Making civil society visible in the Net

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Roberto Bissio
Executive director of ITeM (Third World Institute), the host organisation of the Choike portal, Uruguay
rbissio@item.org.uy

ICTs penetrating into media

In 1981 the personal computer –an Apple II—was honoured by Time magazine as 'machine of year'. Twenty five years ago the very idea of a personal computer was seen my many as a toy for rich young 'nerds'. The chief executive of IBM is quoted as having asked ironically "who would want to have a computer at home?" And yet, activists and NGOs in the global south immediately saw the potential and the benefits of the new technologies, were fast in adapting desktop publishing for their alternative publications and soon started to find ways to connect them through modems.

By mid-eighties the first non-military transatlantic data communications were established between GreenNet in London and PeaceNet in San Francisco, organisations whose very names speak of their motives. In a few years a couple hundred non-profit organisations were calling each other to forward e-Mails. When the preparations for the Earth Summit began in 1991 it was the NGOs in the South that set up (and massively used) the electronics communications of the UN Conference on Environment and Development. And it was the NGOs from the South that convinced the World Bank to start using electronic lists to distribute its documentation to civil society organisation (using the 'electronic conferences' of the newly established Association for Progressive Comm-unications) instead of relying on faxes, which placed a heavy burden on the receiving organisation that not only could not interact, but frequently could not even pay the thermal paper needed to receive them.
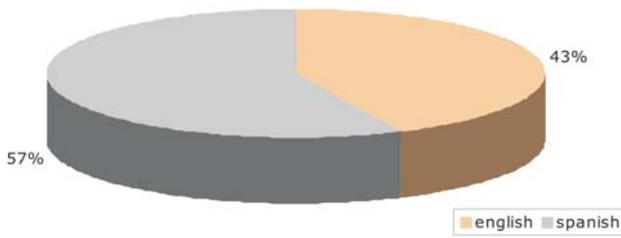
During most of the nineties, 'ICTs for development' used to mean training organisations in the use of computers and how to connect them to the growing Net, subsidising perhaps the communication costs. The benefits seemed so obvious that there was not much need to explain them: communications costs dropped (as opposed to fax or courier), information was not only received but could also be reacted upon fast and efficiently, the network allowed for a new 'many to many' communication, as op-posed to the traditional 'one to one' of telephone, fax or letters or 'one to many' of radio, TV and the printed press. The democratic potential was seen as imbedded in the technology itself and not just in its use as a tool for the 'good causes'.
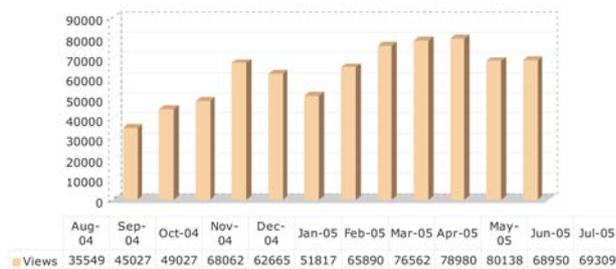
And then the Internet exploded, its commercial use, initially strictly forbidden, was allowed and stimulated. Everybody could speak, yes, but the result was a cacophony of junk mail, unexpected pop-up windows, information overflow and an apparent take-over by the mainstream media, reconverted and 'wired' or taken over by the new emerging stars of cyberspace.

For civil society voices the problem was not any more how to 'speak' –or publish a webpage—but how to be heard. In our own organisation, the Third World Institute of Montevideo, Uruguay (see *www.item.org.uy*) we were challenged to justify the very continuation of our NGONET project, which had started in 1991 precisely to make use of ICTs to enable the participation of civil society in global decision-making. It implied preaching about the potential benefits, writing manuals to explain what an e-Mail is and how to use it, convince donors that personal computers were indeed 'appropriate technologies' for organisations working at the grassroots. But after ten years, what seemed a titanic task was obvious at the start of the new millennium. Why would one need a specific specialised project to help NGOs benefit from ICTs when all they needed was so easily available from the shop around the corner?

Access to all information resources by language

43% english
57% spanish

Use of all information resources

	Aug-04	Sep-04	Oct-04	Nov-04	Dec-04	Jan-05	Feb-05	Mar-05	Apr-05	May-05	Jun-05	Jul-05
Views	35549	45027	49027	68062	62665	51817	65890	76562	78980	80138	68950	69309

The NGONET team, led by Magela Sigillito, realised that "while the Internet has demonstrated its value for civil society international campaigning, lack of adequate visibility of the information on line produced by NGOs and civil society organisations is a major obstacle to a successful dissemination of it and to maximising the opportunities brought by the new information and communication technologies."

In other words, yes, it had become easy to publish in the Net, but at the same time what was the use of doing it when nobody was reading? And nobody was reading because of the central role that 'portals' had acquired. You had your parcel in webspace, but nobody will go there if Yahoo (and later Google) doesn't place you high in

Use of in-depth reports

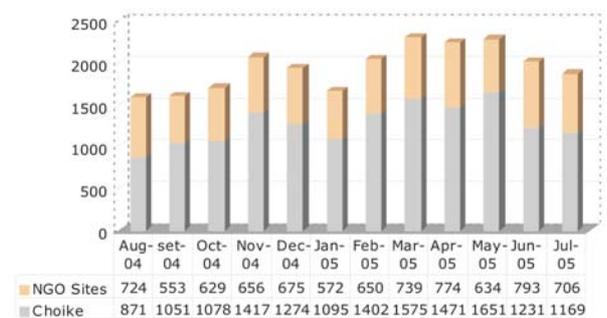|	Aug-04	Sep-04	Oct-04	Nov-04	Dec-04	Jan-05	Feb-05	Mar-05	Apr-05	May-05	Jun-05	Jul-05
Series1	17654	23247	25084	31685	28624	23898	29043	33808	35354	36279	29556	26418

their search results. And you won't be placed high in those results unless many people link at you (or you pay dearly in advertisements). And they won't link at you if your information is not updated regularly, permanently renewed, be made interesting for the public. And you won't spend time and money doing that if nobody reads it. The vicious circle closes like a trap around you. Southern NGOs certainly collectively possess an enormous wealth of information and interesting stories to tell. Yet, by the turn of the century less than a hundred of them had more than a fixed institutional brochure in their webpages. And no motivation to do better.

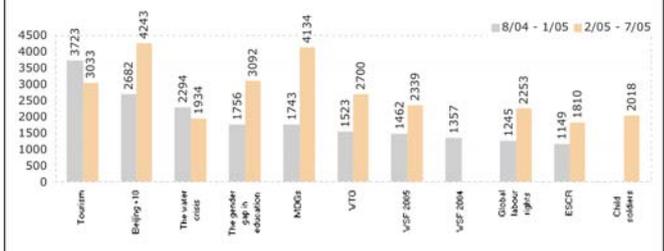## How the people from the South learned their way

Drifting in the wind, according to a Mapuche legend, the cloud lost its path towards life. When it saw the ostrich running fast and determined, it dropped down to ask directions. Thus the cloud became fog. People and animals were left wandering and disoriented, except for the ostrich, which ran fast away. The cloud followed the ostrich's tracks and, to find its own, took the bird up to the sky and left it there in the stars. Since then the Mapuches call both the ostrich and the Southern Cross constellation 'Choike'. That is how the peoples from the South learned to find their ways. Like constellations for travelers, 'portals' help people find their ways in the Internet. 'Choike' is a portal made from a Southern perspective, intended to help users with a specific interest in the issues of particular concern for developing countries.

Choike does not attempt to list exhaustively every site from the South or about it. It selects those that are deemed relevant and useful. 'Choike' is not a destination. It points to where the information is, prioritising sites based in the South and run by public interest organisations. By increasing the visibility of their work, 'Choike' hopes to contribute to the strength of civil society organisations, which are essential for democracy.
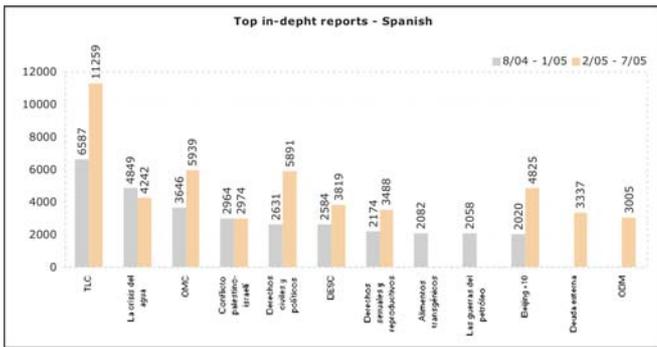

Use of Search Engine

	Aug-04	set-04	Oct-04	Nov-04	Dec-04	Jan-05	Feb-05	Mar-05	Apr-05	May-05	Jun-05	Jul-05
NGO Sites	724	553	629	656	675	572	650	739	774	634	793	706
Choike	871	1051	1078	1417	1274	1095	1402	1575	1471	1651	1231	1169

Top in-depth reports - English

8/04 - 1/05   2/05 - 7/05

Idea of Choike

The idea of Choike was to help convert that vicious circle in a virtuous one. If NGOs start to have a public for their on-line publications, they will publish more and better, which in turn will attract more public… Yet the solution could not be "give me your information and I will publish it for you". Others had that idea before and the result was disempowering for information producers, imposing on them a unified standard and style or placing it in a context that could distort its intended message. To concentrate all

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Top in-depht reports - Spanish

Total Sessions	451,380.00
Total Pageviews	2,320,266.00
Total Hits	7,167,762.00
Total Bytes Transferred	70.65 GB
Average Sessions Per Day	4,030.17
Average Pageviews Per Day	20,716.66
Average Hits Per Day	63,997.87
Average Bytes Transferred Per Day	645.93 MB
Average Pageviews Per Session	5.14
Average Hits Per Session	15.87
Average Bytes Per Session	164.12 KB
Average Length of Session (HH:MM:SS)	00:03:54

Most popular reports (Top ten)

English
1. Beijing +10: Conference on Women review
2. Tourism
3. Millennium Development Goals - MDGs
4. The gender gap in education
5. World Trade Organisation (WTO)
6. World Social Forum 2004
7. Global labour rights
8. The water crisis
9. World Social Forum 2005
10. Economic, social and cultural rights

Spanish
1. Tratados de Libre Comercio (Free Trade Agreements)
2. Organizacion Mundial de Comercio (WTO
3. Derechos civiles y politicos (Political and civil rights)
4. La crisis del agua (The water crisis)
5. Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales (Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)
6. Beijing +10
7. Conflicto palestino-israelí (Israeli-Palestinian conflict)
8. Derechos sexuales y reproductivos (Social and reproductive rights)
9. Deuda externa (External debt)
10. Las guerras del petróleo (The oil wars)

Help Information

Summary

The Summary shows totals and averages for Sessions, Pageviews, Hits, and Bytes for the currently selected Date Range. Visitors information is not shown here because it is only available when UTM visitor tracking is employed.

Calculation Methodology

- Session: A series of Hits to your site over a specific period of time by one visitor.
- Pageview: A request to the web server by a visitor's browser for any web page; this excludes images, javascript, and other generally embedded file types.
- Hit: Any successful request to a webserver from a visitor's browser.
- Bytes: The quantity of network bandwidth used by the files requested during the selected Date Range.

Note: Because Bytes numbers can be very large, abbreviations are used as appropriate, such as MB for megabytes (~ millions of bytes).

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automated spider scans the selected NGO sites regularly and indexes them. And human eyes scan the information in those sites, plus dozens of NGO mailing lists and electronic newsletters to select on a daily basis those news that are to be highlighted in the main pages.

The success of Choike

That human intervention is key to the operation, as it is the editors who determine what is 'relevant' or not, what goes in a headline, which is the main news of the day. That logic seems obvious to a journalist, but it could be deemed as neither 'objective' nor 'impartial'. Do we still need 'gatekeepers' in times of the Internet? The answer is definitely YES. An editor who knows her sources and her intended audience can not –some would say 'not yet'— be replaced by any machine or algorithm, no matter how sophisticated. Her power can, and should, be limited by checks and balances: those of an overview group, evaluations and the participation of the audience itself. And the ICTs can provide new tools and new answers to the old problem of custoing the custodians, including the unprecendented possibility to have editorial teams scattered around the world but still working together. The bottom line is that it is precisely on the human interface of people that are acquainted with the 'movement' and active part of it that lies the very success of Choike, as a place where other actors can feel comfortable and ultimately trust. After all, the very relevance of ICTs for development is that it communicates people with people and not machines with each other. ■

the information in one place, an idea as old as the Alexandria library, seemed the wrong answer in the new Millennium. What about control of the information by its authors? Even if the author is an NGO and the information is not intended to make money and we are for sharing, open source and 'copyleft' instead of copyrights, the authoring organisation should have a legitimate right to determine the way of presenting it, the colours, pictures and style, to obtain the credit for it, to know how many people are reading it and to attract traffic to its own site. Attention, 'eyeballs' in the trade jargon, is the ultimate capital in the Net. In order to solve the contradiction between the need to concentrate a critical mass of high quality information in one place to make it visible and the objective to drive the eyeballs to the websites of the authoring NGOs, the Choike website established itself as a 'portal', a reference to where the information is, in its original context, instead of a centralised information warehouse. A database of NGOs and a search engine are its main tools. The idea is not to list all NGOs in the world in the database, nor to search all of the internet, not even all of the NGO sites in the Internet, but those that have 'relevant' information. An