

NEW TECHNOLOGIES, CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

A critical perspective for the social change *

ABSTRACT

Cyberspace has brought new habits and new relationships into the traditional forms of social intercourse and modern symbolic practices and representations. The formation of a new *telepolis* constitutes the main challenge to be overcome by communication researchers. The breaking of the internal and external boundaries of cities and territories, and the merging together and confusion of public and private spaces, which have always been traditionally separated in modern political discourse and communication, indicates not only new cultural trends in human organization and socializing, but also, through the various electronic forms of interaction and information exchange, the constitution of a new space for political identity and participation.

In the following text, some innovative experiences in the European Union are analyzed, presenting the preliminary discussion about the conceptual bases of new strategic vision for the social movements that tries to explore the new local forms of cultural autonomy of the citizens through the *appropriation* of the new technologies of information in a social research applied on ICTs and Citizen Participation of the network CITIZ@MOVE (URBACT. European Commission).

INTRODUCTION

Innovations in the digital media have modified and conceptually redefined the conventional media system, with the introduction of new production and organization procedures.

The transformation caused by the “Internet galaxy” in the new social morphology is especially apparent in the impact of social activity, and the disruption it causes, in culture. The interrelated, centrifugal transformations of the new cultural ecology are endowing the postmodern individual with everything that is needed to infiltrate reality itself, personalize the world, mould possible and real interactive worlds through the exercise of imagination, and project new principles of participation and local development.

Against this background, the Local Communication and Development Network present the methodological precepts and programming bases which underlie its activity. The network is formed by the Ibero-American Digital Communication Centre at the University of Seville, the Andalusian Local Radio and Television Broadcasting network, and the non-governmental organization the European Institute of Communication and Development. Its aim is to promote the use and adaptation of the new information and communication technologies (NICTs) in the programming of socio-cultural development in the city of Seville.

CONSIDERING THE NEW COMMUNICATION ECOLOGY

The starting point for the project is the recognition of a new Information Ecosystem. In the new media cultura, the process of communication has completely broken free from the spatial and temporal coordinates described by Descartes at the

dawn of Modernity, leading to the incorporation of broader experiences which surpass the local perspectives of events. The spatialization of time on the Web also heralds the appearance of a new concept of local activity.

Castells talks of a new spatial logic based on information flow as opposed to that of traditional social organization which has its roots in the history of the immediate surroundings and local territories. The new model for urban arrangement, a space where the organization of social habits takes is effected through a virtual flow of data, departs from the awareness of physical space and permits virtual simultaneity and the notion of atemporal, fragmented space. Such changes can be seen in town planning, where their impact is especially strong.

The last few decades have seen the start of a contradictory process of urban transformation which transcends familiar historical forms of territoriality, and involves the technomedia and communications networks resulting from the digital revolution. This reformulation of urban information presents significant challenges for communication planning and management concepts in land development policies, challenges which to date have hardly been addressed in the field of Communication Studies. Above all it represents a fundamental ideological problem of legitimation and justification of the social contract.

THE TELEPOLIS AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Cyberspace has brought new habits and new relationships into the traditional forms of social intercourse and modern symbolic practices and representations. As Echevarría points out, technical problems of data access, circulation and rapid

transmission via Internet are important, but much more important is the need for debate about conversion of the Web into a new area of citizenship. Here, the formation of a new telepolis constitutes the main challenge to be overcome by communication researchers. The breaking of the internal and external boundaries of cities and territories, and the merging together and confusion of public and private spaces, which have always been traditionally separated in modern political discourse and communication, indicates not only new cultural trends in human organization and socializing, but also, through the various electronic forms of interaction and information exchange, the constitution of a new space for political identity and participation.

The Web-surfing culture of communication crisis, and hybrid, decentralized, multipurpose, diverse cultural migration and mediation has definitively shattered the cultural laws pertaining to proximity, territory and boundaries. These laws have hitherto been our point of reference in our awareness of what is “our own” and what is “foreign”, what is cosmopolitan and what is local, and the new culture has finally embarked on the road towards a transverse, constructive – even autonomous – concept of the productive values of different cultures, based on a new form of organizing experience, feeling and sense in time and space. This has necessarily taken as its main principle the idea of interculturalism, recognition of the unfamiliar, alterity as a sign of identity, and the assimilation of a dialogue-based culture.

Obviously this represents an unprecedented cultural change which especially affects the collective memory. Today the Web is becoming the major space, or environment/memory, for popular culture. But, as Héctor Schmucler warns, the speed of this development poses a problem:

“A worrying relationship exists between memory and communication: they are both mutually exclusive and dependent at the same time. The common idea of communication today brings to mind instantaneity, simultaneity, and, ultimately, timelessness. Memory has always required duration, persistence; it has no concept of speed. For memory to adapt to the idea of

timeless communication it has had to abandon bodies and take refuge in the abstraction of electronic signals. Communication as pure contact corresponds to digital memory: the storage of successive combinations of insignificant ones and zeros. The only thing that can be recognized in both is a heap of fragmentations; indefinite compartmentalization which obliterates the recognition of an origin and breaks free from any sense of belonging. Memory therefore becomes a mindless repertory of data, and communication merely a series of mechanisms which connects them. This tautological techno-instrumental order which has absorbed both memory and communication does nothing but repeat itself again and again” (Schmucler, 1997: 12).

The contribution of the NICTs to local memory and communication therefore requires, firstly, the modification of analytical strategies, the questioning of research methods and techniques, the integration of study disciplines and perspectives, and a move in a more productive, ecological direction. The complexities of cyberspace and technological networks must be researched critically and reflexively, and a new theoretical framework must be produced to describe and understand the technical nature of the postmodern electronic world. The complex techno-world of the new media must be approached generatively from within, because only a second generation analysis will allow the new communicative processes to be fully projected.

The present telematic situation requires more elastic understanding of communication as a flow. And also a more creative approach towards communications research. As Paolo Virno warns, the virtual nature of the new media culture not only vindicates the singular nature of all experiences, but also galvanises and expands the capacity of the imagination to recover information as a productive channel for knowledge.

The exponential development of smart connection and information documentation technologies provides a central topic for discussion about the very nature of human thought and cognitive processes. The telematic society has finally revealed to us, albeit reflexively, the ecosystem relationship which exists between our system and

the surroundings which we observe and transform through the knowledge-gathering process. This change of communications ideal arises from the creative consideration of the social complexity involved in the new processes of information mediation, and the projection of the social area within the urban environment as a space of pluralism, construction and contradiction for multiple cultural identities, as a meeting place for new realities, socializing, migratory and territorial transformation, a network of networks and social links.

The network metaphor, more than just a play on words, here reflects an imaginary process aimed at converting social actors into dream makers, designers of the city's material, symbolic and sociopolitical processes. A generative research culture is being developed which will eventually contribute in turn to the development of collective processes of appropriation of communicational knowledge and technology, broadening the existing information culture through a concept of dialogue-based, emancipative communication leading to the establishment of a true cyberculture.

We should, then, begin to ask ourselves how this network is to be structured, what levels of analysis and how communicative processes can be understood through these networks, and to move beyond the polarization existent between the individual and the global network. We should also define a new representation policy, because, as Jameson warns, no research project is without social and historical rationality, and no cultural initiative is without its political project.

A NEW STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The original idea of the “New Technologies, Citizen Participation and Local Development” programme is not merely to make tools available to the population of Seville in order to cover consumer demand for internet connections, in line with some of the basic guidelines produced to date by the European Union. These tend to identify the process of construction of the Information Society with State controlled means of digital diffusion, mostly in line with market possibilities and necessities. In the initiatives in this field considered by the European Commission and the governments of the member states, planning and control of the new spaces for telematic interaction reflect the regulatory and mediatory model of the conventional media (press, radio, television), . and either exclude or minimize the creative potential of the citizens and the organized social fabric.

In contrast, the city of Seville's telecentre network represents a commitment to endow the Third Sector and the citizens with real power, a firm will to create optimum conditions for communication free from bureaucracy and free from commercial interests. Its goal is to create a genuine, alternative model for social creativity based on action-research and the communicative capacity of non-governmental organizations and those sectors traditionally excluded from the process of technological modernization, to reconstruct spaces for community participation and meeting, dialogue and cooperation: spaces which unquestionably strengthen the city's governability and institutions.

The project's point of departure is a complex idea of communication in which telematic network coverage, the promotion of autonomous participating groups and community project design based on a language of interconnection will provide the

pillars of productive cooperation to support a democratic, local form of communication, and to multiply three strategic forms of alternative communication:

- Collective, liberating reflexivity on communication practices.
- The dialogue culture of consensual construction.
- The recognition of multiplicity and difference.

Networking policy regarding ideas and social intervention in communication will thus constitute an alternative way of creating culture, another manner of organizing communication and citizen participation:

- Creating dynamics of consensus and integration for the different social actors in the debate on the organizational model to be adopted in public communication.
- Guaranteeing coverage and access for all users.
- Respecting the principal of equality in public participation in the cultural system as organized by the communication industries.
- Facilitating the existence of multiple broadcasters and real pluralism in local information structures.
- And promoting the creative, critical use of communications media based on a transformational communications methodology.

The programme is conceived as a strategic dimension, to reconstruct the city and galvanize its citizens and its local government. Its starting point can be found in the community platforms built by social networks in the city's suburbs and neighbourhoods. It attempts to define a new framework for social relations, and, from an ecological perspective, enable the use of local public space as a complex participative environment, plurally constituted in recognition of the multiple actors and opinions involved. It represents the recovery of the citizens' own voice and communicative activity, and establishes a new model of development based on the citizens' confidence in making known their opinions, presenting proposals, reaching agreements and, essentially, transforming participation in political life into a commitment to the community and to coexistence. In line with this philosophy, the project is based on a Participative Action-Research working plan, a programme of decentralized neighbourhood projects in which communication is directly and transversally linked to local development in all its phases. The constant aim is to observe what possibilities exist for co-determination, historical projection and change, and definition and affirmation of a policy of communications self-government within the World Wide Web.

This dynamic consequently suggests a networked involvement, together with other national and international cities, experiences and working programmes. It implies a permanent attempt to analyze the macroprocesses involved in configuring the global information society to address the local, familiar, specific problems of Seville's citizens. It is consistent with strategic framework projects like the Participative Budgets, of which the telecentre plan forms part and in which it acts in a coordinative role, its

development contributing to vitalize and diversify citizen access, participation and decision-making.

LINES OF ACTION AND METHODOLOGICAL CULTURE

This local experience, and other similar experiences, by members of the network CITIZ@MOVE (European Commission. URBACT) constitutes the intellectual and social capital which has been brought to the project. The common denominator is a practical philosophy of communication based on four principles of public action:

- The leadership and capitalization of the project by The Third Sector and the citizens, leading to a model of network organization, planning and management which involves public participation and social autonomy.
- The establishment of a reticular model of project concept and organization inspired by the concept of deterritorialization. This, although the project is locally based, broadens its strategies of cooperation, information and knowledge exchange, and exploits its involvement with other current European, Latin American and African groups, initiatives and programmes in the same field.
- The commitment to a participative model which also emphasises the social economy. Unlike other projects, Seville's telecentre network does not limit itself to providing a public service and a forum for the citizens. In addition to serving this strategic function of fundamental importance to the Information Society and to local government, the "New Technologies, Citizen Participation and Local

Development” project aims to stimulate productive, dynamic synergies of innovation and economic reorientation which will have an impact in the region. It includes programmes both for specific training in the field of the New Technologies, and for guidance and virtualization for small and medium sized local businesses. It encompasses the creation of new services and production, distribution and social economy organization networks (cooperatives, the content industry, marketing campaigns, incubator companies... . . .).

- The design of an action-research programme in line with the philosophy and proposals of the Science and Society Programme of the European Union. Since its beginnings the telecentre network has been linked to the Project. Specifically it is the result of applied research projects aimed at:

- Systemizing experiences, results and models of political and social citizen participation with and with regard to New Information Technologies.
- Examining the uses, obstacles and factors affecting the integration of NICTs in everyday life and in the city’s public space.
- Defining the processes of communicative suitability and praxis with tools permitting digital citizen involvement.
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The project thus attempts to achieve three strategic intervention objectives:

- The promotion of a new participative, democratic leisure time culture which supports the synergies and processes of public space and local governability organization.
- The generation of electronic network content, either as a result of the creative initiatives undertaken by the social groups involved in the project, or as professional support services for small business owners and traders in each district, and a vehicle for the dissemination of new offers of information, communication and local culture.
- Integration and cooperation with those social groups especially excluded from the process of technological innovation and development of the new information and communication economy.

The organizational core of the NICT structuring process is the telecentre, a physical space possessing the telematic infrastructure necessary to carry out the activities related to the three strategic lines of action. Its objective is to:

- Facilitate citizen access to Internet, with a special effort being made in the cases of the most disadvantaged groups.
- Galvanize local culture, promoting the expression and propagation of popular memory using new digital media supports.

- Contribute to the integration of the immigrant population, support their access to means of interconnection between them and the networks belonging to their own communities of origin or residence.

- Organize new citizens' networks and alliances between social movements and platforms, strengthening the associative fabric and boosting cultural change in the internal relationships and organizations of Non-Governmental Organizations.

To this end, the programme envisages the creation of a central base unit to produce, direct and coordinate the project, and a network of telecentres housed in the city's civic centres and in each of its districts. In cases where it is deemed preferable to have a better communicated, more recognized space, the premises of community associations, non-government organizations or youth associations may be adapted. These venues for social coexistence will form the setting for the structuring of networks designed to generate cultural and civic awareness, proactive concepts of local participation, plural areas for the public handling of collective information, communication and decision-making. The aim is to restructure citizens' forums and interlocutory space in cyberspace.

In our opinion, the new telematic networks open up a potential arena for multiple productive synergies of cooperation, organization and community autonomy, which should be fully explored and understood for optimum development of local communication in the global context of the new Information Society. The civic

networks, community telecentres and public platforms that generate innovation in the adaptation and use of NICTs should therefore be revitalized in the creative processes of organization and social development. Local communities with a presence in cyberspace could be said to be in an ideal position to undertake processes to create collective intelligence for social change based on the radical necessities of human individuals and groups. As it encourages different forms of interaction, cooperation and exchange based on active participation, local communities' access to new digital platforms represents a powerful organizational tool for development from within. It also foments "the democratization of cultural creation and the breaking of the historical barrier between producers and consumers of cultural objects" (April, 1998: 72).

In this respect, the transfer of creative power to information processing, storing and programming machines poses strategic problems of co-responsibility and cultural co-management in the field of communications and development. The management of information wealth and telematic exomemory, and methods of cultural heritage planning and development pose significant, hitherto unconsidered questions regarding the relationships between power, information and development. For example:

"Obviously, documentation policy decisions, those related to the purposes of databases and modes of access, are decisive: the commercialization of stored data constitutes another factor, this time of an economic nature, which is present in both the selection and consultation phases. The value of information is no longer decided exclusively by the internal parameters of the institution which carries out the documentation, but is now affected by true market laws, often of a competitive nature; the availability of information to the public – whether controlled or indiscriminate, free or paid for – or the decision to maintain the management of stored data as a purely internal activity, has as much influence on the system architecture as it has on the conventions adopted, and, ultimately, on the content of the data being stored" (Bettetini/Colombo, 1995: 226).

The commitment to forging a virtual perspective of the new communications should not be understood as opposition to reality, but rather as opposition to the power of the immediate, as conceptual reality, as a utopia, and as a political proposal for

communication in the specific local context. Without a strategic project and a defined policy it is impossible to achieve the desired media culture. The organizational planning and management model for the project is coherent in that it is based on a conscious policy of public domain, social management telecentre network construction, with the participation of the city's government, social organizations and university. A specially created consortium will be the body responsible for evaluating and defining lines of strategic action. The principle of plurality and vocation for public service and autonomous management by citizens' groups provides for the inclusion of representatives from the city's trade and small and medium sized business sectors. The organizational model is obviously communitary, with decentralized, district-based, autonomous public and private financing. The three main groups targeted by the project to be protagonists in the initiative are:

- a. Young people, depending on demand for access to information, culture and vehicles of expression, above all in peripheral districts or those which lack the infrastructure and culture offer available in the rest of the city.
- b. Women excluded from the labour market and without access to knowledge of the digital network.
- c. The immigrant population which needs free public services for personal communication, the organization and satisfaction of basic needs and social and cultural participation in public life.

Taking these three groups as a point of departure, the project proposes the gradual implementation of the network, in four phases:

1. Diagnosis and analysis of the field of action. This first phase includes the study, or pre-input, of the necessities of the population to be affected by the project, and the mapping of public communication related social groups, educator groups and citizen initiatives with experience or unique characteristics which may contribute to the project's effective development and final success. The relevant social, symbolic and economic capital existent among citizens and social organizations will therefore be fully exploited. To this end, the first phase involves the organization of interviews, and discussion, ethnology and survey groups with social organizations, specialists from Youth Information Centres, managers of civic centres and the residents of each neighbourhood or territorial area, in order to discover the most suitable ways in which the New Technologies can be implemented.
2. Participative design of the Telecentre Plan. Once the information compiled during the field study has been analysed and the most prominent conclusions have been identified, we plan to create a participative action-research project, with the *operational group* responsible for organizing the programme's sectorial unity and projects.
3. Central Unit Technical Plan and Execution.

4. Training Plan. The programme will simultaneously implement a training plan to meet the citizens' need for knowledge about the basic skills involved:
 - a. Multimedia communications skills. Skills needed to generate messages on audiovisual and digital supports, with users being taught to handle computer terminals, use technology correctly and employ the resources and programmes necessary for efficient communication.
 - b. Communications organization skills. Development of internal and external organizational skills in communications for social action to support coordinated institutional action by local networks and organizations.
 - c. Data reception and critical interpretation skills. Education communication training for the intelligent, hypertextual, comprehensive use of information and information generating systems.
 - d. Trainer training. Preparation of education communication and technical trainers for citizen training, as the basis for the creation of a Modern School of Citizenship, from a broad sociopolitical and cultural viewpoint.
 - e. Education in technological innovations. Training in entrepreneurial culture and in networked social and cooperative economy organization,

based on the community possibilities offered by the New Technologies and the exploitation of cyberspace.

CONCLUSION

The communications challenge presented by this project is, in short, to attempt to produce and develop citizen networks and social and community life experiences based on new information systems within complex information environments. The challenge is far from easy, as Professor Artur Serra makes clear:

“We know that engineering is based on engineering design, but it is not the same to design a data system as it is to design a social community with a data system incorporated. This design, and the knowledge necessary to attempt it, are twice as complex. And there is another problem which is very difficult to solve: Who designs a community? Can a minority create a blueprint for a community model and then impose it on the rest? Or, to be respectful towards the principles of a democratic society, must the design be approved at least by a majority of that society? Do we have methodologies to enable communities to design themselves? (Finquelievich, 2000: 195).

To these, and to many other questions, we still cannot provide the answers. At present, we only know that the extremely media-intensive social change that is taking place demands communications researchers with attitudes and skills that are completely different, to design and develop the new media culture. We are clearly talking about a new concept of social mediation between communications scientists and the object of their studies, or, in other words, between communications knowledge and information reality.

The academic community involved with communications must overcome the theoretical-conceptual and methodological insufficiencies in research that we have mentioned, but it must also attempt to create new organizational structures to facilitate social autonomy and the construction of a complex knowledge base that can physically,

materially and socially link local media interaction network nodes with their global counterparts. This project is just such an attempt to explore the field from a standpoint of unity and a vision of communication and social organization that is both constructive and complex.

As Aristotle would have said, we are certain that our technology is not justified by its capacity to provide answers, but by its creation of possibilities.

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ELECTRONIC SOURCES

RED DE TELECENTROS (TELECENTRE NETWORK)

www.tele-centros.org

OURMEDIA

<http://www.ourmedianet.org/>

FAO-COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT

<http://www.fao.org/sd/CDdirect/CDre0055e.htm>

SOCIEDAD DE LA INFORMACIÓN (INFORMATION SOCIETY)

<http://www.desarrollosi.org/>

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