

**ARTÍCULO PRESENTADO POR SERGIO GODOY PARA EL TALLER DE
EXPERTOS EN LA UNIVERSIDAD DE OXFORD EN FEBRERO DE 2006**

Disponible online con las demás ponencias en

<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/collaboration/?rq=specialevents/20060203>

y en

http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/collaboration/specialevents/20060203_OII-SSRC_position_papers.pdf

**A Chilean's Perspective on the Institutional Ecology of Social Research
on Information and Communication Technologies in Latin America**

A paper for the OII/SSRC meeting "Information, Communication and the Social Sciences: Connecting a Multidisciplinary Field", Oxford, Feb 2-4 2006.

By prof. Sergio Godoy E, MBA PhD

School of Communications

Universidad Catolica de Chile

Director in Chile of WIP/BIT Project¹

Co-ordinator of Communications & Sociology Research Group for Chile's National Fund of Science and Technology (FONDECYT)

No established field, dominant paradigm or appropriate institutional restructuring has emerged to take advantage of the new multidisciplinary research opportunities...Some of these new configurations have acquired stability within or between (specific) fields; in other cases, they are characterized mostly by isolated experiments.

I think I quite agree with OII/SSRC's statement above about the institutional ecology of IT studies, except for the fact that I have seen more isolation than contribution. Specifically in Chile and in Latin America as well, I see two sorts of harmful isolation hampering a better understanding of how technology is transforming culture, everyday life, and the economy. The first type of isolation is conceptual, the other is geographical. I will start with the conceptual isolationism.

The two tribes

Perhaps because of my own professional bias –management of communications, with an early background as journalist and television producer- I found that this field of study is

¹ WIP stands for World Internet Project, an internationally comparative, longitudinal study of everyday uses and non-uses of Internet and other IT in everyday life, from a sociological/communications perspective. WIP has more than twenty partners worldwide, such as the Oxford Internet Institute, co-ordinated by the USC Center for the Digital Future (www.digitalcenter.org). Meanwhile BIT stands for Business and Information Technology, and studies the impact of IT on business and the economy. BIT is also an international, longitudinal study led by a complementary institution- the UCLA Anderson School of Management (<http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/x683.xml>). WIP/BIT Chile project is sponsored by Chile's National Fund of Science and Technology for the period 2005-2008 (FONDECYT project N°1050769).

disputed by quite distinct, separate urban tribes with their own language, emphasis, preoccupations, funding, and ideological agendas. They even dress differently.

On the one hand there are the social scientists with their casual clothing, their politically correct discourses against gender inequality and the digital divide, and some similar traits that –leaving jokes aside- can be summarised as a “soft”, socially conscious emphasis on the effects of IT, often suspicious about how the powerful and wealthy are taking advantage of these instruments. Even in the capitalistic Chile, their suspicion for the powerful does not always include those in government.

Their emphasis on qualitative methodologies is not merely caused by the fact that this tribe is composed by sociologists, psychologists, communicators, anthropologists, or socially-conscious lawyers, but also because funding is normally so scarce that researchers must rely heavily on a few focus groups, a couple dozen in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation in a handful of households, and similar low-cost techniques done in a quite artisanal way. Impact and replicability of this hard-to-get knowledge is further restrained by the difficulties of publishing in Spanish, which is another large topic I will not get into right now. The average European or US academic may be astonished by how people is actually able do any research at all under those conditions.

The other tribe which is currently dominating many aspects of the research agenda consists of economists and engineers, with their boring attires and their emphasis on quantitative methods and econometric calculations of how IT creates value in different fields of human life understood mostly as businesses. This tribe is often confused with another- that composed by salespeople from the software, hardware, telecoms, and consumer electronics firms trying to sell us all their own digital nirvanas. To be fair with my engineering and economist partners in the WIP/BIT-Chile project, this confusion is sought after deliberately by the salespeople themselves, because they are aware that governments and funding agencies pay more attention (and money) to numbers and management talk.

An interesting example of this conceptual divide is the Chilean government’s Digital Agenda (<http://www.agendadigital.cl/>). A rather worthy effort combining the public sector, private businesses, and academia on behalf of increasing the country’s overall competitiveness (quite good nowadays, for Latin American standards) it is nevertheless an affair dominated by the two last tribes already mentioned –specifically, it is led from the Ministry of Industry (confusingly named Ministry of Economics in Chile).

It wouldn’t be the first time a developing nation embraces a technological solution from abroad hoping to bypass rapidly the hardships and humiliations of poverty. Thus in the past Latin America adopted government-sponsored plans on behalf of railways, inward-looking industrialisation, television, radio, even nuclear power in Brazil and Argentina, with different degrees of failure. So I am wary of machine-centred economists and engineers, because they often dismiss the socio-cultural realities underneath these wares. This reality is very difficult to measure with quantitative, econometric techniques alone (although they are indisputably essential). We humans tend to perceive as reality what we can perceive through our senses. The problem of this number-loving tribe is that they are missing a big chunk of what is going on.

Despite its merits, I personally believe Chile's Digital Agenda somehow biased towards promoting Internet access and PCs above other alternatives. There is recent academic evidence about positive correlations between GNP growth and mobile phone penetration in developing nations (a technology far more successful than PC-based internet in terms of massification, which did not require equivalent government support for growing), but not so in the case of Internet and PCs.

Probably the Digital Agenda in Chile will gradually incorporate the human sciences look in order to overcome the main bottlenecks faced by the country. Machinery at the end doesn't solve all human problems. So any move towards a multi-disciplinary understanding of how IT affects human life will certainly be a plus.

The geographical isolation

This second type of isolation is an endemic problem of Latin America, unsolved even by its greatest heroes such Bolivar or San Martin. This may sound weird to the average non-Latin American, who tends to perceive the continent as a rather undistinguishable *mélange* of superstitious Catholicism, Spanish speaking dagos with big hats in white pyjamas, Pancho Villa, drug-traffickers, lascivious mulattas, jungle, heat, slums, and big-mustachoeed dictators with their breasts filled with self-appointed condecorations. Occasionally the well-inspired foreigner has said to me "Oh, you are from Latin America! I once knew someone from Venezuela" as if I could say to a European, "Once I met a certain Boris from Estonia, do you know him?".

The reality is that, apart from some obvious commonalities driven from the Iberian language and culture, Latin America is a very fragmented continent. Countries are quite separate from each other, and not only because distances are enormous. National rivalries and suspicions are still strong, infrastructure is often inadequate, and travelling expensive. Only in the last decade Chile has become truly cosmopolitan; before that meeting a Mexican, a Colombian, or a Venezuelan was far more improbable than meeting someone from the USA or Western Europe.

Despite the distances, it is often easier to engage on research projects with North American or Western European counterparts –notably Spain and the USA- rather than with our neighbours. Thus the old colonial ties are replicated. I am aware of rather interesting efforts in the field of IT in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina, but so far it has been more difficult to engage in collaborative efforts with them because the available funding (which is scarce to begin with) is overwhelmingly oriented towards or from the more prosperous nations of the North. There is a somewhat arrogant perception that we Chileans have nothing to learn from our fellow Latin Americans.

A framework for orientating the research agenda on IT in Latin America

In November 2005 I participated in the Pan Americas Regional Consultation of IT Experts organised by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IRDC, see http://www.idrc.ca/index_en.html). IRDC summoned some thirty researchers from Haiti to

Chile (the USA was ostensibly absent though) in order to help them adjust its research and co-operation agenda on IT and social development for the next five years. Most came from the tribe of the social sciences, but a few belonged to the other tribes as well so at least some degree of multi-discipline was accomplished. Participants were asked to comment and criticise the following framework, which I find rather interesting for the purposes of the OII/SSRC workshop. I made some amendments which I believe were useful (see table).

	MAIN SUBJECT AREAS		
RESEARCH COMPONENTS	E-economy Aim: create jobs & economic value	E-enablers Aim: improve education & health	E-citizenship Aim: improve transparency & accountability
Knowledge networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT in the informal & formal sectors of the economy • SMEs • Copyright • Creative industries • Technological innovation in Latin America 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender equality • Cognitive divide • Education & qualification for the new economy • Local development & e-Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-government for all • Governmental transparency & accountability • Citizenship participation • Citizen's privacy • Public policies
Capacity enhancement			
Policy involvement			
Assessment and learning			
Spreading the results of research			
Transversal preoccupations: Technological innovation in Latin America Innovative public policies			

This research framework, designed to enhance human welfare at the end, required a multi-disciplinary, international perspective to be really productive and significant. Longitudinal analysis was also deemed important, as we were to study patterns of social and economic change.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have argued in favour of a multi-disciplinary, multi-country approach to studying the impact of IT in the most relevant aspects of human social and economic life, taking into special account the realities of the countries and regions involved along time. It is not easy to bridge the gaps between the different "tribes" studying the phenomenon, nor attract funding to new research perspectives. It is therefore quite important to take advantage of opportunities such as the OII/SSRC workshop. Impact of such initiatives on policymakers, academia, businesspeople and citizen organisations should be actively sought after. At least that is what we are trying to do in Chile with our WIP-BIT project, a joint venture between the Schools of Engineering, Sociology, and Communications, with the support of the Chamber of Commerce and government agencies, such as the Ministry of Economics.