

THE NEWSPAPER OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY (DSC), CHILE

An Innovations in Technology and Governance Case Study

The eruption of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in Latin America has aided the region's efforts to achieve economic, political, cultural, and social development. ICTs have contributed to the sustained progress Chile has enjoyed since the mid-1980s. The Newspaper of the Civil Society is a pioneering experiment in the ICT field to improve the mechanisms of collaboration and participation between civil society and government.

Implemented in 1999 by the IDEAS Foundation with the support of the Fund for the Americas, the Newspaper has become an important tool to support the work of diverse organizations in civil society. It has enabled coordination and communication within civil society and has influenced public policy. Nevertheless, it faced many obstacles limiting its impact and reach as an innovative tool, such as the slow evolution between social connectivity and computer literacy, and the limited receptivity to its role in state policies related to the development of ICTs.

On the other hand, the high degree of legitimacy it has achieved within civil-society organizations and the objective and subjective empowerment they have granted to the Newspaper have spurred the formation of organizations such as the Forum for Civil Society and the training of more than 100 leaders and/or social agents to establish bridges of communication with government agencies in charge of implementing national policy for ICTs. "Public journalism" designed to increase the role of citizens in forming "public agendas" has also played an important role.

Some of the challenges facing the Newspaper are the diversification of its training dimension, its expansion to a national level, the strengthening of virtual public journalism, and achieving financial sustainability.

Introduction

The Newspaper of the Civil Society was created as a response to limited participation of citizenry in public affairs, generally seen in the low influence of civil society on the social and environmental policies of local governments. The program came about when the Newspaper's start-up team wondered how it could leverage the Internet to shape a public agenda from a citizens' perspective—a hallmark of the program setting it apart from other virtual attempts of this sort. The mission of the Newspaper has been to broadcast, without filters or censorship, the expressions of the people, empowering them through the Internet.

The innovative aspects of the program are urgently needed in the public-policy arena Latin America; namely, establishing a civil-society voice through, in this case,

This case was written by Javier Salinas, Coordinator, Innovation Networks, Citizenship and Local Management Program, Fundacion para la Superacion de la Pobreza, based on interviews in October 2003 with Mr. Jorge Pesce, director of Diario de la Sociedad Civil, Chile.

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journalism. Through so-called public journalism, the team is promoting debate over important national and international issues by including voices and actors that until now had no access to official media. To achieve this goal, several sections of the Newspaper have been developed—articles, interviews, news follow-ups, debates—to showcase investigative reporting from ordinary citizens.

Through the Newspaper, diverse institutions now have a space for generating a shared vision of their work, as well as for sharing their experiences. The system has user-friendly services that enable interactivity through instant messaging, chat rooms, video conferencing, discussion forums, electronic surveys, task forces, and so on.

The Newspaper of the Civil Society and building social networks in Chile

The Newspaper brings a social focus to ICTs, which are viewed as tools for education, development, and democracy. In this sense, the developers of the Newspaper understand that the most important and revolutionary aspect of the Internet is its interactive nature. It is the first medium of communication where the receiver/consumer can also be a broadcaster/producer, making it a powerful tool for providing information to the public and democratizing communications. Nevertheless, the Newspaper understood that while the Internet is a valuable tool, its availability does not ensure the development of communities. The real contribution of the Internet to fair, supportive, and participatory societies depends on how and for what it is used.

Therefore, in the experience of the people, there was a recognition that the true contribution of the Internet to these processes resides on two levels:

In the process of generating knowledge:

- The availability of information increases prodigiously.
- The process of sharing and discussing becomes more streamlined and broader.
- The transmission of new knowledge is more democratic, cheaper, and simpler.

In the coordination of activities:

- There are more possibilities for enabling the participation of culturally diverse groups and individuals, regardless of where they are located.
- There are more possibilities for working cooperatively, enabling new alliances and joint distant working.
- It is easier for organizations to become more visible and express their ideas, enabling a joint building of public spaces and media to disseminate their voices.

The Newspaper has also served as a powerful tool for building institutional relations among the different actors in Chile's public processes. In this sense, it has been important for generating two coordinating strategies:

- Among the actors or issuers of the Newspaper
- Among these and other political, social, legislative, and financial entities.

In the first case, the **Ring of Civil Society** page on the Web site links all the sites forming the civil-society community, www.sociedadcivil.cl, plus the entire group of those sites has a link to the group through a logo-panel. The sites that are part of the ring form a navigable virtual network. In the second case, www.sociedadcivil.cl is a space for the “accommodation” of Web sites. At present 12 organizations sites and different projects are hosted in this space.

Since its creation, the Newspaper of the Civil Society has sought to become a bridge between the social world and its organizations and government institutions. For example, through the Fund for the Americas¹ and some of its projects, a series of projects linking entities of civil society and training was developed.

Most of the meeting points took place in the area of training, because the resources that the Newspaper made available to social organizations enabled them to increase participation. Several initiatives in this area are worthy of mention, such as the “National Program for Training and Promotion of Citizen Leadership for Sustainable Development and Democracy” convened by the Fund for the Americas and several government institutions. The contribution of the Newspaper was the creation of a virtual debate forum called “Network for Citizen Discussion,” as well as the development of training modules about the citizens’ Internet called “Internet from a Social Outlook.”

Through these processes, there has been a progressive evolution of the sociopolitical reality of the country through citizens’ agendas, greatly influenced by the development of far-reaching initiatives and activities managed by both the state and civil society. This situation presents new challenges for the processes and strategies of information and communications by the participating actors, agents, and groups, many of whom intervene directly or indirectly in the network of organizations that participate in the Newspaper.

One of the most notable initiatives was developed within the framework of the “Program to Strengthen Alliances Between Civil Society and the State,” together with the Inter-American Development Bank. Thanks to the broad range of activities in this initiative, the Division of Social Organizations in the Ministry of Government was forced to expand its working scope and strengthen its relationship with participating civil-society institutions.

Thanks to these positive advancements, the Newspaper has expanded, reorganized, and subdivided its public spaces with information. It has also taken steps to improve horizontal integration and cooperation among the organizations, with special regard to those that optimize links to the “Program to Strengthen Alliances Between Civil Society and the State” and the Division of Social Organizations.

Relations with many single public agencies have also emerged, influenced by the government’s policy toward new technologies, which is mainly directed at educational and commercial issues and does not give precedence to the participation of the people.

¹ Bilateral USA-Chile Fund for Environmental Projects

Nevertheless, some steps have been taken to have a greater influence on the design of public policies and governmental decisions, an area where the Forum of the Civil Society had an important role. Because of these activities, the Forum has become an important interlocutor of civil society with the State. The observations in this area refer mainly to the effect this initiative had in the realm of social organizations.

At first, the Newspaper saw itself as a virtual replica of a printed newspaper, with articles focusing only on environmental work undertaken by the organizations.

But the program faced the lack of an ICT tradition within social organizations and a scarcity of technology. At the beginning of the project, because many organizations expressed an interest in participating in the initiative, the designers were forced to change their original design. They not only asked for the input of environmental organizations but also wanted input from organizations focused on issues of gender, sexual minorities, rights of children, women, unions, culture, ethnic minorities, and so on. This expansion generated a lack of capacity to respond. Apparently, the experience generated expectations that the Newspaper cannot fulfill by itself. The organizations have understood what ICTs are capable of achieving, but to date they lack a more formal channel (public and private) to satisfy the demand.

Impact of the program

As noted above, part of the success of the program comes from the range of perspectives it acquired from the outset. For example, in the area of developing and strengthening the virtual community, one of the guiding principles was that the social sustainability of the Newspaper was essential to run the organization and unify its network of participants. On the other hand, the coordination of task forces is oriented to link and support the associations of organizations that are the most active and interested in the community. That is what made possible the consolidation by the Newspaper the tools of coordination, communication, and information among the organizations of civil society. It's also important to note the optimization of human and financial resources by the organizations that are participating in the project, that are making full use of the training, linkages and visibility provided by the Newspaper. Finally, and most important of all is the responsibility with which they have assumed their role as issuers of the Newspaper online. Thus far, there have been no instances of misuse of the resources provided.

Presently, the Newspaper is working to extend its coverage to more organizations within its scope. Today, some 200 organizations are registered as issuers on a wide variety of subjects: environmental, cultural, gender, indigenous populations, children, sexual minorities, territorial, unions, functional, and so on. Some 900 issuing members publish individually or representing another organization. The aim for the next stage is to increase those numbers by 20 percent. They also hope to increase the number of monthly visitors from 40,000 to 60,000. The program has been functional, due to the support and legitimacy in civil-society organizations and confirmed by the number of issuers (individual and institutional) that participate in its maintenance. The support of the Fund for the Americas—an organization interested in improving the communication tools—at the beginning of the project, and the impact of social organizations interested in environmental conservation and strengthening democracy was also crucial.

Sustainability of the program

Advancements on the project may be divided according to the areas in which the Newspaper is working. In the area of public journalism, a new outlook is being created, similar to the American analogical media at the end of the 1980s, with the purpose of turning the medium into one that reestablishes the connection with the immediate public, by concentrating on social demands instead of focusing on their relationship with political and economic cupolas. This will enable this new people-oriented media to compete with the traditional media through close contact and constant feedback from the people, who set the guidelines for the media and the development of the public agendas.

One of the main contributions of public journalism has been the reformulation of journalistic work toward covering issues, as opposed to traditional media coverage. This difference is important for the Newspaper because it relates the dimensions of people's work with the development and follow-up of public agendas. Represented by institutions of the virtual community, these relationships aim to increase and strengthen the participation of civil-society organizations in the public debate.

Finally, the aim of the Newspaper, seen as a resource for organizations, is to help them develop an agenda to proactively spread information and thus contribute to overcoming the loss of visibility and action of people, and their lack of influence in the design of public agendas. In this sense, the larger objective of the Newspaper is to strengthen capacity of collective communication amongst organizations by supporting the formation of an active and participatory community linked by elements that are not only instrumental but also symbolic.