

New technologies, citizen participation and local development

A case study for evaluation

*Francisco SIERRA CABALLERO**
UNIVERSITY OF SEVILLE
fsierra@us.es

ABSTRACT

The breaking of the internal and external boundaries of cities and territories, and the merging together and confusion of public and private spaces, which have always been traditionally separated in modern political discourse and communication, indicates not only new cultural trends in human organization and socializing, but also, through the various electronic forms of interaction and information exchange, the constitution of a new space for political identity and participation.

In the following text, some innovative experiences in the European Union are analyzed, presenting the preliminary discussion about the conceptual bases of new strategic vision for the social movements that tries to explore the new local forms of cultural autonomy of the citizens through the *appropriation* of the new technologies of information in a social research applied on ICTs and Citizen Participation of the network CITIZ@MOVE (URBACT. European Commission).

* **Francisco SIERRA CABALLERO**. Dean of Faculty of Communication in the University of Seville. Social research and teacher of Communication Theory and Communication and Development of Doctorate Program “Communication and Criticism Culture”, is Director of REDES.COM. Revista de Estudios para el Desarrollo Social de la Comunicación (www.us.es/cico/redes).

INTRODUCTION

Innovations in the digital media have modified and conceptually redefined the conventional media system, with the introduction of new production and organization procedures. Technology constitutes a disruptive factor as an innovation as it opens up new possibilities and completely new features. “Any machine produces a displacement of the object it is submitted to but also of the subject that makes it work and which carries out new skills through it. The machine leaves no-one indifferent. It modifies, albeit in an infinitesimal way, the place of the person who activates it and who watches how it is activated in the system of places allocated by semiotic capitalism” (Guattari, 2004: 30). To go further, new technologies, especially informative technologies, introduce substantial modifications into the ways of organisation and the tactics of intervention and social co-operation, indirectly conditioning the dialectics of participation, mobilisation, and political influence of citizens. In this way, the cultural autonomy promoted by the New Information and Communication Technologies opens the possibility of realising collective aspirations by articulating spaces of freedom starting from new logics of citizen mediation and expression.

The transformation caused by the “Internet galaxy” in the new social morphology is especially apparent in the impact of social activity, and the disruption it causes, in culture. In the new media culture, the process of communication has completely broken free from the spatial and temporal coordinates described by Descartes at the dawn of Modernity, leading to the incorporation of broader experiences which surpass the local perspectives of events. The spatialization of time on the Web also heralds the appearance of a new concept of local activity. Castells talks of a new

spatial logic based on information flow as opposed to that of traditional social organization which has its roots in the history of the immediate surroundings and local territories. The formation of a new *telepolis* constitutes the main challenge to be overcome by communication researchers. The interrelated, centrifugal transformations of the new cultural ecology are endowing the postmodern individual with everything that is needed to infiltrate reality itself, personalize the world, mould possible and real interactive worlds through the exercise of imagination, and project new principles of participation and local development.

This article explore the idea of intercultural dialectic, recognition of the unfamiliar, alternativity as a sign of identity, and the assimilation of a dialogue-based culture that in the new Society of Information represents an unprecedented cultural change. The article describes how promote the use and adaptation of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the programming of socio-cultural development for the social change from an emancipatory vision. The Local Communication and Development Network present the methodological precepts and programming bases which underlie its activity. The network is formed by the Ibero-American Digital Communication Centre at the University of Seville, the Andalusian Local Radio and Television Broadcasting network, and the non-governmental organization the European Institute of Communication and Development. Its aim is to promote the use and adaptation of the new information and communication technologies (NICTs) in the programming of socio-cultural development in the city of Seville and others cities of URBACT Program CITIZ@MOVE. The results of this article summarizes the exploratory intervention research and a process of systematisation of experiences in the material based on a revision of the bibliography and citizen spaces on the net, the description of common elements of the cities participating in URBACT

(Seville, Graz, Athens, Valence, Derry, Cosenza, Misterbianco, Syracuse, Toledo and Pecs) and the information and dialogue maintained with the participating cities in the CITIZ@MOVE project during the international seminars maintained in the last two years (2004-2006).

CONSIDERING THE NEW COMMUNICATION ECOLOGY

The starting point for the project is the recognition of a new Information Ecosystem. “New Technologies allow the dynamising and flexibilising of the channels of political representation, which had maintained a rigid structure anchored in the nineteenth-century model in which the exercising of universal suffrage began” (Pérez Luño, 2004: 61). Networks such as telecentres expand, and paradoxically contract the public space of interlocution and dialogue, favouring cosmopolitan opening-up experiences and the community recognition of citizens by which the social networks are shaped, now depending on new original rules of operating capacity and local connection that encourage the redimensioning of autochthonous cultures and also the representation of ways of life and proximity. Among other significant modifications, the stable frontiers between what is political, social, and economic have now been altered. The digital revolution proposes in this sense a challenge to cities, which must expand their capacities of socio-cultural dynamisation and attend efficiently the resolution of citizen demands for public information. The decentralisation of information and communication policies is at this point a strategic task in a crisis scenario of the state-nation and the emergency scenario of global players that has renewed the importance of municipalities and local bodies and the regulatory role of the Local Public Administration.

If collaboration technologies (blog, e-mail, wiki, . . .) and open code technologies, in the same way as telematic interaction networks, are a conquest of the freedom of expression, but moreover nodes of intensive productivity shared by the population having access to these resources, it would seem logical to think that the development of the Information Society suggests in Europe the need for an efficient, equitable, and porous Public Administration, capable of assimilating and promoting the horizontal forms of management and participation of citizens, especially at a local level, where the municipalities require, from the point of view of development, a plural, democratic, and productive system of measures, rethinking citizen participation and local culture as from new protocols of “confidence” in the governing and management of public matters. This is so among other reasons because the new informative ecosystem, the logic of the de-intermediation of Internet, has modified the ways, types, and manners of cultural access, questioning the predominant mediation model and indirectly redefining the strategies of organisation and local development.

The novel developments of these technologies of territorial arrangement provide forms and complex strategies of organisation that make possible ecosystems based on information and social creativity, new configurations of order and vision of local development, which feed on diversity and citizen participation. However, “electronic networks can facilitate some forms of communication, but are only an instrument when another type of network is operating (...). The relationships between virtual networks and face-to-face networks must count on other flexible time-spaces where new rites that may favour opening up can be exercised” (Villasante, 2002: 185). Along these lines, telecentres can put into play endogenous factors and exogenous variables that are determinant for the development and local participation of communities, on imprinting

a process of social innovation capable of altering the dialectics of community change. This is largely because this public equipment contributes as a service and social institution towards the modification of usual patterns of information and communication of the communities, linking the various groups and social agents in a complex system of organisation and local development, with the intention of constituting virtuous circles of information, representation, and public participation.

The last few decades have seen the start of a contradictory process of urban transformation which transcends familiar historical forms of territoriality, and involves the technomedia and communications networks resulting from the digital revolution. This reformulation of urban information presents significant challenges for communication planning and management concepts in land development policies, challenges which to date have hardly been addressed in the field of Communication Studies. Above all it represents a fundamental ideological problem of legitimation and justification of the social contract.

THE TELEPOLIS AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

Cyberspace has brought new habits and new relationships into the traditional forms of social intercourse and modern symbolic practices and representations. As Echevarría points out, technical problems of data access, circulation and rapid transmission via Internet are important, but much more important is the need for debate about conversion of the Web into a new area of citizenship. Here, the formation of a new telepolis constitutes the main challenge to be overcome by communication researchers. The breaking of the internal and external boundaries of cities and

territories, and the merging together and confusion of public and private spaces, which have always been traditionally separated in modern political discourse and communication, indicates not only new cultural trends in human organization and socializing, but also, through the various electronic forms of interaction and information exchange, the constitution of a new space for political identity and participation.

The Web-surfing culture of communication crisis, and hybrid, decentralized, multipurpose, diverse cultural migration and mediation has definitively shattered the cultural laws pertaining to proximity, territory and boundaries. These laws have hitherto been our point of reference in our awareness of what is “our own” and what is “foreign”, what is cosmopolitan and what is local, and the new culture has finally embarked on the road towards a transverse, constructive – even autonomous – concept of the productive values of different cultures, based on a new form of organizing experience, feeling and sense in time and space. This has necessarily taken as its main principle the idea of interculturalism, recognition of the unfamiliar, alterity as a sign of identity, and the assimilation of a dialogue-based culture. Obviously this represents an unprecedented cultural change which especially affects the collective memory.

Today the Web is becoming the major space, or environment/memory, for popular culture. But, as Héctor Schmucler warns, the speed of this development poses a problem:

“A worrying relationship exists between memory and communication: they are both mutually exclusive and dependent at the same time. The common idea of communication today brings to mind instantaneity, simultaneity, and, ultimately, timelessness. Memory has always required duration, persistence; it has no concept of speed. For memory to adapt to the idea of timeless communication it has had to abandon bodies and take refuge in the abstraction of electronic signals. Communication as pure contact corresponds to digital memory: the storage of successive combinations of insignificant ones and zeros. The only thing that can be recognized in both is a heap of fragmentations; indefinite compartmentalization which obliterates the recognition of an origin and breaks free from any sense of belonging. Memory therefore becomes a mindless repertory of data, and communication merely a series of mechanisms which connects them. This tautological techno-instrumental order which has absorbed both memory and communication does nothing but repeat itself again and again” (Schmucler, 1997: 12).

The contribution of the ICTs to local memory and communication therefore requires, firstly, the modification of analytical strategies, the questioning of research methods and techniques, the integration of study disciplines and perspectives, and a move in a more productive, ecological direction. The complexities of cyberspace and technological networks must be researched critically and reflexively, and a new theoretical framework must be produced to describe and understand the technical nature of the postmodern electronic world. The complex techno-world of the new media must be approached generatively from within, because only a second generation analysis will allow the new communicative processes to be fully projected.

The present telematic situation requires more elastic understanding of communication as a flow. And also a more creative approach towards communications research. As Paolo Virno warns, the virtual nature of the new media culture not only vindicates the singular nature of all experiences, but also galvanises and expands the capacity of the imagination to recover information as a productive channel for knowledge.

The exponential development of smart connection and information documentation technologies provides a central topic for discussion about the very nature of human thought and cognitive processes. The telematic society has finally revealed to us, albeit reflexively, the ecosystem relationship which exists between our system and the surroundings which we observe and transform through the knowledge-gathering process. This change of communications ideal arises from the creative consideration of the social complexity involved in the new processes of information mediation, and the projection of the social area within the urban environment as a space of pluralism,

construction and contradiction for multiple cultural identities, as a meeting place for new realities, socializing, migratory and territorial transformation, a network of networks and social links.

The network metaphor, more than just a play on words, here reflects an imaginary process aimed at converting social actors into dream makers, designers of the city's material, symbolic and sociopolitical processes. A generative research culture is being developed which will eventually contribute in turn to the development of collective processes of appropriation of communicational knowledge and technology, broadening the existing information culture through a concept of dialogue-based, emancipative communication leading to the establishment of a true cyberculture.

We should, then, begin to ask ourselves how this network is to be structured, what levels of analysis and how communicative processes can be understood through these networks, and to move beyond the polarization existent between the individual and the global network. We should also define a new representation policy, because, as Jameson warns, no research project is without social and historical rationality, and no cultural initiative is without its political project.

A NEW STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The original idea of the “New Technologies, Citizen Participation and Local Development” programme is not merely to make tools available to the population in order to cover consumer demand for internet connections, in line with some of the basic guidelines produced to date by the European Union. These tend to identify the process of construction of the Information Society with State controlled means of digital

diffusion, mostly in line with market possibilities and necessities. In the initiatives in this field considered by the European Commission and the governments of the member states, planning and control of the new spaces for telematic interaction reflect the regulatory and mediatory model of the conventional media (press, radio, television), . and either exclude or minimize the creative potential of the citizens and the organized social fabric.

In contrast, the city of Seville's telecentre network represents a commitment to endow the Third Sector and the citizens with real power, a firm will to create optimum conditions for communication free from bureaucracy and free from commercial interests. Its goal is to create a genuine, alternative model for social creativity based on action-research and the communicative capacity of non-governmental organizations and those sectors traditionally excluded from the process of technological modernization, to reconstruct spaces for community participation and meeting, dialogue and cooperation: spaces which unquestionably strengthen the city's governability and institutions.

The project's point of departure is a complex idea of communication in which telematic network coverage, the promotion of autonomous participating groups and community project design based on a language of interconnection will provide the pillars of productive cooperation to support a democratic, local form of communication, and to multiply three strategic forms of alternative communication:

- Collective, liberating reflexivity on communication practices.
- The dialogue culture of consensual construction.
- The recognition of multiplicity and difference.

From a media-analytic point of view –in Lapassade terminology– a plan of participation and access to the new technologies as an institutional configuration programme for a new municipal culture of information and provide the basic infrastructure in neighbourhoods by the creation of sites that promote access and increase sociocultural dynamics. In this sense, it deals with the fundamental objective of this project and the purpose for the intervention of a strategic plan from a critical and integration viewpoint analysing the multiple factors and local dynamics that affect citizen development: What level of participation and necessities do the less favoured sectors of the population require? What services does the city offer to citizens? To what degree do the uses of the Internet and the NICT's strengthen citizen participation in the municipality? To what degree does the population participate and help to decide the programmes for technology modernization and administration of local telematic networks? To what extent do promoted actions drive the production of local contents? What level of participation does the population have in the development of local content? To what degree do the actions on the Internet modify local life and the forms of mediation and citizen participation?

The answer to these questions, the project plan, will be defined to the extent possible from a radically democratic conception of planning, based on participation management, the community promotion of local development, and, conceptually, on the methodology of Participative Communication for Social Change. The focus of social construction presupposes two levels of articulation: coordination relationships between the activity of social agents and the coherent relationship understood as the construction of a cognitive process of signification and interpretation shared by the players implicated in the same local context. In other words, the key methodology of this planning concept for telecentres is to define a participative model of management and

development for the infrastructure at a local level, guaranteeing the protagonism of neighbours throughout the entire process. In accordance with this principle, the participative research procures at all times to liberate the word, socialize the communicative function, in the understanding of the shared word, the word evoked is socialized power, is communication made community, habitable space for a collective project in the future. In this sense, the Participative Action Research is not here constituted by a simple work methodology but rather of a praxis philosophy, an organization and sociocultural mediation model based on historical conscience and the form of expression of popular cultures that, finally, seek to modify the objective and the very sense of the technological modernization process.

Networking policy regarding ideas and social intervention in communication will thus constitute an alternative way of creating culture, another manner of organizing communication and citizen participation:

- Creating dynamics of consensus and integration for the different social actors in the debate on the organizational model to be adopted in public communication.
- Guaranteeing coverage and access for all users.
- Respecting the principal of equality in public participation in the cultural system as organized by the communication industries.

- Facilitating the existence of multiple broadcasters and real pluralism in local information structures.
- And promoting the creative, critical use of communications media based on a transformational communications methodology.

The programme is conceived as a strategic dimension, to reconstruct the city and galvanize its citizens and its local government. Its starting point can be found in the community platforms built by social networks in the city's suburbs and neighbourhoods. It attempts to define a new framework for social relations, and, from an ecological perspective, enable the use of local public space as a complex participative environment, plurally constituted in recognition of the multiple actors and opinions involved. It represents the recovery of the citizens' own voice and communicative activity, and establishes a new model of development based on the citizens' confidence in making known their opinions, presenting proposals, reaching agreements and, essentially, transforming participation in political life into a commitment to the community and to coexistence. In line with this philosophy, the project is based on a Participative Action-Research working plan, a programme of decentralized neighbourhood projects in which communication is directly and transversally linked to local development in all its phases. The constant aim is to observe what possibilities exist for co-determination, historical projection and change, and definition and affirmation of a policy of communications self-government within the World Wide Web.

This dynamic consequently suggests a networked involvement, together with other national and international cities, experiences and working programmes. It implies a permanent attempt to analyze the macroprocesses involved in configuring the global information society to address the local, familiar, specific problems of citizens.

LINES OF ACTION AND METHODOLOGICAL CULTURE

The common denominator is a practical philosophy of communication based on four principles of public action:

- The leadership and capitalization of the project by The Third Sector and the citizens, leading to a model of network organization, planning and management which involves public participation and social autonomy.
- The establishment of a reticular model of project concept and organization inspired by the concept of deterritorialization. This, although the project is locally based, broadens its strategies of cooperation, information and knowledge exchange, and exploits its involvement with other current European, Latin American and African groups, initiatives and programmes in the same field.
- The commitment to a participative model which also emphasises the social economy. Unlike other projects, Seville's telecentre network does not limit itself to providing a public service and a forum for the citizens. In addition to serving this strategic function of fundamental importance to the Information Society and to local government, the "New Technologies, Citizen Participation and Local Development" project aims to stimulate productive, dynamic synergies of

innovation and economic reorientation which will have an impact in the region. It includes programmes both for specific training in the field of the New Technologies, and for guidance and virtualization for small and medium sized local businesses. It encompasses the creation of new services and production, distribution and social economy organization networks (cooperatives, the content industry, marketing campaigns, incubator companies... . . .).

- The design of an action-research programme in line with the philosophy and proposals of the Science and Society Programme of the European Union. Since its beginnings the telecentre network has been linked to the Project. Specifically it is the result of applied research projects aimed at:
 - o Systemizing experiences, results and models of political and social citizen participation with and with regard to New Information Technologies.
 - o Examining the uses, obstacles and factors affecting the integration of NICTs in everyday life and in the city's public space.
 - o Defining the processes of communicative suitability and praxis with tools permitting digital citizen involvement.

The project thus attempts to achieve three strategic intervention objectives:

- The promotion of a new participative, democratic leisure time culture which supports the synergies and processes of public space and local governability organization.

- The generation of electronic network content, either as a result of the creative initiatives undertaken by the social groups involved in the project, or as professional support services for small business owners and traders in each district, and a vehicle for the dissemination of new offers of information, communication and local culture.

- Integration and cooperation with those social groups especially excluded from the process of technological innovation and development of the new information and communication economy.

The organizational core of the NICT structuring process is the telecentre, a physical space possessing the telematic infrastructure necessary to carry out the activities related to the three strategic lines of action. Its objective is to:

- Facilitate citizen access to Internet, with a special effort being made in the cases of the most disadvantaged groups.

- Galvanize local culture, promoting the expression and propagation of popular memory using new digital media supports.

- Contribute to the integration of the immigrant population, support their access to means of interconnection between them and the networks belonging to their own communities of origin or residence.

- Organize new citizens' networks and alliances between social movements and platforms, strengthening the associative fabric and boosting cultural change in the internal relationships and organizations of Non-Governmental Organizations.

To this end, the programme envisages the creation of a central base unit to produce, direct and coordinate the project, and a network of telecentres housed in the city's civic centres and in each of its districts. In cases where it is deemed preferable to have a better communicated, more recognized space, the premises of community associations, non-government organizations or youth associations may be adapted. These venues for social coexistence will form the setting for the structuring of networks designed to generate cultural and civic awareness, proactive concepts of local participation, plural areas for the public handling of collective information, communication and decision-making. The aim is to restructure citizens' forums and interlocutory space in cyberspace.

In our opinion, the new telematic networks open up a potential arena for multiple productive synergies of cooperation, organization and community autonomy, which should be fully explored and understood for optimum development of local communication in the global context of the new Information Society. The civic networks, community telecentres and public platforms that generate innovation in the adaptation and use of NICTs should therefore be revitalized in the creative processes of organization and social development. Local communities with a presence in cyberspace could be said to be in an ideal position to undertake processes to create collective intelligence for social change based on the radical necessities of human individuals and groups. As it encourages different forms of interaction, cooperation and exchange based on active participation, local communities' access to new digital platforms represents a powerful organizational tool for development from within. It also foments "the democratization of cultural creation and the breaking of the historical barrier between producers and consumers of cultural objects" (April, 1998: 72).

In this respect, the transfer of creative power to information processing, storing and programming machines poses strategic problems of co-responsibility and cultural co-management in the field of communications and development. The management of information wealth and telematic exomemory, and methods of cultural heritage planning and development pose significant, hitherto unconsidered questions regarding the relationships between power, information and development. For example:

"Obviously, documentation policy decisions, those related to the purposes of databases and modes of access, are decisive: the commercialization of stored data constitutes another factor, this time of an economic nature, which is present in both the selection and consultation phases. The value of information is no longer decided exclusively by the internal parameters of the institution which carries out the documentation, but is now affected by true market laws, often of a competitive nature; the availability of information to the public – whether controlled or indiscriminate, free or paid for – or the decision to maintain the management of stored data as a purely internal activity, has as much influence on the system architecture as it has on the

conventions adopted, and, ultimately, on the content of the data being stored” (Bettetini/Colombo, 1995: 226).

The commitment to forging a virtual perspective of the new communications should not be understood as opposition to reality, but rather as opposition to the power of the immediate, as conceptual reality, as a utopia, and as a political proposal for communication in the specific local context. Without a strategic project and a defined policy it is impossible to achieve the desired media culture. The organizational planning and management model for the project is coherent in that it is based on a conscious policy of public domain, social management telecentre network construction, with the participation of the city’s government, social organizations and university. A specially created consortium will be the body responsible for evaluating and defining lines of strategic action. The principle of plurality and vocation for public service and autonomous management by citizens’ groups provides for the inclusion of representatives from the city’s trade and small and medium sized business sectors. The organizational model is obviously communitary, with decentralized, district-based, autonomous public and private financing. The three main groups targeted by the project to be protagonists in the initiative are:

- a. Young people, depending on demand for access to information, culture and vehicles of expression, above all in peripheral districts or those which lack the infrastructure and culture offer available in the rest of the city.
- b. Women excluded from the labour market and without access to knowledge of the digital network.

- c. The immigrant population which needs free public services for personal communication, the organization and satisfaction of basic needs and social and cultural participation in public life.

Taking these three groups as a point of departure, the project proposes the gradual implementation of the network, in four phases:

1. Diagnosis and analysis of the field of action. This first phase includes the study, or pre-input, of the necessities of the population to be affected by the project, and the mapping of public communication related social groups, educator groups and citizen initiatives with experience or unique characteristics which may contribute to the project's effective development and final success. The relevant social, symbolic and economic capital existent among citizens and social organizations will therefore be fully exploited. To this end, the first phase involves the organization of interviews, and discussion, ethnology and survey groups with social organizations, specialists from Youth Information Centres, managers of civic centres and the residents of each neighbourhood or territorial area, in order to discover the most suitable ways in which the New Technologies can be implemented.
2. Participative design of the Telecentre Plan. Once the information compiled during the field study has been analysed and the most prominent conclusions have been identified, we plan to create a participative action-research project, with the *operational group* responsible for organizing the programme's sectorial unity and projects.

3. Central Unit Technical Plan and Execution.
4. Training Plan. The programme will simultaneously implement a training plan to meet the citizens' need for knowledge about the basic skills involved:
 - a. Multimedia communications skills. Skills needed to generate messages on audiovisual and digital supports, with users being taught to handle computer terminals, use technology correctly and employ the resources and programmes necessary for efficient communication.
 - b. Communications organization skills. Development of internal and external organizational skills in communications for social action to support coordinated institutional action by local networks and organizations.
 - c. Data reception and critical interpretation skills. Education communication training for the intelligent, hypertextual, comprehensive use of information and information generating systems.
 - d. Trainer training. Preparation of education communication and technical trainers for citizen training, as the basis for the creation of a Modern School of Citizenship, from a broad sociopolitical and cultural viewpoint.

- e. Education in technological innovations. Training in entrepreneurial culture and in networked social and cooperative economy organization, based on the community possibilities offered by the New Technologies and the exploitation of cyberspace.

CONCLUSION

The communications challenge presented by this project is, in short, to attempt to produce and develop citizen networks and social and community life experiences based on new information systems within complex information environments. The challenge is far from easy, as Professor Artur Serra makes clear:

“We know that engineering is based on engineering design, but it is not the same to design a data system as it is to design a social community with a data system incorporated. This design, and the knowledge necessary to attempt it, are twice as complex. And there is another problem which is very difficult to solve: Who designs a community? Can a minority create a blueprint for a community model and then impose it on the rest? Or, to be respectful towards the principles of a democratic society, must the design be approved at least by a majority of that society? Do we have methodologies to enable communities to design themselves? (Finquelievich, 2000: 195).

To these, and to many other questions, we still cannot provide the answers. At present, we only know that the extremely media-intensive social change that is taking place demands communications researchers with attitudes and skills that are completely different, to design and develop the new media culture. We are clearly talking about a new concept of social mediation between communications scientists and the object of their studies, or, in other words, between communications knowledge and information reality.

The academic community involved with communications must overcome the theoretical-conceptual and methodological insufficiencies in research that we have mentioned, but it must also attempt to create new organizational structures to facilitate social autonomy and the construction of a complex knowledge base that can physically, materially and socially link local media interaction network nodes with their global counterparts. This project is just such an attempt to explore the field from a standpoint of unity and a vision of communication and social organization that is both constructive and complex.

Creating associations for cooperation and developing solidarity, which is to say forming active citizenry, is not possible without democratic policies of communication based on dialogue, on the shared construction of a city, and on compromise and public deliberation. “The individual that uses communication technologies and information does not instantaneously transform into a user (...) The participation in projects and programs of info-inclusion, the governing and rights of the Internet, universal access, including for those who are already present on the Internet, are fundamental conditions for the democratic construction of an information society that is truly for everyone.” (VV.AA., 2003: 60) For this, it is important to collectively plan and define policies and active intervention programmes in technology appropriation. In other words, a politics of integral communication is only productive if it strengthens the associative density, the networks of trust and community solidarity, civic-mindedness and the quality and solidity of reciprocal relationships. All politics of local communication should for the same reason project itself into the frontier between the organization and the citizenry, beyond the Public Administration. Communication with the capacity of cooperative extension favouring the well-being should not elude this commitment and should understand, with precision, its limits and reach. Thus, all telecentre plans should

incorporate in the project regular monitoring and evaluation that routinely tests the satisfaction of the users and organization that make up the community landscape. Evaluation helps the municipal managers to respond to strategic questions in the planning of the telecentre by proving in situ the validity of the programme from the point of view of the project costs and benefits.

The purpose of the evaluation is basically to identify the needs and public functions of the telecentres, from the point of view of community development, and its impact in the economic development for the equality of opportunities, considering of course the entire set of variables related directly or indirectly to citizen participation. But the evaluation also has as its object the development of tools for the verification, adaptation, and effective redesign of the project to facilitate the access and the participation of the telecentre community population in accord with the needs and demands of local development. Beyond the traditional models of evaluation, participative democracy demands, in this line, a complex and integral vision of community necessities in the planning of the telecentres.

So, an emancipational political project is not possible without territorialization, without being anchored into the ground, demarcated in the geographic precision of the municipality, in the habitat and concrete social relationships, historically and culturally situated. Historical memory also needs to have anchorage. Communication should therefore try, in this process, to socialize politics, promote change, define a collective city project, new horizons into the future that open to citizens an agenda of public deliberation in the processes of local change and transformation, opening channels of discussion and free press, webs and virtual forums of electronic democracy where the Local Public Administration takes on the function of porous network of flow and

interchange, of information and collective decisions that fix the links that we constitute. “Far from weakening municipal power, this role will strengthen it because it is a participative event where the interests of each district and particular theme negotiate and contextualize priorities and compatibilities and the city once again is considered as a whole.” (Sousa Santos, 2003: 11)

Definitively, the social appropriation of the NICT should be planned beginning with the appropriate conditions for the generation of new knowledge that permits the citizenry self-determination in the process of local development with the provision of these public facilities. In this sense, the telecentre should be thought of as a space so that the citizens make their voice heard, they interact and organize themselves, they accomplish needs and participate in public life. The reticular logic of communication in the Internet era inspires the visibility of plural voices, of the emergence of social players, agents, and silenced collectives and omitted who seek to be heard, and activates their forms and modes of interaction. The network model is appropriate for this active participation: decentralized, horizontal, with multiple connections, and with spatial limits. This logic of participation and social appropriation of the uses of communication and information technologies should (therefore) be encouraged in the design of the telecentres (VV.AA., 2003: 58). The cultural logic of the networks begin, in this line, from four basic principles:

- The creation of links and horizontal nexus between diverse elements and self-employed people.
- The free circulation of information.
- Collaborative work and decentralized coordination and democracy.
- Self-management and collective production as reflected in the values associated with open codes and free software in accordance with the “ethical hacker.”

Definitively, we could define net culture and the philosophy of the telecentre plan described here as a proposal of a special practice of the utopian as the re-territorialization of the imaginary, like a model, finally, of planning based on cooperative production and radical democracy with special protagonism by the citizens and collective players of the Third Sector for the definition of a citizen project in the Everyone's information society.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- ABRIL, Gonzalo (1998): "Sujetos, interfaces, texturas" in *Revista de Occidente*, number 206, June.
- BETTETINI, Gianfranco and COLOMBO, Furio (1995): *Las nuevas tecnologías de la comunicación*, Barcelona: Paidós.
- FINQUELIEVICH, Susana (Coord.) (2000): *¡Ciudadanos, a la red!. Los vínculos sociales en el ciberespacio*, Buenos Aires: CICCUS/La Crujía.
- GALINDO, J. (1990) : "En la voz y la garganta del futuro. Comunicaciones, culturas y movimientos sociales emergentes" in *Comunicación y Sociedad*, number 9, Guadalajara : UdG.
- GOLDING, P. and MURDOCK, G. (1990) : "Pobreza informativa y desigualdad política. La ciudadanía en la era de las comunicaciones privatizadas" in *Comunicación y Sociedad*, number 9, Guadalajara : UdG.
- GUATTARI, Félix (2004): *Plan sobre el planeta. Capitalismo mundial integrado y revoluciones moleculares*, Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.
- GURSTEIN, M. (Ed.) (2000): *Community Informatics: Enabling Communities with Information and Communications Technologies*, Hershey: Idea Group Publishing.
- HALLECK, D.D. (2002): *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media*, New York: Fordham University Press.
- HARVEY, David (2003): *Espacios de esperanza*, Madrid: Akal.
- HUDSON, H.E. (1998): *Universal access to information and communication technologies for sustainable development: economic issues and strategies*, Report to IDRC, Ottawa: IDRC.
- LASH, S. and URRY, J. (1998): *Economías de signos y espacio*, Buenos Aires : Amorrortu Editores.
- LASH, S. (2002): *Critique of information*, Londres : Sage.
- MARÍ SÁEZ, Víctor (Coord.) (2004): *La Red es de todos. Cuando los movimientos sociales de apropiación de la red*, Madrid: Editorial Popular.
- McQUAIL, D. (1998): *La acción de los medios. Los medios de comunicación y el interés público*, Buenos Aires : Amorrortu Editores.

- PÉREZ LUÑO, A.E. (2004): *¿Ciberciudadaní@ o ciudadaní@.com?*, Barcelona: Gedisa.
- QUEAU, Philippe (1998): “La presencia del espíritu”, in *Revista de Occidente*, number 206, June.
- SCHMUCLER, H. (1997): *Memoria de la comunicación*, Buenos Aires : Editorial Biblos.
- SIERRA, Francisco (1999): *Elementos de Teoría de la Información*, Sevilla: MAD.
- SIERRA, Francisco (2000): *Introducción a la teoría de la comunicación educativa*, Sevilla: MAD.
- SIERRA, Francisco (2004): “Methodology Guide.Diagnosis and future workshop. New Information Technologies and Active Citizenship”, CITIZ@MOVE-URBACT, European Commission.
- SIERRA, Francisco (2006a): *Políticas de comunicación y educación. Crítica y desarrollo de la Sociedad del Conocimiento*, Barcelona: Gedisa.
- SIERRA, Francisco (2006b): “Final Report: New Information Technologies, participation and active citizenship”, URBACT NETWORK CITIZ@MOVE, Urbact Secretariat, European Commission.
- SIERRA, Francisco (2006c): “Nouvelles technologies, participation citoyenne et développement local. Une perspective critique du changement social », Actes du Colloque International Démocratie Participative en Europe, Laboratoire de Études et de Recherches Appliquées en Sciences Sociales, IUT, Université de Toulouse.
- VILLASANTE, Tomás R. (2002): *Sujetos en movimiento. Redes y procesos creativos de complejidad social*, Montevideo: CIMAS/NORDAN.
- VV.AA. (2003): *Otro lado de la brecha. Perspectivas latinoamericanas y del Caribe ante la CMSI*, Caracas: Redistic.
- WHYTE, Anne (2000): *Assessing Community Telecentres. Guidelines for Researchers*, Ottawa: IDRC.

* The ideas expressed in this text form part of the research project entitled “New Information Technologies, Citizen Participation and Local Development”, directed by the author and coordinated by the Ibero-American Digital Communication Centre (www.us.es/cico) for the European network URBACT. Some of the premises expressed in this text were originally formulated by two of the main protagonists of the mentioned project: Manuel Chaparro (University of Málaga) y Víctor MARÍ SÁEZ (University of Sevilla-CICO), studying the Master Universitario en Comunicación y Desarrollo (University Master in Communications and Development), co-participants in the research team responsible for the City of Seville Telecentre Programme.