

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2012

THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



Global Information Society Watch

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Introduction

Alan Finlay

“Corruption is a plague as old as the world.” – AZUR Développement (Republic of Congo)

The theme of “corruption and the internet” is not necessarily a straightforward one, as it may seem at first. Locating it exactly means crossing several other, and perhaps more familiar, advocacy paths, such as e-governance; secrecy, privacy and transparency; access to technology and information; open data; and media freedoms generally. Corruption clearly also occurs at different levels (e.g. national or local), in different sectors (perhaps involving companies or quasi-independent government agencies), and embroils different role players as perpetrators, victims or advocates for change – officials, police forces, company directors, presidents, citizens, the youth. It can also imply the need to consider the moral temperament of a country (see, for instance, Benin).

Each of these has different implications for advocacy. In the case of sectoral or local-level corruption, the state can be an ally. In the case of national-level corruption, civil society aligns itself with the citizen, to raise awareness and put pressure on the state to adhere to global norms of transparency and accountability.

Talking openly about corruption, in some cases, can also be dangerous. At least two authors withdrew their participation in this year’s GISWatch citing this as the reason. As Mireille Raad (Lebanon) writes:

Unlike other activist issues such as advocating for rights generally, an effective and targeted campaign against corruption will put you in a confrontation with “criminals”. Having a good strategic and even legal background on crime and criminals and a bulletproof game plan in this regard is a must.

Country report authors are divided about how useful the internet can be in tackling corruption. Echoing Bytes for All’s experience that “[e]ven the thought of interacting with a government department is a nightmare for an ordinary citizen in Pakistan,” PROTEGE QV (Cameroon) points out that information and communications technology (ICT) systems implemented in the country’s customs administration “limit encounters with public officials” and in doing so have a positive impact on combating corruption.

The internet is also proving effective outside of the ambit of state institutions – to raise awareness, launch campaigns, and for developing tools to track and monitor corruption (see the South African and Brazilian country reports for examples of this).

Transparency International (see the Jordan country report) argues a direct link between lower corruption and internet access for citizens – a 20% increase in internet access is reported to decrease corruption by 0.60 points. A number of country reports appear to support this, highlighting the role that internet-savvy citizens can play as watchdogs on corruption. In the case of Morocco, DiploFoundation finds that:

Many Facebook groups have emerged to denounce corruption practices in Morocco. People have started taking initiatives to raise awareness about the phenomenon and its impact on the local economy from a citizen perspective.

Anas Tawileh (Syria) comments on the use of platforms such as Ushahidi:

It also reduces the potential for corruption, as employees in the workflow for any service provision within these agencies would know that many eyes are watching over their shoulders. This, effectively, crowdsources monitoring of administrative performance by the citizens themselves.

Initiatives to monitor state activities in a transparent way, and, in effect, to highlight areas of potential corruption are often innovative in their simplicity. In Saudi Arabia, the website [zaddad.com](#) – “The Index of Saudi Promises” – tracks local media for project deadline commitments made by Saudi officials, and then lists those projects with a countdown ticker next to each of the commitments made. The motivation behind this site has an emotional clarity that matches its directness. As the site founder Thamer al-Muhaimeed writes: “This index is our memory of the sum of undelivered promises... because we have nothing but these promises.”

SETEM (Spain) finds that online media tend to be more amenable to combating corruption:

[D]igital media or digital publications by the mass media are much more open to covering cases of complaints and violations of rights, while the paper editions of the mass media are reluctant to publish such information.

Similarly, Metatron Research Unit (Hungary) shows that the online news website Atlatzo can pursue stories more persistently than commercial or state-owned news outlets, and focus more consciously on impact:

In contrast to prevailing journalistic practice, claims are often backed up by original source documents which are either linked or published directly on the site. Presenting the evidence in the concrete form of the original source documents boosts the credibility of claims, which is key for anti-corruption work.

However, the watchdog role citizens can play is dependent on a number of factors, including the level of access citizens enjoy, the freedom of institutions such as the media, the ability of citizens to access public events (and to report on those freely), and the readiness with which a state shares information with its citizens.

Independent monitoring initiatives – such as those monitoring municipal spending – are often as good as the quality of data that is made available by the state. And Brazil shows that the authorities can go to great lengths to quash attempts to effect more transparency on spending, making the translation of complex data so that it can be easily understood by citizens virtually impossible.

The question of access to information is raised by several other organisations, including the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which points to the Obama administration's poor track record in granting access to information requests (worse than George Bush's, believe it or not). In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, blocked websites leave the Maan news agency to ask: "Is withholding information from the public an act of corruption, in and of itself?"

As some reports suggest, the link between censorship and corruption can be tangential – one need not necessarily imply the other. But even in the absence of evidence of corrupt activities, in environments that lack free expression and association, and are deliberately censored by the state, corruption is a likely corollary.

E-government programmes – launched to promote an efficient, accountable and transparent government – have also been shown to be as strong as the political will that drives those programmes forward. DiploFoundation finds that Morocco's Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane, who was to usher in a new era of accountability in that country, instead "sounded defeated and helpless with no concrete plans to eradicate corruption."

Jinbonet (Korea) argues the following:

In 2012, Korea scored the highest on the e-government index in the United Nations survey on electronic government. On the other hand, Korea ranked 43rd out of 183 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Given this, it is clear that the development of e-government does not guarantee transparency in government.

Nodo TAU (Argentina), meanwhile, records a negative experience when it comes to e-voting:

Although information technologies are valued in their ability to increase access to information through the digitisation of electoral rolls, the registration of voters, and the processing and dissemination of results, if applied to the act of voting, they make the process more vulnerable.

Access defines how successfully ICTs can be used in combating corruption. Kishor Pradhan (Nepal) reminds us that any e-government programme must be based on appropriate technology – in this case, an anti-corruption telephone hotline is used more than an online complaints system.

Similarly, CONDESAN and Red Científica Peruana (Peru) offer the following fascinating account of the impact a lack of access has on the citizen-government relationship:

Since there are neither good connections nor appropriate technical staff in rural areas, the rural municipalities have opted to establish an office in the nearest town and move part of their offices to the city. However, this has created discontent amongst the population, who felt that their leaders were governing from the cities. Even with the existence of portals to access information, citizens do not have access to the internet, and therefore, their only option to make themselves heard is to travel to town or the nearest city. Because of this we find that the government has not moved closer to citizens using ICTs – on the contrary, it has moved further away.

Perhaps more than before, globally corruption has created a distinct sense of distrust in nations' leaders. KICTANet (Kenya) notes that:

[A] large proportion of Kenyans believe all or most public officials, including the president, to be involved in corruption. The police are considered the most corrupt, followed very closely by parliamentarians and government officials. The media and civil society are the most trusted groups.

Benin decries the moral decay in that country, in which the youth are seen to be complicit. Remedies are proposed. Other reports, such as Syria, see the youth as a necessary participant in anti-corruption efforts: "[The e-complaints platform] was completely conceived, developed and implemented by young Syrians aged between 14 and 16 years."

This, the report adds, "clearly shows the determination of the upcoming generations to tackle the challenges that hindered the development of their countries for decades." ■