

## AN ATTEMPT TO SOCIALIZE THE TELELAC EXPERIMENT

### TELECENTER NETWORK FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: SHARING LESSONS LEARNED BY TELECENTERS AND ENHANCING THEIR EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF CIVIL SOCIETY

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#### STARTING DOWN THE ROAD

It is hard enough for me to organize my thoughts about these first six months of the Telelac project. Imagine how tough it would be to do so for all those years during which I have been involved in issues of communication that we once called "popular", but now "alternative". Anyway I keep discovering ideas, as if they needed to have little calling cards and would not show up by themselves.

Maybe this is one of those things that happens to us now with New Information and Communication Technologies, when we adopt them and adapt ourselves to new terms, acronyms and abbreviations, without worrying too much about clarifying concepts and defining ideas or at least establishing the semantic differences that will necessarily exist in the ways we communicate, as long as we are communicating as people -- individuals and not objects.

If we are not taking the time to define our ideas, neither are we much concerned to clarify the processes in which we are involved. By neglecting this exercise, we lose ourselves in a sea of information, since our lives and our plans become mere data that we may occasionally record but that have no impact in changing our lives. Our life itself, and the history of our peoples, becomes an imprecise and ill-defined collage. It is urgent for us, then, to find in ideas and processes not only a rational crutch that will allow us to proceed ("I think, therefore I am", said Descartes) but to review the processes by which we grow as human beings and in our ethical values and by which we develop intellectually and spiritually.

The speed with which we now communicate, thanks to ICT's, would seem to be hostile to attempts to reflect on our human condition, not to mention the local and regional processes in which we are involved.

#### THE TELELAC PROJECT

I began by speaking of the difficulties I encountered in setting down these lines about our experience with the Telelac project, which is still a fledgling of less than one year, born in 1999. What was the day? -- I think it was in July, I'm not sure, since at the time of its birth I was swamped in virtual paperwork. Nevertheless, I shall make an effort to tell you about this experience, in summary form, not so that I may be sprinkled with holy water in "deserved recognition" of having done "extraordinary things", but, on the contrary, to

sketch a profile of what could become a frame that will be filled in, not by an artist, but by a group of people who are launched on the road to new achievements.

Allow me first to reveal a detail: before beginning this experiment (the Telelac project, not this report!), I found myself questioning many of the "facts" they were assumed to be true in the world of cyber communication. Perhaps what most stirred my conscience was a question: what use is all this paraphernalia of cyber communication to the people I bump into everyday on the street, in the schools or in the fields, at the bus stop, the store or the supermarket, in a country like Ecuador, or in any other country on this continent that still bears the scars of poverty and so much poorly distributed wealth, with its people of so many cultures and colors, with its natural diversity besieged by commercial exploitation? Every time I had to board yet another luxurious airplane to make yet another trip to attend yet another meeting of cyber communicators, I found myself asking if I was not in danger of getting sucked into the globalist fiction and cutting myself off from the reality of my local setting.

These and other questions led me one day to lunch the Chasquinet experiment, together with other websites [["loc@s"](#)] that are immersed in the same existential crisis of knowing how to use ICT's as a tool for influencing economic and social policies and as instruments for improving the life of the poor. This is why I decided to give priority to developing telecenters in Ecuador, with the same energy that I had put into other experiments in my life as a communicator trained, not in some academy, but in the tide of everyday life, where I had to swim hard in order not to drown.

It was then that, together with my friends of both sexes, all ages and many disciplines, but all of them, like me, foolish enough to keep on dreaming, I took an "airplane", not a transcontinental flight, but one of those that brings us firmly back to earth in a very specific spot. That is to say, in a concrete space where the people waiting for you are real flesh and bones, people who need clear paths for getting on with their lives in spite of everything, people who do not swallow the idea that new technologies are the eighth marvel of the world, but who need tools just to carry on with their work and their everyday lives, people who don't attend grand symposiums on the digital divide but who need instruments to support them in their efforts and their communication.

Thus began the Chasquinet experiment, and shortly thereafter the Telelac experiment. And here I am today, in this virtual space, and here in Picton, beside Lake Ontario, with you. I don't know whether we shall go on dreaming or wake up and find ourselves staring into the mirror of reality.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TELELAC PROJECT

Let me make a short digression at this point: I shall refer to the Telelac experiment at times as a project and other times as a process, as a synonym for constructing a product that implies not only goals but, above all, changes for its players.

In fact, the Telelac process had something unique: it was discussed by stakeholders of various kinds and origin, first when it was just an idea and before it started to be implemented. And at the same time, as one of those coincidences that life throws up, without knowing that we were on the same track, it was Ricardo who invited me to board the ship and facilitate this process. Telecenter operators located at various points around the continent, tenacious researchers in electronic communications, serious managers of alternative communication projects, all of us met online, during April and May 1999, to try to build something collectively, without any hierarchy, with some preconceived ideas but without any structured work plan. It was certainly a first attempt at synergy, an interesting one but not the best.

In effect, the Telelac project is the ongoing result of a collective effort. Its conceptual framework, self-diagnosis, the definition of needs and priorities, the methodological conception, among other matters, resulted from horizontal and online debate, and it was here that we began to encounter the first difficulties.

### TELELAC: A SYNERGISTIC PROCESS

There is a very simple idea of what Synergy means, one that perhaps we share: "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". In the Telelac project, the most important thing is that the "whole" is a collective creation and is much more than the ordered and systematized sum of its parts. Later we shall return to this simple concept, when we come to review progress with the Telelac project.

In the online meeting to which I referred the first steps of the project took shape, we thought about the way of implementing a program of collective evaluation and learning from particular experience in the development of telecenters. As well, we set as our principal objective the definition of a methodological framework for telecenters and the preparation of a regional program to support them.

Before elaborating the project, we posted a questionnaire online with semi-structured questions relating mainly to the expectations of telecenter operators and researchers. Later we prepared a supplementary questionnaire on the sector's development needs, a questionnaire that was answered by most of the participants in the online discussion. This involved a virtual dynamic that ate up many hours of Internet time and of lost sleep!

We then discovered that there is an enormous variety and wealth of experience with telecenters around our continent, which include at least the following kinds: the basic telecenter, those that are operated independently by their respective owners but are interconnected and coordinated centrally, civic telecenters, cybercafes, multiple-use community telecenters, and others.

### THE PRE-DIAGNOSIS

In this way, there gradually came to light a product that we called the "pre-diagnosis". I will not bore you with statistical tables or projections, and I did not bring with me any

PowerPoint with charts, curves and indicators. The information that we processed during the pre-diagnosis was not from any random sampling, nor even a targeted sampling, but was taken from the reports there were returned online by people who took an interest in the project.

Let us recall some of the results from the pre-diagnosis:

First, what these telecenters had in common was a physical space where the public could have access to information and communication technologies for the personal, economic and social development of their users.

Secondly, the telecenters offer a combination of services ranging from basic telephone service and e-mail to full connectivity with the Internet and the World Wide Web. Some of them offer additional services such as fax, scanner and word processing, retrieval of specialized information for applications such as telemedicine, ecotourism or distance education. They are typical example of multiple uses, i.e. of the way our societies can recycle technology.

Third, the telecenters are part of a project for communication or training for specific social sectors: youth, academic research networks, local development networks, information centers, in some cases farmers, etc.

Fourth, the telecenters grew out of more or less spontaneous experiments and then found it necessary to relate with other, similar experiments in something more organic, more coordinated, as part of a social information and communication strategy, responding essentially to specific needs and community crises.

Fifth, in some cases the telecenters are one link in a chain of communication that had its origin in community radio and that in a sense includes the production of videos, printed newspapers, but above all the oral communication so typical of our peoples. In fact, this has happened in certain indigenous communities in the Andes, generating local news through a community radio station, which is then transmitted over the Internet in the indigenous language and in Spanish. This reinforces intercultural relations and bilingualism, it introduces a form of communication that is less inequitable, it publicizes the ancestral rights of these peoples, it strengthens the system of distance education, and so on.

Let us look at the process of preparing the pre-diagnosis from another angle: during the preparation stage for the Telelac project I can recall two results. On one hand, a collective effort in response to stimuli from coordinating the discussion list, although I recognize that sometimes we had to act with an overdose of energy in that coordination, in order to overcome certain constraints resulting from the imperfect working of "online democracy". On the other hand, the project proved that telecenters are technological adaptations in search of solutions to people's concrete needs. This challenges us to put together a communication movement, based on the dynamic of the telecenters, to reflect the identities and strategic purposes of individuals, groups and peoples.

From these pre-diagnostic elements we drew an initial conclusion, in terms of a common need: there is a demand to improve the management of the telecenters, and this could be met if we build "models" that leave room for adapting to the specific circumstances of the telecenters, for the inventive imagination of the groups involved, for the creativity of the individuals who make them up, in other words, the often-repeated "value added" of the process.

The second conclusion: financing for the telecenters is generally speaking their "umbilical cord" (not yet cut) to external cooperation agencies, which generally donate funds for the acquisition of equipment, but not to cover operating expenses, which are financed through the sale of services (usually at low prices so as to ensure the project's continuity). In any case, we may think that users are being subsidized by the telecenter. But who is subsidizing the telecenter? In some cases, the telecenters have received repayable loans from some government agency, or perhaps a municipal grant. There are a few examples of grants from private entities. But there are also cases where services are provided free of charge to users. In short, the telecenters have not yet adopted the practice of self-financing and self-sustaining operations. This is truly a strategic challenge: what sense is there in building a castle in the sand that is dependent for its existence on external sources of financing?

## INITIAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE TELECENTERS

Following are some of the successes with telecenters, which I group at two levels:

- Improved infrastructure and connectivity, where telecenters have purchased their equipment, upgraded their premises, connected themselves to the net and to an Internet service provider, etc.
- A level of social commitment, of establishing relationships with the community, overcoming some of the material constraints and limitations on access to knowledge. In effect, [some] telecenters are helping to establish local management committees, while others are involved in local environmental issues, etc.
- A mutual learning process in which technical experts have become involved in social issues that they were previously unaware of (because they are so accustomed to navigating in the stratosphere), and in this new space they have discovered people who do not have this kind of knowledge but who instead have tremendous human sensitivity and an enormous social commitment. This is one of the lessons to be learned from the telecenters.
- In some cases, users have learned to become promoters of the telecenter, and this has led to less paternalism and more self-initiative ["autosuggestion"].

BUT NOT ALL IS WELL...

We must admit that only in isolated cases have the telecenters actually responded to the specific needs of the community, such as:

- Supporting women in use of the Internet as a mechanism for action and mobilization (campaigns to stop the cutting of mangrove swamps or campaigns to mobilize and demand respect for community duties and rights).
- Supporting the youth of indigenous communities in meeting their needs and helping to make use of the Internet to this end (example: community ecotourism run by young people).
- Supplying information on new job opportunities for marginalized children, by giving them access to basic education and opportunities to escape from drug addiction and from the informal sector where many of them live.
- Training new professional cohorts in the use of the Internet and computers among marginalized youth.
- Serving as a community meeting place for mutual aid in dealing with daily problems and participating in the process of personal development and strengthening self-esteem, in order to influence social processes and break down the barrier of fear that blocks access to new technologies.
- Helping to detect patterns of conduct and problems afflicting women in the community.
- Serving as a channel for selling products made by the community, and using electronic commerce.

## THE CHANGES UNDERWAY

I must tell you that from March 27 to 30 of this year, 17 people from 12 countries met in Papallacta, Ecuador to refine the Telelac project. Let me mention a few details about this meeting: first, the place: Papallacta is a resort spa with hot springs, tucked away in an idyllic corner of the eastern Andes of Ecuador, only three hours from the city of Quito. The place has a landscape and a climate conducive not only to sound thinking about technical matters but also to a meeting of minds among the people who visit it.

I hope that we can all meet in Papallacta to take up the challenge of seeing ourselves as people in need not only of discussion about technical protocols but about human growth!

The general purpose of the Papallacta meeting was to design strategies and concrete actions for establishing the kind of commitments (and not only financial commitments) that participants would be taking on with respect to the project, and vice versa. We also had some specific objectives:

- To prepare and improve the project operating plan.
- To design the project's internal structure.
- To determine execution times.
- To assign responsibilities for each area of the project.

As I said earlier, at Papallacta we had a wonderfully synergistic experience, and so we were able to achieve the following goals:

- We designed strategies, policies and activities for the project.
- We designed the steps needed to strengthen the telecenters.
- We defined concepts such as the telecenter, the online resource center, the virtual community of telecenters.
- We prepared a schedule for implementing the virtual community of telecenters.
- We designed criteria for research on telecenters and for monitoring and evaluating their work.
- We evaluated the Telelac web site

## PROJECT ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

Let me put to you for consideration the following outputs from Papallacta:

- We redesigned the concept of the telecenter, as a space where people can gain access to ICT's and use them to promote the development of their communities, improve their quality of life, and influence policies governing access to telecommunications. Telecenters are places of public access to the Internet that seek to speed up the process for people with no resources to buy a telephone or computer. Through such access to the Internet we hope to close the enormous technological divide that exists in many poor countries.
- The first component of the project we redefined as "state-of-the-art", and not as "research", as it had initially been designated. By "state-of-the-art", we mean documentation, information, searching, analyzing materials that have to do with developing the telecenters. But it also has to do with understanding experience with telecenters, with the business models needed to support them, with the approach to operating and maintaining telecenters in other parts of the world that could be applied in our countries, with understanding and adapting new technologies at low cost for poor communities and with the influence that different groups can have on telecommunications policy in every country.
- The second component of the project we redefined as a "toolbox and online resource center", instead of "strengthening telecenter management". The purpose of this strategic line is to create a collective space for operational learning in which we can offer tools and services for strengthening the telecenters.
- The third component that we redefined in Papallacta was that of evaluation, a concept that in Papallacta was expanded to become "space for feedback and permanent learning". The objective of this strategic line is to develop, test and socialize a set of methods, techniques and instruments for monitoring and evaluating the work of the telecenters.

- In Papallacta we rethought the hoped-for outputs from the project, including training modules, preferably distance training, for telecenter operators, with an emphasis on management, financial sustainability and methods for handling the virtual community of telecenters. We also considered training people to train the public in uses of the Internet, information production, etc.
- Other products from the synergy that was created in Papallacta included identification of strategic alliances for the Telelac project, with the World Bank, the IDB, Bellanet, Barrionet, Mistica, the Mexican Telecenters Project, IDRC, etc. With respect to strategic alliances, we discussed the need to have clear rules of the game in order to build alliances with the private sector.

One important result of the meeting was preparation of the Manifesto of Papallacta ("the Internet is for everyone") [www.tele-centros.org](http://www.tele-centros.org) and [www.chasquinet.org](http://www.chasquinet.org) which was disseminated widely around the world and has been the subject of a campaign for gathering signatures (to date we have 4100 signatures). Some of the notable people who have signed are here today, including the president of Telecommunications Canada, ICANN and individuals working with regulatory agencies in Latin America and the Caribbean. Echoes of that manifesto can be found in IDRC, RITS, Colnodo, Sangonet, APC, INTERDOC, ITU Philippines, and elsewhere. The manifesto has also been distributed over hundreds of e-mail lists such as Global Knowledge, Asia Politics, APC Forum, Enredo, MISTICA, mujer.prog.al.devmedia, Global Knowledge Leap, etc.

One of the commitments that we made in Papallacta was about the need to influence regulatory policies and to provide access for all. We are continuing to gather signatures and to search for mechanisms to influence access policies that will benefit marginal and impoverished sectors, the greatest percentage of the world's population. In Papallacta we spoke at length about the problem of access and the high cost of the telecommunications needed to access ICT's, which we saw as the major obstacle that most people face in gaining access to these technologies and in influencing policies that would improve their quality of life. Democratizing communications and access to them is the principal mandate of the manifesto and of the virtual community [somos@telecentros.org](mailto:somos@telecentros.org).

## THE SUCCESSES OF THE TELELAC PROJECT

On this point I should stress the formation of a virtual community and the network of Latin American and Caribbean telecenters: "Nosotros somos @ telecentros" and a mailing list linked to the Web for exchanging experiences, lessons learned, accessing resources, teaching materials and above all having a supportive and human network to help us in our local efforts and experiments. A community that supports us and helps us avoid repeating errors, where we can exchange knowledge and experience and strengthen our efforts through cooperation and mutual support.

After less than six months, the telecenters list already has 120 [people] registered, including academics, evaluators, activists, promoters, telecenter coordinators, trainers, among others. And every day we receive notice of new subscriptions.

We have suffered some problems of noise in working with the list, in part because we have not wanted to moderate it as a strategy so that there would be no appropriation by any organization, but rather that it should be considered as our virtual space and our meeting place. Currently there is minimal technical moderation, but it is not moderation of contents. The list has been managing itself based on the needs of people who have access to it. Currently it has become an open forum for exchange and a meeting point for people wanting to work in the telecenters.

The persistent challenge is that in many of the community telecenters people have not developed an Internet culture, and the operators have only a basic or primary education. They are therefore reluctant to write to a list where they don't know the addressees and they prefer personal contact, and in this way they fill up our personal mailboxes to the saturation point.

Developing the state-of-the-art of the telecenters, where the strategy consists in deepening the pre-diagnosis and holding a competition so that the telecenters can share their history and their daily life. For this purpose we have prepared a questionnaire and we hope in the future to be able to compile and disseminate the answers in this space. The purpose of this area is to provide inputs for evaluation monitoring, and a kit for strengthening telecenters, in order to develop materials and workshops that will strengthen them as well as the online resource center on strategic uses of the Internet.

The success of this initiative lies in the fact that it is strengthening the community of telecenters, since many initiatives [projects?] are applying to join the virtual community and [are requesting] clear rules of participation that will protect them within a global community or network. At the present time we have more than 170 telecenters in Cuba, 50 experiments of a regional scope. Some 21 organizations have sent in their histories.

We are also in the midst of compiling and selecting materials that will form part of the resource center.

We hope to have the Web site ready for testing by the end of August, and to have the databases designed.

Evaluation monitoring by building bridges to other initiatives such as OLISTICA, Mistica, the IDRC evaluation framework, Global Knowledge Leap and in this way to coordinate activities and build bridges to overcome the barrier of isolation. The draft evaluation report of Telelac will be ready by the beginning of August.

Rather than measuring results in terms of achievements and goals, we have stressed the benefits of the process itself, which demonstrates the importance of cooperation and teamwork. In our case, when we launched the project we did not even have a team, but in Papallacta we brought together 17 individuals with sound experience and with a desire not to compete but to cooperate. The process is collective and participatory and we are learning to interact as we go along.

## THE CHALLENGES OF TELELAC

When I tried to synthesize the challenges of our project I recalled the day when the Pichincha volcano erupted just outside Quito and filled the sky with a cloud of dust 12 kilometers high. At first it took the shape of a giant windmill that seemed to be falling right on top of us, as it would crush us and spare none of the inhabitants of Ecuador's capital. That day we felt fear and admiration for the beauty of nature, repentance for our sins as lapsed believers, and a great relief when at last the gigantic cloud of volcanic ash began to dissipate.

The challenges facing Telelac are immense. We must coordinate actions with other regional and global initiatives under way to develop and organize telecenters, to coordinate telecommunications policies, to lobby, to sensitize people about gender issues, to systematize the strategic use of the Internet tools and training methods, to design strategies for financing and self-sustainability, to systematize technical and technological aspects (Linux, collaborative working applications, etc.), to organize participatory monitoring and evaluation.

We have more questions than answers, and I share them with you and await your sound ideas: how can we build a cooperative network and finance it after the initial funding runs out? How can we link Telelac to other global processes and build a global telecenter portal so as to benefit from experience? How can we put together a lobby group that will influence policies for access to ICT's and strengthen the processes that we are developing?

We know that social change is only possible if we ourselves can change. But how can we develop a culture of support, collaboration and promotion for the growth of telecenters, starting with the human individual and integrating the family, the workplace, the community, the country, assuming personal and institutional responsibilities so as to bring about integral change?

We are convinced of the need to promote the full development of individuals who work in the telecenters, helping them deal with their challenges and appreciating their success, as well as the importance of influencing social change by looking hard at ourselves, at our way of doing things, at the work we do and at the impact we have.

We must document our stories and build a means for exchanging experiences and generating a culture of support and solidarity. This will help to build up a body of know-how that comes from solving common problems and it will empower communities and [under]-privileged sectors to seek permanent and creative solutions to their local problems.

As Joneji Masuda said 20 years ago:

"My fourth vision is the creation of interdependent synergistic societies. A synergistic society is one that develops when individuals and groups cooperate with complementary efforts to achieve common objectives, determined by society as a whole. The operating principle of this society is synergy, a new principle that will replace the current one of free competition in a capitalistic society".

We therefore need to deepen our thinking about our experience, accept our challenges and develop mechanisms of cooperation and collaboration that will allow us to create synergic processes among all those involved in PANLAC and to have a real impact on development and social change. We need to accept responsibility and generate a process of change based on what we are learning as we go along, with a spirit that is open to cooperation and growth.