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A Bridge between Technology and Social Capital

Corporación Encuentro and its Telecentres

Corporación Encuentro
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Corporación Encuentro (Encounters Corporation) and its Telecentres
A BRIDGE BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Poverty in itself is a breach; but if technology is not brought closer to those who do not have access to it, a new more extensive and wider breach will cut across our society. Today, 4 years after it was created, *Corporación Encuentro* (Encounters Corporation) is bringing ends together efficiently: the most deprived sectors with the Internet, a task which makes it exemplary in Latin America and which is supported by the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA), an organization lodged at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada.

Thursday, October 24, 7:00 p.m. Something unusual was happening at 6733 Grecia, an important avenue in the popular town of Peñalolén. It was odd to see the President of Chile's wife, Luisa Durán's retinue stationed at the doors of the humble yellow house, which for four years has lodged – on its three floors – the first Internet Telecentre created by *Corporación Encuentro*. The mixed combination of people that were entering the centre, including townfolk, authorities and businessmen, was also quite unusual.

Of course, something big was being celebrated: for the first time, in August 2002, the Telecentre had achieved self-financing, demonstrating that the almost utopian “sustainability” of technological-social projects was feasible. Inside, Claudio Orrego, founder and President of *Corporación Encuentro*, was thanking – with emotion and pride – those who had made this dream possible.

This dream, became a reality in March 1997, when *Corporación Encuentro* started to function in a small chapel in the town of La Faena de Peñalolén. This institution's only aim was not to make a profit, but rather to provide efficient tools for an encounter between technology and those who had no access to it.

"In the beginning" – remembers Orrego – “we thought of doing something which would offer tangible opportunities, enabling the inhabitants to defend and fulfill themselves and move ahead. It was not to be material help, which would come to an end in time, but rather a place where social capital could be obtained and generated, which would increase the density of community networks and, in the end, would improve the people's living standards”.

Social Capital

Nice words, stated many times and by many non-governmental organizations; words which, however, take on a new meaning in light of the *Encuentro* Telecentre experience, whose main theoretical framework is confined to these two words: social capital.

Briefly, the aim is to generate community experiences; that interaction and confidence emerge from particular actions in order to work together for the benefit of all the community and of the individuals which are part of it. This is the main difference between an *Encuentro* Telecentre and a cybercafé in downtown Santiago or a public booth in Peru. Because, aside from providing a place where people can access the Internet, the objective is that they learn together, that under the same roof they adopt the technology as theirs and strengthen the ties with their peers, with their neighbour and with the tenant on the corner.

“I’m not opposed to people making money with the Internet” – says Claudio Orrego – “only ours is another matter. We are more than just a place where people can access the network or have a coffee, we want to use the technology appropriately so that people will have confidence in their capabilities and their relationship with the community. We believe that this is the only way to effectively help them take hold of their future”.

“A Mouse” at our fingertips

As Orrego said in his speech commemorating self-financing, “managing computer networks requires technical expertise, managing networks of people requires leadership, commitment and passion”. This premise has given the *Encuentro* Telecentre another distinctive attribute: training.

The idea isn’t that people who don’t know how to access the Internet have someone else download the information for them. On the contrary, the primary objective is that they learn and that this be done through experience. As they say at the Telecentre: “to learn with a mouse at your fingertips”.

In this sense, the *Encuentro* Telecentre has carried out a “sui generis” (unique) model of technological education. Internet beginners receive instruction from their peers, whether it be from a youth from the town (“pobla”) or a common housewife, allowing a more friendly, realistic and productive approach to computers and the network.

The results have been more than satisfactory, getting mothers who had never laid a hand on a PC in their lives, to work as computer operators in companies; senior citizens, bored with the monotony of their daily lives, creating their own radio program; and adolescents with drug problems now being qualified Internet trainers.

The formula for financing training programs has also been innovative. “We realized” – points out Cynthia Soto, Executive Director of *Corporación Encuentro*– “that there were many frequent users, mainly young people, who didn’t have the money to pay for the hours they spent connected to the Internet. We offered them the opportunity of becoming trainers, exchanging their work for free time on the Internet and a percentage of the money received from the training. This group was joined by computer science students from the community who needed to practice, thus forming an excellent group of trainers within our restricted budget.

It's not a give away

The conviction that nobody is getting anything for free is important to the success of this particular project. On the contrary, from the outset everyone agreed that the hours spent navigating and training at *Encuentro* should be charged.

"When we started" - says Claudio Orrego – "many said that we were not going to make it if we charged for our services, that paying wouldn't work. Today we have achieved that difficult financing. Basically, I'm convinced that people attach more value to what they must pay for; saving their pennies ("*juntando las chauchas*") to be able to navigate they consider the place their own and feel they have more right in demanding to learn".

Presently, the *Encuentro* Telecentre's hourly navigation rate is \$ 500 and training fluctuates between \$ 6.000 and \$ 13.000. However, these amounts are adaptable to each client's particular situation, in short, nothing is free but it is negotiable. Under this premise, we permanently look for new ways to make the access easier, creating for example, 2 for 1 combos and an exchange of free navigating for hours of training.

From Peñalolén to the world

However, If Internet and the creation of the Telecentre was the first idea on paper, circumstances led *Radio Encuentro* to go on the air first. Thanks to a community frequency not in use, on December 8, 1998 at 9 o' clock at night this singular radio project starts its broadcasts on 107.3 FM, with no other objective than that of creating links within the community through technology.

"The Radio" - says Orrego – "started to show that the community's power of organization was tremendous. In the beginning social organizations came simply because they wanted to show what they did, later people came with certain interests, wishing to make a program, which then united more people and transformed them into organizations. That is to say, the radio programs became social groups, which later generated another space in which to become organized and tackle common objectives".

From the outset, *Radio Encuentro* reflected the energy of all those who took part in it, its creators as well as its audience of thousands of Peñaloléns. With slogans such as: " A Radio!, a Community Radio and they are offering spots to whoever wishes to broadcast their activities, no matter their colour, smell, nor beliefs pal (*Compadre*)!!!!!!!!!!!! they managed to get the population involved in the project, calling upon the old as well as the young. At present, *Radio Encuentro*, not only has the youngest radio controller in Chile, but has also become the first Chilean radio to broadcast in real time through the Internet 24 hours a day (www.elencuentro.cl).

To be exact, today after 4 years, *Corporación Encuentro* is a real network. There are already 16 Internet Telecentres in 11 communities in the Metropolitan Area with 48.000 navigation hours, 30.000 consumers and over 1.200 trainings. Because of these achievements, the Corporation was singled

out for formal support by the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA), managed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

These merits have made *Corporación Encuentro's* case a story worth being told, more so because it joins multiple similar initiatives that are bringing technology to those who do not have access to it, forming a digital country, more organized socially and, consequently, with more possibilities of equality.

Paraphrasing Claudio Orrego, in a world where democracy is weakened because there is a lack of social networks, here technology, far from alienating people, is starting to find, liberate and bring them together.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL BREACH IN NUMBERS

- 68% of technological royalties and fees are absorbed by the United States and Japan.

- Penetration of the Internet in the United States and Norway is over 50%, while in Africa it's less than 0.4%.

The difference in technology between nations of the first and third world, is replicated within the countries. Inequalities at different levels:

- Geographic (for example, in the Dominican Republic 80% of access to the Internet is concentrated in the capital).

- Socioeconomic and educational (89% of the consumers in South Africa have a higher education).

- Generation (89% of the consumers in China are under 35).

- Gender (62% of the consumers in Latin America and 86% in Senegal are men).

In **CHILE**, the socioeconomic segments with higher incomes (ABC1 C2), which correspond to 26% of the total population, make up 68% of the access to the Internet.

- A minimum percentage of micro-businessmen have access to the Internet.

- 57% of the connections are in Santiago. 84% of the consumers are under 34. 65% have some kind of a higher education.

Rosa Cisternas, "La Rossy", 48 years old.

Villa Universidad de Chile, La Reina

Housewife and Manager

"I arrived at the *La Reina* Telecentre in the Summer of the year 2001. I didn't have a fixed income and really wanted to learn how to use a computer, but I couldn't afford the course. I happened to pass by the Telecentre and my daughter insisted that I go in and ask, - you have

