The Use of the Internet and the Democratisation of Information: the Brazilian Experience

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Etymologically speaking, the word 'democracy' originates in the Greek language and means 'the people's government'. It is related to a political regime that is based on the people's sovereignty. To 'democratise', in its turn, means 'to make accessible to all classes of people; to make popular'. In this context, it seems to be very easy to make a link between democracy and the Internet, the world-wide network that has transformed the physical boundaries in the globe into mere geographical reference points. Apparently, at least, the use of the Internet may lead to the democratisation of information, as such a network makes the information that is available in electronic format widely accessible to everyone. Nevertheless, there may be some requirements for one to benefit from such access. The democratisation of information does not seem to be just a question of computer and network availability. It implies, among other things, literacy, but it even means something more than that.

The Brazilian background

Let us take Brazilian experience with the Internet as an example. Brazil is a developing country in South America with around 160,000,000 inhabitants. The political regime adopted in Brazil is a democratic republic, comprising 27 federated units (26 states and one federal district, which is the capital). Personal computers have been used in Brazil for more than a decade. As in the world generally, computer prices have gradually fallen in Brazil, and computers are being bought by an increasing number of ordinary citizens. Besides that, universities, public and private institutions, banks, etc. have adopted the use of microcomputers and other communication technologies increasingly, so allowing their employees to have access to them. Moreover, access to the Internet has been facilitated by the Brazilian government in order to allow an increasing number of people to be connected. However, computers in Brazil are for the middle and upper classes only, and these people represent less than 20% of the whole population. In fact, only a small percentage of the population own a computer at home, though more have it available in their workplaces. The fact remains that, if one looks at the Brazilian population as a whole, there is only a small percentage that have computers available for them to use. In terms of communication, until 1998, all telephone services were provided by a public sector company, the TELEBRAS and all its subsidiaries, in each state of Brazil. Because of that monopoly, telephone lines have been expensive, and not available to the whole population. With such a picture in mind, we can now discuss the use of the Internet in Brazil, and the role the network is playing in the democratisation of information, in terms of 'making it accessible to all classes of people' in the country.

The Brazilian National Research Network

By the end of the 1980s, the Brazilian government had decided to launch the Internet in Brazil, after some preliminary initiatives with communication networks involving three major universities in the country. It was carried out via the establishment of the National Research

Network project (RNP) in 1989. The RNP was launched as a national consortium funded by the National Scientific and Technological Development Council (CNPq), a federal agency under the Ministry of Science and Technology, with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

In its first phase, from 1991 to 1993, the RNP backbone was implemented and made available in eleven states. At this stage, the backbone consisted mainly of connections at 9.6 and 64 Kbps, and the Internet was restricted to academic initiatives.

In the second phase of the project, from 1994 to 1996, an increasing number of institutions were connected to the network, leading to a rapidly increasing demand upon the backbone. In order to satisfy this demand, the backbone infrastructure was enlarged, implementing more speedy (2 Mbps) connections. At this stage, the RNP expanded its role. Its backbone stopped being restricted to the academic environment only and expanded access to all sectors of the society, offering important support to the consolidation of the commercial Internet in Brazil. The National Research Network project is now in its third phase, which consists of the establishment of the RNP2. The main aim in this third phase is to stimulate the development of a new generation of the Internet network in the country, allowing Brazil to join the North American initiative Internet 2 and the European initiative TEN-155. There is also the aim to promote the implementation of advanced services and applications in a number of states, based on High Speed Metropolitan Networks.

Expanding the access

In 1995, the Internet was opened to commercial use. Since then, Brazil has registered extremely high growth rates in the use of the Internet. In terms of the number of hosts, for example, Brazil is now[1] in the 18th position in the world, the 3rd position in the Americas and the 1st position in South America, with 163,890 hosts. Commercial Internet is available through a number of different backbones. The largest of them in terms of both comprehensiveness and capacity of data transmission circuits is the EMBRATEL backbone, which connects more than 110 locations throughout the country. Besides this increasing availability of connections, there have also been a number of private and public initiatives for democratising Internet access for the ordinary citizen. Two examples that can be given are the development of community access centres, where users who cannot afford their own computers have an e-mail address on the Internet, and the sponsoring of special projects for physically handicapped people, such as one for blind people.

Thanks to such an expansion in the network infrastructure, and to a number of access providers who are offering their products through the network, a variety of information services dealing with national issues are now available through the Internet. All kinds of applications, both national and international, can be found, from the simplest ones, such as sending greeting cards, to the most sophisticated ones, such as handling statistical information about the Brazilian population.

Legal aspects of the Internet in Brazil

The advent of the Internet in Brazil has led to a discussion of the legal aspects involved in its use, both in the National Congress and amongst some jurists and lawyers who are concerned with the legal consequences. There is a concern that the advent of this new technology represents a challenge to the organisation and evolution of the society: because it brings about changes in habits and social activities, and this implies changes in the juridical norms that exist in the country. A few articles and papers have been published in journals specialising in legal and juridical information. The main themes under discussion have been censorship, intellectual property, privacy, security and criminal activity. In the National Congress, various bills have

been under discussion since 1996 and they are concerned with all these themes. However, none of them have yet passed into law, which means that there are no legal regulations for the use of the Internet in the country. It is worth noting that some of these problems, such as privacy and security, can be partially solved by technological procedures, and the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee and the RNP personnel have been taking some action in this matter.

In terms of censorship, a Brazilian jurist specialising in juridical informatics asserts that censorship is simply not applicable to the Internet. The Brazilian Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech to everyone, and many consider cyberspace to be a world where censorship does not exist and can be applied.

In relation to intellectual property, there are two main questions which are the focus of discussion. The first one is copyright, whose treatment -despite being more or less homogeneous world-wide, thanks to international conventions- becomes complicated when it implies more than one jurisdiction in the solution of a conflict, as in the Internet case. The Brazilian jurists who have discussed this issue do not envisage an easy solution to this. The second one is concerned with conflicts relating to domain names and trade marks. Although Brazil is one of the pioneer countries in Latin America in having a proper institution responsible for domain registration in the Internet, there have been no judicial disputes involving domain names so far. The Normative Act No. 1, issued by the Internet Steering Committee in Brazil, stresses the rules regarding domain names in the country. Some of the recommendations state that conflicts not solved via agreement between the parties involved should be resolved by the common judiciary system.

In terms of security, an example of the initiatives being taken in the country is one by the National Research Network which aims to deal with security and criminal issues on the Internet. It is the creation of the Centre for Handling Security Incidents - CAIS. The mission of such a centre is to register and follow-up security problems occurring in the RNP backbone and also to disseminate information about preventive actions relating to network security to Internet users.

In summary, although there are some modest initiatives in Brazil in terms of concern and action regarding the legal aspects of the Internet, the country still adopts mainly a laissez-faire policy.

The democratisation of information: a selected case

I would like to draw attention to one of the initiatives in Brazil, which aims to provide broad, free information access to every citizen. This is the Legal Information System, made available by our Federal Senate. This reflects the commitment of our legal authorities to making national legal information accessible to society and is related to democratisation of information. This is particularly true since this access is to the legal norms of the country, which may lead to a better knowledge of individual rights.

A legal information system was developed in the Brazilian Senate in the 1970s, via its Data Processing and Informatics Centre, PRODASEN. It has been gradually enhanced and enriched since then, and its databases nowadays cover the whole range of Brazilian legal norms in full text format. Search strategies have been implemented on the system to allow the identification of legislation on specific topics. In the beginning, the information available in the PRODASEN databases was accessed only by Senate users. Very soon it was decided to open the access to institutions that had an agreement with the Federal Senate, mainly libraries of other public federal institutions. These have access via remote terminals connected to the Senate mainframe

computer. Such access has gradually expanded since then. As a further stage, the Brazilian legislative database has been made available electronically on CD-ROM and can be purchased by whoever wishes to do so. With the advent of the Internet, and as a result of the democratisation programme for access to the Federal Senate information, a web page has been implemented, which gives access to the variety of information available in the PRODASEN databases. Besides being allowed to visit the Senate main locations, to learn about the Senate history, to visit a special library within the Senate, and so on, one who accesses the Federal Senate home page today can, for instance, read the whole of the Brazilian Constitution, either in Portuguese or in English, on his computer screen. It is also possible to search the federal budget, or legislation on a specific topic, and to directly access some important items within the national legal system. "This is the informatics contribution to the democratisation of legal information" says the Federal Senate home page.

In fact, it is easy to have access to the documents which have a direct link to the Federal Senate home page, despite the need for being literate in www applications in order to navigate (though the navigation in this stage is very easy). However, one who needs to search for legislation on a specific topic faces more difficulties. Some knowledge of search strategies is necessary to begin with. In some cases, knowledge of the legislative process itself is also required. Supposing that these and other requirements are fulfilled, legal terminology still does not always allow a clear understanding by the ordinary citizen.

These concerns can easily apply to a number of other examples, since there have been many government initiatives to help provide national information to society. How can one advocate the democratic aspects of such access? We are talking about the democratisation of information in Brazil, where a fair percentage of the population, besides not having computers and telephone available for them to use, are illiterate in Portuguese. It should be added at this point that most of the information available on the Internet is in English, which reduces even more the percentage of Brazilian people who can make effective and broad use of the facilities. There are those who benefit from all this, of course, and who are able to make use of almost everything that is made available. The democratisation of information in Brazil is a reality. But it is worth noting that we are talking about a small percentage of the population. A small percentage of the population is not exactly 'democracy', which is concerned with all classes of people. In truth, the Internet caters for an elite in Brazil.

Conclusion
Such considerations seem to apply to the wide range of information services available through the Internet world-wide. Brazil is only one case of a developing country. As far as computers and telecommunication infrastructures are available, there is some access in such countries. Nevertheless, for information to be truthfully democratised, computer literacy, language literacy, ability to understand jargon, such as the scientific -just to give an example- are necessary, and all of this require knowledge. Moreover, funding is also essential in this case. As the knowledge, and the money, are in a small number of hands in the world, would it mean democracy?

1. Network Wizards, July 1998.