

Latin American Internet users, like those in the developed world, “may be merely surfing the labyrinth of the Library of Babel dreamt by Borges: a library in which the contents matter far less than the apparent infinity of its holdings.”

## The Hall of Mirrors: The Internet in Latin America

RICARDO GÓMEZ

Half a century ago, Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges published two short stories, “The Library of Babel” and “The Aleph.” The first describes an infinite library containing every book imaginable. The second speaks of a place in which one can see all things that exist in all places, from all possible angles and perspectives, in that single place and time. Although we cannot quite imagine what Borges would have thought of the Internet had he lived to experience it, these two images are increasingly being used in the region to describe the hall of mirrors that is the Internet today in Latin America.

Globally Wired:

Politics in Cyberspace

*Second in a Series*

The Internet, together with the array of information and communication technologies that make it possible, has penetrated Latin America and the Caribbean to an unprecedented degree in recent years. Surpassing even the most optimistic predictions, its use in the region grew by over 100 percent between 1997 and 1999. Like nearly everywhere else in the world, the Internet was almost unheard of in Latin America only a decade ago, but by the end of 1999 an estimated 5.3 million Latin Americans used it. This, however, represents about only 1.5 percent of Latin America’s population (in the United States, an estimated 37 percent of the population uses the

Internet). Viewed in global terms, Latin Americans composed just 3.2 percent of the 165 million worldwide users of the Internet in 1999.<sup>1</sup>

Recent studies describe an incipient growth of web sites in Spanish, but this expansion is negligible compared with the explosion of information available in English. The majority of Internet users worldwide speak English as a native language, but the proportion of non-native English speakers has been steadily growing, and by the end of 2000 there will be more non-native than native English speakers using the Internet. Nonetheless, English continues to be the dominant language on the Internet, with between 70 and 80 percent of all content in English, and only 1.5 percent in Spanish.

Other studies prefer to measure the astounding growth of the Internet in the world and in Latin America by counting, for each country in the region, the number of web hosts, Internet nodes, registered domain names, web pages, or results generated by web search engines. According to these measures, Internet growth has been equally compelling in the last few years. But the rush to assess the Internet in numerical terms ignores an important nonnumerical question: What are the social implications of the Internet’s explosive growth in Latin America?

### BEHIND THE MIRRORS

The Internet is a hall of mirrors. In its multiple images, its uses reflect the inequalities and injustices of the societies into which it is inserted. Thus, information technologies are not positive or negative in themselves; but neither are they neutral. They take the form and direction of the societies in which they are introduced, and at the same time they help further shape the relations and modes of interaction in these societies. Latin America is made

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<sup>1</sup>Estimates of Internet usage vary greatly because of measurement difficulties. Some argue that not more than 5 million people used the Internet in Latin America in 1999; others claim 34 million will use it in 2000.

up of a multiplicity of cultures and identities, all inscribed in societies in which access to resources, knowledge, and opportunities is inequitably distributed. Moreover, despite the institutions of formal democracy in most Latin American countries, these governments are frequently corrupt and elitist and are not subject to public accountability for their acts and omissions.

Urbanization, fast-paced privatization, and the economic reforms of the past decades have further impoverished a vast majority of Latin Americans, while an even smaller minority continues to own and control most resources, information, and wealth. A fraction of this small minority constitutes the largest community of Internet users in Latin America—a community that continues to be primarily urban, male, white, middle-aged, upper-class, and somewhat English proficient. Although some poor rural women use the Internet, they are marginal in the larger picture of the Internet in Latin America.

Mexico and Brazil have the greatest number of Internet users in the region, but they are also the most populous. Both countries have recently adopted new telecommunications policies that focus on deregulation and privatization of state monopolies. Few countries have adopted clear policies to promote uses of information and communication technologies as public goods or that guarantee all citizens' right to communication. And where such legislation does exist, resources are not available to implement it. As Venezuelan researcher Raisa Uribarri Minardi has pointed out, Venezuela's new constitution may "guarantee the public service of informatics networks" and stipulate the creation of a Council for Information Technologies under the Ministry of Science and Technology, but no budget has been established for its operation.

Cuba may be a special case in Internet access and use in Latin America. With Haiti, Cuba has the poorest telecommunications infrastructure in Latin America. But in Haiti, as in the rest of Latin America, Internet access is mainly an economic privilege, whereas access to the Internet in Cuba is a political luxury. In her study about the Internet in Cuba, Katherine Reilly concludes that, "short of radical changes, it will be a long time before Cubans have access to universal, nondiscriminatory, affordable and secure access to the Internet. The US embargo continues to limit access to technology, and the

Cuban government continues to censor and manipulate information."<sup>2</sup> Cuba is caught between harnessing the opportunities of the Internet for economic improvement and giving up centralized control over the circulation of information.

### USING THE INTERNET THE "LATIN AMERICAN WAY"?

Although no singular spirit or culture can be considered explicitly Latin American in the vast ocean of habits, practices, and uses in cyberspace, clearly millions of users are in the region, and millions of web pages with information about Latin America are available. There are, of course, expressions of the political, cultural, and social life of the countries in the region. Soon after its creation in 1991, Peru's scientific network Red Científica Peruana realized the Internet provided not only a "window to the world" but also a "window into Peru"; the network began to build a large web site with information about the country's culture and people that was aimed at foreigners using the Internet. This seems unimpressive today, when thousands of sites display the cultural heritage, diversity, and traditions of Peru, and of every other country in the region. Even the Cuban tourism office has a web site to attract foreign visitors (although it is hosted in Canada, since the connectivity infrastructure is too small and too expensive to support many visits to any single Cuban web site hosted in the island). But in 1994, the window into Peru was a unique achievement.

Beyond local content, is there anything "Latin American" in the way the Internet is used? Are there designs, layouts, or links indigenous to Latin America? Are there particular Latin American navigation or surfing patterns? Is there anything special in the kinds of users, their age, gender, interests, or motivations that sets them apart from the community of users worldwide? In sum, is there any indication that the style of Internet usage is different in Latin America than in the rest of the world?

Aside from geographic location and language, the most salient difference between the Internet in Latin America and North America or Europe is the cost of the equipment and Internet connections. These costs tend to be significantly higher in Latin America (and in Asia and Africa) than in the more developed regions of the world. Cost alone constitutes a major barrier to more widespread use of the Internet in these regions. The cost structure also means those who do use the Internet do so less frequently, and for shorter periods of time.

Subtler Latin American differences include proportionately younger users and faster adopters,

<sup>2</sup>Katherine Reilly, "Digital Revolution versus Cuban Revolution: The Internet in Cuba" (unpublished paper, Carleton University, December 1999).

and the use of more collective or public access points (as opposed to individual or private) than in North America or Europe. It has also been noticed that Latin American users tend to be less active participants in mailing lists. But beyond these initial perceptions, it is difficult to show evidence or measure any particular "Latin American way" of using the Internet.

### WASTED TIME

Indeed, similarities rather than differences among Latin American and other Internet users may be the case. Connecting to the Internet makes users a part of a global community, one that is rapidly bringing back to life the idea of the global village that media guru Marshall McLuhan popularized nearly 40 years ago in *Understanding Media*. But the global village created by the Internet may be more a world-class elite, with its members sharing common interests (possibly research, but more likely business, trivia, hobbies, or fetishes) rather than a common national or local identity or interest.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than gaining a better global awareness and easy access to information, research findings, or expert opinion, Latin American elites appear to be joining the average North American users in their Internet patterns. And what are those patterns? Recent studies monitoring patterns of Internet use in the United States by tracking the paths followed from one link to another and the duration of the visit to each site by web users are revealing. In one study, the Nielsen Media Research group found 18.9 million users had entered the Internet from their homes in the United States on Thursday, September 2, 1999. These users were connected for an average of 31 minutes and visited 3 web sites. From the ocean of available information, the one site at which web surfers spent

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<sup>3</sup> Information on nearly any topic imaginable can be found on the Internet (recent studies calculate more than 800 million pages on the Internet, although many may be duplicates). Nonetheless, an estimated 83 percent of current web sites are of a commercial nature, while the remaining 17 percent is allocated as follows: science and education 6 percent; health 3 percent; personal web sites 2.5 percent; pornography 1.5 percent (although most pornography is also commercial); and others 4 percent. (See <http://www.wwwmetrics.com>.)

<sup>4</sup>See <http://www.nielsenratings.com>.

<sup>5</sup>Giovanni Sartori, *Homo Videns* (Rome: Laterza, 1997).

the longest time (67 minutes) was eBay.com—a site that hosts on-line auctions and is one of the recent success stories of on-line commerce.<sup>4</sup>

If the average North American's Internet user's longest attention span is for on-line auctions, it would support the views of Italian philosopher Giovanni Sartori, who has analyzed the banalization of knowledge and culture through television and claims it is only made worse in cyberspace. According to Sartori, despite its great potential to broaden access to knowledge and to further understanding, the Internet is becoming the place where small clusters of people get together to discuss shared hobbies or interests. In short, for some users, cyberspace is mainly a terrific way to waste time.<sup>5</sup>

### E-COMMERCE IN LATIN AMERICA

The Internet can also be seen as a terrific way to make money. In North America electronic commerce is already beginning to have a significant effect on business-to-business transactions, with a similar impact expected in retail or business-to-consumer relations and transactions. Latin America is also seeing an eruption of e-commerce, with profound social implications. Although retail sales or on-line auctions over the Internet are still rare in Latin America, business-to-business transactions, especially among large businesses, are starting to turn to electronic communication support in an increasingly globalized economy.

Small and medium-size Latin American enterprises have been generally slower at tapping electronic resources for business, most likely because of cultural reasons and the required investment and expertise. While some successful early adopters have been able to take advantage of an apparently level playing field for e-business, others are finding ready-made solutions offered by large corporations such as Microsoft. The result is that it is easier to use the Internet to conduct business with large corporations than with other small industries or commerce. For example, using Microsoft's small-business edition of its Office 2000 software makes it easy to access the built-in link to Office Depot anywhere in Latin America. Customizing that software to order office supplies from a local retailer is much more difficult.

Even governments are revamping electronic support for public contracts and procurement, hail-

ing the benefits of reduced costs and increased transparency. Nonetheless, critics at a recent UNESCO conference in Aguascalientes, Mexico found little evidence of less corruption, favoritism, or waste when a government's commercial purchases and procurement transactions have been made electronically. If the political system does not favor transparency, accountability, and efficiency, the technological tools deployed will not, by themselves, bring about any of these qualities to government behaviors.

Finally, those who toil in the informal economy in Latin America, which provides the livelihood of many in the poorest sectors of the population, are completely shut out of the new information economy—except for the opportunity to sell mouse pads, empty CD boxes, and keyboard dust covers on city street corners from Mexico to Argentina.

## CYBEREDUCATION

The Internet is profoundly transforming the way we think about education. Computers and Internet access are being introduced in schools at all levels, and universities are increasingly offering Internet-based courses and full programs of study, changing not only the geographic locations for education but the very relations between students, teachers, and the construction of knowledge.

Distance education itself has a long history in Latin America. Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia has offered teachers in rural areas a distance education program for over 30 years, taking advantage of new technologies as they have appeared, including radio, television, and audio- and videocassettes. In thinking about the potential of the Internet for distance education, the university is confronted with the reality of rural schoolteachers who work in environments without electricity or phone lines, and where notebooks and chalk are scarce commodities. In many cases, radio may continue to be the technology best suited for distance education.

Nonetheless, Internet-based distance education often makes it easier to attend and participate in courses without moving from home, even if home means a community access center (often called a telecenter) or an Internet cafe. For the few who can afford—economically and socially—higher education, distance education may mean taking courses offered from the capital city rather than at the local college, or from a foreign institution rather than from the national university. Privileged students have already found it easier to maintain and

increase their access to education resources thanks to distance education. Local and national higher education institutions may soon find it more difficult to attract the best students, who can instead register for distance education classes at universities in North America and Europe.

What will be the fate of universities and colleges in poorer countries? Most will probably be forced, like small enterprises, to buy (and at best adapt) ready-made solutions from the warehouse giants, be they paper clips, toner cartridges, or curricula and courses for university degrees. A few schools and universities in the South, however, will be able to form partnerships with others in the North to provide joint programs and courses. For example, a leading Latin American player in Internet-based distance education is the Technological Institute of Monterey (TEC) in Mexico. In association with North American and other Latin American universities, TEC now offers a growing variety of degrees and programs electronically. At the UNESCO Aguascalientes conference, one of TEC's senior managers made the outrageous claim that the university's distance learning opportunities were "great for business—even better than drug trafficking!" Putting aside the implications of comparing education with drug trafficking, the vision of cybereducation as a market opportunity renders education one more product on the shelves of the global supermarket. And its quality, value, and relevance will increasingly cater to the needs of the global elite, both online and in the classroom.

## INTERNET GUERRILLAS

The Internet has also found a role in Latin America's armed conflicts. In Colombia, which continues to suffer through one of the longest and bloodiest wars in the region, the country's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), recently put up its "official" web site with news and propaganda. When the government discovered that the web site was being hosted in Mexico, it exerted strong diplomatic pressure to have it closed down.

The clearest example of the symbolic importance of the Internet for political activism can be seen in Chiapas, Mexico. While much of the North American grassroots support for the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua was organized with the help of e-mail and electronic bulletin boards in the United States, the Zapatista revolutionary movement, which led an insurrection in Chiapas in 1995, was the first to tap into the potential of the Internet for interna-

tional support. From the mountains of Southeast Mexico, Subcommandante Marcos leads a guerrilla movement, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (named for Emiliano Zapata, a leader of the Mexican revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century). Marcos and the Zapatistas survive and continue to trouble the Mexican government with their demands for justice and freedom for the country's indigenous communities.

The Zapatistas' endurance in the face of military repression can in part be credited to their imagination and their use of the Internet. Through e-mail networks and a dozen or so unaffiliated web sites, the news of this struggle has become known internationally, capturing the attention of numerous supporters in North America and Europe. Marcos's revolutionary—yet poetic—speeches and communiqués are quickly posted, translated, and disseminated worldwide. The Zapatista guerrillas, through their use of the Internet, may be fighting the first postmodern revolution. But despite its symbolic importance, the Zapatistas' and FARC's use of the Internet constitutes only a small part of a much larger picture of the Internet in Latin America.

## ALTERNATIVES

In a field dominated by commercial interests pursuing a global business agenda, alternative (and marginal) uses of the Internet are also emerging in Latin America. There is little indication, however, that they are different from alternative and marginal uses of the Internet elsewhere. Alternative uses include collective approaches to community access to the Internet and to content development, interest in social development and grassroots empowerment, and strengthening civil society organizations and networking. Nonetheless, the promise of a vibrant global civil society and the panacea of so-called electronic democracy are far from realized.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the Internet may be able to contribute to improved social equity and to democratization and development. Latin America has a long tradition of appropriating technologies for social development and community empowerment. Radio, video, photography, and desktop publishing have all been used by civil society organizations as tools for education and grassroots development. The Internet has joined those technologies as a valuable tool for information exchange, networking, and collective action.

<sup>6</sup>See Ricardo Gómez, "The Nostalgia of Virtual Community," *Information Technology and People*, vol. 11, no. 3.

The Internet would become an even more valuable tool for social development if legislation were passed that supported the right to communication, and that promoted telecommunications as a public service. Few Latin American countries are considering such legislation, and as in the case of Venezuela, even fewer are willing or able to dedicate the resources that would be needed to turn policy into reality.

An important step in influencing the adoption of policies supportive of equitable access is gaining access, getting connected, and going on-line. The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) offered nongovernmental organizations in the region e-mail addresses and bulletin boards as early as 1989. But it was only with the explosion of commercial service providers around 1996 and 1997 that access to the Internet has become possible for a significant number of civil society organizations and activists in the region.

Most capital cities, and some smaller cities and towns in Latin America, are beginning to construct facilities that provide public access to the Internet. In most cases these facilities are commercial Internet cafes in affluent neighborhoods and hotel lobbies, but sometimes access is provided through telecenters in public libraries, schools, government offices, or even health-care or other community centers. Some telecenters provide services that range from basic telephone, fax, e-mail, and word-processing services to full Internet access for web-browsing, chat, and games. Telecenters may also offer web hosting and web site design, and web searches and updates that fill local needs for health, agriculture, or government services information. Some would like to offer more sophisticated services such as telemedicine applications (for example, performing sonograms or X-rays and electronically sending the results to a specialist for revision). Nonetheless, these sophisticated applications are still far from viable in the contexts in which most telecenters operate.

As the telecenter movement gains strength in Latin America, many of the people promoting these centers hope to exchange information and experiences with their counterparts elsewhere in the region and in the world. But while initial evaluations suggest there may be benefits to the community, the potential also exists for detrimental effects on local communities as information and communication technologies are introduced. These can include strengthening local factionalisms and creating new power struggles, further marginalizing women or

illiterates, and demobilizing the community from pursuing other priority activities. Furthermore, many people are starting to ask the simple question: Access for what? In the words of a group of “plugged-in” (networked) youth activists for community organization in Venezuela (Centro de Animación Juvenil), Where does the plug plug in? How does this new technology plug into society?

### LOST IN THE LABYRINTH?

Although the number of Internet users in Latin America is growing, it continues to be a small proportion of the population. Despite the symbolic importance of the Chiapas virtual revolution, and the community telecenters providing public access for local development, the majority of Internet users is an elite that joins world consumers in a global supermarket that allows increased access to scarce commodities such as information, education, goods, and opportunities for advancement. Existing gaps between rich and poor are only increasing—both within Latin American countries and globally, emphasized by an even larger gap between the info rich and info poor.

The Internet may be a global hall of mirrors that allows entry only for a few and that, from the

inside, appears infinite in its multiple reflections. The growing population of users is primarily made up of elites who find in the Internet a way to make and spend money, but mostly a way to kill time. If this is the dominant trend—if Internet use is, like mass media, promoting the lowest common denominator of atomized superficial surfers and hobby fans wasting time together—the actual threat to society may be minimal.

Yet the opportunities for alternative uses and for social development may become more important if well-informed and organized users take advantage of the opportunities for relevant information exchange, networking, and collective action for equity and social responsibility. Conducive legislation, equitable access, and most important, effective, knowledgeable, and critical use of the available tools are the foundations from which the Internet can become a tool for social development in Latin America. Otherwise, reduced to being viewers of each other's reflections and consumers in the global supermarket, we may be merely surfing the labyrinth of the Library of Babel dreamt by Borges: a library in which the contents matter far less than the apparent infinity of its holdings. ■