



Session Title:

Hello Regulator? Regulatory Authorities' Information and Communication Practices

**Information Sharing by National Telecom Regulatory Authorities
Through Their Websites: The Asia-Pacific Experience**

Chanuka Wattegama

Director, Organizational Development
LIRNEasia
Colombo, Sri Lanka

wattegama@lirne.net
12 Balcombe Place, Colombo 08, Sri Lanka
+94 77 305 5486, +94 11 267 1160
Fax: +94 11 267 5212

November 2007
Research supported by IDRC



Abstract

A national telecommunication regulatory authority, like any other government organization, has to *talk* to its stakeholders, including citizens. One of the best ways to do this is through a website, an electronic window that delivers different types of information: factual, consumer, business, etc. This paper discusses the types of information that national regulatory authorities (NRAs) in Asia-Pacific countries share with their stakeholders, and the approaches they take. It is based on a benchmarking survey that evaluated the information that NRAs provide to telecom operators, investors, consumers, researchers and even the general public. Marks were awarded to each website for the availability of information and features that were useful to the regulator's stakeholders. A total of 27 websites were evaluated from a region that includes 62 economies. The results vary widely but it is clear that some countries use the tool in a very effective manner. This discussion also serves as a guide for NRAs that plan to improve their present websites.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 A website as an NRA delivery channel

Any government agency needs to effectively communicate with its stakeholders, including citizens. This is done using a gamut of channels: print as well as electronic, traditional as well as modern, one-way and interactive, and channels that unicast or broadcast. The organization's website is a key medium among these and an important window through which the spirit of e-government can be realized. A well-constructed website provides citizens and other stakeholders with one of the best possible interfaces with a government agency. It allows for self-service, whether a citizen wishes to find a particular piece of information, perform a transaction or obtain a copy of a certificate. It is available round the clock and does not waste a citizen's time in queues. In addition, companies can search for information and for opportunities with the government, and even apply for certain facilities online. In short, a website is a virtual representation of the entire organization in cyberspace.

A national regulatory authority (NRA) is an important government agency in any country, especially in the context of information society reforms. It is responsible for the healthy growth of the telecommunication sector and the diffusion of telecommunication services to the public at all levels. It serves a large group of stakeholders, ranging from citizens to businesses, from prospective investors to incumbent telecom operators. An NRA's website should serve as an information gateway to all stakeholders.

In addition to serving as an instrument for transparency and accountability, a well-designed and informative website can also demonstrate the extent and facility with which the NRA uses the technologies and services it regulates. A well-maintained website increases confidence in the regulator's skills and capacities. Moreover, an effectively run website with useful, up-to-date information and functionality can be an effective communication tool that not only speeds up communication, but decreases time and costs incurred for regulatory compliance (Mahan 2005).

2.0 Discussion

2.1 Web surveys

The following discussion is primarily based on an online website survey undertaken in the Asia-Pacific region in 2005. The survey was mainly guided by a similar study on Africa (Mahan 2005) and an earlier study by the United Nations Division for Public Economics and Public Administration (UNDPEPA) and the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) (2001).

Mahan's study (2005) benchmarks the websites of independent NRAs in 22 African countries. It grew out of a collection of preliminary regional surveys which examined the extent to which NRAs were using websites to inform and communicate with the public, including citizens, businesses and other governmental and non-governmental organizations. While the website presence indicator for NRAs cannot capture the overall effectiveness, efficiency or transparency of the regulator, it clarifies categories of information and their respective users to indicate responsiveness and interactivity in providing information.

2.2 Country selection for the web survey

The survey was conducted on NRA sites in the Asia-Pacific region. Based on the broad definition of 'Asia' as the group of countries bordered by Russia, Turkey and Egypt and the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and including the independent island nations in these oceans, the region encompasses 62 different territories.¹

These 62 countries were then checked for the availability of an NRA² and a corresponding website developed to an acceptable level.^{3,4} Countries that did not meet these requisites were excluded.

Five NRA websites were removed from the list due to a practical limitation. These five websites, namely those of Armenia, China, Indonesia, Thailand and Yemen, did not have English versions. This is not to say that every country should have an English version of its website, only that it was impractical for these websites to be included in this research. South Korea has an abbreviated English version on its NRA website, which is why it too was excluded.

As a result, 27 NRA websites were identified for analysis in this preliminary study.

2.3 Types of information shared

NRAs have multiple stakeholders, and an NRA's website should cater to the requirements of each. Hence, the best way to evaluate or rank an NRA website is to look at it from the perspective of each stakeholder.

The four key stakeholder groups are:

- i. **Existing industry players:** They require a close relationship with the regulator. The website is an appropriate medium because they have the tools for web use.
- ii. **Prospective investors (local and international):** An NRA website is expected to present accurate business information required by such parties. In the case of international investors, the website is the best means of obtaining regulatory information. The information that potential investors may look for falls into several categories: legal, financial and technical information, as well as local market statistics.

A prospective investor would also be interested in the country's business and economic

¹ Recognition by the UN was used to decide whether a country is an independent territory or not, with the exception of Hong Kong, which was considered a separate entity as it operates in a different regulatory environment from that of China.

² <www.itu.int/ITU-D/treg/profiles/RegPolicyAddress.asp?lang=en> Accessed 6 November 2007.

³ For instance, some sites were still under construction, as in the case of Syria. In the case of some other countries (especially where the NRA is not a separate entity), the websites were found to be inadequate for analysis.

⁴ Japan, New Zealand and Tonga were prime examples of countries without NRAs. In these cases, the roles of the NRA are played by the Telecommunications Bureau, Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications of Japan; the Commerce Commission of New Zealand; and the Prime Minister's Office of Tonga, respectively. Though these agencies are responsible for some duties of an NRA, it is difficult to evaluate their multi-function websites against other NRA websites.

environment. This information might be available from other websites, but a proactive NRA website should provide the basic information or at least useful (and working) links to the relevant websites.

- iii. **Consumers:** Consumers may want information about new technologies and their reliability, or performance indicators of different service providers. They may also be interested in knowing what their rights are and in safeguarding them.
- iv. **Others:** There is a plethora of other stakeholders such as media personnel, researchers, students, etc. Most of these groups depend on the NRA website for the latest information on the telecommunication sector.

It is difficult to use this approach in practice, however, because some information is relevant to more than one category of stakeholders, which means some sets of attributes would be evaluated more than once. Therefore, the method had to be slightly modified.

Four categories of information were identified as information that should be present on an NRA website to meet the requirements of the stakeholder groups identified above:

- ❑ **Factual information:** This includes legislation, statistical indicators, etc.
- ❑ **Consumer and citizen information:** Information of interest to end-users or prospective end-users, about consumer rights (including how to complain), tariffs, etc. In addition to actual legislation and formal guidelines, FAQs (frequently asked questions) and other means of making the information more accessible must be present.
- ❑ **Business information:** This relates to information required by current and prospective operators and investors such as licensing procedures, technical requirements, interconnection agreements, online forms for certification, authorization, etc. Here, weight is given to information which *explains and describes* the procedures and requirements, rather than mere access to formal documentation and legislation.
- ❑ **Telecom regulatory news and other features that make the site more intelligible:** This final category ensures *accessibility* of information, regulatory news and developments to researchers and journalists who can further disseminate regulatory information. Often these features contextualize the site information and make it more intelligible.

In addition, there are general features that any NRA website should have, if it is to be useful to its stakeholders:

- i. **Availability of the NRA's mission statement or equivalent:** Government websites are expected to justify the existence of the entity that the website represents, in this case the NRA. The organization's mission statement usually fulfills this purpose, by giving users of the website a broad picture of the nature of the organization and its responsibilities and activities.

- ii. **Future plans and vision:** Telecom is a rapidly developing field. Therefore, an NRA should have a vision and objectives. Presentation of this information on the website will assist stakeholders.
- iii. **Regular updating:** This can be verified by the dates on which the latest updates were made (if this information is available) or by the nature of the news items and other information. Unfortunately, this study did not permit periodic observations that are necessary for the best results on this criterion.
- iv. **Availability of information in local language(s):** This is relevant if the language(s) used by the citizens is not English. The NRA websites are not expected to present every piece of information in local languages. However, it is expected that at least some local language content should be available, if more than 10% of the country's population does not understand English.
- v. **Links to external sites:** The presence as well as the relevance of the links is important. For example, an NRA site should lead an investor to sites providing general information about the investment climate. The links should, of course, work.
- vi. **Ease of finding information (site map or separate paths or areas on home page for different groups of users):** This is important to ensure ease of obtaining information.
- vii. **Organization charts and contact information:** One of the difficulties that stakeholders frequently face is finding the relevant person to contact. It is therefore essential for a website to contain an organizational chart and/or contact details of the officials.
- viii. **Availability of online forms:** Online availability of different kinds of forms that facilitate interaction with the NRA can save much time and effort. Ideally the site should provide the means to submit these application forms. However, only a handful of sites provide this specific feature now.
- ix. **Using the website for recruitment:** Although this is not an e-government service, an NRA can use a website to fulfill its human resources requirements in an effective, speedy and cost-effective manner. Job seekers cannot be considered as direct stakeholders, but the availability of this feature is important from an organizational perspective.

2.4 Marking scheme

Table 1 illustrates how each category was weighted in the evaluation process.

Table 1 – Category weights

Note: Where the NRA was not responsible for some particular task (e.g., licensing, handling customer complaints, etc.) the marks were awarded if the site had a link to the website of the relevant agency.

	Category	Overall category weight	Sub-category	Weight within category	Weight by sub-category
1	Factual information	25%	Legislation, regulations	50%	12.50%
			Statistical and technical information	50%	12.50%
2	Consumer and citizen information	25%	Information for consumers (other than rights)	50%	12.50%
			Consumer rights information	25%	6.25%
			Consumer complaints procedure	25%	6.25%
3	Business information	25%	Equipment certification	15%	3.75%
			Market entry information	15%	3.75%
			Interconnection information	15%	3.75%
			Reports	55%	13.75%
4	General	25%	Mission statement, future plans, updating, local languages, local links, international links, ease of use, availability of online forms, organization chart/contacts, recruitment information	8% each; total 80%	2.00% each; total 20%
			Telecom news	20%	5.00%
Total		100%			100.00%

3.0 Results and conclusion

The results of analysis shown in Figures 1 through 5.

Figure 1 – Country marks for factual information

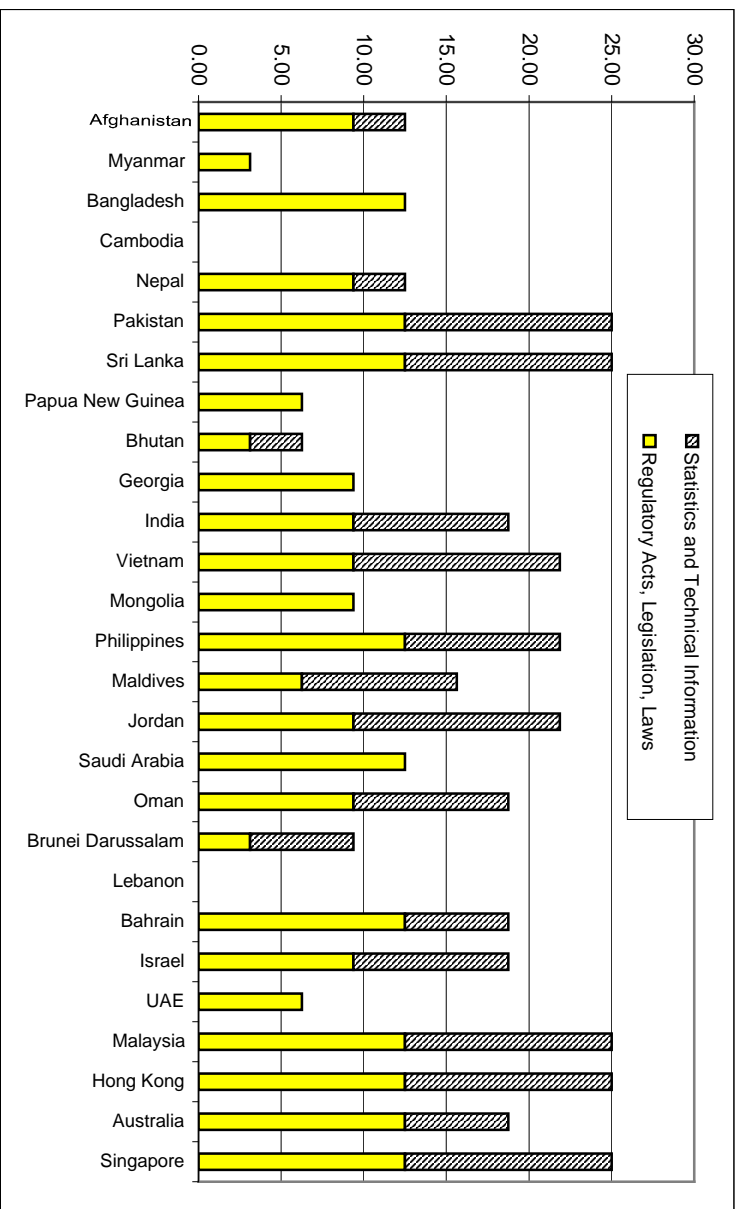


Figure 2 – Country marks for consumer information

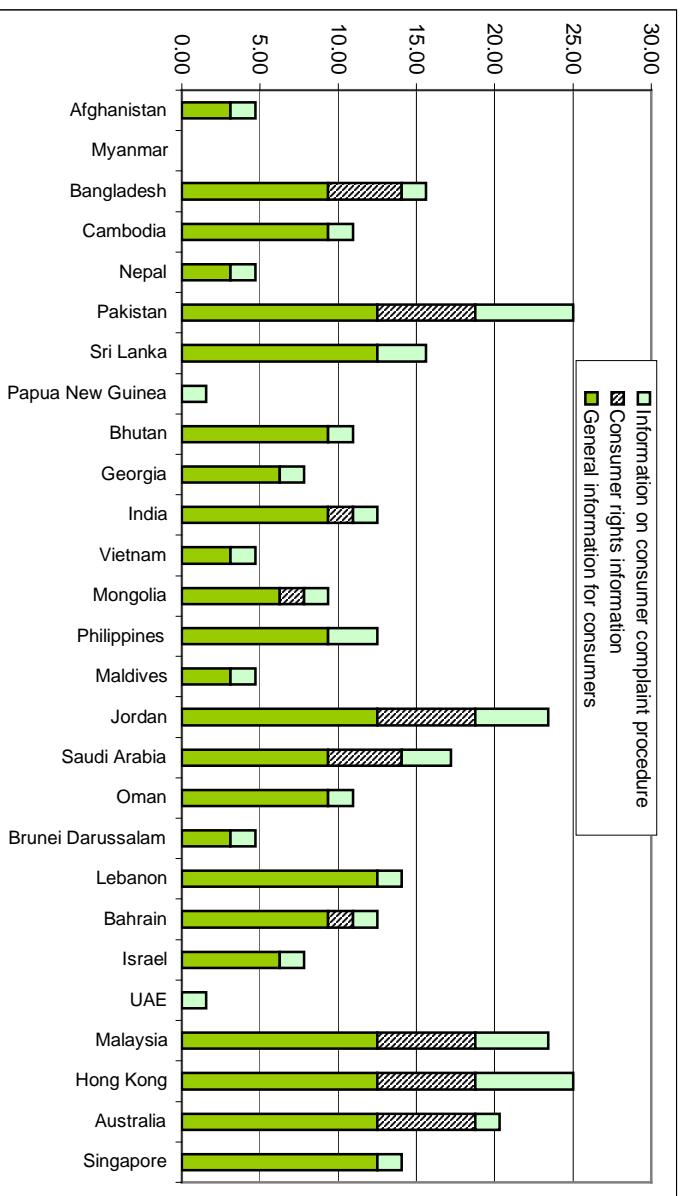


Figure 3 – Country marks for business information

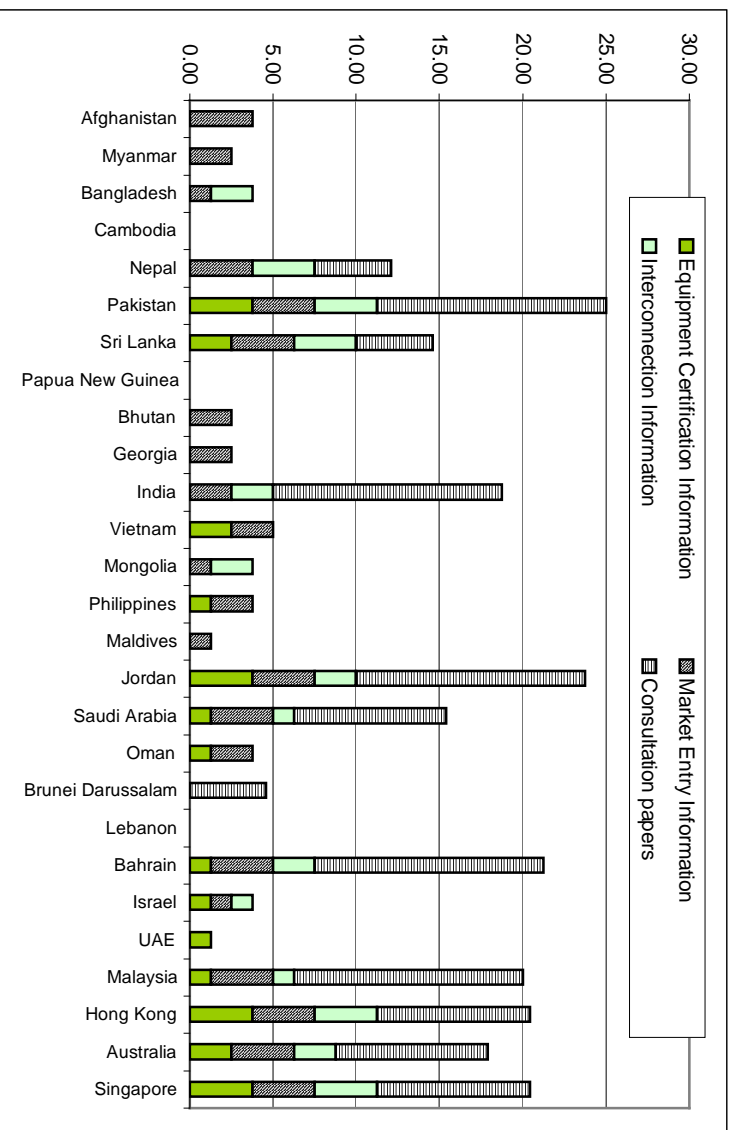


Figure 4 – Country marks for general information

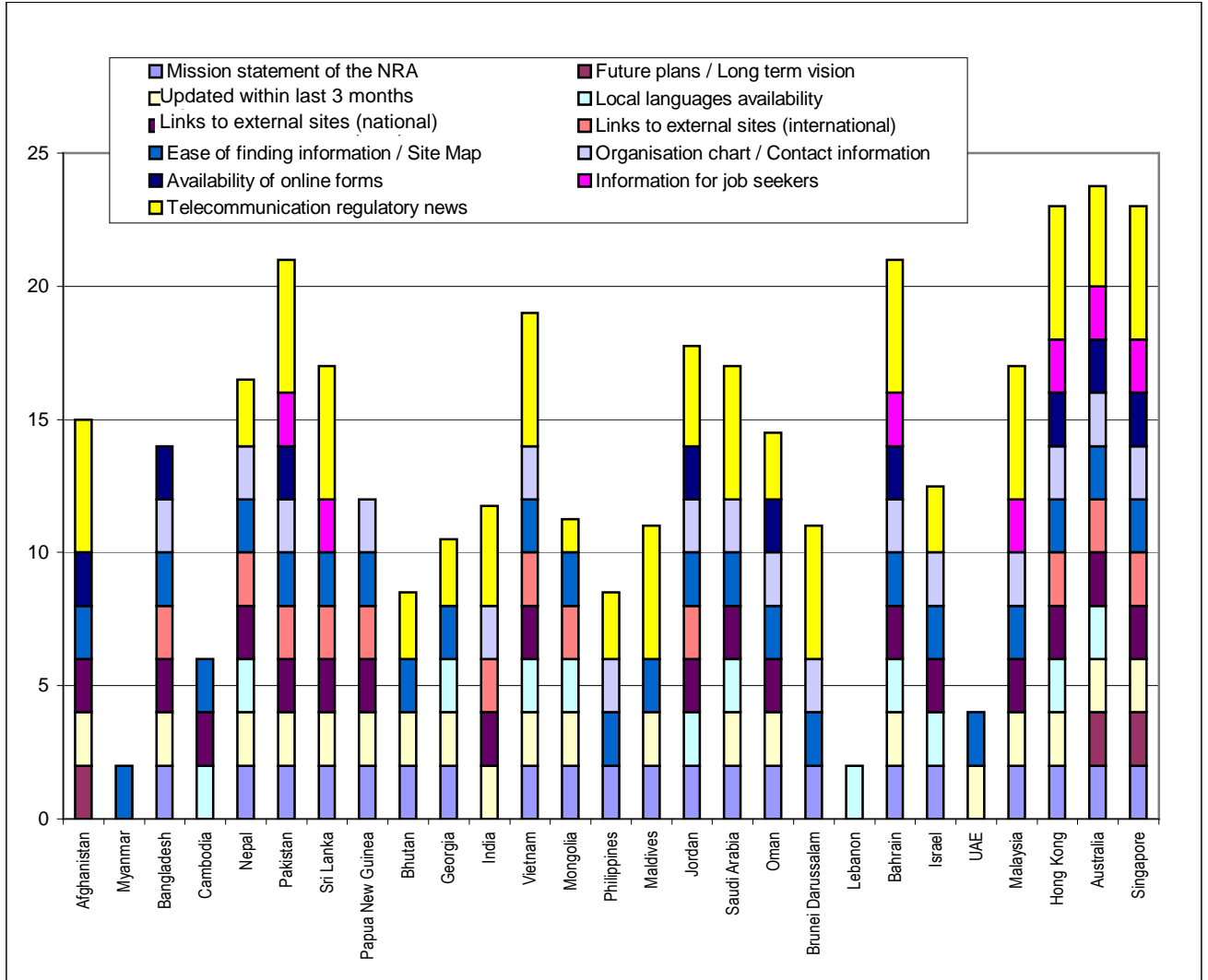
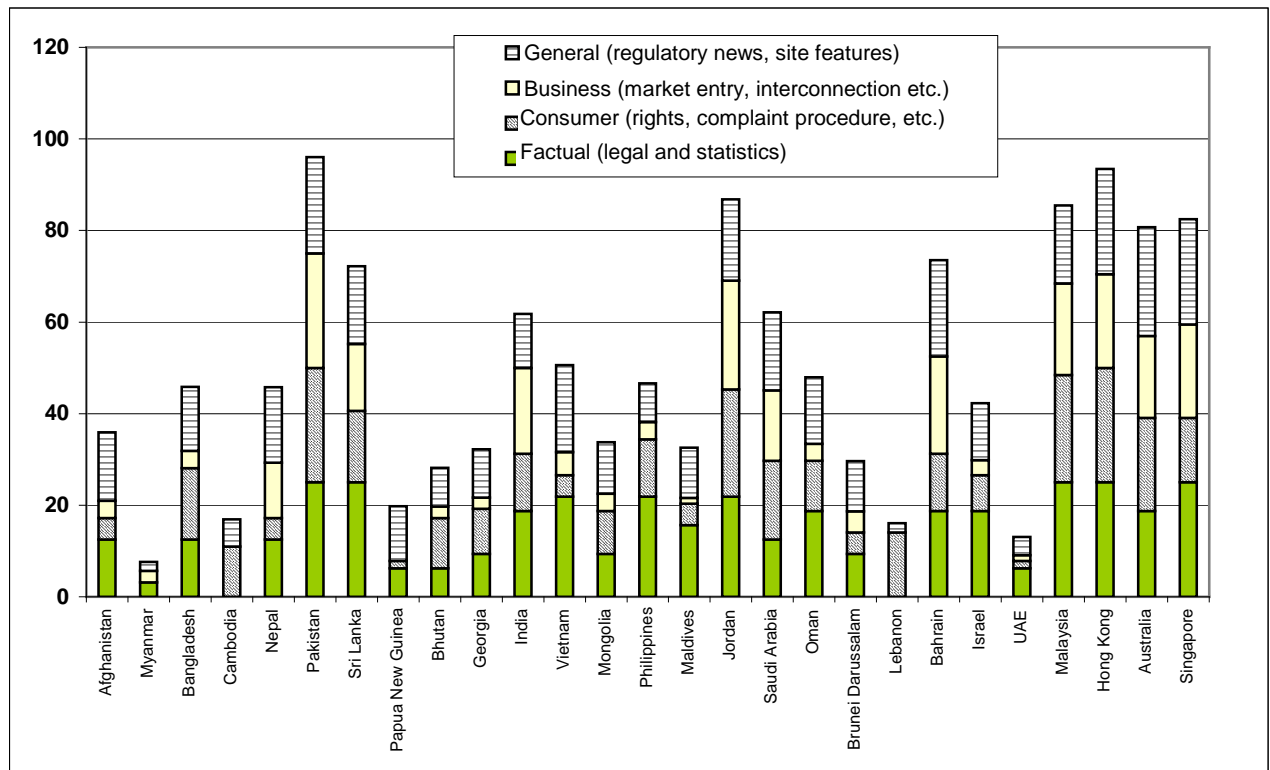


Figure 5 – Final country performance



3.1 Limitations

In some of the countries whose NRA websites were surveyed, English is hardly used in day-to-day activities. For such countries, such as South Korea, it might not be necessary to have all the information in English. However, because of resource limitations, only the English versions of websites were evaluated in this study. This could be a source of error.

3.2 Conclusions

Out of the 62 independent Asia-Pacific economies, only 44 NRAs (71%) had websites at the time of the study (taking the websites under construction into account as well), as compared to 85% of NRAs in Africa. In other words, three out of ten NRAs in the Asia-Pacific region did not have a web presence. It might not be fair to attribute this purely to the lack of strategic direction at the top level. It could be due to a lack of resources or other problems. It is also possible that in countries where internet penetration is poor, NRAs view websites as a futile effort. Irrespective of the reason, the lack of a website does not make a good impression.

Out of the 27 websites reviewed, some contained only basic information, with no more than ten pages in all (e.g. Myanmar, Cambodia and Lebanon), and ranked low in the classification. It is worth noting that most of these sites were from countries with low internet penetration. At the other extreme were sites such as those of the NRAs of Hong

Kong, Pakistan, Australia, Singapore and Malaysia – all of which have high internet penetration levels, with the exception of Pakistan. These sites were not only informative, but also presented information and other services in a user-friendly manner. In fact, these sites can be recommended as guides to others.

This survey did not evaluate sites based on esthetic criteria. However, the manner of presenting information was a factor in the evaluation. If esthetic aspects were considered, sites such as those of the UAE and South Korea would have gained more marks. On the other hand, there were NRAs such as those of Australia and Singapore which had neglected esthetics but where presentation was effective. The NRAs of Hong Kong, Malaysia and Pakistan had attempted to strike a balance.

Overall, many sites were good in presenting factual information, especially legal information. Out of the 27 sites, 37% scored full marks for presenting legal information and regulations, and 81% scored at least half the marks. Only 7% of the websites lacked legal information. On the other hand, performance with regards to the availability of statistics was not satisfactory. Only 26% of the websites scored full marks for presenting comprehensive statistics, while 56% obtained at least half of the marks. One third of the sites had no telecom sector statistics. For this section, the NRA websites for Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka present ample statistics about their local markets.

The presentation of information for consumers was generally unsatisfactory.⁵ Around 30% of the websites obtained full marks for presenting useful consumer information in an appropriate format. Only 11% of the websites did not contain this information. However, when it came to presenting consumer rights, 63% of the sites had no information at all. Only 26% scored more than half of the marks in this sub-category, and only 19% scored full marks. Information about consumer complaint procedures was unavailable on many sites. Out of the 27 sites, 70% had only the contact details or a feedback form to be used for consumer complaints. However, there were a few sites that scored full marks in this category. Hong Kong's NRA website not provided detailed information on procedures for making complaints and investigation procedures, but also information on ongoing and completed cases.

Pakistan's NRA website is also worthy of special mention. In addition to detailed information on making complaints, it provided information on the types of complaints that will be received, who to contact, toll-free numbers and the progress of complaints in process. Complaints could be made using a user-friendly online form.

Except for information regarding licensing procedures and tariffs, many websites also lacked information usually sought by businesses. When it came to information on restricted equipment and interconnection, the corresponding percentages were 25% and 24%. Providing a list of restricted/prohibited equipment enables importers and users to easily refer to the list when importing equipment, rather than approaching the NRA each time.

Many websites presented the outcomes of consultation papers. Some sites, such as that of India's NRA, have substantive collections of these papers.

⁵ The possibility of some websites having this information in their local language versions is not ruled out.

In terms of general features, 78% of the sites contained either their mission statements or equivalent information. A large percentage of NRAs had mission statements as befits modern organizations and were attempting to share the justifications for their existence with stakeholders. However, only 11% of the NRAs have gone a step further to communicate their long-term visions and business plans. Meanwhile, 74% of the websites had been updated within the last three months, while a few sites were updated somewhat more frequently.

A feature that most of the sites lacked was the possibility of submitting online applications. This is a useful feature that not only facilitates interaction with stakeholders, but also helps to move the website to a more advanced level, from an 'informational' to an 'interactive' or 'transactional' one. However, only 14% of the websites reviewed in this survey could be classified as anything more than informational. These sites went just one step further and offered online application forms for obtaining a license. Many other sites offered off-line application forms which could be downloaded from the site but could only be submitted by regular mail.

The presentation of information in local languages was unsatisfactory. In the vast majority of the Asia-Pacific economies the official or commonly used language is not English. However, only 44% of the NRAs surveyed had taken steps to present themselves in the local language(s). The countries that did not have local language pages include Afghanistan, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, India, Malaysia, Maldives, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Sri Lanka. In some cases there may have been difficulties in creating websites in local languages, but for others that is hardly an excuse.

Many sites gave links to other relevant sites: 67% of the NRA websites had links to local sites (in most cases, government ministries and departments), although only 44% provided links to international websites (such as that of the International Telecommunication Union). About 93% of the sites had either site maps or a similar means to ensure easy browsing for users.

Around 63% of the sites contained organizational charts. Many sites also featured relevant news from the telecom sector, but the actual presentation was not satisfactory in some cases. Among the websites assessed, 26% contained recruitment information.

Some NRA sites presented information about the country itself (e.g. the UAE) while others presented picture galleries (e.g. Bhutan). These features did not affect the evaluation.

The most important conclusion is that most of the below-average NRA websites can be improved with little effort. The NRA sites that scored high in the overall evaluation scored high in almost all aspects, while those that scored low failed in more than one aspect. The lesson to be learned is that instead of reinventing the wheel, it is best to emulate the high-scoring NRA websites.

The study did not specifically look into pro-poor and pro-gender balance aspects. Most of the information on the sites might not reach the marginalized communities of some countries, but the NRAs themselves can do little to address that issue, other than perhaps having local language versions.

An interesting question one can raise is what type of channels an NRA uses or can use if internet penetration is significantly low. The survey did not study the possibilities in detail, but it is pertinent to ask whether there are any possible channels apart from the traditional print (newspapers) and electronic (radio, TV) media, especially using new media.

The first possibility that comes to mind is CDs (and maybe DVDs). The same information that a website is supposed to deliver can be disbursed using a CD as the medium. Although this may appear as a perfect solution theoretically, its practical value is questionable. Low internet penetration is also an indication of low PC penetration, so the population might not be able to access the content even if the information is made available to them on a CD.

4.0 References

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