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# Conclusion

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## Creating synergy between research on the social impact of ICTs and political action for equitable development

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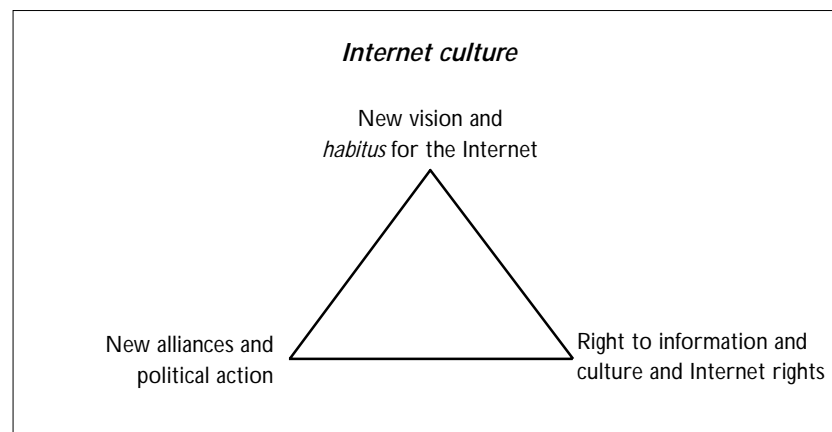
The Internet is a tool and a language, and as such it constitutes a new system and form of producing, distributing and circulating knowledge and information. Studying its social impact in diverse settings of Latin American and Caribbean culture and society is useful to the extent that it can provide guidance for designing and implementing public policies in support of equitable development in the various aspects of the region's social life, including programmes and initiatives for promoting information and communication technologies (ICTs).

As we have seen, using this tool and its associated language cannot by itself bring about the changes needed to improve living conditions. On the contrary, the Internet is part of a broader social and political context in which, for the most part, it tends to reproduce and exacerbate inequality and exclusion. For the time being, studies suggest that the Internet is leading to a greater concentration of material and cultural (symbolic) wealth, something that we examined in detail in the introductory study, where we described how a utilitarian approach to the use of ICTs has merely reproduced the dominant order, based on social exclusion and on racial, ethnic, gender or generational inequality.

Nevertheless, it remains strategically important for vulnerable or excluded social groups to appropriate this instrument together with its symbolic system, inasmuch as it can induce and empower citizen participation and channel public demands for political and social equity to local or regional governments. In this respect, ICTs are a vitally important tool for groups and organizations of civil society seeking to promote social policies in the fields of human rights, public health and education, by opening debate on the rights of the public to communicate and participate politically.

In this respect, research into the social impact of the Internet in schools, in local governments and in law involves rethinking political institutions on the part of researchers and civil society organizations (CSOs) and the public in general. It leads us to think about principles and rights that find no practical application in Latin America and the Caribbean and that, at least for now, are merely gathering dust on the pages of constitutions and legislation: political participation, freedom of expression, and the right to communication and access to knowledge (education).

As a final conclusion of the research project sponsored by FLACSO-Ecuador and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada), and other initiatives in Latin America such as the MISTICA virtual community and Fundación Acceso (both supported by IDRC), we may say that the building of an Internet culture that will guarantee access, appropriation and meaningful use of ICTs will depend on the pursuit and convergence of three processes and lines of action: (1) building a new vision and practice (*habitus*) for the Internet; (2) establishing new strategic alliances between institutions and individuals in civil society, the private sector and the government sector (local, regional or national) with a view to achieving social development of ICTs (both through collective access and through the social use or appropriation of this tool); and (3) action and advocacy by CSOs and the public to secure the right to communication and culture and Internet rights, both in daily life and in the texts of national and international legal instruments.



We offer below some thoughts on each of these three processes, which are essential for building an equitable Internet culture for Latin America and Caribbean.

#### A new vision and habitus for the Internet

Studies on the Internet's social impact in Latin America have highlighted the need to link cultural concepts and practices and citizen participation as the key to designing development projects that use the Internet. In other words, the current problem with ICTs goes beyond the issue of connectivity (physical access) and implies the use and appropriation of a new language and a new tool by groups of citizens and CSOs.

In this respect, studies and research covering school culture (in Bogota, south-central Chile, and the communities of Zapala and Tanti in Argentina)

and local governments (introduction of ICTs in Buenos Aires, Montevideo and the Chilean municipalities of El Bosque, Puente Alto, Los Andes and Rancagua) point to the need to approach Internet projects with a vision and practice that goes beyond the prevailing and purely utilitarian viewpoint in initiatives for incorporating ICTs into schools and public life.

For the moment, most of the initiatives examined are divorced from local culture and have been implemented and adapted to suit conventional power structures: this situation reflects the gulf that separates school life from real life, and prevailing education philosophies from community needs. These studies have revealed the logic underlying school systems and the dynamics of local governments, which tends to perpetuate local power and management structures that do not involve any real citizen participation and that impede the emergence of an Internet culture based on the right to communication and culture.

A new vision and *habitus* of the Internet must be based primarily on the development of new approaches to civic education.<sup>1</sup> These new approaches require a grassroots-led approach within the school system and local organizations (*barrio*, community, etc.).

Social use of the Internet should be based on this educational nexus where the three dimensions – local, regional and global – intersect. From this perspective, new teaching approaches offer ways of learning, perceiving and acting through new forms of communicating and exchanging knowledge, involving strategic use of the Internet. Such an educational reform must also be included as part of the agendas for projects at various social levels and scales, ranging from educational projects in schools and proposals for electronic government to experiments in building virtual communities.<sup>2</sup>

### The right to information and culture and Internet rights

Undertaking projects to promote social use of the Internet requires formal recognition, in constitutions, national legislation and international legal instruments, of the right to information and culture and Internet rights; and at the national and local government levels, these must be reflected in a horizontal policy cross-cutting all other social policies.

This recognition will only be possible if CSOs and citizens' movements dedicated to developing public policies (health, human rights, political participation, education, etc.) expand their political agenda to include consolidation of these rights, which must be regarded as prerequisites in this globalized world for exercising the rights of citizenship that form part of the national and international legal framework, as well as the rights of free expression and political assembly that are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Internet rights must consider both physical access to ICTs and their social appropriation and meaningful use (which allow them to be incorporated into school culture, the community and local government), consistent with the

circumstances of each country, region and locality. These rights should serve as the basis for building a political culture based on citizen participation, involving in particular those social groups that have traditionally been excluded on racial, ethnic, gender or generational grounds.

The legal models applied to the Internet issue in Latin America and the Caribbean should not be mere copies of foreign legislation: they must respond primarily to local and national needs and should seek to harmonize the free flow of information and knowledge with the rights to privacy and intimacy and “fair use” of intellectual property. If these countries are to successfully join the globalized information world, there must be harmony between these two currents: the one that promotes free access to knowledge and information, and the other that protects individual rights and intellectual property.<sup>3</sup>

Securing these new collective rights will only be possible through the strengthening of citizens’ movements and CSOs and the forging of alliances between them and the private sector and government in each locality, region and country. Building these alliances will depend on the specific political and economic scenario and on the negotiating skills and initiatives of these groups. There is no one model for this kind of alliance.

### New alliances and political action

Development of a new vision and *habitus* for the Internet and the inclusion of Internet rights in national and international legal instruments, as part of the right to communication and culture of peoples and citizens, will only be possible with the initiative and collaboration of CSOs, citizens’ movements and organizations devoted to research into the social development of ICTs. These groups, besides including ICT development on their internal agendas, will have to promote alliances, still in short supply, with private sector entities (including but not limited to the major telecommunications companies) and with local, regional and national government bodies.<sup>4</sup>

These accords must reflect a new political culture (vision and *habitus*) in terms of the social commitment that the private and government sectors must assume for promoting the social development of Internet rights. Securing such a commitment will depend on the negotiating capacity that CSOs and citizens’ movements can mobilize in order to enlist the support of those sectors and link it to the needs of different local cultures.

Fostering this process will also depend on strengthening CSOs and citizens’ movements and their capacity to exert influence in local and national contexts. The shaping of alliances, solutions and formulas for social development of the Internet will depend on the particular scenario in each country and region.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there are no fixed formulas or models of Internet development: the approach must depend on the context in which it is to be applied.

On the other hand, we must also take account of historic global tendencies and those that affect Latin America and the Caribbean. Especially pertinent in this respect is the work that Scott Robinson has conducted (see “Background” in his paper) on the regional historic context of public policies for ICTs, in which he highlights the convergence of several important phenomena: the weakness of the state’s regulatory role over public policies, the concentration of wealth (material and cultural) in the elites, the widening of the digital divide (characterized by the growth of a market for Internet services targeted at urban elites and ignoring underprivileged sectors), the leading role of large international consortia and enterprises (especially in the telecommunications field), and mass migrations.

This context provides a regional scenario in which CSOs and citizens’ movements in Latin America and the Caribbean will need to forge innovative alliances in the pursuit of imaginative proposals (such as the community telecentre network proposed by Scott Robinson) that are adapted to local and national realities.

## Notes

1. We use this term *civic education* in the sense given to it by Scott Robinson, as a learning process and methodology aimed at fostering participatory processes for linking electronic government initiatives and the incorporation of ICTs into schools more closely to local cultural needs.
2. The experiment with the MISTICA virtual community, described in this book by Daniel Pimienta and Luis Barnola, offers a good example.
3. The research coordinated by Carlos Gregorio on the Internet’s social impact on the rights to privacy and intimacy as well as the paper by Agustín Grijalva on copyright and the Internet address squarely the issue of this legal and cultural balance.
4. The need for such alliances is detailed in the conclusions from the research coordinated by Susana Finquelievich and in the papers by Juliana Martínez and Scott Robinson.
5. Juliana Martínez distinguishes between political contexts or scenarios where the state has the predominant say in Internet policies and others where private enterprises play the leading role.



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