The Hall of Mirrors of Internet in Latin America

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This paper presents an overview of the growth of the Internet in Latin America, and the challenges it poses to commerce, education, and social equity. It discusses the potential risks and benefits society faces with the introduction of the Internet, and provides examples of current trends in its use. While for the most part the Internet may be increasing existing social gaps and inequalities, progressive movements can harness it as a valuable tool for social benefit. On the other hand, the Internet may simply become an elitist way for a small minority to spend money and to waste time.

The Hall of Mirrors and the Explosion of the Internet in Latin America

Half a century ago in Argentina, the famous writer Jorge Luis Borges published The Library of Babel and The Aleph. The first one describes an infinite library containing every possible book imaginable, including the true catalogue of the library as well as the refutation of this true catalogue. The second talks of a place in which one can see all things that exist in all places, from all possible angles and perspectives, in that single place and time (Borges, 1979). Even though we cannot quite imagine what Borges would have thought of the Internet if he had lived to experience it, these two metaphors are increasingly being used in the region to describe the hall of mirrors of the Internet today in Latin America.

The Internet, together with the array of information and communication technologies that make it possible, has been introduced in Latin America and the Caribbean at the unprecedented pace over the past few years. Surpassing even the most optimistic predictions, it grew by over 100% between 1997 and 1999 in the region2. Just like almost anywhere else in the world, the Internet was mostly unheard of in Latin America only a decade ago, and it is supposed to be used by about 5.3 million people in the region at the end of 1999. This represents about 1.5% of the population in the region (compared to the estimated 37% of the population in the US who would use the Internet). There is great variation in this kind of estimates, given their speculative nature and measurement difficulties. Some say there are not more than 5 million Internet users in Latin America in 1999, others claim there will be 34 million in 2000. In any case, if we take the 5.3 million figure as a useful indicator, this is only 3.2% of the 165 million worldwide users of the Internet estimated for 19993.

Recent studies calculate there are over 800 million pages on the Internet, although many of them may be duplicates. On the Internet you can find information about just about any topic imaginable. Nonetheless, about 83% of current web sites is supposed to be of commercial nature, while the remaining 17% is shared between other kinds of information, estimated as

follows: science and education 6%, health 3%, personal web sites 2.5%, pornography 1.5%, and others (www.wwwmetrics.com). These statistics may be questionable --not only the categories are not mutually exclusive, but some argue pornography was the first commercial success of the Internet. But once again, they serve as a useful indication.

In terms of language, recent studies describe an incipient growth of web sites in Spanish (Cervantes Institute in Spain --www.cvc.cervantes.es, Global Reach in the US --www.euromktg.com, or Fundaci≤n Redes y Desarrollo in Dominican Republic --www.funredes.org). Nonetheless, this growth is negligible compared with the explosion of information available in English. Even though in 2000 the proportion of native-English speakers using the Internet may be smaller than that of non-native speakers (currently they are getting close to 50% each), English continues to be the dominant language on the Internet (between 70 and 80% of all content would be in English, and only 1.5% in Spanish, according to some of these sources).

Other studies prefer to measure the astounding growth of the Internet in the world and in Latin America by counting, for each country in the region, the number of web hosts, Internet nodes, registered domain names, web pages or results of web search engines. On all counts, Internet growth is equally compelling in the last few years. Raul Trejo's detailed report (1999) on Latin American connectivity trends, with detailed statistics and tables, presented at the Latin American conference on Internet social impact (www.inegi.gob.mx/informatica/espanol/simposio99) sponsored by UNESCO in Aguascalientes, Mexico in October 1999 provides additional insights.

Rather than going into great numerical detail, we will focus our discussion on a more difficult matter, what the statistics fail to reveal: What are the social implications of this explosive growth of the Internet in Latin America?

What lies behind the mirror?

The Internet is, in more than one sense, a hall of mirrors that reflects the human condition it thrives in. Despite its amazing growth, the Internet only reaches a small proportion of the people on the globe, and a tiny fraction of the population of Latin America. In its multiple images, its uses reflect the inequalities and injustices of the societies in which it is inserted.

Information technologies are not positive or negative in themselves; neither are they neutral. They take the form and direction of the societies in which they are introduced, and at the same time they help to further shape the relations and modes of interaction in these societies. Latin America is made up of a multiplicity of cultures and identities, all of them inscribed in societies in which access to resources, knowledge and opportunities is inequitably distributed. Despite a formal democracy in most countries, governments are frequently corrupt, elitist and with no public accountability for their acts and omissions.

The quick processes of urbanization in the region, and the fast-paced privatization and economic reforms of the past decades have further impoverished a vast majority, while an even smaller minority continues to own and control most decisions, resources, information and wealth. A

fraction of this small minority constitutes the largest community of users of the Internet in Latin America: a community of users that continues to be primarily urban, male, white, middle-aged, upper-classed and semi-English proficient. Although we know of some poor, rural and mestizo women who use the Internet in some locations, we also know the extreme extent of their marginality in the larger picture of the Internet in the region.

Few countries have adopted clear policies to promote socially responsible uses of information and communication technologies in general, or of the Internet in particular. And where there is such legislation, no resources are available to implement it. In a recent online discussion, Venezuelan researcher Raisa Uribarri Minardi points out that the country's constitution may "guarantee the public service of informatics networks" (Art. 108), and stipulate the creation of a Council for Information Technologies under the Ministry of Science and Technology, but no budget is set aside for its operation.

Cuba may be a special case in Internet access and use in Latin America. Together with Haiti, Cuba has the poorest telecommunications infrastructure in Latin America. But while in Haiti, as in the rest of Latin America, Internet access is mostly an economic privilege (despite the political motivation behind the recent closure of one of the largest Internet providers in Haiti, ACN), access to the Internet in Cuba is a rare political luxury. In her study about the Internet in Cuba, Katherine Reilly (1999) concludes "It appears that short of radical changes, it will be a long time before Cubans have access to universal, non-discriminatory, affordable and secure access to the Internet. The US embargo continues to limit access to technology, and the Cuban government continues to censor and manipulate information". Caught between harnessing the opportunities of the Internet for economic improvement and giving up the centralized control over the circulation of information, the Internet is putting the Cuban government "between a rock and a hard place".

Using the Internet "the Latin American way"?

Thinking about whether there is a particular "Latin American way" of using the Internet, I have recently engaged in a number of interesting discussions, both online and offline. While there is no singular spirit or culture that can be considered explicitly Latin American in the vast ocean of habits, practices and uses in cyberspace, it is clear there are millions of users in the region, and millions of web pages with information about Latin America. There are, of course, expressions of the political, cultural and social life of the countries in the region. Soon after its creation in 1991, Peru's Scientific Network RCP (Spanish acronym for Red Cientifica Peruana) realized the Internet not only provided a window to the world, but also a window into Peru. There are today thousands of sites that display the cultural heritage, diversity and traditions not only in Peru but throughout all Latin America (even the Cuban tourism office has a web site to attract foreign visitors).

Beyond the possibility of local content, is there anything properly Latin American in the way the Internet is used? Are there particular designs, layouts or links that are proper to Latin America? Are there particular Latin American navigation (surfing) patterns? Is there anything special in the kinds of users, their age, gender, interests or motivations that sets them apart from the rest of

the community of users worldwide? In sum, is there any indication that the way the Internet is used is any different in Latin America compared to the rest of the world?

These are questions with no easy answer. It seems that aside from geographic location and language, the most salient difference between Latin America and North America or Europe is the cost (both in absolute numbers and in proportion to income) of the equipment and the Internet connections. These tend to be significantly higher in Latin America (but also in Asia and Africa) than in the more developed regions of the world. Cost alone constitutes a major barrier for more widespread use of the Internet in these regions. The cost structure also means those who do use the Internet, do so less frequently and for shorter periods of time, which may be in itself a particular worth considering.

But thinking about the possibility of subtler Latin American particularities in the way the Internet is used, some of my colleagues suggest there are proportionately younger users and faster adopters, using more collective or public access points (as opposed to individual or private) in Latin America than in North America or Europe. In addition, users in this region would tend to focus more on communication (interactions) than information (exchange). Others have perceived Latin American users tend to be less active participants in mailing lists, even during surges of reactions known as "flames"4Beyond these initial hunches, we agree it is difficult to show evidence or measure any particular "Latin American way" of using the Internet.

Joining World Elites to Spend Time Together

More than difference there may be similarity. We could think that by being connected to the Internet, users become part of a global community, one that is rapidly bringing back to life the idea of the global village (like Borges' Library of Babel, McLuhan's idea of the global village is also about 50 years old). The global village brought about by the Internet may be more a world elite class, with more commonalties among its users sharing common interests (maybe research, but most likely business, trivia, hobbies or perversions) than any common national or local identity or interest.

This is reason to worry. Especially if it means that rather than gaining a better global awareness and knowledge through easy access to information, research findings or expert opinion, Latin American elites are joining the average North American users of the Internet whose patterns of use may be contributing to further lowering the quality of communication, interaction and understanding to the minimum common denominator.

Recent studies in the US monitor patterns of use, tracking the paths followed from one link to another and the duration of the visit to each site by web users. The findings are revealing. For example, Nielsen found 18.9 million users had entered the Internet from their homes in USA on Thursday, September 2, 1999. These users were connected for an average of 31 minutes and visited 3 web sites (www.nielsen-netratings.com). In the ocean of available information, what do people look for, and what do they get, in an average session of half an hour and three web sites? On average, the longest duration of 67 minutes on a single site was on eBay, which hosts online auctions, one of the recent success stories of online commerce.

If the longest attention span of average Internet users is for online auctions, we may be finding arguments in support of Italian philosopher Giovanni Sartori, who analyzes the banalization of knowledge and culture through television, and claims it is only made worse on cyberspace. Despite the great potential of the Internet for knowledge and understanding, the Internet is becoming the place where people get together to spend time in small clusters of shared hobbies or interests. For users torn between a frustrated and alienated feeling of power, and a permanent child's dream life in an imaginary world (real life is just another window), cyberspace is mostly a terrific way to waste time (Sartori, 1998).

E-commerce in Latin America

The fastest growing area of research and development on the Internet is electronic commerce. In North America it is already starting to have significant impact in business-to-business transactions, followed closely by changes in retail or business-to-consumer relations and transactions. In Latin America, the irruption of e-commerce and e-education is quickly picking up speed, with profound social implications. Even though retail sales over the Internet (or online auctions) are still not very common in Latin America, business-to-business transactions are starting to turn to electronic communication support in an increasingly globalized economy.

Small and medium enterprises in Latin America have been generally slower at tapping electronic resources for business, probably because of cultural reasons and in view of the investments and expertise that is required. While some successful early adopters have been able to take advantage of an apparently level playing field for e-business, many others are starting to find ready-made solutions offered by Microsoft in association with large corporations. The result is that it is easier to use the Internet for business with large corporations than with other small industries or commerce. For example, it is easier to access the built-in link to Office Depot anywhere in Latin America using Microsoft's small business edition of Office 2000, but it would be more difficult to customize it to order office supplies from a local retailer...

Even governments are revamping electronic support for public contracts and procurement, hailing the benefits of reduced costs and increased transparency. Nonetheless, critics at the recent UNESCO conference in Aguascalientes, Mexico find little evidence of less corruption, favoritism or waste in government's commercial transactions turned to e-commerce. If the political system does not favor transparency, accountability and efficiency, the technological tools deployed will not, by themselves, bring about any of it.

Finally, the informal economy sector, which provides the livelihood of many in the poorest sectors of the population, is completely shut out of the new information economy, except for the opportunity to sell mouse pads, empty CD boxes and keyboard dust covers in street corners from Mexico to Argentina.

New challenges in Distance Education

The Internet is not only changing the way people do business, but it is also profoundly transforming the way we think about education. Computers, Internet access and online

interactions are being introduced in schools at all levels, and distance education is making leaps forward in higher education. Universities are increasingly offering Internet-based courses and full programs of study, changing not only the geographic locations for education but the very relations between students, teachers and the construction of knowledge.

Distance education has a long history in Latin America. Universidad Javeriana in Colombia has offered teachers in rural areas a distance education program for over 30 years, seeking to take advantage of new technologies as they appeared: radio, television, video and audio cassettes... Thinking about the potential of the Internet for distance education the University is confronted with the reality of rural schoolteachers, who work in environments without electricity or phone lines, and where notebooks and chalk are precious scarce commodities. Despite the euphoria about the technological possibility, satellite phones and solar-powered laptops are not in the picture of any realistic distance education program under these circumstances.

A recent study finds that keeping up with technology is a major cause for stress in university faculty (www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri). Nonetheless, Internet-based distance education is making it easier to attend and participate in courses without moving from home, even if home means a community access telecentre or an Internet café. For the few who can afford --economically, socially-- to attend higher education, distance education may mean following courses in the capital city rather than in the local college in small cities, or in foreign institutions rather than at the national university. Privileged students are finding it easier to maintain and increase their privileged access to education resources thanks to distance education. Local and national institutions for higher education may soon start to find it is more difficult to attract the best students, who can rather register at universities in North America and Europe. It will also be easier for students in the North to follow a course or two at a Southern university if it is offered remotely. This kind of exchanges exists and may well continue or even grow. But the dominant flow is likely to be from students in the South who access university programs in the North.

What is the fate of universities and colleges in poorer countries? Most will probably be forced, like small enterprises, to buy (and hopefully adapt) ready-made solutions from the warehouse giants, be they paper clips or curricula and materials for university degrees.

A few schools and universities in the South will in fact be able to partner with others in the North to provide joint programs and courses. A notable Latin American player in internet-based distance education is the technological institute of Monterey (TEC) in Mexico, which has positioned itself as a leader in distance education in the country and the region. In association with North American and other Latin American universities, TEC now offers a growing variety of degrees and programs electronically. At the Aguascalientes conference we have mentioned, one of TEC's senior managers made the outrageous claim that their best incentive is "it is great for business; it is even better than drug traffic!" Putting aside the implications of comparing education's with drug traffic's revenues, the vision of education as a market opportunity brings about important changes in the philosophical approach to education, and on its social implications. Basically, education is one more product in the global supermarket. And its quality and relevance will increasingly seek to cater the needs of the global elite, both online and in the classroom.

The Internet may be consolidating the role of education as a commercial commodity, in a model in which distance education becomes only a sub-category of e-commerce in the new information economy. A streamlined, globalized economy that is increasingly controlled by fewer and larger players, while the rest are swallowed, eliminated, or reduced to marginal insignificance in the ocean of information and opportunities circulating on the Internet.

Alternatives for Democratization and Development

The dominant tone of the discourse surrounding the explosion of the Internet use has been of euphoric enthusiasm. Once the marginal realm of academics and engineers, businesses soon started to regard it as the gold mine of the future. Social activists, initially pioneers in the use of electronic communications for progressive causes in support of civil society (notably through the Association for Progressive Communications, APC), are now marginal players in a field dominated by commercial interests pursuing a global business agenda.

Alternative (and marginal) uses of the Internet are also emerging in Latin America, but there is little indication that they are any different from alternative and marginal uses of the Internet elsewhere. Alternative uses include collective approaches to community access to the Internet and to content development, interest in social development and grassroots empowerment, strengthening of civil society organizations and networking, regardless of geographical boundaries. Nonetheless, as I have shown in "The Nostalgia of Virtual Community" and other publications, the promise of a vibrant global civil society and the panacea of so-called electronic democracy are far from realized (Gomez, 1998).

There may be some potential in uses of the Internet that contribute to better social equity, democratization and development. Latin America has a long tradition in the appropriation of technologies for social development and community empowerment. Radio, video, photography, desktop publishing have all been used by civil society organizations as tools for education, grassroots organization and empowerment. The same may hold true with the Internet, which is being used as a valuable tool for information exchange, networking and collective action.

A policy environment that supports the right to communication, and that promotes telecommunications as a public service of social benefit would help to tap into the opportunities of the Internet for social development. Few countries in the region are actually considering such legislation, and even fewer are willing or able to dedicate the resources that would be needed to turn policy into reality. Influencing the adoption of national policies in Latin America that are supportive of equitable access and public benefit of information technologies is a key challenge, if the Internet is to become more a tool for social development and community empowerment.

In this context, an important step in this appropriation is gaining access, getting connected, going online. The APC offered non-governmental organizations in the region e-mail addresses and bulletin boards as early as 1989. But it was only with the explosion of commercial service providers (around 1996-97) that access to the Internet has become possible for a significant portion of organizations and activists from civil society in the region. In addition to exploring

possible ways to take advantage the Internet's opportunities for business and education, numerous efforts in Latin America, Asia and Africa are now seeking to provide increased access to the Internet by marginalized groups in society.

Several cities and even a few rural locations are providing public access to the Internet, be they commercial Internet cafes in well-off neighborhoods, or community access centers (often called 'telecentres') in public libraries, schools, government offices or even health care or other community centers. These telecentres may become important information resource centers for the local communities. Some provide services that range from basic telephone, fax, e-mail and word processing services to full Internet access for web browsing, chat, games. In some cases telecentres are offering web hosting and web site design, information searches and updates for local needs in health, agriculture or government services, and some even consider offering distance education packages, employment services and tele-medicine applications.

The telecentre movement is gaining strength in Latin America, and many of the people promoting them are seeking ways to exchange information and experiences with their counterparts in the region and in the rest of the world, where comparable experiences are emerging as well. Initial evaluations suggest that while there is great potential for positive benefits to the community, there is also potential for detrimental effects on local communities with the introduction of information and communication technologies. Furthermore, many are now starting to seriously ask the simple question: access for what? In the words of a group of 'plugged' (networked) youth activists in Venezuela, where does the plug plug in? How is this technology 'plugged' into the larger context of society?

Lost in the Labyrinth?

The scenario is not as positive as we would desire. Internet users in Latin America are growing in numbers, although they continue to be a very small proportion of the population. Despite community telecentres providing public access for local development, the majority of users is an elite that, thanks to the Internet, joins the world class of consumers in a global supermarket, with increased access to scarce commodities such as information, education, goods and opportunities for advancement. Existing gaps between rich and poor are only increasing, emphasized even more by an even larger gap between info-rich and info-poor, both within Latin American countries as well as globally, between North and South.

The Internet may be in fact the global hall of mirrors in which few can enter, and which once inside appears infinite in its multiple reflections. The number of users is growing, primarily made up of elites (white, male, middle-aged and English-proficient) who find in the Internet a way to make and spend money, but mostly a wonderful way to kill time. But if this is the dominant trend, if Internet use is, like mass media, promoting the lowest common denominator of atomized superficial surfers and hobby fans wasting time together, the actual threat may be minimal.

In fact, the opportunities for alternative uses and social development may become more important, in proportion, if well-informed and organized users take advantage of the

opportunities for relevant information exchange, networking and collective action for equity and social responsibility. Conducive policy, equitable access, and most of all, effective, knowledgeable and critical use of the available tools may be the foundations that can make of the Internet a tool for social development in Latin America. Otherwise, reduced to being viewers of each other's reflections and to being consumers in the global supermarket, we may be surfing the labyrinth of the Library of Babel dreamt by Borges in the shadows of his blindness. In the Library of Babel it makes little difference which room your are in or which book you find. It does not matter if it is the library's true and faithful catalogue, one of the thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of their falseness, or the demonstration of the falseness of the true and faithful catalogue.

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2 In his paper, Raul Trejo (1999) provides more detailed figures and analysis. Also, information is regularly updated on popular Internet sites such as www.nua.ie/surveys, www.unesco.org/webworld, www.emarketer.com/estats, www.isoc.org, www.jup.com, or for a Latin American source, www.nic.mx/esta/survey among others.

3 165 million users worldwide, distributed as follows: 90.63m in USA/Canada (54.9%), 40.09m in Europe (24.3%), 26.97m in Asia/Pacific (16.3%), 5.29m in Latin America (3.2%), 1.14m in Africa (0.7%), and 0.88 in Middle East (0.5%). More conservative estimates indicate a total of 100 million users, but there does not seem to be great variation in the proportional distributions.

4 These ideas were suggested online by colleagues in a virtual community of researchers that collectively analyze the social implications of the Internet in Latin America, www.funredes.org/mistica.