

Título	Community Informatics in Argentina: Act II		
Tipo	Ponencia	<i>Evento</i>	SHAPING THE NETWORK SOCIETY The Future of the Public Sphere in Cyberspace A Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility Symposium, Seattle, US. http://www.scn.org/cpsr/diac-00
Fecha	Mayo 20 - Mayo 23, 2000	<i>Autor</i>	Susana Finkelievich y Alejandra Jara
Temática	Informática comunitaria		
descriptores	Informática comunitaria		
Origen	Asociación Links, http://www.links.org.ar . Para utilizar el contenido de este documento consulte condiciones en el sitio web.		

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May 20 - May 23, 2000
University of Washington HUB
Seattle, Washington, USA

Community Informatics in Argentina: Act II

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>From silence to Top Web Ring

The informational revolution has generated deep changes in the management schemes of economic units, as well as in every level of governmental administration. In Argentina, local governments have begun to use informatics to optimize their work and built better links with citizens only in the second half of the Nineties. This was

Community Informatics Act I, described in a previous work¹. But the curtain has opened on ACT II, in a crowded theatre: the number of Argentina Internet users has risen to a million, and the new government strives to include the country in the Information Society. The telecommunications revolution has generated new forms of social relations and organization, as well as innovative action ways for civil society organizations.

By late 1999, the Top WebRing en Internet, the ranking of websites oriented to different regions in the world, was headed by an Argentine initiative: 100 webmasters had put together their efforts and built the Circuit of Argentine Cities (<http://www.argenguide.com.ar>) which uses the Web to disseminate community news, promote local micro-enterprises, publicize touristic attractions, and offer a discussion space for communities' members. The members of a women's movement use a discussion list (araca@ccc.uba.ar) to seek support for a national campaign oriented to exert pressure on the newly-elected National government to elect correctly the civil servants who will work in the areas related to public policies for women. The Umbrella Club's website connected and helped unemployed individuals who wished to put together capital, technology or organizational expertise to create micro-enterprises. A non-profit organization oriented to community help to low-income inhabitants (<http://www.redsolidaria.org.ar>) has received and administrated nearly 100.000 help demands, and uses its website and telephone communications as links with its beneficiaries. The neighbors of various Buenos Aires neighborhoods crate an electronic network to fight urban violence. These experiences, current in developed countries, but miraculously innovative in Latin America, are only a few of the current cases in which organized citizens use ICT to achieve their own community goals.

The use of computer-mediated communication by community organizations has not been completely explored in Argentina. Will COs be capable to built their own information / strategic articulation networks? Will ECN allow an evolutive jump in social interaction forms, as well as in the organizations' use of technological, human and financial resources? Will they facilitate the emergence of a social dialogue, capable of socialize and share experiences and know-how, in a process of strengthening civil society?

This paper describes the results of an empirical exploratory research, developed mainly through electronic surveys. It does not develop theoretical concepts: our intention is to provide the elements for the construction of a theory on social uses of the Internet. Our target were civic society organizations (CSO) in Argentina, which are present in the Internet. We developed a

¹ Susana Finquelievich: "Community Informatics: The Slow Argentinean Way", Conference on Community Informatics, Ballarat, Australia, September 1999.

semi-structured questionnaire, send through e-mail and accessible in Internet. After some tests, the massive survey was finally implemented in August 1999. In a sample of 378 cases, we obtained favorable answers from 23,8 % (90 cases). The results were analyzed using the SPSS statistical package². The data obtained facilitate the identification of tendencies on the effects generated by ICTs use on social organizations. We hope that our “kitchen” will contribute the ingredients to the collective construction of a theory on electronic community networks.

The spreading of Internet

Internet began its commercial dissemination in Argentina in 1995. By July 1999 the number of Argentine Internet users had raised to 900.000, and by March 2000 to 1.086.000, according to Prince&Cook Consultants. Experts foresee 4 million users by year 2003. The competitiveness between Internet service providers (ISP) implement commercial strategies, which offer cuts in Internet access costs (Radar, Ciudad Digital, and Advance), free Internet access, and Internet connection included in the computers selling costs (Compaq, IBM).

The panorama of community organizations, which use ITC for their work, is changing fast. A survey made by our research team on NGO's use of ITC in Buenos Aires in 1998 had shown a barren landscape: only a few of the largest NGOs were using ICT (Baumann, 1999). However, this situation changed drastically a few months later. Our 1999 survey detected 49 organizations that used currently ICTs and were connected to Internet. Most of them participated in virtual forums and were establishing links with other community organizations within the country.

Connected and unconnected in networks space

According to the National Center of Community Organizations (CENOC), in Argentina there are nearly 40.000 community organizations³ (Filmus, 1998). Even if the Third Sector shows a high degree of heterogeneity concerning the organizations' goals and characteristics, it is possible to detect two kind of organizations: Base organizations (BO), and Support Organizations (SO).

BOs focus their actions on the benefit of their own members –main target of these organizations activities-, and/or their own community, even if other community

² We were gratefully helped by Sociologist Maria de los Angeles Sola Alvarez, who participated in the construction of the sample, the survey, and generously contributed with her ample knowledge on the Argentine associative sector.

members, or other communities, can eventually benefit from them. Their scope is basically local, and they were created, as organizations, in response to their members' needs to solve specific problems that gather them together. Their organizational management capacity is generally low, and they frequently lack graduate professionals among their staff. They can be defined as organizations that emerge *from* the community, and that orient their activities towards some type of "services to community groups", or to "improving the community's life quality".

SOs show an important degree of heterogeneity in their characteristics and goals. However, they share some common traits. The main beneficiaries of their actions are not their own members, but an external target. Many SOs are known as *Public Welfare Organizations*, focused on providing social services, complementing or replacing State's actions. Others are *technical support organizations*, known also as Non-Governmental Organizations, or intermediate organizations. Their work is focused on the provision of technical support to base organizations in the development of community projects. Other type of SO are organizations created by enterprises, generally foundations, which give financial support to projects or community groups that a given enterprise decides to help. The third type of SO are the groups that work on research and studies with the purpose to contribute to the general social development. Their actions scope goes beyond the local sphere, and they generally have a high management capacity, which allows them to develop effective strategies of fund raising. They define themselves as organizations that are created *for* the community (CENOC, 1997).

Most SO have fully incorporated the use of ICT in their activities. Our research shows the general tendencies: for each SO that use currently ICT, only one BO uses them. These results are partly related to SO characteristics: better fund raising strategies, disponibility of financial resources, high educational degree in their staff members, and a better management capacity. graduate

SOs are generally involved in wide geographical area projects. Most of their programs (44%) have national scope; a high number of SOs (22%) have not only national, but also international activities. The main advantages provided by ICTs to these organizations are effective and fast communications, a considerable decrease in transportation and communication

³ CENOC define como *Organizaciones de la Comunidad* a todas aquellas organizaciones de la sociedad civil -formalizadas o no- que, sin perseguir fines lucrativos, trabajan en el ámbito de lo privado desarrollando actividades de bien público.

expenses, and most of all, the possibility to coordinate team activities without minding geographical distances. ICT incorporation by SOs has originated the simplification of work, and the enhancement of the organizations' capacities, dramatically increasing their productivity levels.

The unbalance found within different organizations with regards their use of ICT is dramatically increased when analyzing the territorial localization of community organizations. More than half (54 %) of the organizations have their physical quarters in the city of Buenos Aires. 72% of them are concentrated in the central region of Argentina – the provinces of Córdoba, Buenos Aires, and Santa Fe-, the richest, and most urbanized region in the country. Partly, this unbalance is explained by the fact that many Internet providers' services do not cover the whole of the country. ISP presence in all the cities in the provinces is a relatively recent fact⁴. The important access costs reduction offered by ISPs, as well as the 0610 access line (which implies halved prices for Internet telephonic connections- do not reach most of the medium and small cities in the provinces.

These data draw a map of organizations that are *connected or unconnected* to the information flows. Local organizations linked through information technology to global networks are in much better conditions than the others that do not use ICT to reinforce and widen the scope of their actions, to be known in their own community, to become valid respondents to local governments, to conform partnerships with regional, national and international organizations, to have a better access to financial sources, and to acquire a new empowerment.

Community organizations, ICT and gender perspective.

One of the variables to consider, when analyzing the Third Sector organizations' ICT uses and appropriations, is the gender composition of the organizations' staff. A recent CENOC survey showed that in 2912 community organizations, 92 % of the staff is volunteers. When analyzing their gender distribution, we found that 73% of them are women, and 27%, male. The volunteer's work (mostly feminine) that keeps community organizations working is characterized by a high degree of rotation, and part-time dedication. The thousands of women who participate in community organizations in Argentina work mostly on practical, mechanical tasks. This becomes particularly significant when confronted to the profile of the average Internet user in the country. According to the information provided by the National Communications Secretariat in

⁴ Bassi, Roxana 1998 "Informe de Internet en Argentina" El informe puede ser obtenido enviando un e-mail en blanco a reporte@arda.com.ar

the Second National Internet Survey (<http://www.secom.gov.ar>), there is a dramatic difference of Internet use among men and women: men are 86%, and women 14% of Argentina internet surfers.

If most community organizations depend mainly on women's volunteer work, these women should be appropriately trained in the use of informatics tools. Unequal gender training in the use of ICT, and unbalanced access to Internet are considerable obstacles for any community project searching to increase electronic participation means. It becomes urgent to conceive a countrywide technological literacy program to overcome these differences.

Technology and services infrastructure

Our universe of *connected organizations* has mostly two or more telephone lines, which facilitate Internet access. Most of them have at least two computers (Pentium MMX -166, 200, 233- Mhz onwards) equipped with reasonably fast modems. But only a minority among them works on an informatics network. The number of computers per organizations in relation to the number of staff members (a media of 24 individuals per organization, counting paid staff and volunteers) is strikingly insufficient, and it generates a bottleneck in the access to the informatics equipment. A high number of organizations just borrow the computers that belong to some of their members.

Most organizations use part of their funds to pay for full access to Internet. They explain this decision by mentioning communications rapidity, the enlargement of communication possibilities and access to information, and the decrease of communication and transportation costs. Some community organization member's state:

- ✓ *Network communication is flexible, cheap, and easily manageable.*
- ✓ *We use Internet because of the communication advantages. It saves us time and money; it gives us the possibility to participate in networks, in discussion forums, and to download updated information.*
- ✓ *We decided to use Internet due to our need to keep our national and international contacts. We want to provide our members and beneficiaries with this communication means, to disseminate our work, and to reinforce the links with other Third Sector organizations.*
- ✓ *How else could one get communicated nowadays?*

Community organizations that are trained in ITC use have started using Internet in 1997, and they are quite expert cybernauts. They use it mainly for emails, and network surfing, but they seldom participate en discussion forums.

An electronic hand towards communities

If institutional communication, as defined by the McBride Report (<http://www.rree.gob.pe/rree/peru-ecu/libro/mcbride/if-index.htm>) is "the system of data, ideas, and knowledge exchange established on one hand among public and private, national and international institutions, and on the other hand, their real and virtual public", enhanced nowadays by digital communications, the Argentine Third Sector use of community informatics agrees with this concept. Among the surveyed institutions we found that the processes and tasks related to information search, dissemination of the organizations' activities, and internal information flows have changed strikingly. However, we didn't find any cases that used Internet for fund raising, nor for any financial activity.

E-mail lists and web sites are used more frequently and intensively than radio, TV and street posters, as a way to promote and disseminate activities, and to communicate with the community. Community organizations have found that using ICT they can produce their own news programs. Most of them have their own web site, and a high number publish electronic newsletters. Even if the public they can reach through these means is limited to the minority of Internet users (around 1 million in April 2000) the limited access most NGOs have to traditional media make electronic communications an attractive, accessible dissemination means to reach a better visibility in the community. Most organizations state that their number of members and beneficiaries has increased through the use of Internet.

In relation with the circulation of information, and institutional communication, either at intra and inter organizational levels, many organizations use e-mail much less than the phone or face-to-face meetings, even if e-mail could be much more useful to coordinate some activities, e.g. volunteers work. Most organizations do not possess an infrastructure to facilitate their members the access to a single information environment: there are no intranets to facilitate access to survey activities, to scan plans, nor to share information in a virtual environment. Generally, the hierarchically high staff members are the ones that have priority access to Internet-equipped computers. This centralization of electronic means could reinforce the organizations centralized structure and bureaucratization, related to a vertical internal structure (Castells, 1998). Obviously, this negative effect is not a product of informatization, but of the deep-rooted organizational culture.

However, CMC multiplies contacts among organizations and organization members, and favors the articulation among Third Sector organizations. CENOC's 1997 Report on network participation, meaning the disposition that allows to increase the organizations capacity and

abilities to negotiate, exchange experiences, and rebuild a social networks that generates the inclusion of the excluded social sectors, reveals that 37% of the organizations participate in this kind of networks. In August 1999, according to the information we have gathered among organizations that use currently ICT, 92% of them exchanges experiences and information with other organizations to produce positive synergies and put together scarce financial resources, to discuss the priorities of a social agenda, to reach common decisions faster, to develop mechanisms of local governments involvement in the resolution of community problems, and to increase urban inhabitants participation in the improvement of their life quality.

The map of the articulations that community organizations establish with other organizations or individuals shows that most links are established with persons (generally professionals that can provide useful advice), with other Third Sector organizations, and lastly, with governmental institutions. Some organizations have started to contact virtual communities search for information and support. The use of ICT by Third Sector organizations may accelerate a process of networks construction. It will depend on shared values, the slow building of a participation culture, the abilities to develop positive synergies and generate networks, the reinforcement of horizontal communication flows, and the capacity to achieve consensus within the communities. Technological links do not ensure by themselves an effective communication, nor do they create communities, but they do facilitate contacts among community organizations, as well as the necessary knowledge to reinforce the organizations integration and to encourage new spaces for social networking.

In Latin American countries, it is necessary to protect and encourage the development of the *social capital*: social organization (such as networks), norms, confidence, to facilitate social coordination and cooperation. Electronic networks have proved to make feasible the reinforcement of local cultures, supported on horizontal communication schemes, and far from the traditional leadership schemes, associated with the “caudillo-patrón” figure (Bustelo, 1999). They can also accelerate the learning process on how to knit social networks in community organizations, as well as generate and reinforce the links among different institutions, and facilitate participation processes.

Social networks + ICT = TSI

The context in which these organizations evolve is changing at a dizzying speed. The new National Government, in function since December 1999, is trying to fill the informatic gap that separates Argentina from more developed countries. In April 2000 the *Program Educ-ar* was launched. It aims at training in the use of ICT the whole school population in the country (11

million children). On April 17, the Vice President announced the launching of the *Knowledge and Society Program*, aimed at bringing together scientists and common citizens, with a view to turn Argentina into a “knowledge society”. The Program includes intensive training campaigns to disseminate Ict among the population. Just some days later, on April 23, the President announced a country-wide plan to provide free Internet to a million of medium and low-income families. The plan includes soft loans to buy computers, free connections to Internet, training, and lower phone rates for Internet connections.

These measures will undoubtedly have effects on the Third Sector capability to use informatic tools. On one hand, many low-income organizations will be finally able to acquire the informatics equipment they desperately need; on the other hand, the number of citizens able to be joined by electronic means will triple, according to the Government’s expectatives. If community oirganizations succeed in building strong social networks, the use of ICT will add up to conform the true Information Society Technologies: the combination of social organization and technological tools.

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