

2020 a field-test for country's Internet connectivity, bandwidth capabilities

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KUALA LUMPUR: The year 2020 has been a large-scale field-test for the country's Internet connectivity and bandwidth capabilities, especially as more than 32 million Malaysians began adapting to the new norms during Covid-19 pandemic.

The use of the Internet as a medium to deliver information and to communicate has been key to embracing the new norms, including in the education and business sectors.

Even the simple practice of scanning MySejahtera QR codes before entering any premises would not be possible if the user or the area concerned did not have a good Internet connection.

In fact, since the Movement Control Order (MCO) was enforced by the government in March, Internet usage has skyrocketed as people spend more time online, with some taking the opportunity to build a presence on social media as an alternative source of income.

Minister of Communications and Multimedia Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah in his blog post in November also touched on the setting up of 'Digital Communities' on platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram.

According to Saifuddin, all parties need to work harder on developing a digitally skilled community, which could drive the country forward and remain competitive with other nations in the future.

He said apart from improving infrastructure and their devices, communities also need to be ready for digital transformation, master the use of technology, and be more aware of fake news and cybersecurity.

Meanwhile, an incident that caught the attention of various parties including ministers was when a Universiti Malaysia Sabah student living in the interior of Sabah, Veveonah Mosibin, 18, had to spend the night on a tree to give an online exam due to poor internet connectivity.

The video triggered strong debates on the issue of Internet connectivity and infrastructure in rural areas, especially in Sabah, which still lags behind other states in terms of Internet coverage.

However, Veveonah's case is not an isolated one, and the government needs to work on improving the existing weaknesses and expand broadband facilities more efficiently, while preparing the country for the future.

This is also a clear indication that Internet connectivity is no longer a luxury, but a necessity, and it needs to be recognised as the third public utility, along with water and electricity.

Recognising the need to improve connectivity and quality of communications services for consumers nationwide, Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin on Aug 28 announced the government's initiative on developing the national digital infrastructure plan, known as Jalinan Digital Negara (Jendela).

The five-year digital infrastructure plan under the 12th Malaysia Plan will pave the way for the provision of comprehensive and high-quality broadband service coverage as well as prepare the country for a steady transition to 5G technology.

Sabah is the biggest beneficiary of the infrastructure development project under the Jendela initiative with an estimated cost of RM2.45 billion.

Muhyiddin, when launching the 'Gerbang Sabah' (Sabah Gateway) said people in the state would enjoy better broadband services from between the end of the year till 2022, as 419 new towers will be erected and 1,972 existing transmitters will be upgraded to 4G.

Besides Sabah, the government is also in the process of improving telecommunications facilities at Orang Asli villages throughout the country, with 61 telecommunications towers erected in these areas.

Eight more towers, including in Pos Lemoi and Pos Kampung Telimau in Cameron Highlands, Pahang, are being erected, and expected to be up and running in phases beginning the first quarter of next year.

In addition, the Jaringan Prihatin programme introduced by the government when tabling Budget 2021 recently is set to benefit the B40 target group next year, providing them with RM180 in credit to purchase internet plans or devices.

With all the initiatives implemented and planned by the government this year, let's hope 2021 brings about better experiences in terms of digitalisation and embracing the new norms post-Covid-19, while ensuring that no one is left behind or deprived of enjoying these technological advancements. — Bernama