

COMMUNITY INFORMATICS: The Slow Argentinean Way¹

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Abstract

*Argentina is slowly walking along the path of ICT uses for social and civic purposes. Local governments and community organisations are understanding the potential advantages of Community Informatics, while facing multiple prejudices and material obstacles to implement it. This chapter shows the results of a three-year research on the subject of information technology, local governance, and community networks in the City of Buenos Aires. It deals with two intimately interrelated issues: a) **Local government's use of ICT for local management and communication with citizens: results and obstacles.** The government is opening slowly to the use of ICT to decentralise urban functions, increase the flow of horizontal institutional information, update urban management, inform the citizens, and increase public participation in urban affairs. However, prejudices, fear of technology, and above all a resilient institutional culture, are still considerable obstacles for informatization. The paper surveys the technological changes implemented by the Government of Buenos Aires City and studies the social actors who were responsible for them, as well as the social processes that made them possible. b) **Emerging Community Networks.** From 1997 onwards, they have multiplied in various sectors: education, culture, community health and wellness, citizens' rights, participation in urban affairs. The chapter studies the local particularities of community, focusing on the differences between large and small community organisations, and their conceptions of time and space, linked to the use of on line resources.*

Citizens, politicians, researchers, have been searching for answers to the defies and new social processes which emerge at the end of the millennium, characterised by three main trends: **informatization, urbanisation, globalisation** (Castells, 1998). In Latin American cities, these global processes have had many adverse effects: urban fragmentation, increasing unemployment, poverty, socio-spatial dualisation, severe cuts in social services, higher costs in urban infrastructures and services generated by their privatisation, difficulties of local governments to manage the increasingly complex cities and to satisfy the populations demands. One of these possible answers that local

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governments are beginning to implement is precisely the use of informatics to increase the efficacy of institutional management, to collect the demands of the population, and to obtain political consense.

On the other hand, a number of social movements, community organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), citizens, briefly, a set of social agents who constitute civil society, are implementing strategies to create alternative action spaces, and searching for solutions to the local problems triggered by global processes. These social agents are also beginning to use informatics to create local and international networks, get strength through the dissemination of their actions, access to international funding sources and exert pressures over national and local governments.

These processes do not evolve without severe difficulties. Organisational inertia, resistance to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), scarce access by the population to ICTs, inadequate policies carried on by telecommunication enterprises, translated into high Internet and telephone costs, contribute to make slow and painful progress along this path. However, some of the existing social agents assume new roles: progressive sectors of local governments and the more active members of the largest community organisations find a common ground in claiming a broader citizens participation using electronic communication.

A set of questions emerges when working on the subject of Community Informatics in Latin America: How are information and communication technologies transforming urban life quality in a developing country? How are technological decisions related to the local political context? How is information technology used in communication between urban managers and citizens? Which are the factors that facilitate or inhibit the implementation of ICTs in the cities? How do community networks emerge in this context? This paper tries to answer these questions, by contributing to the understanding of the potential advantages of Community Informatics in Argentina, and the prejudices and material obstacles it faces. It shows the first results of a three-year research on the subject of information technology, local governance, and community networks, co-ordinated by the author. The main case study is the City of Buenos Aires (13,5 million inhabitants, including Greater Buenos Aires). The paper deals with two intimately interrelated issues:

- **Local government's use of ICT for local management and communication with citizens: results and obstacles.** In 1995, the Government of Buenos Aires City has undergone a structural transformation, from a system in which the Mayor was chosen directly by the Republic's President, to a citizens' elected Mayor. The year 1995 is also a landmark, with respect to the local government's attitudes towards the use of ICTs in local management and communication with the citizens. The government is opening slowly to the use of ICT to decentralise urban functions, increase the flow of horizontal institutional information, update urban management, inform the citizens, and increase public participation in urban affairs. However, prejudices, fear of technology, and above all a resilient institutional culture, are still considerable obstacles for informatization. The paper surveys the technological changes implemented by the Government of

Buenos Aires City and studies the social actors who were responsible for them, as well as the social processes that made them possible.

- **Emerging Community Networks.** Computer-sustained community networks are emerging in Argentina. From 1997 onwards, they have multiplied in various sectors: education, culture, community health and wellness, citizens' rights, participation in urban affairs. The chapter studies the particularities of community Informatics in this developing country, focusing on the differences between small and large community organisations, on their diverse use of time, space, and online resources. It summarises the results of the research developed to the present, based on the research work developed by Herzer and Kisilevsky (1998), Kisilevsky (1998), Baumann (1999), and the author herself (1998, 1999), within the research team "City, Society and Cyberspace", in the University of Buenos Aires.

The inertia of organisational culture

How do local governments incorporate Informatics as a new tool? How do civil servants perceive these technologies? Do these perceptions change with governments from different political colours? In order to understand the political processes related to the implementation of information technology, it is necessary to travel briefly through the history of the recent political decisions.

The City of Buenos Aires acquired its legal state of Autonomous City with the reforms introduced in the National Constitution in 1994. The citizens, or "porteños" (people from the Port), as they call themselves, won the right to elect their own Mayor, -until then chosen by the President of the Nation- and to implement their own legislation. On August 6, 1996, Dr. Fernando De La Rúa assumed his position of Elected City Government Chief. The very same year, the Constitution of the Autonomous City was sanctioned, and a new Legislative Body was elected in 1997, to replace the old City Council. The New Legislative Body changed some of the procedures in order to increase public participation in urban affairs. It introduced mechanisms of semi-direct democracy: public audiences, referendums, and popular initiatives. However, it postponed most of the decisions concerning the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to a near future, in which a new "intelligent" building would be equipped for the Body. They did, however, build a web page, which will be described later.

By 1998, the Legislative Body had acquired some informatics equipments that were placed in the building (actually the San Martin City Theatre), occupied transitorily while waiting for the new one to be finished. It included computer terminals, an internal information network and a server for the official web page. No attempt was made to train the legislators and the civil servants in the use of informatics or to hear their needs about this issue. As a matter of fact, many Legislators claimed that they had no information whatsoever about official plans to improve the technological conditions of the institution. Some of the Commissions in the Legislative Body benefited from the new equipments and

from Internet connections, but most of the Legislators, when interviewed, said that the informatics equipments they had in their offices were their own, and that they lacked Internet connection. Besides, this network, planned as a technological support for the legislative work, was not introduced to the civil servants, which ignore all about the dependencies that are connected to Internet how to use it. The presentation of new projects, the delivery of the daily bulletin about the work done by the different Commissions and the results of the sessions, the documentation and information generated by this work, was still done according to the old ways: by hand, in the corresponding counters. Many remnant members of the old City Council did not know how to use a computer, least of all how to connect to Internet, and they did not believe that their work would be benefited by the use of ICTs. Those who usually used the computers –although simply as text processors- were the Legislative advisors. All these facts show that the use of ICTs was quite limited. The restrictions were attributed to the precarious situation of the temporary building. Hopes for progress, technological as well as organisational, were postponed until after moving to the new intelligent building.

Citizens' participation and on-line activities

Different attitudes and behaviours towards on-line activities are related to diverse styles of municipal governance. Interviews with the legislators included questions about this subject, which detected two apparently opposite attitudes. The first paradigm was *restricted participation*. Legislators who adhered to it stated that voting was the only participatory action citizens should have. Eventually, they admitted that citizens' participation could go as far as expressing their opinions within the spaces created by the Legislators themselves, such as a Committee meeting or neighbours visits to the premises of the political party where the Legislator developed his political activities. Legislators who adhered to this scheme were also the most antagonistic towards the use of ICTs, since their political practices are supported by clientelistic, face to face relationships, in which the Legislator is the exclusive owner of all pertinent information, and held the power of management and resource control.

The second paradigm was *extended participation*. Legislators who supported it maintained that social organisations and neighbours associations should have access to decision making in urban issues, and that spatial physical and social institutionalised participation spaces should be implemented for that objective. Not surprisingly, these Legislators were those that perceived ICTs as useful tools to disseminate information to the citizens, collect their suggestions and complaints, and to improve civic participation in the resolution of urban problems.

What has changed between past and present?

By mid-1998, the Administrative Secretariat of the Legislative Body (SA) proposed to redesign and recycle the Legislative Palace. The goal was to adapt it to the exigencies of a modern Legislative

Body; to design and implement management technologies, emphasising the informatics aspects. These changes were aimed at guaranteeing the values of transparency and efficacy, and to train the staff in updated management skills, including informatics.

Moreover, it was planned that each legislator and each parliamentary commission would have their equipments connected to the network, as well as access to Internet. The Legislative body would have its own web site, and both the administrative and parliamentary circuits would be managed from the network. Also, the network would have public access, and citizens would have access to it from their own PCs or from the Legislative Body's decentralised headquarters. *The project included the creation of a participatory citizen's network to allow a fluid interaction between citizens, community organisations, and the Legislative Body, based on "free access to all the information in the network"*. The first phase includes a pilot experience: connecting 5 to 7 neighbourhood centres, conceived as physical spaces for computer terminals, training courses and other related activities. The project is also recycling the old Legislative Palace into an "intelligent building", with 600 computer terminals with voice and data, Internet and Intranet connections, laptops and e-mail to receive messages from neighbours, a cable TV channel, and direct transmission of the Legislative sessions through a giant screen.

A deep transformation has started in late 1998. One of the most significant changes in institutional culture is that at present, the implementation of ICT in everyday work has become a top priority of the Legislative Body. The Grupo Gestor (Managing Group) was created, with the purpose of leading a structural institutional transformation, agreed by all the political parties. The project will accompany the modernisation process with training campaigns, which started in October 1998, in order to educate the staff in the use of informatics and particularly Internet and Intranet. The incorporation of ICTs is considered as the instrumental support of the Modernisation program. The new legislators, particularly the younger ones, are much more favourable regarding the use of informatics. However, they accept to use it without giving much thought to its potentials, the real needs they have for information technology, how they could benefit from its further uses, where and how should it be implemented, which priorities should be defined. Much like the old City Council's members, they are not acquainted with the potentials of the recently implemented Intranet and underutilize the informatics equipments (Herzer and Kisilevsky, 1998).

Two initiatives of the Buenos Aires Government regarding interaction with citizens via electronic means should be mentioned: the City's web site and the Legislative Body's web site. The first one, (<http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar>) provides complete information about Buenos Aires' government. The site includes the Government's organization, and the names and addresses of the current civil servants (although not their e-mails, phone nor fax numbers), the City's budget, information about tourist places, a site dedicated to the Centros de Gestión y Participación (CGPs, or Centres for Management and Participation). When compared to the previous information void, this web site is encouraging. However, it does not offer the possibility of interactive communication, except by

a single electronic address to which citizens can send comments and proposals. Visitors cannot send e-mails to the Government's offices, nor use the web page to make any consultation nor procedures.

The Legislative Body's web site, <http://www.legislatura.gov.ar>, goes further and offers genuine possibilities for interaction. The site provides several links, from "Getting acquainted with the Legislative Body" to "Internal Structure". It provides information about each legislator, including his or her photo, résumé, and E-mail address. Through "Live Transmission" it is possible to "assist" to the Legislative Body's sessions, while "The Legislative Network" offers opportunities for real interaction among civil servants and citizens: chats with the legislators, virtual forums, surveys, etc. Although it is still too early to evaluate the degree of success of these electronic services, they promise to become valuable channels for active citizens participation.

This site is a considerable qualitative progress in the field of local government's use of informatics, not only because it offers detailed information about the Legislators, but also because it provides spaces for citizens expression and participation through Internet. However, technologies by themselves do not cause changes if they are appropriated and adequately used by the potential users. The existence of the Legislative Body web site is undoubtedly a progress in the path of facilitating access to information to the citizens and expands the possibilities of popular participation in urban matters. But the final result depends on the involvement assumed by the civil servants with these tasks, and this involvement requires constant training but above all, a will to transmit transparent information and to encourage information flow in all directions.

Electronic Urban Decentralisation: The Turtle Path

The process of decentralisation and deconcentration of urban management carried on by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires, through the creation of CGPs, is included in the Modernisation and Decentralisation Program. The Program clearly explicates the decision to implement ICTs uses for urban administration and citizens participation: **"The purpose of technology is to allow the citizens to have a wider access and participation in the Government's decisions through the use of computer and telephone networks"**. (Programa de Modernización y Descentralización, 1997). Its goal is to implement a process of ICT implementation, based on the thought that a multimedia digital network gives the government both the possibility to inform the citizens about their work and to provide a communication channel to encourage the participation of the City's inhabitants.

We have identified the following obstacles met by the decentralisation project:

a) *Delays in the budget assignation*: The project starts to be implemented in early 1996, but the budget was effectively assigned in April 1997, delaying the whole process.

b) The underutilisation of available computer equipment: The CGPs started to acquire computer equipment in early 1997, at an average of three computers per Centre, equipped with modems, laser printers and dial-up connections to Internet. However, until October 1998, the computers were used merely as word processors, and only then some of the CGPs Directors started using e-mails and Internet. By then, an Intranet system with a centralised service, the Claim Central Unity (CCU), was implemented. Through the CCU, the CGPs can transmit the neighbours claims or complaints to the different City Departments, to be solved. However, once the claim is sent, the CGPs cannot control its parcourse, nor follow the precedures for its response.

c) Lack of trained staff. CGPs have a reduced staff, mostly employees from the previous government, without any formal training in informatics or telecommunications. The three UNDP consultants charged with the informatization process are too busy to assist sixteen Centres. Besides designing and implementing the new networks they are charged with their maintenance, as well as hardware and software repairs. No technical team has been foreseen to assume these tasks. In many cases, the CGPs Directors ignore the potentials and multiple uses of the Program. This is explained by the absence of clear transmission, not only of the Program's goals and strategies, but also of the information about the informatization process.

d) Lack of understanding, at various levels of the City's administration, of ICTs potentials and possibilities as participation instruments, about the availability of infrastructure and above all, about the need to adapt the institutional culture to their use. Civil servants are preoccupied about how to distribute information, to citizens and to other governmental levels. They usually use alternatives as bulletin boards, local media, newsletters, etc., but they do not think about information technology as a useful tool. Even if computers are available at CGPs, ICTs are seen as a remote instrument to be used in an indefinite future, not as a concrete, present possibility.

In synthesis, the three City government levels have implemented quite different strategies regarding ICTs uses, which are not necessarily complementary. The Executive's website is conceived as an information place, or virtual bulletin board. The Legislative Body's website is designed as an interactive space, an open door for citizen's participation. Meanwhile, the CGPs Informatization Project seems to be reduced to use Intranet to transmit neighbours claims. To the obstacles pointed earlier –which are common to the three Government levels- are added three questions which must be solved in order that the Government's initiatives become effective tools for citizens participation:

The first issue is *organisational*: it is necessary to promote deep transformations in the organisational culture of the public administration. It is not merely a technological change, directed to increase or change the availability of hardware and software. Neither is it an issue of training the staff in the use of information tools. It is not even a problem solved by hiring technologically trained specialised personnel. On the contrary, it is what in Organisational Sociology is called “orgware”. Its

goal is to incorporate genuine network logic in all the levels of the Administration. This requires not only changes in technical equipments, skills, and abilities (the “hard” organisational aspects) but also deep transformations in institutional habits, hierarchies, organisational mobility, information flows, and communication strategies. Above all, it needs tapping the maximum the existing human resources, which implies constant training and consultation about their needs and perceptions within the organisation. *Adaptation to network communication implies the reengineering of the “soft” aspects of public institutions, as well as the creation of a true citizen-centred culture of service, as opposed to the present institution-centred organisational culture.* These changes will not be effective if there is not a political will to change the procedures, rules, standards, and statutes that structure and paralyse the institution. It becomes necessary to include a new rationality, goal-oriented, instead of rule-oriented (Finkelievich, Vidal, and Karol, 1992; Finkelievich, Karol, and Kisilevsky, 1996; Baumann, 1999).

It is also important (and there is never too much insistence on this point) to guarantee citizens access to the use of ICTs. As far as present socio-economic conditions, mainly those that concern the distribution of the national income and access to socio-cultural goods and services, continues to polarise the current Argentine social structure, and to generate an increasing social exclusion, there is no possible democratic use of informatics. It is necessary, in the first place, a State promotion of initiatives regarding the implementation of free computer terminals in public places, such as libraries, community centres, CGPs, NGOs, etc. In the second place, it becomes essential to include ICT uses in education, particularly in the first levels. It is not enough to teach students on the use of informatics, but also to the constant use of ICTs in the classrooms and at home, as a means to obtain and produce information, and to integrate all areas of knowledge.

From BBSs to Citizens Rights

Internet was launched in Argentina in 1995. Although it was awaited with expectation, it is still an expensive tool for the local elites, although it is disseminating among the middle-income groups. It is estimated that less than 500.000 persons (0.7% of the population) have Internet connections in a country of 34 million inhabitants. High costs of Internet connections and telephone tariffs make Internet prohibitive for the majority, given the fact that 27, 1% of the Argentine population earn less than \$148 a month (ECLAC, 1999). However, since 1985 some groups were already creating virtual communities through BBSs. Later, Universities implemented discussion forums through e-mails threads, but it was not until 1995 that electronic community network started to play a social role. These emerging networks are for the time being the realm of the middle classes, which is explained because they possess both the financial capital to acquire computer equipments and the cultural capital to use them.

The online research of virtual communities related to citizens participation, during July and August 1998, was deceiving in the first phase (Baumann, 1999). We could not identify virtual communities as defined by Howard Rheingold (1994): "... *Social entities that emerge from the Web when a sufficient number of people carries on public discussions during enough time, and with enough human feelings to establish personal relationships in cyberspace*". We found discussion forums, and newsgroups, but none of them discussed urban or local policy issues. We decided to focalise our search on NGOs that worked on issues *related* to urban everyday life, such as human rights, environmental problems, or survival strategies for the impoverished middle class. Among them we found Conciencia (Conscience), and Poder Ciudadano (Citizens' Power) -both of them working on the defense of citizens rights-, Greenpeace, the Asociación Voluntarios de Parque Centenario (Volunteers for Centenario Park), and the Paraguas Club (Umbrella Club, a network which links together unemployed middle-class professionals and micro-entrepreneurs). All of them displayed recent, modest and rather rudimentary web sites, where the NGOs provide information about their goals, work and achievements. In all the sites there is e-mail address where the visitors can contact them, but only as a bi-directional communication. No efforts to establish a network are made.

We decided to reformulate our research, and to focalise on NGOs as possible embryos of virtual communities. We grouped a sample of twelve NGOs around a series of variables: *organization* (goals, action areas, participation in NGOs forums, human resources), *economic structure* (funding, budget) and *use of technology* (use of ICTs, perception of community informatics, usual means of communication and information). Two categories of NGOs were identified: information-rich and information-poor. The first and smaller one (two organisations out of twelve) has computers and Internet connections. They have e-mail, web sites, and they constantly explore new ICT uses and consider information technology as indispensable for their work. These organisations have considerable high budgets (from \$500.000 to \$700.000 per year). They do not have a local territorial belonging, but work at national levels. They also have highly qualified paid staff (between 15 and 25 employees), besides a relatively high number of volunteer workers (around 40 persons), who use ICTs daily, particularly Internet. Other characteristics are memberships to national and international networks of NGOs, the inclusion of community informatics as a permanent issue in their agenda, and the development of massive communication strategies. Last but not least, these organisations receive financial support from different national and international institutions and foundations, enterprises or individuals, and have efficient fund raising systems.

The NGOs within the second category (information-poor) do not have informatics equipment, or they have some computers, but they are under-utilised. None of these NGOs has access to Internet. They have strong geographic links with a given neighbourhood or urban area, and they have extremely low budgets, which are often informally managed. They have no paid staff, and they work with part-time volunteers, generally professionals in Law and Urbanism who do not use ICTs, but approve of its

use. (The staff members explain that they do not use ICTs themselves pointing to the insufficiency of financial resources and the lack of training in computer use). These organisations do not belong to NGOs, national or international, and do not include ICTs as a priority issue in their agendas. Their massive communication strategies are defined according to the moment's requirements, and they do not have sustained relationships with the local media. Occasionally they have spaces in neighbourhood newspapers or newsletters, or in FM radios, but they have serious financial limitations when they must pay for publicity. They are strongly dependent on external financial support, though discontinuous small funds from different State institutions, local enterprises, and/or individuals, and they have serious difficulties to keep autonomous funding systems, since they do not have permanent, self-reliant, and organised fund-raising systems.

In short, there is a direct correlation between the financial situation of a community organisation, its territorial scope, and the use of ICTs. Information-rich community organisations are those which are also financially solvent, have national and/or international scopes, manage massive communication campaigns with the media and have highly specialised paid staff. On the contrary, information-poor community organisations are financially unprotected, have no self-reliant funding strategies, have strictly local roots and goals, and depend on volunteer work. However, these are not the only variables: the dualisation of community organisations concerning ITC use is closely linked to their relationships with space and time.

ICTs, Time, Space, and Social Organisation

Our field work pointed to the fact that the difficulties experimented by smaller NGOs to incorporate ICT use are directly related to their geographical roots and scopes. Their very essence and objectives these organisations are rooted in specific spaces, neighbourhoods or limited urban areas within a neighbourhood, where they implement their actions (Baumann, 1999). Even their names denote the geographic and social areas where they work: "Friends of Palermo Lake", "Volunteers for Centenario Park", "Creative Neighbours of Saavedra and Núñez", etc. Small NGOs operate at neighbourhood level, in face-to-face networks, which constitute their very identity. This is one of the causes that until recent times made their members think that they did not need ICTs, since they have direct contact with other members and with the population they address to. Their target population is the nearby neighbours, and their actions are focused in the defense and conservation of concrete public physical and social spaces. Most of their activities are centred on impeaching the transformation of local places through the global spatial logic, through monumental public works and/or private development projects (large closed condominiums, mega malls, etc.). However, some changes have been detected in the last year: these NGOs have realised that their strength resides in their capacity to integrate local urban networks. When they do, they add demands, get further training, they are able to

influence in decision-making levels, and to impose a local logic to the civic society, thus contradicting the global logic of international enterprises, without losing their local power. Some of these networks have achieved remarkable success, becoming important social agents in the process of urban planning, through their participation in the City Government areas where the Buenos Aires 2000 Strategic Plan is being debated. These NGOs are admitting the advantages of ICTs use as valuable tools for their everyday work and the dissemination of their goals and achievements, but as it is mentioned above, they have still serious financial and training difficulties to implement an efficient use of community informatics.

On the contrary, the largest NGOs are not rooted on physical places (Baumann, 1999). Their goals reach wider, more general areas, and are focused on environmental or ethical issues. Their names do not refer to any geographical area, but to social principles: Citizens Power, Greenpeace, Conscience, etc. Larger NGOs participate in wider national or international networks. This is a significant comparative advantage, since they have access to financial resources and strategic alliances, which strengthen their actions, and provide them information and training. Since their target population refers to the whole country, or to many other countries, the use of ICTs is fundamental to participate in these networks, mainly through e-mails, chats and web pages. Their space is the globalised world.

The ways in which community organisations conceive, use and manage their relationships with time is also a significant variable when evaluating their relationships with ICT. A member of a neighbours' organisation says: "Our organisation works with socio-biological time rhythms. People come to work here, but there is always somebody who gets married, has a child, gets divorced, loses his or her job, has exams at the University... There are times in which no one comes, and we have to wait until our members have solved their personal problems to reassume community work"

The relationship NGOs establish with time is correspondent with the relationship they establish with space. Large NGOs have a number of specialised, paid permanent staff, trained in ICT uses, who use time in flexible ways, and are in constant contact with other organisations in real time, disseminating and receiving information around the world, and around the clock. ICTs allow them to participate in global or national campaigns, and to take actions in real time. They can plan the most effective strategies, since their networked actions affect power where it is: the space of flows. On the contrary, small NGOs are strongly rooted in local spaces and times, away from the space of flows. Their relative isolation, as well as their reduced budgets, keeps them far away from the space of flows. They seldom have access to funding possibilities and to acquire computers, as well as skills in ICT use. Hence, they do not have a rapid answering capacity towards the advances the space of flows over the local spaces they try to preserve. Their time use is more biological and social than the a-temporal time managed by the enterprises.

These difficulties and limitations are related to their self-perception. An NGO volunteer sadly stated: “We are the falling middle class”. Those who actually fight to preserve urban green areas and neighbourhood’s life quality from the unyielding development enterprises are those who do not want to give up the benefits of social welfare, those who believe in social redistribution of the national product. The deterioration of public spaces in Buenos Aires is a consequence of the privatisation of life quality in the space of flows. As we stated in a previous work (Finkelievich, Vidal, and Karol, 1992), those who live in the space of flows –ironically, limited to restricted urban areas, the wealthier neighbourhoods- have more urban services, cared-for green areas, recreation facilities, safety, because they have an income that allows them to afford these commodities. On the contrary, those who live in local space fear the State abandon the increasing absence of public physical and social spaces. For these last social sectors ICTs, particularly Internet, may be specially effective, in order to strengthen the links between community organisations and the whole society, gather together NGOs that work on compatible issues, and thus exert the necessary pressure on the State when necessary.

Bridging the informational gap

When participating in discussions and debates about the Informational Society it is frequent to hear theoretical thoughts about the “black holes” in global cities, “dualisation of the informational society” or “Third digital worlds”. These concepts refer to the large masses of population excluded from the benefits of the globalised worlds, lacking goods and services to consume or sell (not even their devaluated labour force), and socially irrelevant for the system. The borders that separate these social groups from those who do benefit from the informational society area drawn by their participation in such a society, their management of informatics tools and above all, by their participation the processes of creation and dissemination of knowledge, information and technological production. The city of Buenos Aires is a typical example of these concepts. This is why it has become fundamental the generation, by national and local State, of active policies to disseminate ICTs use, to promote an active, massive and free access to them for those who cannot afford them, and to train the population in the use of ICTs having into account their social uses. We suggest a series of items to be considerate when designing public policies:

- The inclusion of training in new technologies from the earliest stages in education, in order that children may be able to internalise the use of ICTs as tools for information and participation.
- The creation and dissemination of public, free electronic networks. This is feasible through the implementation of a structure of PCs connected to Internet. This terminals could be accesses at CGPs, schools, public libraries, public phone services, etc, or encouraging the creation of Freeness, Civic Networks or Public Access Networks.
- State strategies to provide or help providing computer equipments and Internet connections to

NGOs, through “soft” loans from State Banks, agreements between the State, electronic firms, and communication enterprises, subsidies, etc.

- Training and funding of technical teams for permanent training and research, with the goal to train and assist NGOs and community organisations, orienting them towards the different uses of ICTs and adapting informatics tools to the particular needs of each social sector.

ICTs by themselves do not generate an increase in citizen’s participation, nor encourage the surpassing of social or economic barriers. ICTs are not intrinsically democratic. They are (only?) tools to communicate, establish links and relationships, and support the huge amount of information in which the dominant economic system is based. Increasing the use of information technologies does not imply the disappearance of social or the emergence of more democratic societies: these ideals depend from the policies adopted by governments and the civil society. But access to information technologies is a *sine qua non* condition, an indispensable step for any social project that searches to promote those values.

The understanding of the external environment, including technological and socio-cultural changes, is also an increasingly significant factor in the work of civil servants in local governments, particularly for those concerned with the conception and development of public policies and strategies, and for those who are in permanent contact with citizens. In order to help local government’s officials and urban researchers to implement Community Informatics in urban services, it would be necessary to consider the following steps:

- To work jointly with local government’s officials, representative of Community organisations, and representatives from other governmental levels on the definition of priority goals, regarding the use of ICTs for local government, as well as for community uses.
- To inscribe strategies and policies regarding the use of ICTs in urban management in the frame of integrated policies. These policies concern both the restructuration and improvement of local public administration and the rethinking of science and technology policies in order to adapt them to local needs. This would include the permanent training of the City Government staff in ICTs uses, as well as the implementation of direct means of communication between civil servants and citizens, through face to face meetings, web pages, virtual forums, etc, in which citizens participation could break the concept of local government institutions as closed, self-contained environments.
- To implement new norms that contemplate the civil servants obligation to answer to all electronic mail they may receive from the citizens, to participate in public virtual forums and to publicise in the City’s networks the available information about the City’s budgets, civil servants résumés, urban development projects, etc.

Buenos Aires has still a long way to go before its complete incorporation to the Information Society.

The creation and consolidation of a virtual space for public participation, democracy reinforcing, and the strengthening of solidarity community networks requires constant efforts from both the local government and the civil society. We are still far from the generation of a critical mass of ICTs users and community organisation members who could impulse a synergetic movement for the constitution of electronic citizen's networks. NGOs are key agents in this process, and the trends detected in our research suggest that they are heading towards this direction. However, progress in this area needs the generation and extension of a double process. On one hand, it implies the local Government's efforts to change its institutional culture, disseminate and reinforce its own electronic networks and collaborate in the generation of electronic community networks. On the other, it requires the community organisation efforts to create and disseminate their own networks, and claim free access to information. Only when these two movements will converge in the web, Argentine communities will be able to plan a better civil society and a fuller democracy.

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