

NTICs, the Digital Divide and Citizen Empowerment

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The subject of the potential of new technologies in information and communications (NTIC) for citizen empowerment are at the epicenter of Cuban society. These include technologies involving networks, telecommunications and computing that directly or indirectly impact the quality of our daily lives and education (telephones, television, still and video cameras, the Internet, computers, etc.).

There is proof that access and strategic use of NTICs have the potential to promote economic development, reduce poverty, and increase democratization (including freedom of expression, the free flow of information, and the defense of human rights). Given our country's current democratic deficiencies, it is crucial for NTICs to take a central place in cooperative efforts on behalf of development, and in actions meant to promote democracy.

It is absolutely necessary to make visible and strengthen the role of civil society and the individual responsibility of each and every person in his or own personal growth, and that of his or her environment, through technological tools. This is essential to being able to develop a more innovative, creative and social Cuban society. The greatest obstacle on the tortured road to citizen empowerment through NTICs is the digital divide.

What is it about? How to explain those words so little employed by everyday Cubans? Mexicans Arturo Serrano and Evelio Martínez have already defined it in *La brecha digital: mitos y realidades* [The Digital Divide: Myths and Realities] (2003), stating that it is "la separación que existe entre las personas (comunidades, estados, países...) que utilizan las Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación (TIC) como una parte rutinaria de su vida diaria y aquellas que no tienen acceso a las mismas y que aunque las tengan no saben como utilizarlas" [the separation existing between people (communities, states, countries, etc.) that employ Information and Communications Technologies as a routine part of daily life, and those who do not have access to the same, and do not know how to use them, even if they do].

Concomitant with the digital (technological divide), there are gaps or disparities between people, communities and countries, but these are in no way at the margins. Instead, they are intimately related to the digital divide, for example, as a result of geography, income, gender, language and race. All these 'conditions' undermine a society's stability and prosperity, but the racial divide, irrespective of the world's diversity of ethnic groups, is the most egregious. A large proportion of white people have a higher standard of living and access to TICs, when compared to African descendants. Such is the case in Cuba, where lighter-skinned people have a higher standard of living

than those with darker skin. In Cuba, social prosperity is directly proportionate to the lightness of one's skin.

Yet, a broader view of the digital divide includes not only access to TICs, but also knowledge of how to use them to positively impact our lives. Access and use presuppose:

- Availability (telecommunications infrastructure and networks)
- Availability of services
- Skills and knowledge about adequately using them

Given the required availability, accessibility, skills, and knowledge, the following is a summary of the situation in Cuba:

- The telecommunications infrastructure and networks in Cuba are poor. A fiber optic cable is supposed to start functioning soon, but there is little information about it, and there are many rumors about corruption at the ETECSA telecommunications monopoly. This might make one think that the infrastructure will not improve any time soon.
- Access to services is very limited. The high cost of Internet connectivity leaves most people without access to the web (according to the Cuban government, this is due to having to rely on satellites affected by the U.S. blockade). The cost of technology goods is too high. Likewise, there are no smart phones and tablets, and satellite telephones are prohibited.
- As far as skills and knowledge are concerned, we have more than 300 *Youth Computing Clubs*, and even various *Computing "Palaces"* (centers), where people can take courses about using computers with Windows systems, or open systems like Linux. Yet, disorganization, a lack of complete and free access to the Internet, and the exclusion of social networks from learning programs threaten our process of empowerment.

How can we know the state of the digital divide in our country? What is Cuba's position regarding the digital divide? The answer can be found in various annual reports (or indices) that a number of international organization generate, among them:

- The United Nations Development Program's Index of Human Development (UNDP: <http://www.undp.org/>). Cuba is in 51st place. This report measures survival rates for newborns, levels of literacy among adults, school attendance, and per capita gross domestic product (GDP) (<http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/CUB.html>).
- The International Telecommunications Union Index of Digital Access (<http://www.itu.en>). Cuba is among the countries with somewhat low access: 0.38 (<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/newslog/State+Report+Shows+Low+Levels+Of+Access+CUBA.aspx>). This index is based on information about the quality (bandwidth and number of subscribers to bandwidth), infrastructure (teledensity, cell phone users), knowledge (literacy and school attendance), accessibility (cost of Internet access) and use (number of Internet users). This index is not updated frequently enough, but is still worth consulting.
- The International Economic Forum's Networked Readiness Forum (<http://www.weforum.org/>), which monitors the possibility of integrating the benefits of TICs in more than 100 countries, and indicates their principal structural and institutional obstacles. (http://www.weforum.org/pdf/Global_Competitiveness_Reports/Reports/GITR_2004_2005/Networked_Readiness_Index_Rankings.pdf).

- The Panorama of TICs, generated annually by the Organization for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD: <http://www.oecd.org/>). (www.oecd.org/sti/ito) (http://www.oecd.org/document/44/0,3746,en_2649_34225_43435308_1_1_1_1,00.html).

Diverse studies have shown that the size of the digital divide is very much linked to socioeconomics. The level and quality of public services and telecommunications infrastructures, as well as other factors, rely on these. Without a good telecommunications infrastructure or healthy competition, Cuba cannot offer affordable prices or diverse services (landed telephony, cell telephony, Internet access). Without inter-operator competition, as a result of ETECSA's monopoly, the services offered are of a low quality. Cuba may possibly have the most expensive Internet service in the world.

According to Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com), Canada and the United States had 70% Internet penetration in 2010; Australia and Oceania, 54%; Europe, 45%. In Latin America, penetration is 16%; in Africa, it is not even 5%; in Cuba, it is less than 1%!

This call for a reduction in this inequality, and plans for action, have been formally defined by the United Nations, which already expressed its “deseo y compromiso de construir una sociedad de la información centrada en la persona, incluyente y orientada al desarrollo, en la que todos puedan crear, consultar, utilizar y compartir la información y el conocimiento, para que las personas, las comunidades y los pueblos puedan desarrollar su pleno potencial en la promoción de su desarrollo sostenible y mejorar su calidad de vida, de acuerdo con los objetivos y principios de la Carta de las Naciones Unidas y respetando y defendiendo plenamente la Declaración Universal de Derechos Humanos” [desire and commitment to constructing a society with information focused on people, inclusive of and oriented towards development, in which all will be able to create, consult, use and share information and knowledge, so that people, communities, and peoples can develop to their full potential while promoting sustainable development and improved quality of life according to the objectives and principles of the United Nations Charter]. Soon, the rights of cybersubjects will be codified, too.

Yolanda Rueda (NGO *EmpoderaCuba.org*) wrote in *Innovación para el Empoderamiento ciudadano a través de la TICs* [Innovation for Citizens Empowerment through TICs] that this concept is very broad. It is still being worked on, and there is still much collective thinking to be done about it. We must be conscious of the fact that we cannot allow it to be tagged, much less that it be used to convince us that something is already being done about it.

In the Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, *empower* leads directly to *authorize*, as if they directly corresponded with each other, but are *empower* and *seize* truly synonyms? *Authorize* means “to place something under someone's power, or to give them possession of it,” that is: to give someone authority or power over something or over someone. Yet, *empower* has a different, subtle and more critical connotation.

In English, it means the ability to do something, which is more related to *power to* and not *power over*. Even if one or the other may be equivalent at certain times, they are completely different and even contradictory concepts at other times. Empower, as in *the power to*, presupposes that somebody, an individual or group, has abilities, in principle, that will allow him or them to assume responsibility for his or their future. Thus, the individual or group has agency, the ability to face, influence and even try to generate his or their future according to his or their will and desires. Additionally, another fundamental characteristic is that empowerment is no more than potential until

it is activated. The *ability to* becomes reality the very moment it is executed; before that, it is just simple potential.

This is why a willingness to act is equally important as the ability to act. The will to go from potential to action necessarily implies a responsible, individual decision. Thus, we might define *power over* something as a potential authority over others, while a *power to* involves personal responsibility. To become empowered consists of each person being responsible to and for one's self, to and for one's environment, and having to take an initiative; of being an active social agent capable of improving his or her future, as well as everyone else's, all this in a manner more efficient due to using technological tools that make possible setting into action ideas, in the simplest and most practical way. Furthermore, this should be possible in any social setting, through education and culture, as well as through public health and political participation. In other words, anything and everything involved in improving human rights.

Upon participating in the e-STAS (Symposium on Technologies for Social Action) that was celebrated in Malaga, Spain, in May 2011, I organized and solidified my thinking about empowerment. My exchanges with Slim Amamou, communicator Idefonso Mayorgas and Ana Torres, from the *Cultura y Paz* NGO, led by the former UNESCO director Federico Mayor, among others, convinced me to create in Cuba a structure focusing on prioritizing the empowerment of all Cuban citizens through TICs—thus, the creation of our NGO *EmpoderaCuba*. We believe that with help from our active members, and all who want to participate in this great cause we will be able to make progress in the following categories:

- Generating knowledge and understanding about the potential of TICs for citizen empowerment, and the awakening and consolidation of democracy.
- Institutionally strengthening organizations in civil society, NGOs and media workers, so they can participate critically on the topic of democracy, and institutionally strengthening the State's actors, to improve its transparency and good government.
- Strengthening community voices in public debate and decision-making, as well as in the protection of government transparency and responsibility.

Only the sum of all our efforts can make it possible for the digital divide to be reduced to a minimum one day, and for citizens empowered through NTICs to be able to live in a place characterized by equity, freedom and democracy.

Author's Note:

From 2009 to early 2011, I traveled throughout the Americas, from the Rio Grande to Patagonia. With backpack and laptop in hand, I visited many poor communities and offered my minimal contribution to the first step towards citizen empowerment: a campaign for digital literacy. I had a great experience in the Afro-Aymara community of Tocaña, in North Yungas, Bolivia. I left a record of that journey at a travelogue that can be consulted at www.afromonde.blogspot.com. I had the opportunity to continue this enriching humane work in Africa, where the situation is even more critical. From the Cape of South Africa to Lubumbashi, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and through Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania, the digital divide is brutal and begs assistance. I recorded my experiences in Africa at www.africanunite.blogspot.com. I spent two years working on empowerment, all by myself, and everywhere I went, people asked me: "What is the situation in Cuba?"