

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008

Focus on access to infrastructure



Global Information Society Watch

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MEXICO

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Introduction

Mexico is currently living through a very difficult social and economic process, putting both urban and rural areas under pressure. Violence is part of daily reality, including a high rate of femicide (more than 6,000 women have been killed since 1999 in mostly unsolved gender-specific murders) (Univision, 2007). There are hundreds of deaths related to drug trafficking, and kidnapping gangs have grown across the country. The only constant is the lack of a guarantee of fundamental rights.

Family income has declined, limiting people's access to diverse goods and services, including information and communications technologies (ICTs). According to information published by the Federal Consumer Protection Agency (PROFECO), the cost of a "basic food basket" has jumped from the equivalent of 16.8 minimum wage days of work in December 2006 to 23 days as of May 2008 (Di Constanzo, 2008). This situation has worsened the plight of Mexican families.

The country's federal administration frequently privileges the interests of big capital and the market over the interests of the majority of citizens. The government has tried to sell off national resources such as coastlines, oil, gas and telecommunications frequencies, to mention but a few, to the highest bidder – be it Mexican or foreign capital.

Access to ICTs

Due to the economic and social conditions of the country, ICTs continue to be tools used by the privileged sectors in Mexico. The country's uneven state of digital access is due to differences in income, age, gender, urbanisation, and socioeconomic disparities between regions.

Country statistics are overwhelming. Mexico is home to the second richest businessman in the world: his name is Carlos Slim and he earns USD 30.13 million a day (Bill Gates earns USD 5.4 million daily) (Galán, 2008), whereas the daily minimum wage of a Mexican worker is just under USD 5.

It is no coincidence that telecommunications is one of Slim's most successful business areas. He is owner of Telmex and America Móvil, suppliers of telephony and internet not only in Mexico, but also in several Latin American countries. Slim made his fortune in the 1990s, when the then state-owned telephone company Telmex was sold to him at a very low price, paving the way for huge profits later on. Besides Slim, a number of other Mexican families are also well recognised for their monopolistic business practices (e.g., the Salinas Pliego, Arango and Azcárraga families).

In 2007, two respected sources regarding internet access and ICT use offered us differing data. The Survey on Availability and Use of Information Technologies in Households carried out by the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics estimated that there are 20.8 million internet users in Mexico, while the Internet User Habits Survey conducted by the Mexican Internet Association (AMIPCI) placed the number of users at 22.7 million (AMIPCI, 2007). The difference of almost two million users is far from negligible.

In spite of this imprecision, it is clear that the majority of internet users in Mexico are young, with 63% aged between 12 and 34. Meanwhile, 47.6% of internet users are women, whereas men constitute 52.4%. While the gender divide does not appear significant, a combination of socioeconomic factors does limit women's access to internet. For example, besides the usual technical, educational and family patterns that benefit men more than women, many men have access to the internet and ICTs in their workplace, while many Mexican women work in the manufacturing and services sectors in positions that do not involve computers, the internet, or ICTs generally. The low access to internet amongst the general population as a whole is also explained by a combination of other factors, such as a lack of skills in the use of technologies, the cultural rejection of ICTs, and a lack of awareness of their specific benefits (Tello, 2008).

On the other hand, 92.4% of internet users are located in urban areas, whereas only 7.6% are in rural areas. There are also differences between regions. Northern and central Mexico have lower poverty indexes compared to southern Mexico, because of the high concentration of economic activity in these regions. As a result, northern and central Mexico's investment in computers relative to gross domestic product (GDP) is greater than the national average. Southern Mexico and some areas of central Mexico, which have higher rates of poverty and lower investment, are also regions with a high density of indigenous populations. All this means that a woman over 40 years of age living in a rural area will have very precarious access to technology.

In an attempt to promote ICTs as a driving element of the economy, the government has taken care to position technologies in the field of market competitiveness, placing little emphasis on the potential social benefits of ICTs for the general population. But despite privileging ICTs and the market sector, surprisingly, Mexico has not been able to consolidate ICTs in the world of Mexican business. According to the 2007-2008 Global Information Technology Report, produced by the World Economic Forum in cooperation with

the international business school INSEAD, Mexico dropped nine places in the Networked Readiness Index, from 49th in 2006 to 58th worldwide. Two fundamental reasons for this decline were given: the federal government's limited use of ICTs and inadequate administration in the education sector (Cervantes, 2008).

In Mexico the low penetration of ICTs in business is notable. This varies according to company size, geographic region and economic sector. Reasons cited by various sources include telecommunications regulation, broadband rates, the unequal sizes of companies, and the lack of financing to acquire computer equipment. For this reason, there is a deep digital divide amongst Mexican companies compared to other countries (Tello, 2008).

On the other hand, the same report indicates that Mexico's broadband penetration has expanded. In 2008, broadband users increased by almost 5%. However, the costs are still high for the majority of the population. This is corroborated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Communications Outlook 2007 report, which states that Mexico is the country with the most expensive broadband prices of all 30 OECD member states. The cost ranges from USD 52.36 to USD 802.65 a month. By comparison, at the international level, Sweden's broadband costs range from USD 10.79 to USD 46.74 a month (OECD, 2007).

Since mobile telephony is experiencing the greatest growth in the telecommunications sector in Mexico, it could be deduced that it is the service offering the greatest access in the country. There are 589 handsets per 1,000 inhabitants, amounting to 64.6 million lines for the third quarter of 2007. This means that mobile telephony experienced a growth of 19.4% over the previous twelve months (Competitive Intelligence Unit, 2008). This growth is interesting, since it has occurred despite high service costs. Operators who offer cost-effective time rates (per second) are very few. The majority of them charge per minute, which increases costs for users. This is a critical issue for consumers. It seems that a lot of people have phones, but do not use them very frequently.

Setting the digital agenda

Without doubt, Mexico needs a digital agenda in order to ensure equitable access. At present a comprehensive digital agenda in the country does not exist. Instead, at the federal government level, there are a series of uncoordinated programmes and initiatives in different ministries. These programmes are spread across the National Development Plan, its corresponding sectoral plans, and individual state development plans. However, a proper inventory of these programmes does not exist, preventing an analysis of the course that the state has undertaken to lead the country towards a digitally developed society (Política Digital, 2008).

The official initiative involving universal access and governmental information over the last seven years has

been e-Mexico, which attempted to create a system of satellite connectivity that offered services to the education and health sectors in particular, amongst other government sectors. However, since it was implemented by the Ministry of Communications and Transport, it did not receive support from either the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Health (Hofmann & García-Cantú, 2008). E-Mexico has not been successful, in spite of several governmental efforts. At present, government agencies are discussing a new strategy for universal access that takes advantage of WiMAX and Wi-Fi connectivity for schools, health centres and government offices across the country. The State Networks for Education, Health and Government, a new version of e-Mexico (without the satellite), and the University Corporation for the Development of the Internet (CUDI) will be the principal implementers of the project.

In terms of content, e-government services try to facilitate access to state information for the general population. However, these sites are infrequently updated, and are not coordinated; they are a reflection of the deeper limitations of the Mexican e-government initiative, until now plagued by a lack of coordination in buying equipment, a lack of a regulatory framework, and, evidently, a lack of joint strategies within the government.

In any digital agenda, a fundamental element is access to public information. Mexico initiated that process some years ago. But transparency in Mexico is "practiced with difficulty, and in most of the territory does not reach a satisfactory level," a recent investigation by the Economic Research and Development Centre (CIDE) concluded (Zócalo, 2007).

Another point that any digital agenda must include is the right to communicate. Access to ICTs without the right to communicate is a contradiction. The rights of indigenous people, women and citizens in general to communicate; the right to be informed; the rights of journalists to practice their profession without risking their lives; the right to access ICTs in accordance with the vision and needs of different groups: all must be guaranteed. In short, a digital agenda should be focused on people, and not only defined by the market.

Governmental support for ICT research is also a key aspect. The Mexican government does not offer the necessary support, leaving the responsibility to academics and the research sector. However, as Guillermo Rodríguez Abitia, the director of the Centre for Information Technologies Development at ITESM-CEM says: "At present most of the companies dedicated to information technologies are service providers to big companies, and consequently conduct little research" (Investigación y Desarrollo, 2008).

Some academic research initiatives have been launched. The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), for example, is trying to connect diverse Mexican institutions nationwide and define a 20-year road map for the ICT sector. The UNAM network has also established agreements with the Ministry of Economy to implement knowledge management offices in educational institutions, which would address the country's telecommunications needs.

The federal government's firm steps in favour of proprietary software companies – the government has, for instance, renewed its partnership with Microsoft Mexico – does not favour a policy of broad access. At the same time, the federal government has announced specific guidelines for state spending. Two points stand out:

- Federal institutions must stop buying ICTs. Within a period of 36 months, all ICTs should be obtained via rental service contracts with commercial companies (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2006).
- While the guidelines allow for state agencies to choose between free and open source software and commercially restricted licence solutions, because these agencies are forced to enter into service agreements with commercial companies, software is controlled by the provider. Already there are numerous reports of companies prohibiting the use of free software in federal contracts.

The country's digital agenda should also pay attention to specific groups of the population. There are currently no specific guidelines for women, young people, native language speakers or differently-abled people, to mention a few.

On this point, a decree was published in May 2008 establishing Mexico's compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Among other points, the convention obliges Mexico to adopt measures that ensure ICT access, including access to the internet, for people with disabilities. This is very important for the country, since approximately 10.3 million people have some type of disability (Álvarez, 2008), but currently have no facilities for using basic services, like making emergency calls or consulting official information. Under the convention, Mexico is committed to making public information available in accessible formats, including, for example, producing TV programmes with subtitles. Even though the impact of the convention is not yet visible, its fulfilment means a hope of guaranteeing the freedom of expression for people living with disabilities.

Action steps

In Mexico, public policies favouring the citizenry are fundamental to ensuring effective ICT access for the general population. We should consider what Tello says: “[A] society with cables is not the same as one that is prepared to access, evaluate and apply information. The aspiration to become a knowledge society necessarily implies that, in addition to network access, people have real access to information, that they know what to do with it, and that they have the capacity to transform it into knowledge, and this into tangible benefits” (Tello, 2008).

At present, several laws are pending, perhaps the most urgent being the law on radio, television and telecommunications. While the Supreme Court of Justice resolved an issue of conflicting articles in June 2007, the delays in its approval have been due to political reasons – despite recommendations from international human rights organisations.

Mexico requires a public policy that responds to social needs and generates value for people. For example, it is essential to increase national spending on ICTs. It is also essential to reduce mobile telephony and broadband costs. At the same time, it is crucial to break the monopolies of telecommunications companies. Social ICT projects, like digital villages, are also important.

Finally, citizens need to regain trust in public information. A controlled mass media, the publication of contradictory information, and the assassination of journalists have eroded public confidence.

The promotion of social networks to encourage participation, strengthen identity and build transparency is also fundamental. Mexican women and men face the challenge of creating a regulatory framework that ensures access to ICTs, and makes society's participation viable in the rebuilding of the country. ■

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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2008 is the second in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH or **GISWatch** has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of information and communication 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 2008** *focuses on access to infrastructure* and includes several thematic reports dealing with key access issues, an analysis of where global institutions stand on the access debate, a report looking at the state of indicators and access, six regional reports and 38 country reports.

GISWatch 2008 is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) and the Third World Institute (ITeM).

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2008 Report

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