2013
WEBINDEXREPORT

Communication is a fundamental social process, a basic human need and the foundation of all social organisation… Everyone, everywhere should have the opportunity to participate and no one should be excluded from the benefits that the Information Society offers.

World Summit on the Information Society Declaration, 2003.

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Knowledge has always been one of the most valuable and unequally distributed resources in the world. The first great democratisation of knowledge and communication came with the printing press, which enabled the mass production of books and drove down the costs of owning them 500-fold.[1] The World Wide Web, which was invented by Sir Tim Berners-Lee 25 years ago, has the potential to bring about a similar revolution.

1. Executive Summary

Recognising this, 175 governments gathered in Geneva for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003. They committed to harnessing the internet and other information and communication technologies to build a world "where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge", enabling people "to achieve their full potential… and improve their quality of life."

On the ten-year anniversary of the World Summit, this report assesses progress towards the WSIS goals (see Box 1). Our 81-country research evaluates how far ordinary people around the world can use the Web to obtain the basic knowledge necessary to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals and improve quality of life – for example, early warning information on floods and droughts; advice on sexual and reproductive health; facts on government budgets and spending; or basic data on the performance of local schools.

We also assess how far the Web is empowering people not just to receive information, but to voice their own views, participate in public affairs, and take action to improve their lives – a second important pillar of the WSIS vision.

The decade since the Geneva Summit has thrown up new challenges. Many countries are grappling with rising inequality in the wake of the 2008-10 global economic crisis, exacerbated by persistently high unemployment.[2] Climate change poses an imminent threat to the livelihoods, health and food security of billions; spreading awareness of the environmental crisis facing us, and the knowledge and skills needed to cope with it, is an urgent priority. Civil liberties that are fundamental to democratic participation and accountability are under threat from several quarters.[3]

Against the background of these threats, the WSIS goal of an inclusive information society is more necessary and compelling than ever before. But beyond the digital divide, the world faces a participation divide, as unequal access to knowledge and speech online denies millions the necessary tools for free and informed participation in public life. Democratisation of information and communication flows is further constrained by a global trend towards greater online censorship and surveillance.

Access and skills

The number of internet users worldwide has more than doubled since WSIS, from 16 percent of the global population in 2005 to 39 percent in 2013. In Sweden and Norway, the two top-performing countries overall in this year's Web Index, almost 95 percent of people are online. Seven Web Index countries, including most of the top-scoring middle income countries, have taken legal steps to ensure rights of access to the internet. However, except for Morocco (ranked 54th overall in the Index), none of the developing countries in the Web Index have achieved the WSIS target of connecting at least 50 percent of their populations,[4] and in Africa, fewer than one in five people are using the internet.

Between 50 and 70 percent of Africans cite high costs as the main reason they are not online, suggesting that today's digital divide is primarily a matter of lack of affordability rather than lack of infrastructure.[5] On average, across the developing countries in the Web Index, a basic, entry-level broadband package costs 65 percent of monthly per capita income.[6] Socioeconomic divides in internet use, driven in part by high costs, also exist in many middle and high income countries, including the US, our Web Index number four.

Too few countries have launched large-scale digital and media literacy programmes inside or outside of schools, even though "full integration" of Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) in education and training at all levels was one of the key WSIS commitments.[7] Only 56 percent of Web Index countries were assessed as allocating "significant" resources to ICT training programmes targeting women and men equally.

[1] Silver, N., 2012. The Signal and the Noise. Penguin.
[2] OECD, 2012. An Overview of Growing Income Inequalities in OECD Countries: Main Findings. http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/49499779.pdf
[3] See for example Quentin Skinner's interview with Richard Marshall, 26 July 2013, published at http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/quentin-skinner-richard-marshall/liberty-liberalism-and-surveillance-historic-overview
[4] This is true whether developing countries are considered to be those classified as "low and lower-middle income" by the World Bank; or those achieving medium or low scores on UNDP's Human Development Index.
[5] Gillwald, A., 2012. "Understanding Broadband Demand in Africa: Internet Going Mobile," ResearchICT Africa research paper. http://www.researchictafrica.net/docs/Gillwald%20CITI%20Zambia%20Broadband%202012.pdf
[6] Average of fixed and mobile broadband costs, using latest ITU price basket data. For mobile broadband only, the average cost is slightly lower, but still over 50% of average monthly income.
[7] Exceptions include South Korea, China, Jordan, Estonia, the Philippines, and the US.

Expanding knowledge and participation

Over 100 countries now have laws guaranteeing access to information; just over half of the Web Index countries have right of information laws that are judged to be robust and well enforced.[8] Moreover, 55 percent of the countries in the Web Index have committed to national Open Government Data initiatives.

Nevertheless, ten years after WSIS, basic information that people need to improve their lives and livelihoods and participate in decision-making remains inaccessible to many. ICTs provide a powerful tool to overcome this gap, and countries placed near the top of our Web Index rankings – developing as well as developed – are making creative use of the Web as a cheap, effective and interactive way to broaden access to information, increase accountability in governance and deliver basic services more efficiently. However, over 60 percent of Web Index countries are failing to adequately disseminate even the most basic information online in areas such as health, education and agriculture.[9]

The rights and priorities of women are especially poorly served by the Web in the majority of countries researched, with locally relevant information on topics such as sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence, inheritance and the rights of low-paid workers remaining largely absent from the Web.

Governments lag even further behind on the release of raw official data, with less than 10 percent of key government datasets in the countries we studied available online in fully open formats (see Box 2).

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and entrepreneurs tend to be ahead of government in using online tools to expand access to information. Across most areas we surveyed, CSOs were more active and innovative in their outreach than governments, particularly when it comes to harnessing the interactivity of the Web to provide channels for people to report problems and ask for help.

Surprisingly, however, we found that few civil society websites and even fewer government ones are designed to allow people to access or contribute Web content via channels more accessible to poor and disadvantaged groups, such as mobile phones or local radio. Government use of mobile channels is lowest in Africa, where it could potentially make the biggest difference.[10]

Use of online information by micro, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) is strong in North America and Europe, but still in its infancy elsewhere. We looked specifically at the extent to which farmers and SMEs in the agriculture sector – the backbone of most developing country economies – are using online market price information and weather information to expand markets and increase earnings. In only 13 of 81 countries did we find evidence that such information was driving significant innovation, but in developing countries where this occurred, there was a noticeable impact on the livelihoods of firms and farmers.

The Web as a tool for civic engagement and participation

Traditional civil society organisations, trade unions and political parties in most countries are frequently failing to keep up with the growth of social media, and in only half of the countries surveyed do they use Web-based tools extensively to engage citizens around influencing government decision-making or holding governments accountable.

However, the Web and social media are giving rise to new, more spontaneous forms of collective action. The growth of user-driven networking has been especially rapid in Africa and the Middle East, albeit from a low base.[11] Over the past year, the Web and social media played a role in raising awareness and mobilising people on political issues in 80 percent of the countries studied, and on environmental issues in 66 percent of countries.[12] In about half of these countries, our researchers found evidence that the Web had played a leading role in galvanising both political and environmental action.

Nevertheless, the potential impact of social networking is currently constrained by the size of the connectivity and skills gaps described above, which limits social media use outside of relatively affluent groups; and most significantly, by government moves to co-opt, monitor and control online conversations.

Freedom and openness

As Sir Tim Berners-Lee put it in his recent address to the Open Government Partnership, democracy requires a technical infrastructure, which is increasingly provided by the Web. He proposed that a free and open Web means "don't block me, don't spy on me."[13] The United Nations passed a landmark resolution last year upholding rights to freedom of expression and opinion online.[14] The Philippines – the top-ranking developing country in the Web Index – has crowdsourced a "Magna Carta" bill for the internet, and Brazil – one of the top emerging market countries in the Index – has also tabled a groundbreaking framework of internet rights. Despite concerns over a recent data localisation amendment, the draft *Marco Civil da Internet* is notable for the ambition of its vision to enshrine users' rights to a free and open Web, and for broad popular participation in drafting it.

Globally, however, spying and blocking are on the rise. In nearly one in three countries, politically sensitive Web content is blocked to a moderate or severe extent, and only five countries in Web index (six percent) meet best practice standards for checks and balances on government interception of electronic communications (requiring a warrant from an independent court, substantive justification and transparency in the oversight process).

Provisions against cybercrime, terrorism, or blasphemy are frequently being employed to silence legitimate dissent or justifying blanket digital surveillance.

Recommendations

A second Gutenberg revolution has yet to arrive for the majority of the world's people. As the Web increasingly becomes essential to full participation in public life, concerted action is urgently needed to deliver on the WSIS commitments to increase internet access, affordability and digital capacities; to provide adequate access to critical information; to find creative ways to bring currently unheard voices into the Web's global conversation; and to protect privacy and freedom of opinion online.

Without these steps, the amazing power of the Web and social media may largely amplify the voices and harden the interests of those who already have control over knowledge and access to influence – cancelling out the ambitious but necessary WSIS vision of creating an information society that furthers inclusion, participation and human rights.

We call on governments, civil society organisations and companies to commit to the following actions to re-energise the information society:

1. Reverse the rising tide of online censorship and surveillance. The rights of all citizens to freedom of expression, opinion, and association and privacy both online and offline must be enshrined in law and respected and upheld by all stakeholders. Governments and civil society groups should initiate robust and participatory national debates on the role of the Web in achieving human rights and advancing national development – bringing together all social groups and stakeholders to build a vision for the role of the Web in achieving human rights and national development, and to participate in defining the legal safeguards, policies and programmes needed to achieve that vision. Technology companies should accelerate their deployment of privacy-enhancing technologies; oppose the development of specifications that enable excessive and invasive violations of internet users' rights; and cooperate in developing regulations on the export of censorship and surveillance technologies to repressive regimes.

2. Make broadband affordable and accessible to all. Accelerate actions to achieve or surpass the UN target of reducing the cost of broadband below five percent of average per capita income by 2015. Encourage community wi-fi and other innovative uses of spectrum for public benefit, and re-invest some of the revenue raised from the ICT sector (such as license fees and Universal Service Fund contributions) in achieving universal access to mobile and fixed line internet.

3. Guarantee that all women, men, girls and boys can access essential information. Essential information is that which is necessary to understand and secure individuals' rights to health, education, shelter, livelihood, healthy environment and public participation. Steps needed include ensuring information is widely disseminated via the Web, in formats and languages accessible to excluded groups; allocating specific funds and creating incentives to support non-government actors and independent media to develop innovative public outreach strategies; proactively releasing government data for anyone to download and re-use; and strengthening the legal right of citizens to obtain information on request.

4. Educate everyone on digital rights and skills. Ensure that all teachers receive basic ICT training as part of their professional education, and that all schools and public libraries offer digital literacy and skills training by 2015, with a focus on empowering consumers and young people to take a creative and critical approach to online communication, to make full use of technology to enhance their lives and livelihoods, and to ensure their own privacy and safety on the Web.

8 World Bank Institute and Open Contracting Partnership, 2013. "Open Contracting: A New Frontier for Transparency and Accountability," Research paper, October.
9 As measured by the number of countries who averaged 3 or better on a 5 point scale for effective dissemination of information on health, education, climate adaptation, women's rights, workers' rights and other key topics.
10 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012. UN E-Government Survey 2012, http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan048065.pdf
11 Ibid.
12 As measured by the number of countries who averaged 3 or better on a 5 point scale for the extent of social media and Web use for political mobilisation.
13 Sir Tim Berners-Lee, 2013. Remarks at the closing plenary of the Open Government Partnership Summit, 1 November, London.
   A video of the speech is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_-I79P2j8gw
14 http://www.regeringen.se/content/1/c6/19/64/51/6999c512.pdf

Country	INDEX Composite	SUB-INDEX Universal Access	SUB-INDEX Freedom and Openness	SUB-INDEX Relevant Content	SUB-INDEX Empowerment
Sweden	1	3	6	5	2
Norway	2	6	1	4	4
United Kingdom	3	8	24	1	3
United States	4	12	27	10	1
New Zealand	5	11	8	3	5
Denmark	6	2	7	7	12
Finland	7	9	2	13	10
Iceland	8	1	3	9	17
France	9	16	5	8	6
Korea (Rep. of)	10	4	33	6	8
Australia	11	15	30	2	7
Netherlands	12	18	4	12	13
Japan	13	14	15	15	9
Austria	14	10	16	16	15
Canada	15	17	26	11	11
Germany	16	7	19	17	14
Switzerland	17	13	10	25	18
Estonia	18	22	11	30	16
Ireland	19	25	14	18	25
Belgium	20	20	23	23	22
Poland	21	27	18	28	19
Italy	22	21	21	26	23
Portugal	23	19	9	27	33
Czech Republic	24	23	17	33	20
Israel	25	26	31	19	24
Greece	26	29	12	22	32
Chile	27	30	22	21	29
Spain	28	24	28	40	28
Uruguay	29	32	13	34	42
Mexico	30	38	32	29	31
Singapore	31	5	70	14	35
Colombia	32	33	40	31	26
Brazil	33	37	36	41	27
Costa Rica	34	52	25	39	34
South Africa	35	34	20	48	37
Argentina	36	42	43	24	40
Malaysia	37	36	62	32	21
Philippines	38	48	44	42	38
Peru	39	56	29	43	50
Mauritius	40	46	34	45	52

Country	INDEX Composite	SUB-INDEX Universal Access	SUB-INDEX Freedom and Openness	SUB-INDEX Relevant Content	SUB-INDEX Empowerment
Russia	41	43	67	35	30
Hungary	42	53	37	51	45
Ecuador	43	47	51	44	46
Tunisia	44	51	45	53	41
United Arab Emirates	45	31	74	20	55
Thailand	46	40	63	52	39
Jamaica	47	55	41	49	58
Indonesia	48	57	48	46	53
Kazakhstan	49	44	75	36	44
Bahrain	50	35	71	37	51
Qatar	51	28	77	38	60
Venezuela	52	39	64	50	54
Kenya	53	63	57	55	36
Morocco	54	67	55	56	43
Ghana	55	66	35	60	62
India	56	62	47	63	48
China	57	45	79	47	49
Turkey	58	54	58	59	57
Tanzania	59	61	42	65	56
Namibia	60	49	39	66	76
Senegal	61	70	50	64	47
Jordan	62	41	73	54	63
Egypt	63	58	66	57	66
Bangladesh	64	65	56	61	65
Uganda	65	73	49	76	59
Zambia	66	72	53	70	61
Nigeria	67	60	59	68	69
Botswana	68	64	46	77	80
Saudi Arabia	69	50	81	58	74
Benin	70	80	38	72	78
Nepal	71	75	61	67	71
Viet Nam	72	59	80	62	72
Burkina Faso	73	77	54	73	75
Malawi	74	79	52	81	68
Rwanda	75	71	69	71	64
Cameroon	76	76	65	75	70
Pakistan	77	68	76	69	67
Zimbabwe	78	69	68	78	73
Mali	79	74	60	80	81
Ethiopia	80	81	72	79	77
Yemen	81	78	78	74	79