

Google exec urges Myanmar to embrace free speech

ERIKA KINETZ - Associated Press



Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt on Friday urged Myanmar's government to allow private businesses to develop the country's woeful telecommunications infrastructure, emphasizing the importance of competition and free speech.

"Try to keep the government out of regulating the internet," he said to a round of applause from a group of students at a technical university in Yangon. "The answer to bad speech is more speech. More communication. More voices," he said. "If you are a political leader you get a much better idea of what your citizens are thinking about."

Schmidt said the Internet can help cement political and economic opening in Myanmar, which has undergone rapid changes following elections in 2011 that gave the country a civilian leadership after decades of direct military rule.

"The internet will make it impossible to go back," he said. "The internet once in place guarantees communication and empowerment become the law and practice of your country."

Today, inadequate infrastructure and prohibitive prices mean only about 1 percent of people in Myanmar have access to the Internet and less than 10 percent have mobile phones. The Internet is so slow during peak hours that sometimes it is impossible to use Gmail.

"The government has to make it possible for the private sector to build the

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telecommunications infrastructure," Schmidt said. "If we do that right, within a few years the most profitable businesses within Myanmar will be the telecommunications companies."

He said Google's first priority in Myanmar will be to improve access to information through its search, translation and mapping applications.

"Right now the thing Google can do most is get information into the country," he said. Google recently launched a local homepage for the country, www.google.com.mm.

He said he is scheduled to meet with Myanmar's president, Thein Sein, on Friday afternoon.

"I'll say they've made a courageous step to open the country," he said. "Now they have to follow through with it."

Schmidt's visit to Myanmar comes after trips to Libya, Afghanistan and North Korea, which he said was a "truly wacky place."

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