

Brazil's weak service makes WCup Tweets unlikely

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In this May 11, 2014 photo, a couple takes a selfie during the Brazilian league soccer match between Fluminense and Flamengo, at Maracana stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Experts say Cup visitors will discover that Brazil's mobile communications services are severely lacking, mostly because the government and telephone companies are ill-prepared for the month-long tournament. Some even worry about possible mobile network blackouts. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Ecstatic football fans unable to celebrate a World Cup win with real-

time Tweets, or post "selfies" of themselves from inside stadiums. Or worse, emergency calls blocked by jammed cellphone towers unable to handle the volume.

Those are among the fears as hundreds of thousands of mobile phone-wielding fans get ready to attend soccer's premier event in Brazil.

Experts say Cup visitors will discover that Brazil's mobile communications services are severely lacking, mostly because the government and [telephone companies](#) are ill-prepared for the month-long tournament. Some even worry about possible mobile network blackouts.

Even under the best conditions, voice calls often drop and accessing the Internet on a smartphone is mind-numbingly slow. As last year's protests during the Confederations Cup demonstrated, it can be impossible to use [mobile services](#) in a big crowd in a packed soccer stadium.

Government investment was supposed to remedy the problem before the World Cup. Leaders promised blazing-fast 4G mobile networks in the 12 cities hosting the matches, but that didn't happen.

"We've learned from the Confederations Cup, and put specific trucks outside the stadium to enhance the connectivity," said Thierry Weil, FIFA's marketing director. "But at the end of the day, to be honest, having 70,000 in a stadium, where everybody wants to make a phone call at halftime, well, I'd say you better talk to your boyfriend or girlfriend ahead of the game."

In a worst-case scenario, the mobile communications systems could be so overloaded that people may not be able to call first responders in an emergency, said Christopher Gaffney, a visiting professor at Rio's Federal Fluminense University whose research focuses on Brazil's

preparations for the World Cup and Olympics.

"World Cup visitors won't be able to communicate the way they want to," said Gaffney. "Instagram, Twitter, social media will not function at world class levels but at Brazilian levels, so people visiting Brazil will experience the frustrations we face every day."

The problems with Brazil's mobile services have emerged as demand has soared while the infrastructure for delivering them failed to keep pace.



In this May 11, 2014 photo, soccer fans take a selfie during the Brazilian league soccer match between Fluminense and Flamengo, at the Maracana stadium, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Ecstatic football fans unable to celebrate a World Cup win with real-time Tweets, or post "selfies" of themselves from inside stadiums. Or worse, emergency calls blocked by jammed cellphone towers unable to handle the volume. Those are among the fears as hundreds of thousands of mobile phone-wielding fans get ready to attend soccer's premier event in Brazil: The World Cup. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

There are more than 272 million active cellphone lines in the country of 200 million people, according to the telecommunications regulator Anatel. The resulting spotty coverage makes telecommunications among Brazil's most loathed industries.

Telephone companies blame municipal governments for what they say is excessive red tape required to construct more cellphone towers to improve mobile services. But government officials complain that the telecommunications companies have greedily signed up tens of millions of Brazil's new middle-class consumers without adequately improving infrastructure.

"Companies need to invest in their data networks. There is a desire from citizens to access the Internet through their mobile devices and we have to expand the capacity of data networks," Anatel president Joao Resende said during a recent public hearing.



In this May 11, 2014 photo, a soccer fan takes a photo with his cell phone during the Brazilian league soccer match between Fluminense and Flamengo, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Government investment was supposed to remedy Brazil's lacking mobile communications services before the World Cup. Leaders promised blazing-fast 4G mobile networks in the 12 cities hosting the matches, but that didn't happen. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Brazil's Communications Minister Paulo Bernardo acknowledged that fans will have serious problems using cellphones in at least half of the stadiums. He has said time has run out to install equipment necessary to boost data services in many venues, including the Sao Paulo stadium hosting the June 12 opener.

Big events have shown what can happen when Brazil's communications networks are overloaded.

Networks couldn't handle the crush last year when 1 million people flocked to Copacabana for Pope Francis' first international visit, practically making a miracle necessary to send an Instagram photo. During last year's big street protests, demonstrators could rarely use their phones to make calls or post photos or videos of Brazil's largest demonstrations in a generation.

During the final of the Confederations Cup, a dress rehearsal for the World Cup, it was nearly impossible to send a text message or make a call from inside Rio's Maracana stadium.

Technicians hope to set up reliable coverage in the bleachers by parking vans outside the stadiums with equipment serving as mobile Wi-Fi spots.

But problems such as dead spots are possible, said Carlos Duprat, head of Sinditelebrasil, a Brazilian industry group that is preparing cellphone coverage at World Cup venues.

In Brazil, municipalities are responsible for the use of the ground and most have restrictions that don't allow us to build as many antennas as needed," said Duprat. He said telecom licenses have also been restricted.



In this May 11, 2014 photo, fans use their cell phones during the Brazilian league soccer match between Fluminense and Flamengo, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The country's spotty coverage makes telecommunications among Brazil's most loathed industries. (AP Photo/Hassan Ammar)

Duprat said Brazil's main carriers invested heavily ahead of the Cup, but have faced hurdles like outdated laws restricting the construction of antennas.

"It's true, the carriers have problems," he said. "But they're not all to blame."

Brazil's top carriers declined to comment on mobile services during the Cup, saying that Sinditelebrasil speaks for the industry.

Adriano Pires, director of the Brazilian Infrastructure Center in Rio de Janeiro blamed Brazilian bureaucracy for the insufficient infrastructure.

"The stadiums, the antennas, it all takes a long time to build and everything's delivered late because it's all linked," he said. "There's no point in having a cool stadium if you have a terrible telecommunications system."

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