

INFORMATION NETWORKING IN LATIN AMERICA: PROMISES AND CHALLENGES

Paper to be
published in the proceedings of
the 8th SLA annual
State-of-the-Art Institute
"Latin America: the Emerging Information Power,
Washington, D.C. on
November 8-9, 1993.

by

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Toluca, México, November, 1993

ABSTRACT

Networks can be excellent ways of cooperation, where information exchange, data processing or shared acquisition of information records are the main goals. Latin America has several information networks, most of them with the support of international organization, like UNESCO, IDRC, and OAS. In this paper, a description of the main cooperation schemes and networks is provided, including some of the products of cooperation and the sponsoring organizations' role. An analysis of the promises and challenges of information networking is provided.

1. INTRODUCTION

When freeing South America from Spanish rule, Bolivar had the dream of a Latin American country that would spread from the border of the United States to Patagonia. This dream has proven to be difficult to achieve. Latin America shares a common history, the same language and a similar religion. However, these similarities do not always work in favor of regional integration. Information networking in the region has promises and challenges to meet before this millennium ends. In this paper, an attempt is made to explain the Region's networking achievements and some of the cooperation challenges posed by cultural and economic causes. The analysis is focused on the Spanish/Portuguese speaking countries.

2. TRADE AND COOPERATION

Economic relations among Latin American (LA) countries are scarce. Most LA nations look north to have access to the largest market of the world, which is comprised of the North American economies of the United States (US) and Canada. Any amount of trade among LA countries looks small in comparison and more difficult to handle. For instance, air travel communication is easier to the US than within the LA region.

Mexico, the second largest economy of the region, after Brazil, exports only 2% of the total goods and services to its closest neighbors the six Central American countries. Imports from these countries, on the other hand, amount to barely 1% of Mexico's foreign trade [5]. However, Mexico trades 66% of all its exports with the United States, and imports almost the same amount of goods from the US. Latin America, as a whole, has an inter-regional trade that amounts to 12% in exports and 14% in imports of the total trade of the region [12]. Therefore, most of the LA foreign trade is with North America, Europe and Asia. However, the smaller economies seem to trade more with regional partners. These figures show the rather weak economic relations among most LA countries (See Table 1). As a consequence, if economic links are poor, information exchange is likely to be poor as well

Table 1

INTER-REGIONAL TRADE (X) As percentage of total trade.			
Argentina	21%	Ecuador	8%
Bolivia	58%	Paraguay	31%
Brazil	13%	Peru	18%
Colombia	16%	Uruguay	30%
Chile	17%	Venezuela	13%

3. FREE TRADE TIDE

Fortunately, the political and economic integration of Europe and the US reaction of forming a somehow similar economic block with Latin America is motivating countries of the region to reduce import/export tariffs in order to increase the volume of trade. Mexico and Chile signed a free trade agreement, and Mexico is also working on a possible agreement with Costa Rica. Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay signed a similar agreement two years ago. Venezuela, Colombia and Peru are also discussing to the creation of a tariff free territory between them. This interest in increasing trade among LA countries is likely to help information in the short run, since at least government organizations and private companies will require more information on trading partners.

4. INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Despite the low trade volume among LA countries, the Region has been able to cooperate since the 1960's. Successful information networks have been founded , in general, by international organizations. A list of the most important parent organizations is included in Table 2. The table lists 27 of the most important parent institutions which have supported information networks or agencies in LA. Twenty one information systems and networks are identified, and are listed in Table 7. Both tables should be consulted to identify the organization acronyms which are used throughout the paper. The lists are by no means complete, but it include the active organizations which have appeared in different publications of the LA region [1,3,7,9,10,13,14].

Among parent organizations there are international agencies that stand out for their long commitment to information networking in LA. For instance, CEPAL has done important LA networking, by integrating the region in economic matters. It has created and supported INFOPLAN, which is one of the most active networks. It has national focal points, which provide links to other national networks. CEPAL, thorough CLADES has published directories of information centers with economic development information, and economic planning indexes, among other publications.

UNESCO has been another key player in LA information networking. Several, if not most, of the networking initiatives have been fostered by this UN organization [11]. The regional office in Caracas, Venezuela has supported the creation of networks and information systems along with financing several meetings, and exchange and training of information professionals. Another important UNESCO contribution, with IDRC support, has been the provision of the software MINISIS/Micro-ISIS. This software has been the means for information processing standardization and

networks. Out of 4,094 software copies distributed around the world, nearly 1,400 have been given to LA institutions in the region (INFOLAC 3(4)19. This package is the most popular software in library and information activities in the region. The minicomputer version of this program is used in most national online databases in Mexico and in Brazil.

Table 2

MAIN SPONSORING ORGANIZATIONS

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| * ACAL - Academy of Sciences of LA, Caracas, Venezuela. |
| * ALIDE - LA Association of Finance Institutions for Development, Lima, Peru. |
| * ALADI - LA Association of Economic Integration, Santiago, Chile. |
| * CEPAL/UN-Economic Commission for LA, Santiago, Chile. |
| * CLAD - LA Center for Development Administration, Caracas, V. |
| * CELADE - LA Demographic Center, Santiago, Chile. |
| * CIDE - Research and Development Center for Education, |
| * CIMMT - International Center for the Improvement of Maize and Wheat, Mexico, City. |
| * CLACSO - LA Council of Social Sciences, Santiago, Chile. |
| * CRESALC -Regional Center of UNESCO for Education in LAC, Caracas, Venezuela. |
| * FAO - UN Food and Agriculture Organization. |
| * IICA - Inter-American Institute of Agricultural Sciences, San Jose, Costa Rica. |
| * IIN/OAS -Inter-American Institute of Children, Montevideo, Uruguay. |
| * ILET - LA Institute for Transnational Studies, Santiago, Buenos Aires and Mexico, City. |
| * ILCE - LA Institute for Educational Communication, Mexico C. |
| * IAEA - International Agency for Atomic Energy, which has national focal points in various countries. |
| * ILPES - LAC Inst. of Economics in Social Planning, Santiago, Chile. |
| * OLADE - LA Organization of Energy, Quito, Ecuador. |
| * OAS - Organization of American States, Regional Program of Scientific and Technological Development. |
| * PAHO/WHO-Pan American Health Org., a regional office of WHO. |
| * PIIMFA - Inter-American Program of Information on Children and Families, Montevideo, Uruguay. |
| * REDALC - Education Network for LA and the Caribbean, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. |
| * RIT - Ibero-American Network on Terminology, Caracas, Venezuela. |
| * SELA - LA Economic System, Caracas, Venezuela. |
| * UC - University of Colima, Mexico. |
| * UNAM - National Autonomous University of Mexico. |
| * UNESCO/PGI-Unesco General Program for Information. |

Along with UNESCO, IDRC has also played a important role in fostering cooperation among national information agencies in the region. This Canadian organization has provided funds and know-how to at least 12 regional networks [1]. It organized, among other related seminars, the seminar to exchange experiences of regional information networks in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) in Havana, 1988.

OAS' contribution to library activities has been mainly in library training and in granting of scholarships in library studies. It founded the school of library science in Medellin, Colombia where hundreds of Latin American librarians have been trained. The prime time of this institution was in the 70's when there were few library schools on the LA continent, becoming the only alternative in library education for several countries.

International library associations, such as the International Federation of Libraries and Associations (IFLA), have also helped to create cooperative programs through its Advanced Librarianship Program (ALP). This association has a section devoted to LA and a regional office located in Sao Paulo, Brazil. IFLA funds have helped to organize seminars on public libraries, national libraries, and specific projects such as the Latin American database INFOBILA on library science, which is compiled by the National University of Mexico (UNAM). Other organizations like FID, national library associations and international information organizations have also contributed to LA information networking.

To discuss the contributions of international organizations which contribute or have contributed to information cooperation in the region would take several pages. Therefore, this description is concluded by briefly mentioning the following organizations: FAO, an organization that funded the AGRINTER program; a network of great impact in LA agricultural activities, now a ceased program.

WHO which sponsors BIREME, one of the oldest and active information networks in the region. IAEA that sponsors the atomic energy network of LA; and USIS which has basically provided training and guidance in information networking. Finally, other types of sponsoring organizations that have played important roles in networking are large national research/ educational institutions of LA nations (See Table 2). A list of active networks, information systems and countries where they are located is provided in Table 7.

5. NETWORKING OUTCOME

Information systems and networks have compiled or created various information products to exchange information. Tables 4, 5, 6, 7