A Robin Hood for the Digital Age

More and more schools will be connected to the Internet in Brazil. (CIDA Photo: P. St-Jacques)

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In February 2002 tens of thousands of people, in search of alternatives to the prevailing economic model, converged on the city of Porto Alegre, in southern Brazil, for the 2nd World Social Forum. Its theme: "Another World is Possible."

At the heart of this other world lies the Internet. This is the powerful conviction held by Carlos Afonso, head of technological development at RITS, the Rede de informações para o Terceiro Setor (Information Network for the Third Sector). This nonprofit organization, based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, has been working since 1997 to make computer technology and its powerful communication tools available to the poorest sectors of the population, largely bypassed by the digital revolution. The ultimate aim of RITS is to set up a genuine information network. RITS receives funding from UNESCO, the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), among others.

For Afonso, the Porto Alegre Social Forum was a proving ground: his network took on the task of managing all the World Social Forum's Internet sites. This was a colossal challenge for the nonprofit organization, which lacks the resources available to private sector companies. The results: an average of 200 000 page views a day. "At the height of the Forum, half a million page views were tallied in a single day," says Afonso. "Let me tell you, there were times when I was literally chewing my nails! We were leaning over the equipment, praying the servers wouldn't crash under the load." Their network, mostly based on open source software technology, proved equal to the challenge.

The Internet at the service of NGOs

RITS is understandably proud. It was a master stroke for the modest network, which has demonstrated what can be accomplished by a nonprofit organization dedicated to serving civil society. According to Paulo Lima, RITS' Executive Director, "Without the Internet, holding a forum such as this would have been next to impossible." Afonso adds: "The Forum organizers have become aware of how important the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are for civil society. In fact, this year, they held seminars and workshops on this theme. Naturally, I'm delighted."
The involvement of RITS in the Porto Alegre Social Forum is a perfect illustration of the network's core mission — to modernize civil society organizations. The sharing of information and the switch to digital modes of communication are seen as the keys to this change. RITS takes the lead in this by disseminating a free weekly "webzine" RETS (Revista do terceiro setor), which summarizes news from Brazilian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In the lineup: news, features, interviews, and classified ads on public interest topics.

"Every issue covers a variety of topics, many of them inspired by the ton of mail received each week," says editor-in-chief Graciela Selaimen, who is in charge of RITS' information activities. "The zine is posted online every Friday, and we have 60 000 subscribers as well. The feedback is overwhelmingly positive. Our readers write to tell us how useful the information is, which is very rewarding."

An information network about civil society

Selaimen also supervises the posting of a directory of Brazilian NGOs, whose powerful browser allows access to half of Brazil's NGOs. "It lists 40 000 organizations working in fields such as the environment, health, education, help for underprivileged children, and various types of discrimination. Over the years, RITS has become the reference in the world of Brazilian NGOs," she says. The RITS Web site also hosts a virtual research centre on Brazilian civil society. Draft legislation, regulations, the impact of information technology on daily life — all are analyzed in-depth.

In addition RITS runs a state-of-the-art Web portal, Cidadania na Internet, the content of which is produced and published directly by more than 60 NGOs on several social, political, economic, and cultural themes. And it is about to launch a Web-based reference centre covering public policies on digital inclusion. In 2003 it launched Oppi, Observatório de Políticas Públicas de Infoinclusão (Infoinclusion Public Policies) — a Web-based reference centre covering public policies on digital inclusion (www.oppi.org.br).

Some 300 Brazilian NGOs, including some of the most important, are officially affiliated with RITS. They pay between US$200 and US$700 a year for services such as Web site hosting, email access, or Intranet services, all of which help them to optimize and pool their efforts through regular communication.

RITS also provides its members privileged access to management and legal information, and provides technical support in the design and development of Web pages. Annual association fees are around the US$120 mark, depending on the services used. In 2005 RITS began providing Internet services for corporations, thus helping maintain the social projects RITS develops and supports.

The challenge: Connecting all Brazilians

RITS thus helps Brazil's have-nots to make themselves heard on the Web. "Our next challenge is to broadcast this voice to individual Brazilians," says Lima. "At present, fewer than 6% of Brazilians are connected to the Internet." And Afonso points out that "users are mostly concentrated in the south, near Rio and São Paolo. The regions far from the main centres have no access to a local server, which sharply increases user fees." In more than 80% of Brazilian municipalities, for instance, Internet providers must establish a long-distance telephone connection before connecting to the Web. Because this makes providing local service prohibitively expensive, it is simply not offered.
In a move to universalize Internet access, the government has set up a special fund called FUST (Fundu do Universalizou dos Serviços de Telecomunicações). Its operating principle is simple: it collects fees from telephone and telecommunications firms established in Brazil. Telephone and cable providers have, since January 1, 2001, paid 1% of their gross income into the fund: US$500 000 has thus been collected each year. The plan is designed to last five years.

"This is a lot of money," says Lima. "Our main concern is to ensure that it will be invested in the right places. It could certainly allow a large number of citizens to gain access to the Internet, but for this to succeed, the money must be properly spent," he adds.

The FUST: Money unspent

Afonso deplores the fact that the millions accumulated in the FUST are currently sitting idle due to administrative and political bickering. What's more, authorities have decided unilaterally on what types of projects will be eligible for funding. "The plan is to connect schools, libraries, health centres. It remains to be seen whether this will stimulate citizens and communities to participate actively in civil society," says Afonso. "Digital inclusion is more than simply being connected to a network. The Internet is a medium, and needs to be exploited as such. It's not enough, for instance, that a school have Internet access; students must also know how to tell their story on the Web," he points out. Afonso is also following the tendering process set up by the authorities, keeping a keen eye out for potential corruption and conflicts of interest.

What should be done with these vast sums? Afonso believes that half the available monies would be enough to set up and operate 6500 telecentres across the country — one centre per 25 000 inhabitants. Telecentres are Internet access points open to the community. Currently RITS, in partnership with the municipality of the city of São Paolo (population about 12 million), runs 80 telecentres in the poorest areas of the city. Each telecentre has 20 workstations entirely based on open source software and well connected to the Internet. The telecentres are financially sustained by the municipality, no user fees are charged, and each is managed by its own local steering committee, composed of local organizations. The telecentres are used by more than 350 000 people.

Afonso and his RITS colleagues are doing their best to support similar projects being planned in other regions of Brazil. They are working along with the National Institute of Information Technology (ITI — Instituto Nacional de Tecnologia da Informação) and Petrobras on a project called Casa Brasil to create 50 telecentres in cities and regions across the country.

Like Robin Hoods of the digital era, they want to see the amazing tool called Internet in the hands of the poor. Their challenge is to convince NGOs, whose agendas are already full to overflowing, to make room for this important issue. RITS' message to NGOs: this is a worthwhile focus and, in the long run, to invest in the Internet is to equip yourself to fulfil your organization's mission. For Afonso, one thing is clear: "If NGOs used the new ICTs more, they would eventually become much more effective."

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