

The Meaning of E-Politics for Civil Society in Latin America

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This memo explores briefly what civil society actors in Latin America understand is at stake in ICTs for them in political terms: rights, resistance, mobilization, capacities, constituencies, and last, but not least, social and economic development.

The new channels of access facilitated by ICTs to information, expression, and dissemination of individual and/or collective messages mean a significant civil progress: any interested citizen is able to:

1. Search for, stock, process, re-create, compare, and disseminate huge quantities of practical information for his /hers social, political or professional needs, as it was never imagined before the Internet.
2. Claim, protest or make proposals before many institutional levels, with greater simplicity, speed, and power than before the Internet. Citizens can make their voices heard either individually, or articulated with other individual or social groups. They can be heard by millions of other anonymous or well-known individuals throughout the world as never before.
3. ICTs improve citizen's participation in public affairs. Citizens democratic participation is generally associated with large political issues in electoral processes, as well as with the (always relative) knowledge and control on the State's and main political leaders actions. However, citizen's participation has a facet which is much nearer everyday life: any person can have (or should have) access to public administrative information, and use it in equal conditions as the rest of the political body (both managed citizens and managers).
4. Citizens political participation through ICTs can have strong impacts, not only on the political agenda, but also in respect of social and economic development: they can claim for employment, protest against firms that endanger their environment, participate as NGOs in technopoles or in economic innovation initiatives, approve or react against public or private sector's initiatives.

E-Politics in Latin America

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For the last five years, there has been in Latin America and the Caribbean (ALC) an ever increasing use of ICTs for political purposes. ALC is undergoing a phase of social reactivation whose agenda, as Sally Burch (2001) points out, include global issues and social actors who seek to break out of the isolation of their specific struggles. Several examples can be shown: neighborhood assemblies in Argentina following the financial crash of December 2001, organized, supported and developed through ICTs; the political movements for and against Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, among others. But above all, the organization and implementation, mostly through the Internet, of three Global Social Forums, which have taken place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, gathering literally millions of international participants, has have significant impacts in the world's political and economic agendas.

Disparities: regional and international

The development of ICTs offers new possibilities and new challenges. Latin American civil society needs physical as well as cultural access to ICTs. 79 % of Internet users in the world live in industrialized countries, but the digital divide between ALC and the industrialized world is being reduced. The average Internet access in the Region is 8 % of the population, and the world average is 9 %, according to a study carried on by the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL)².

ALC countries have near 500 million inhabitants. According to the firm EMarketer, localized in New York and specialized on Internet statistics, the Region will have 43 million of Internet users by the end of 2003, and probably 60 millions in 2004. However, the internal digital gap goes beeper: 70 % of the Latin American population with higher revenues (15 % of the total population), will have access to the Internet in 2004, while the whole region will have an estimated average access of 10% (CEPAL, 2003). This “internal gap” is characterized by the lack of effective access to the Internet by part of the poorer population, or inhabiting remote areas, but it's also linked to the increasing difficulties to enjoy other ICT-related services, and to cultural problems, such as technological illiteracy.

What impacts on which social sectors?

Some questions arise: are these Internet-supported social movements representative symptoms of the present society? Are they socially revolutionary, or socially conservative? Is on line mobilization made by Latin American civil society effective? Will they be successful in generating political, economical, social cultural changes, in the targeted population, or in the wider society?

Based on the research I have conducted and coordinated, as well as the information and research in the bibliography, I believe that these social movements are, indeed, representative symptoms of the present society. As Litz Vieira states:

“... the democratization process has stopped to be fleeting and functional to become it forms permanent. It's a process of adjustment between legality and genuineness, between morals and Law. This new interpretation opens a space for the social movements and civil society organizations, while it incorporates new concepts, including a revision of the public sphere, into the democratization process. He adds: “The processes of reproduction of cultural patterns become political forms in the public space” (Vieira, 2001).

² http://www.tips.org.uy/amsi/info/News_06/news_06_002.htm

A space that, as the anti-global social movements have proved it, belongs as much in the physical space of streets and cities, as in the space of flows in the Web. Social organizations as the neighborhood assemblies in Argentina or anti-global demonstrations all over ALC countries enlarge the concept of public space, exceeding political parties, incorporating new topics to political agendas, and playing a fundamental part in the construction of a new public sphere, supported by electronic networks. In this sense, they are movements, neither revolutionaries nor conservative, but socially innovative. They have been successful in generating social and cultural changes in the target population, and in society, in a wider sense: the creation of a new associative concept of democratization, identified with the practice of citizenship, highlighting the limitations of both the State and the market, and allowing the concept of democracy as a social practice, with the citizens as direct actors in the democratization processes.

One of the most direct cultural impacts –a process, and a tool - is the social appropriation and the dissemination of the Information Society tools, no longer available only to elite members. Another is the construction of a social, public subjectivity: the values and present actions in the civil society which frankly oppose the characteristic systemic values of the State and the market, and generate new forms of sociability, as well as the reciprocal alteration among instances of social practice, and the production of subjectivity. Yet another is the practice of operational solidarity, through which the neighbors have implemented organized and sustained help to elderly people's homes, street children, unemployed parents, and other kinds of needy social groups.

The impacts are less perceptible in the formal political sphere, although, as Vieira outlines, the plural occupation of public space can carry an imbalance in the relationship between the actors and the political system, with prevalence of the political society, and with the insertion or participation of civil associations in the State, conferring them a semi-public status (Vieira, 2001). It is certain, however, that at least some of the political and social claims will find a place in the political agendas, in national and international organizations. At economic level, however, no impacts have yet been registered.

In the digital era, another world is possible.

However...

In spite of an increasing social appropriation of the Internet, it has not become yet an issue to be claimed. Latin American social organizations use ICT tools because they understand that they support development, because they need better and cheaper communications, and because they have realized the fundamental role ICTs play in building social capital and information capital. But a better access to the Internet, or the social appropriation of ICT tools for economic development, is just beginning to appear in their agendas: for example, the last two Global Social Forums held workshops on social uses of the Internet. But nobody demonstrates in the streets in favor of cheaper access to the Internet, nor claims for a larger number of public access points, even if the existent ones are being used to their full capacity.

As Edgar Morin has stated: “The bird flies unaware of the air that supports its fly”

Leon, Burch and Tamayo (2001) state that a growing number of social organizations assume that a pending challenge is to develop communication policies and strategies, as a condition to be able to affirm their visibility and more powerfully influence public debate, as well as to improve their internal organization. There is in civil society an increasing appreciation of the valuable potential of the Internet as a way to communicate with local, national and international society, without depending on the “traditional” media.

The step to claim the Internet as a social right is a short one.

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