turn considers access to information as one of the indicators of the country's e-readiness.

In a recent appeal (April 2009) to the Parliament of Tajikistan, President Emomali Rahmon drew attention to the information "war" that Tajikistan is losing due to many factors. One of them is the low level of local online content.³

The Ministry of Transport and Communications has, for the second time, attempted to create a unified communication centre using the facilities of the state-owned operator. Once created, the centre will become a unique point for transferring all international voice traffic. The ministry has been seriously lobbying for this measure as the only option to reduce illegal voice traffic, even though it runs against ICT legislation and introduces many threats into the market, including fragile information security and technological dependency. The issue is likely to be raised over and over unless the state-owned operator, Tajiktelecom,⁴ is privatised. The operator is scheduled to be privatised in 2010, although this date might be changed, as has happened several times in the past.

Legislative environment

A telecommunications law was adopted in 2002, and its impact has been significant since November 2005, when Article 38 (dealing with networks and services) came into force.

The newly ratified law on the right to access information is key when it comes to shaping the legal environment for accessing information of public interest online. The law aims to create the legal conditions necessary for all citizens to exercise freely their right to access information, as well as for state agencies to provide information openly. Currently developed mobile telephony infrastructure could speed up this law implementation process. What is needed now is an implementation mechanism for the law.

1 Public Fund Civil Internet Policy Initiative (CIPI): www.cipi.tj/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=127&Itemid=4

2 Ibid.

3 Appeal of the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon to the Majlisi Oli (Parliament of the Republic of Tajikistan). www.president.tj/habarho_150409.html

4 www.tajiktelecom.tj

The Ministry of Education has lobbied for restrictions on the use of mobile phones at school. These restrictions were passed in 2009, and now mobile phones are banned at school, and may not be used during class at colleges or universities. In a country where many educational establishments do not have electricity, mobile devices are tools capable of compensating for this shortage.

The current technical and technological capacity of mobile providers is capable of providing internet protocol television (IPTV). For example, two state TV channels, 1TV⁵ and Safina,⁶ were accessible through the Babilon-M mobile network⁷ until the end of 2008, as part of a pilot project. This is one more option for promoting national e-content using mobile telephony infrastructure. However, the regulator of the sector, the State Committee on Television and Radio Broadcasting, has not yet approved the service.

A lack of online content

A young generation of experts, particularly those in the mass media and ICT industries, are adept at deploying Web 2.0 technologies for content development. Despite this, a low level of content development has been the main challenge faced by the country since ICT access became widespread.

Most of the available online information is entertainment related. A few mobile content providers, such as Next-Style,⁸ Intech⁹ and Zervana,¹⁰ have been actively competing in the market. Services include short message service (SMS) voting for competitions. Sometimes these services are used in public initiatives – for example, the SMS voting used in a competition called “The Seven Treasures of Tajikistan”, initiated by the Tourism Development Centre.¹¹ At the same time, the International Trade Centre, through its partnership with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, has been promoting a project to create a web-to-SMS engine integrated in the Chamber’s website.¹² This initiative aims to assist local farmers to harness available technologies for accessing information and reaching new markets.

According to official data almost half of the active internet users in Tajikistan use mobile phones to access online resources.¹³ Unless adequate local content is developed, an import-oriented country in the traditional economy might be mirrored in the knowledge economy. Considering that the number of mobile telephony users has grown much faster than internet users, it is not hard to see that Tajikistan, as a landlocked country, is missing an opportunity.

A viable state policy is needed to address these kinds of gaps. For instance, the restriction on mobile phones in schools is short-sighted, given their potential benefits as educational tools. At the same time, the regulation of the sector needs to be streamlined. For example, a common gateway for voice traffic is not the only way to reduce so-called “grey traffic” (illegal traffic). National economic benefits must be the focus when approaching these kind of challenges, not the interests of one player in the market, even if this player is the state-owned operator.

Without online content that meets local needs, Tajikistan might miss its unique opportunity. What the country needs now is a proactive policy-making body in the ICT industry that is capable of harnessing the advantages of technology. Only such a body can face the current and potential threats by developing viable policies.

New trends

As mentioned, the current technical and technological capacity of mobile providers is capable of providing IPTV service. The deployment of 3G and WiMAX by key mobile companies means that more areas will have mobile internet access. The availability of national TV channels via mobile networks is an affordable approach to meet the needs of access to information in small communities that cannot access these channels via traditional broadcasting.

WMNT is a mobile access technology developed by a local company, Babilon-M. WMNT provides access to server resources (the mobile terminal will perform the role of remote terminal for a number of content-providing servers, and will itself serve as a high-speed wireless interface between different devices). With WMNT there will be no high-cost high-performance processors and complicated operations systems. This will make it affordable to many users.

Action steps

ICTs, mobile devices included, are a tool; and like every tool they need to be managed according to their advantages and disadvantages by the user. The ideal place to educate users as to the potentials and pitfalls of technology is at school. Yet school curricula are lacking.

The more learners have the freedom to access information and online resources, the more demand is created, both for education and entertainment content. Users, including students, who can access resources regardless of their location will benefit. The law that restricts the use of mobile technology in the classroom must, as a result, be amended. A viable policy on ICT for education is also needed.

Illegal traffic, as any other illegal action, is bad for the whole society. Creating a common gateway (unified communication centre) to tackle this issue is not necessarily the only way forward. Various options have to be considered and analysed jointly with key market players, bearing in mind issues such as the quality of services and the rights of consumers. The national interest, rather than any single

5 www.1tv.tj

6 www.safina.tj

7 www.babilon-m.tj

8 www.nextstyle.tj

9 www.intech.tj

10 www.zervana.tj

11 www.tourism.tj

12 www.tpp.tj

13 State Service on Regulation and Supervision of Information and Communications: www.gsnrsi.tj

operator's interest, must be a priority. Illegal traffic is not the only challenge in the market. Presumably some others are emerging and/or might emerge and solutions should not be outcome-oriented but problem-oriented. Only a viable policy is capable of facing these kinds of challenges.

A policy-making body, with a focus on meeting the needs of society as a whole, is needed to develop policy, raise the necessary funding, and coordinate effective implementation. The ICT Council under the President of Tajikistan should be considered for this role. ■

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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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