

# CYBERCAFÉS AND NATIONAL ELITES: CONSTRAINTS ON COMMUNITY NETWORKING IN LATIN AMERICA\*

Scott ROBINSON

*“What characterizes a Community Networking/Community Informatics (CN/CI) approach to public computing is a commitment to universality of technology-enabled opportunity including for the disadvantaged; a recognition that the “lived physical community” is at the very center of individual and family well-being-economic, political, and cultural; a belief that this lived community can be enhanced through the judicious use of ICTs; a sophisticated user-focused understanding of Information technology; and applied social leadership, entrepreneurship and creativity”.*

Michael Gurstein

## ABSTRACT

*What follows is an exercise in inductive thinking whereby some simple facts, a few strategic omissions in Mexico’s Internet public policies, and experience with telecenters allow me to profile a larger scenario challenging the current design and prospects for Latin American community networking and digital inclusion projects. Community networking refers to locally anchored and driven information and communication services. The argument is straightforward: a survey of cybercafés and their clients in Mexico in relation to a new publicly funded connectivity program, scarce, useful online content, and qualitative data from this horizon elsewhere in the region, suggest Latin American social and political elites share no significant commitment to digital inclusion policies in their respective national spaces. At the same time, traditional cultural parameters and economic conditions discriminate against extensive public community networking. The emergence of networking among indigenous organizations and amidst migrants’ kin groups are notable exceptions. The overall pattern has dramatic implications, discussed here, for IT public policy and community networking initiatives, their proponents and sponsors in the region, and their opponents as well, now and in the immediate future.*

## A REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The regional horizon of digital services being rolled out, beyond the urban, national capitals and major cities, throughout Latin America today reveals a number of interesting issues worthy of discussion. For example, the region is a mosaic of national connectivity programs with very distinct cost structures for digital services, and only four legislated universal access funds tapping private IT company profits (Brazil, Chile, Peru and Colombia). Additionally, limitations on adopting new technologies, and lots of hemming and hawing among regulatory agencies, politicians and the vested carriers (fiber and satellite), as well as hardware and software companies operating in every country combine to restrain policy development and implementation. While there has been a limited, but concerted attempt to create pilot telecenters in many places, usually funded by foreign foundations or development agencies, only a few Brazilian states, Chile, Colombia and Venezuela as a whole have implemented scaleable official programs with sizeable resources. These telecenter pilots must be distinguished, to be sure, from their commercial cybercafé cousins, to be found everywhere today. A telecenter is a cybercafé that also offers training in the digital tools and information usage, content development (web pages), is locally anchored, and actively recruits links to community activities, institutions and needs, public and private. While many telecenters aspire to this optimal combination of focus and priorities, most cannot mobilize local initiatives that scale and compete with the simple, fee

for service cybercafés. These projects often end up limiting their initial service offerings while looking more like their cousins as time passes. A failed telecenter initiative can easily become just another cybercafé in town, and many have.

Any discussion of telecenters and cybercafés in Latin America today must necessarily engage with larger issues regarding the role of national elites in determining public policy, the lack of efficacy of the current neoliberal development model, decapitalized rural economies and extensive outmigration, electronic media discourse and influence, political parties, non governmental organizations, post-Zapatista rebellion (1994) native organizations, emergent social movements and public policies to achieve what has come to be generically labeled as “digital inclusion”. There is a need to analyze the process whereby these groups and their legitimizing ideas and rhetoric, historical heirs to privilege and power, feed the contemporary process of negotiating power alignments in what are, still, very traditional, hierarchical societies. The observable, yet surprisingly rapid rate of cybercafé expansion and presence (without government subsidies nor marked regulatory support), throughout the region, has modified the prescribed medicine for the current affliction known to some as The Digital Divide. Others, myself included, judge the growing polarization amongst rich and poor as another manifestation of an older concept, known simply in outmoded language as the neocolonial class struggle. This is, of course, a social process, rooted in regional and national history, and has profound implications on its own. The upshot of this complex flow of actors, conceptual paradigms, rules and interests, old and new, plus digital tools and social demands generates a rich *bricolage* with several dimensions in the region. These include the current model of Internet expansion, expensive digital inclusion programs, complacent elites, recent mass media adoption of the web and email for audience interaction, growing privatization of quality university educations, national diasporas, an increasing number of native groups’ offices online, an enormous population of cyber semi literates weaned on the basic skills at their local cyber shop without the will nor the incentives to seek information more useful for their daily wherewithal, together with public educational systems languishing in bureaucratic wrangling, mediocre results and the growing hegemony of decision makers weaned in private schools. This essay is a broad brush sketch of these multicolored thematic tiles that form a backdrop mosaic for the local scenarios of community networking in the region, today and probably tomorrow.

## POLICY CONSTRAINTS

While Mexico is the second largest economy in the region, behind Brazil, and its political economy is entwined with the United States and Canada as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), there is to date no universal access fund sponsoring Internet connectivity throughout the land (to be found among its major trading partners). The telecommunications regulatory authority, COFETEL, remains subservient to the executive branch of the federal government, and the influence of the “dominant carriers” therein is readily apparent. It was only in mid-2002 that long distance charges were eliminated from calls within the same dialing area code. As a consequence, since about 1999 cybercafés began sprouting at a growing rate. Prior to this date Internet access for people in many small towns and villages was very expensive; in effect this *laissez faire* policy discriminated against widespread cost effective access to the network of networks. Those independent ISPs who competed with the dominant carrier (98% of the local telephony market), Telmex (Teléfonos de México), jostled with the dragon on unequal terms, obliged to use their lines and digital exchanges. Evidence suggests

there appears to have been a Telmex policy of deliberately disconnecting open lines every ten minutes, forcing the ISPs and their customers to place another call, billed accordingly and often long distance, with the corresponding inconvenience factor.<sup>(2)</sup> Many small ISPs went under. The government's public policy seems to have been to not have any, allowing the dominant players (competition in long distance and commercial networking services began in 1996) and the "market" to determine the rate of expansion of Internet access beyond urban centers. At the same time, the universal access fund, stipulated in the current legislation (1996), was never created nor funded by the COFETEL, no doubt influenced by the reluctant major players whose profits would have been taxed as per the rules elsewhere in the region. Nevertheless, demand for Internet access increased dramatically, assisted by significant media hype and advertising campaigns plus the pervasive insistence upon email use among radio and television personalities and during talk shows. Secondary school teachers began demanding homework to be digitally printed, using local computer rentals and increasingly, Internet resources (although the teachers remained non users). In a hopscotch fashion, cybercafés (usually without the coffee) began to appear in small towns, even villages, a room with a few computers for rent, rustic places where one can use the Internet for a modest fee per hour, print some homework, perhaps scan a photograph or two, chat with friends. These are small, mom and pop businesses, often opened next door to or in the back of an ongoing family establishment and operated by young kin who studied computing somewhere, at a commercial training institute with a six month program in a nearby market town, or perhaps even a few years at a public university or technology school.

The national universe of cybercafés, however, was ignored completely when the Fox regime designed its eMEXICO program in 2001, and finally began to field projects in late 2002. This strategic omission was the latest in this string of non policies, and quite frankly, was the proverbial last straw, provoking me to conduct a survey of 259 of these establishments in four Mexican states together with a profile of their young digital consumers as well. The overall objective of this exercise was to understand this burgeoning universe of connectivity in previously unsuspecting places and to try to come to grips with the reasons for the evident string of omissions in public policies, in Mexico and elsewhere in the region. What follows are some reflections on these omissions, analysis of the cybercafé profile and user surveys, and their implications.

## INSTITUTIONAL STAGNATION

To my mind, there is a fundamental contradiction between the economies of scale the connectivity technology today permits, and the reluctance of national elites, who largely control content and media regulation in their respective national spaces. Likewise, there is a noteworthy policy stalemate regarding what is to be done given the current stagnation in economic growth in the South, the Dot.com slump, reduced international cooperation budgets, emerging low cost connectivity options (WiFi), and bellicose gestures in the North. This policy stalemate is to be found among the international financial institutions (IFIs), the UN agencies (remember the Dot Force?) including the World Bank (whose expensive Development Gateway has failed to catalyze widespread support), major foundation donors, the Dot.com players with their philanthropic facades, even within the fledgling NGO-based telecenter movement. The IFIs are trapped inside their 1944 BrettonWoods *modus operandi* whereby, in the name of national sovereignty, they are unwilling or technically unable to oblige their shareholder members to

adopt policies on a regional basis, with the corresponding economies of scale and impact. Consequently, the growing levels of poverty has made the earlier Internet for All declarations seem ingenuous and self serving.

While the Internet originated with federal government subsidies in the United States (and European Community governments and commissions have been generous in their support of infrastructure rollout), the model for Internet expansion in Latin America is strictly based on market demand. While the Latin elites were at first slow or reluctant to embrace the virtues of digital services and products, the pace has quickened since the late 90's. Today, national and now regional elites, a mixture of intermarried families inheriting colonial privileges and a *nouveau bourgeoisie*, the product of intelligence mixed with savvy deals with foreign companies, their products and marketing networks, are increasingly articulated by regional common market agreements and the corresponding joint ventures these permit and impose. By now they have incorporated the full range of digital tools and services permitted by their respective commercial, financial, media and political domains. The Internet is here to stay, but I will argue, as a new, additional instrument of political control by a privileged few. Beyond this small minority not many can afford basic much less broadband services that tap the potential of the technology and its increasingly rich content. It almost goes without saying that the poor, semiliterate and disenfranchised, the lower middle class on down to the base of the socio-economic pyramid, remain without the means nor perhaps the incentives to get online and find scarce appropriate content for their personal, family and community welfare.

## ZERO GROWTH AND DUAL ECONOMIES

The current stagnation in the Latin American economies is now a pattern of de facto zero growth more than two years in the making. This translates into national and regional scenarios of massive out-migration; more and more people, women included, from rural areas whose products are worth less in the market, often due to dumping of subsidized agricultural products in the North, are heading out, with or more probably without papers to the United States and Europe, via Spain and Italy. Ecuador is the prime example. Food security is becoming an issue as population growth outpaces subsistence staples and environmental degradation is a threat in many places. Public institutions, under international pressure to privatize key public services, are taxed beyond limit to deliver education and health care for all citizens, including the migrants' families whose remittances increasingly resolve balance of payments problems and feed those remaining at home, in the villages and urban slums. The return or consolidation of a neocolonial dual economy is evident: a minority control financial services and oligopolistic markets while the vast majority live in poverty and families plan their emigration strategies in the widespread exodus currently underway. One market system sells products to and for the rich, including Internet services, and another, the one economists call the informal sector, provides a subsistence living for the vast majority who buy from the oligopolies and sell whatever they can in the way of products and services to each other. Remittances are now financing the survival of a good share of the nonbanking informal sector, urban and rural, in many countries. To date, the Internet is *not* an instrument of communication and commerce for those immersed in this predigital system of exchanges.

Other events, rather processes, have also altered the panorama in regard to the new digital tools. The tools themselves have matured while the former national telecommunications monopolies, recently privatized, have skillfully maneuvered the regulatory frameworks, most

often to their advantage, and laid fiber optic cables to serve their until now protected markets of corporate and government customers. Residential customers pay much more for dialup services in the South than their consumer cousins in the North. Mobile wireless telephony now outnumbers fixed line customers almost everywhere, but the providers tend to be the same companies; their challenge now is how to get their customers to pay for more services, including short messages. Some competitors now offer broadband connections via satellite, an expensive novelty in the region, therefore assuring access for all those with the ability to pay, at best 3% of the national populations. Connectivity has become the handmaiden of elite-controlled commerce, banking, media and private education (observe the Tec de Monterrey's multinational campus system), and as a consequence the Internet has been absorbed as another instrument of social and political control. The promotion of eGovernment may be a shrewd substitute for eGovernance. Perhaps to offset this predictable (in hindsight) state of affairs, the international community has been preaching digital inclusion for at least the past three years, since the Y2K crisis came and went. But the rhetoric has focused on the Digital Divide, between those online (and hence metaphorically inserted in the information and knowledge networks that connectivity purportedly instigates) and those whose lives remain untouched by digital access to information. Little has been said in the official documents, generated at numerous UN agency sponsored conferences, about the link between this Divide and the neoliberal developmental model that currently exacerbates poverty while permitting the growing enrichment of a powerful few. This situation is elegantly argued by many attendees at the successive World Social Fora in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The class polarization among rich and poor is not addressed as a root cause of the so called Digital Divide among the established institutional players who reject statist solutions; rather, the official Newspeak insinuates that computers and access are necessary antecedents for learning and poverty reduction, ignoring the structural constraints the digital inclusion projects are designed to conceal or mitigate.

The regional mass media have embraced the Internet as a marketing tool, often for their own investments in parallel Internet services, and to create an illusion of potential audience interaction with newscasters, cultural commentary programs, occasionally, government officials, and more importantly, pop music stars and their fan clubs. The advertising for brands and shops in the upscale shopping malls that serve the elites and the minority middle class wannabees in every Latin American city has become over time a mixture of traditional print media and web-based promotions keyed to television merchandising. Also, the amount of traffic on the MTV en Español web server is an indicator of the recent articulation between programming geared to a youth market with the ability to pay and their probable Internet access. Overall, this dual economy moves today with limited, if not zero growth, in a context of regional monopolies, thousands of microenterprises and millions living from remittances sent home by migrant kin.

## **BEYOND POLITICAL PARTIES**

Another process of growing significance in the region is the rapid spread of citizen-based Non Governmental Organizations over the past decade or more. These NGOs are now engaged in a low intensity conflict with the traditional political parties in turn beholden to old guard elites who seldom represent any political interests other than their own and who consider electoral politics to be their rightful monopoly point of action and *raison d'être*. Similarly, many Latin American political parties are languishing in the age of politics where media is

open to the highest bidder. A subtle crisis in governance is underway. Charismatic colonels can now win elections with the aid of incongruous coalitions of political interests united around platforms that fail to make connectivity and relevant content for the people a priority, although the campaign rhetoric may occasionally offer succulent promises of such goals. On many issues and in many countries, the NGOs have eclipsed the political parties on a range of contemporary issues including human rights, environmental concerns, and nowadays, digital inclusion. At the same time, their increasing sophistication has propelled them into public policy debates where their grasp of the issues and technical details often surpasses that of the political parties and their leadership. At the fringe, native organizations struggle to learn the use of ICT tools while speeding coalition building and weaving ever larger networks of sympathizers. But the old-line parties who still control the electoral and parliamentary machinery, including those that used to be considered on the Left, distrust the NGOs and native groups seeking “autonomy”, effectively blocking digital public policy innovations they cannot control and do not understand. This impasse among the parties and NGOs is in effect a crisis in the system of political representation, and has stagnated substantive public policy debates in many countries.

A networked society is anathema to traditional patterns of patronage and political controls, and this plays out in many ways. The blatant ignorance of many members of relevant parliamentary telecomm commissions points to an ostrich in the sand approach; there are disturbing signs of Luddite attitudes among some progressives, distrustful perhaps of transparency and more fluid information flows. Meanwhile, the NGOs remain outside the orthodox political playing field, often fragmented, haggling about strategies while competing for foreign donor funding and performing on the few international venues the UN and other agencies patronizingly offer from time to time. On balance, the mainline instruments of political representation have refrained from embracing digital inclusion as a platform priority. The question of connectivity and public access to the digital tools is, to my mind, a key issue where opinions and political commitments vary dramatically, and where the ignorance of the issues re digital inclusion has led to a remarkable degree of negligence on the part of the traditional political parties whose platforms seldom, if ever, make bold gestures in this direction or reflect an understanding of the stakes at risk. These old guard actors resist becoming digital stakeholders, perhaps fearful that the process will compromise their power and sovereignty.

The observed rush to connectivity for the ruling minority has been accompanied by shrewd manipulations of the regulatory framework. Access to the regulatory commissioners in each national market is dominated by the same group of hardware, software and carrier megaplayers with excess capacity we all know: IBM, Hewlett Packard, Sun, Dell, Microsoft, Oracle, Global Crossing, Cable and Wireless, Hughes, Gilat, PanAmSat, New Skies and others. In effect, their subsidiaries and lawyers in each national space are writing the de facto rules for entering markets with new technology that may or may not threaten legacy players with their first-to-market products. This phenomenon may be labeled community networking at the top. The resulting rather closed system of rules and regulations is not conducive to technological innovation, to say the least, and could be put to the test very soon given the perfection and consumer roll out of the Wireless Fidelity (WiFi) technology using the 802.11b technical specs operating on the unlicensed (not everywhere) 2.4GHz spectrum. Some companies may invest more resources in fighting rule changes that affect their market share than they spend on the development or offerings of better and lower cost products and services in the Latin American markets.

One forthcoming battle could see the more recent broadband carriers, including some satellite firms, all with unsold overcapacity on their fiber and transponders, teaming with local WiFi entrepreneurs anxious to reduce the market share and hence, power of the legacy players. But the challenge remains the limited purchasing power (and IT skills) of the urban lower middle class who could entertain the options in the name of greater educational opportunities for their children who are not finding the anticipated level of access at school nor appropriate content with incentives at the local cybercafés. To date, rural constituencies appear to be beyond the focus of policy makers and local organizations have priorities other than building community IT networks and learning online.

### **ELITE COMPLACENCY**

In this period of zero growth and dual economies, elite complacency with their recently acquired connectivity in their upscale market is a worrisome new factor to be considered. History suggests the neocolonial elites in Latin America are a voracious lot, intent at all costs on retaining their hereditary control of banking, commerce, media and politics, in short, the reigns of power in their respective territories. Whereas there may be evident factionalism today where portions of these elites are now partners or business associates with transnational interests, especially in the digital telecommunications services market, they all enjoy the privileges of membership in the dominant class of their national space. These privileges include a private educational system that guarantees elite reproduction, and the care and feeding of the Internet is one aspect of this pedagogical challenge. There is no question these national elites have incorporated the technology into their system of private schools and universities and it is the first generation of graduates from these institutions that has largely fueled the Internet rollout in all the countries of the region, and staff the regulatory commissions and the few extant digital inclusion programs as well. But it should be clearly stated this has become a self-serving procedure, and whereas these groups have integrated the digital tools into their domains and instruments of control, we must question their commitment to offering the tools and information access to the vast majority of their impoverished national populations. It is my contention this commitment is non-existent or very limited, especially in times of zero growth, and as a consequence, this is one of the factors contributing to the Internet stagnation scenario found throughout the region today and bodes ill for the immediate future.

### **LEGACY PLAYERS**

One aspect of this stagnation can be confusing: the magical thinking (or is it thinking magic?) behind the now standard formulas for offering Internet services to the public in the geographically and culturally diverse Latin American states. The current pattern of national connectivity programs suggests they are in fact designed to protect and expand legacy markets for legacy players. Witness the design of the eMEXICO project wherein the bidding procedures are crafted so only the major players with large scale systems and proprietary software may participate; and this may not be an anomaly. There does not appear to exist, in the case of Mexico, a commitment on the part of the political parties nor the identifiable elites presently in power, to sacrifice a degree of revenues from the national budget in order to subsidize a national connectivity program focusing on content and the incentives to use the tools and available information. Rather, the current design calls for State subsidies of market expansions and protection for the established players. This is not my brand of universal access; on the

contrary, it is another way these firms can externalize costs while securing their oligopolistic markets for the near future. This is risk management at the people's expense, with the ruse that state subsidized mass connectivity will lead to some murky degree of integration into the Information Society. I don't think this will occur soon.

While the ramping up of national connectivity programs moves forward in many countries under the modality of market protection, the *New Washington Consensus* pervades the philanthropic and telecommunications policy atmosphere and networks: to wit, the United States will aggressively defend its perceived national interests, markets and access to strategic resources, no matter what, wherever it chooses. This unfortunate post 9/11 policy shift coincides with the telecommunications oversupply glut, in Latin America and elsewhere, the growing realization that market driven development strategies are *not working* to reduce poverty in the region, and, I fear, a perceptible move to giving more priority to policies and instruments of social control using the fear of terrorism guise as device for mobilizing support and legitimacy for this strategic realignment. Granting more access to information may be less a priority under this shifting strategic framework than before 9/11, wherein the antiterrorism rhetoric justifies shackling innovation lest the radicals get their hands on powerful new tools, a probable ex post facto fret. At the same time a dynamic class polarization is underway, whereby the poor are increasing in number and the rich are fewer and even richer. As noted, national elites in Latin America, now in firm control of their recently privatized State apparatus, are a good example of this pattern, and their interests are to be seen in the design of national connectivity programs such as eMEXICO, Compartel (Colombia) and those being proposed (Ecuador). These projects are not about digital inclusion, as purported, rather they are designed, as noted, to expand and protect markets controlled by incumbent hardware, software and telecommunication players. Similarly, the highly touted e-government programs may be a synonym for social control wherein the citizen is conceived as a mere consumer of information while facilitating minor administrative chores. At this juncture, it appears policies are focused on helping business and solving practical problems of political control, downplaying issues of public domain information, reinforcing the digital commons and providing useful, culturally appropriate content for novice digital consumers.

## DIGITAL FOQUISMO

At the same time, many, myself included, are awakening from a lengthy slumber, a “digital foquismo fantasy”, wherein we believed, analogous to the ingenuous guerrilla movements’ strategy of the 1960’s and beyond, that people will rise up, demand and use online information in novel ways, if only we will bring a community telecenter near them! The “foco” was/is the locus of action outsiders may set in motion, and “foquismo” is the frame of mind that believes this will happen. Experience suggests there is no guarantee this will occur as a magical act of will. Many NGOs, with generous international funding, have spent the last three years or more, and considerable personal energy and resources, creating these micro institutions offering connectivity and training in periurban slums and rural places; but when the new cybercafé, or whatever it may be called, opens down the street or across the plaza, the telecenter is no longer financially sustainable. It cannot compete offering training and content creation services that are in fact under priced and that few are able and even willing to pay for. Most often, the value added dimension (mixed with the “information and digital skills will make you free” litany) is insufficient to generate loyal customers and satisfied users in impoverished



places, often living off Diaspora remittances. Today, I wager there are very few community telecenters worthy of rigorous certification under this label. And all this occurs in a political climate where the elites (and the companies they represent) are delighted that others may invest their scarce resources in generating future demand for their products and services. On balance, there are few commitments at the level of national governments to invest in social capital, subsidizing telecenter connectivity, training program costs and culturally appropriate content. For this reason, community telecenters cannot remain open for long once the original funding has been exhausted, and nearby commercial cybercafés offer a lower cost point of access. The issue of telecenter sustainability is linked to this overarching political ambience wherein the State and its managers ignore community initiatives, in fact may even scorn them as illegitimate meddling in their traditionally hegemonic space. At the same time, there is little value or political virtue attached to distributing what should be public information in the public domain. The Information Commons is a concept far afield of shrewd neocolonial elites, including the political parties, intent on maintaining their power and influence in spite of the new digital tools.

### CYBERCAFE SURVEY

The question of the legitimacy and sustainability of community telecenters has been on my agenda for some time. The experience of creating and managing three such facilities in northern Morelos State, in central Mexico, provided ample opportunity to learn some lessons the hard way and face the studied indifference of local officials, political parties, and even government digital connectivity programs. At the same time, the influx of small cybercafés in the small towns and villages served by the Morelos pilot telecenter project, created a challenge to telecenter sustainability, a new situation that merited study and analysis. However, a small sample in three rural towns clearly would be insufficient to generate a pattern of behavior, of the small cyber shops and their young customers, so a larger survey was in order. This opportunity presented itself in the middle of the year 2002, when it became clear, as noted above, the government's eMEXICO initiative was getting underway without any mention whatsoever, much less taking into account, of the growing number of cybercafés, perhaps more than six thousand, nobody knows, spread throughout the land (and now distributed throughout all Latin American countries). A decision was made to attempt to survey the universe of cybercafés in four, small Mexican states: Aguascalientes, Colima, Morelos and Tlaxcala. A subset of another 20 cybercafés was also included from a rural region of the State of Mexico adjacent to Morelos. Hence, two survey questionnaires were developed, one to profile each cybercafé in the sample and another to profile what their customers do in these micro businesses. A total of 259 cybercafés were included in the sample and the series charts, available online exhibit a profile of these small shops.<sup>(3)</sup> The variety of variables compared merit further discussion.

What stands out immediately is the number of these cybercafés in the four, small single-city states surveyed. This is also an indication of the demand for digital services on the part of those who cannot afford the equipment and monthly service charges from home and do not have access at school or at work, indeed the vast majority of Mexicans today, and all of this *before* the government's digital inclusion program. This distribution profile is a reflection of the relative lack of access for most, and at the same time an indication of the tardiness of any universal service public policy initiative in Mexico. Only two state governments have connectivity programs,

Guanajuato and Puebla, and neither cooperate with their universe of cybercafés in state. The only community telecenter project per se is the one operating in northern Morelos for which I am largely responsible.(4) This is an uncanny situation for a nation of 100 million people and, allegedly, the world's twelfth economy. Clearly, the federal government's eMEXICO initiative faces an uphill battle, both against the universe of these small, undercapitalized and hence fragile, mom and pop cyber shops, and against the low accountability bureaucratic culture extant in the public secondary schools and municipal offices where the program is beginning to install equipment with Internet connectivity.

The results from this research project confirm the fact that these digital consumers are young, mostly students, often sent by teachers, using the cybercafés during the school year where some teachers may occasionally appear as well. The fact that 83% of the users are younger than 25 years of age bespeaks a budding culture of consumption in this age group, yet implies as well a growing polarization amongst young cyber-literates and the rest of the population. The fact that few school teachers are cyber shop users today bodes ill for a rapid expansion of users in the school system, as government policy makers plan.

### SOME ALARMING IMPLICATIONS

Training and local content development distinguishes the community telecenters from commercial cybercafés. The survey results support this established pattern as well. Only a third of the total universe offer any training courses, and where training is provided it focuses mainly on tool usage, but not information processing or management per se. The cost of connectivity is not that cheap, given average incomes in rural places, and users are not averaging more than an hour of online time. This is not very much in terms of the immense amount of online resources available. The research offers a very suggestive profile of the true pattern of digital consumption, and no doubt close to the mark for young people of both sexes in most Internet Café users throughout the region. With 43% of online time devoted to chatting and email, we can surmise this is, on balance, playful behavior, having fun while interacting, often with sexual overtones and intent, with others. The interviewers confirmed this in private conversations, after the questionnaires were administered to users in each cybercafé during the survey. As a teacher in a public university, it is distressing that only 26% of users' time, the last priority, is spent with homework. It should also be noted that the nature of this "homework" requires some scrutiny: the value of cut and paste homework papers, printed on lovely color printers, is rather limited, compared to reading texts, finding data and synthesizing this information into a text draft of one's own authorship. This latter option is a rarity in the cybercafés where use of the commercial Spanish language homework site, [www.tareas.com](http://www.tareas.com), is widespread.

This situation of constrained digital tool usage in a context of few incentives for learning, as opposed to play, is worrisome. In fact, this may be the key factor that points to a digital consumption syndrome based on games, play, reinforcement of sports fetishism, and virtual sex that leaves the learning function far behind. If the young consumers are playing and complying with cut and paste homework assignments, can we then assume this *habitus* is here to stay and will be difficult to transform? I fear this is the case, and should be a premise for digital public policy planning in Latin America from here on out. The observed pattern of digital consumption in the cybercafé survey is indeed alarming, although national connectivity plans do not appear to possess an experimental attitude that generates useful research about ongoing digital consumption behavior, nor are programs being designed to incorporate these profiles of

the cyber shops themselves as well as what their users are doing and need. The research reveals data suggesting users, in fragile businesses without community buy in or official support, are less interested in learning, and much more motivated to what is playful and entertaining. It appears online behavior may simply be a continuation of media consumption patterns already well established by radio and television, the well prophesized media-induced social control syndrome may have arrived full tilt.

## POSTMODERN BREAKS

The cybercafé survey data suggest what we may call a “postmodern break” at work in traditional places. I would argue this rupture or break in tradition is to be found in the chat and pornography consultation behavior in the commercial cybercafés, where the youthful consumers are largely free to do whatever they want, with some exceptions. The contrast between this pattern of private consumption of online delights and what is permissible at home and in the village public square is indeed dramatic. Cybercafés in traditional cultural spaces are provoking a schizoid syndrome whereby young digital consumers are observing taboo images, enjoying access to realms of sexual and other information prohibited to even discuss at home or in school. With a public education system in perpetual crisis, underfunded by governments beholden to elite interests, reluctant to channel more fiscal resources to public schools, sex education programs hampered by Catholic Church pressures, and “modernizing” initiatives managed by technocrats from private schools (including eMexico), culturally distant from their “subjects”, it may well be that cybercafés in remittance economies are de facto training grounds for tomorrow’s migrants. An absence of knowledge seeking is remarkable throughout the survey of cybercafé users and, to my imagination, forebodes a deepening of the crisis in public education where the infrastructure is rustic, teachers are underpaid and therefore not well motivated to innovate, rules of discipline are slack and no one is expelled under normal circumstances (at least not in Mexico). Why should one continue in school if there are no jobs to be found?

Meanwhile, the Diaspora economies of the South are living and eating thanks to remittances from kin in the North. Whereas multilaterals sponsor research about the expansion of the remittance economies, there are few official efforts to lower today’s usurious transfer costs, although increased competition has halved the rates in two years. The use of telecenters and cybercafés for families communicating with migrant kin is limited, not for lack of trying, but simply because migrants inside the United States, for example, do not, paradoxically, have ready access to connectivity, much less training to use the tools, nor share information seeking values. There are notable exceptions, but free Internet service is only available in public libraries that are not friendly places for illegal *latino* migrants inside USA. Where are the action proposals making available digital tools that can lead to the reduction of transaction costs allowing local, micro finance organizations to manage savings and credit in novel modes for those whose sacrifices lead to foreign exchange equilibria for the national elites? Absent is the political will to exercise available instruments of power that would allow the migrant communities to invest in digital instruments to lower their communication and remittance sending costs and hence have more resources available at home. Their own hometown associations could pay for digital inclusion projects, if the national policy environments were friendly.

## **SKEWED COMMUNITY NETWORKING**

As a consequence of the above factors and argument, we are now at a turning point re the use of digital tools for social development in the context of the evolving political economy of IT in the dual Latin American societies. It is fair to assert that community networking in fact never arrived in the region, because it was unwelcome or without the policy and cultural incentives to seed and thrive beyond the elites. The networking to be found reflects the polarized social hierarchy of rich and poor. This kind of networking cannot be catalyzed with the young users in cybercafés who are largely poor and disenfranchised and more focused on online play plus personal and family survival issues rather than commitments to their community. My experience tells me that local political leadership, at the community level, ignores these questions, and may even fear the technology. While tradition rules at home, it may limit initiatives in the cybercafés in rural spaces as well. Thus while the elites have taken care of themselves, a stilted form of community networking to be sure, the poor may be destined to limited access and few incentives to use the available tools and information. This does not mean, however, community networking is absent among the indigenous and rural communities immersed in traditional forms of exchange throughout the region, nowadays heavily dependent upon remittances for their wherewithal and pragmatically open to innovation reduces their communication and money transfer costs.

The current design of publicly funded digital inclusion programs in the region suggest the issue is not so much about money any more, rather about the political will to design cost effective projects that offer services with culturally appropriate content and impetus among those groups already networking the old fashioned way. These options are now available with the legacy digital tools and those emerging from the ever present and dynamic innovation pipeline (e.g., Wireless Fidelity linked to the Internet by satellite connections). To my mind these programs are not attuned to the needs of presently unconnected potential users. And it is self-evident the current digital culture created by and supported by the consumption patterns of the Latin elite will continue to grow albeit slowly, while vain attempts are being made to expand these offerings to a mass market that does not exist. Cybercafé users will no doubt continue their playful online behavior as user-focused learning and community networking stimulæ may be scarce while a justifiable survival ethic prevails. The recent history of bankrupt dot.coms in Latin America and elsewhere, plus the ongoing consolidation of today's most profitable enterprises, together with media convergence, all point to a merger fest that reinforces elite control of the dual economy at hand. With limited Internet penetration in most countries and government digital inclusion programs skewed to favor business not consumers, with the bulk of users employing the cybercafés in a catch as catch can mode, and those few, struggling pilot telecenters that remain, the consumption of digital resources is dominated by the elites and those that aspire to emulate their lifestyle and cultural consumption. To my mind, this is a betrayal of the potential for greater democracy accompanying community networking and more open access to online public information, processes that are wanting in the region. Indeed, this is not an optimistic portrait. Perhaps two key groups, the diaspora and indigenous networks who often overlap, will provide demand, some capital and the will to innovate, adding digital tools to their extant transnational community circuits. This will require new forms of thinking, technical expertise, partnerships and negotiating skills. While presently poorly equipped, these two constituencies are ripe for new forms of community networking.

\* El texto publicado por REDES.COM es una versión del capítulo publicado en Day, Peter and Doug Schuler, eds., *COMMUNITY NETWORKING ANTHOLOGY*, Routledge, London, 2003.

#### **Notas**

1- Michael Gurstein, *Communities: the Hidden Dimensions of ICTs*. Posted to the Community Informatics list, February 23, 2003.

2- As reported personally by an independent ISP client in Cuernavaca, Morelos, June 2002, who timed the disconnect intervals at precisely ten minutes.

3- [ftp://ftp.chasquinet.org/pub/docs/politicas/ciber\\_mexico.doc](ftp://ftp.chasquinet.org/pub/docs/politicas/ciber_mexico.doc)

4- See project summary: [www.idrc.ca](http://www.idrc.ca)

