
From Latin America: Diversity, Globalization and Convergence

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Abstract

This paper will consider new ways in which digital technologies emerge as possible narratives of citizen empowerment, and explores the notion of convergence as digital connectivity and cultural interaction. Before appearing in the field of technology, the idea of convergence was known in the cultural sphere through the idea of interculturality, which refers to the impossibility of cultural diversity understood from above. Interculturality is desired or regulated on the fringes of processes of communication between different cultures and interactions between local organizations, national institutions, global information flows and decision-making processes. If communication proves to be asymmetric, it implies not only new forms of political and cultural hegemony, but also new forms of political and cultural resistance and reinvention.

Keywords: cultural studies, citizen empowerment, globalization, digital technologies.

Current thinking about the relationship between culture and technology reaches conclusions that are for the most part hopeless, then stops. The culturally conservative say that cable television is the last gift in Pandora's box and that satellite transmission will crown the tower of Babel. At the same time a new class of intellectuals, who run the centres where new cultural and information technology operates, speak confidently of their 'product'. Neither of these attitudes represents solid ground. *What we have is a terrible combination of technological determinism and cultural pessimism.* So, as one after another of the old and venerable institutions are taken over by the imperatives of a harsher capitalist economy it is unsurprising that the only reaction is a perplexed and outraged pessimism. For there is nothing that the majority of those institutions wishes to gain or defend more than the past, and the alternative future would bring precisely and obviously the final loss of their privileges. (Williams, 1997)

The New Sense of Diversity in *Interculturality*

The permanent tributes to cultural diversity that we encounter today, not only on the part of governments and international public institutions but also business organizations operating in the field of cultural industries, are inversely proportional to what is happening at the level of policies that protect and stimulate that diversity. For everything, or nearly everything, remains at levels of decision-making to which local players do not even have access and real mediators of globalization are not included. Nowadays, the survival of diversity is being played out in *a new global cultural institutionalism* capable of calling global organizations to account – a new form of institutionalism that will only arise out of a new style of relationship with what up to now has been, supposedly, the only ‘founding relationship’, that is, the one between culture and state. The question is not one of substituting the state but rather of ‘re-establishing’ or ‘re-institutionalizing’ it in terms of citizens’ interaction with local community initiatives and calling the new global players to account.

Thoughts from Latin America on the Relationship between Technology and Culture

Between fundamentalist entrenchment and commercial homogenisation there is room for studying and debating what can be done from the perspective of political culture in order to ensure that economic alliances do not serve only to secure the free circulation of capital but also of culture. Latin American culture is not a destiny revealed by the earth or by blood. Rather, many times it has been a frustrated project. Today it is a relatively open and problematically possible task. (García Canclini, 2002)

In the new Latin American context a strongly encouraging feature has come to the fore over the last few years, namely, the return of politics to centre stage after almost 20 years of suffering a distorted situation where the economy – disguised as science pure and simple – acted as the only and uncontested protagonist. The *macro economy* supplanted political economy and not only relegated politics to a subordinate position in the decision-making process but also contributed greatly in Latin American countries to a symbolic hollowing of politics insofar as politics lost the ability to bring us together and make us feel as one. This in turn has a *demoralizing* effect in the form of a growing feeling of humiliation and sense of powerlessness, both at an individual and a collective level. The kidnapping of politics by the macro economy also contributed to the delegitimization of the state, turning it into an intermediary carrying out the orders of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organization (WTO) in relation

to an increasingly unequal and exclusive society, with growing percentages of the population living below the poverty line and millions forced to emigrate to the US and Europe. For, upon setting itself up as the agent responsible for the organization of society as a whole, the market seeks to redefine the very purpose of the state, and does so by means of a *reform* which not only sets goals of *efficiency* (which has its notably quantitative and short-termist roots in the private business model) but also throws it off balance, not in the sense of causing a deepening of democracy but rather in the sense of weakening democracy as the symbolic bringer about of national cohesion. It is because of all of this that the *return of politics* breathes fresh life into the atmosphere, expanding the horizons not only of action but also of thought, which has also been stifled by the alliance between '*pensamiento unico*' (one-track mindedness or single-track thinking) and technological determinism. Politics returns with all the inertia and emptiness that it entails, but also with efforts to recharge it with symbolic depth and to be on the alert for new angles and ways of thinking about it and describing it.

Thinking about the relationship between technology and culture from a Latin American perspective involves standing back, as Raymond Williams points out, from the *ill-fated combination of technological determinism and cultural pessimism*, a tendency adopted by several European thinkers of the stature of the political scientist Giovanni Sartori or the literary critic and cultural analyst George Steiner. The critical thinking of the Brazilian geographer Milton Santos who, in the last of his books published in his lifetime (Santos, 2004) traces his defiant vision of globalization as both *perversity* and *possibility*, a giddy paradox that threatens to paralyse both the thought and the action capable of transforming its course, rises up to counter that tendency. On the one hand, globalization *invents* the enslaving process of the market, a process which, at the same time as homogenizing the planet emphasizes differences at a local level and causes increasing disunity. Hence the *systemic perversity* that brings with it and brings about an increase in poverty and inequality, in the now chronic unemployment, in diseases such as AIDS which become devastating epidemics in the continents that are not the poorest but the most ravaged.

However, globalization also represents an extraordinary combination of *possibilities*, changes that are now possible which rely upon radically new facts, of which two in particular stand out. One is the enormous and dense combination of peoples, races, cultures and tastes which occurs on every continent today – albeit with great differences and asymmetries – a combination that is possible only to the extent that other world visions emerge with great force and throw into crisis the hegemony of Western rationalism. The other lies in new forms of technology that are increasingly being appropriated by groups from lowly sectors, making *socio-cultural revenge* or a form of *socio-cultural return match* possible for them, that is, the construction of a counter-hegemony all over the world.

For Milton Santos (2004) that combination of *possibilities* exposes mankind for the first time in history to ‘empirical totality’ and as a result to a new historical narrative. But the construction of that narrative undergoes a ‘political mutation’, into a new kind of *utopia* capable of assuming the magnitude of the following challenges:

- the existence of a new technical system on a global scale that revolutionizes the use of time insofar as it causes convergence and simultaneity in the whole world;
- the crossing of old technologies with new, taking us from a position where influence was specific – owing to the effects of each technology in isolation as has been the case up to now – to a form of transversal connection and influence that affects every country in its entirety, directly or indirectly;
- what the intervention of politics currently involves – for, although production may be fragmented by technology as never before, the political unity that articulates the phases and commands the whole by means of a powerful *unified engine*, leaving behind the variety of motors and rhythms with which the old imperialism functioned, has never been stronger. ‘*Exponential competitiveness*’ between enterprises around the World ‘demanding more science, more technology and better organization every day’ (Santos, 2004:27-28) is the new type of engine powering globalization;

- the peculiarity of the *crisis* that capitalism is facing lies, then, in the *continuous clash between the factors of change*, which now go beyond the old limits and measurability overspilling territories, countries and continents;
- that clash, which is the product of extremely *mobile relationships* and great *adaptability on the part of players* reintroduces the ‘central nature of outlying areas’, not only at a country level but also at the level of society, which has been marginalized by the economy and now resumes a central position as ‘the new base in the confirmation of the reign of politics’ (Santos, 2004:125-126).

What our time regards as a peculiar and conditioning feature of how we think about technology is its slender relationship with a globalization which, in terms of the speed and brutality of the changes with which *global unification* is carried out, exposes some of the most perverse social aspects of the changes that we are going through. Among these, the one with the greatest reach is the growing separation of state and society. For, as a result of being shaped and kept in check by the rules of play imposed by institutions of global economic unification such as the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank, the state finds it extremely difficult to respond to the needs, demands and dynamics of its own society.

In Latin America, then, we face a structurally broken society, but at the same time a society in which its cultural communities (García Canclini, 2002) – from indigenous communities, through some of its small and medium-sized cultural industries to the urban youth, are becoming a crucial setting for the re-creation of a sense of the collective, the reinvention of identity, a renewed use of heritage, a productive linkage between what is local and what is global. Even in the midst of the most brutal processes of economic recession, inequality and exclusion, Latin American societies are living the global transformations that combine a new method of production with a new method of communicating which, as Castells (1997; see also Appadurai, 2001) states, converts culture, the human faculty of processing symbols, into a direct productive force. So, although the technological revolution in communication aggravates the *breach* in terms of inequality between social sectors,

cultures and countries, it also mobilizes the *social imagination* of communities, strengthening their capacity for survival and association, protest and democratic participation, for defending their socio-political rights and activating their expressive creativity.

Interculturality and Cultural Sustainability

Before appearing in the field of technology the idea of *convergence* had made itself known in the cultural sphere through the idea of *interculturality*, which refers to the impossibility of *cultural diversity* understood from above, that is desired or regulated on the fringes of processes of *exchange* between different cultures. Today, that exchange takes place in a space beyond the area defined by national, geopolitical borders and its most profound form was described by Paul Ricoeur (2004) as the *meeting point of irradiation* between cultures, which are configured in networks. In order to understand the complexity of that *cultural irradiation* Ricoeur relies on the concept of *translation*. For interculturality finds in translation its paradigm both in historical and formative terms, given that in translation there is the clear possibility of a constitutive mediation between cultural *plurality* and human *unity*. It is in translating from language to language that we have learned the true possibilities and also the limits of any form of exchange between cultures. Translation represents a departure from the rejection of the outside world, of all that is foreign or different that is a feature of a wide variety of languages. For what the long history of translation itself has shown is, first, the translatability of all languages (take, for example, the disconcerting case of Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were believed to be untranslatable for centuries) and, second, the emergence of *cultural hybridization* as a product in and of translation. In the face of the failure of a long-held belief in the existence of a common parent language, which would spare us the arduous path of bringing cultures 'face to face' with each other, history tells us to work simultaneously with *conditions* of what is translatable and what is indecipherable in each culture, and consequently with the insurmountable requirement that all cultures should know one another and recognize themselves as such within the possibilities and limits of their exchange.

What enhances the productivity of this concept of interculturality is its intrinsic relationship with the idea of *narrative identity* (see Bhabha, 1990 see also Marinias, 1995), that is, the idea that every

identity is created and constituted in the act of being related, in the process of being *told to others*. This is what the precious polysemy of the Spanish verb *contar* (meaning to recount or relate) tells us. For 'contar' means to tell stories but also to be *taken into account* by others and also refers to a form of *reckoning*. In this single verb we find two constituent relationships. In the first place, the relationship between telling stories and counting in the opinion of others or being taken into account. This means that in order to be recognized by others it is essential to tell our story, since the narrative is not only expressive but makes us what we are, both individually and collectively. Especially in collective terms, the possibility of being recognized, taken into account and counting in the decisions that affect us, depends upon the capacity of our stories to take account of the tension between what we are and what we want to be. Second, there is the relationship between telling (narrating and being taken into account) and *reckoning*, which has a double meaning. On the one hand, this establishes the relationship between recognition and social participation, the capacity for participation and intervention by individuals and groups in everything that concerns them; on the other hand, it establishes the perverse relationship between telling a story and the market co-opting the (commercial) value of the sense of translation of cultural translations and exchanged narratives.

Like interculturality, the concept of *cultural sustainability* (VV. AA., 2005) is also a concept under construction. Having its origin in ecological thinking, the concept of sustainability entered the field of culture as a consequence of a new perception surrounding the depth of the relationship between cultural differences and social inequality, and consequently between culture and development. In that context, *cultural sustainability* aims at spelling out explicitly, both in terms of thought and action, the following. First, the *long-term nature of culture* insofar as this represents a permanent contradiction with the increasingly short-term nature of the market and also insofar as the workings of cultural life have things in common with other social, community-level processes, with all that that entails in terms of foresight, planning and accompaniment. Second, it aims to take account of the possibilities for social development that cultural creativity generates in its independent, community spheres and in the different areas of industrial culture.

Cultural sustainability moves on three basic vectors. The first is the *awareness that a community has its own cultural capital*. An awareness that until recently was repressed, or at best avoided, by instrumental, diffusionist cultural policies which saw culture as something totally external to community life, something to which communities had to be given access and not something that those same communities themselves inherit, renew, reproduce and recreate and which, accordingly, is *something that belongs to them* and which maintains *ties of belonging* out of which both social and cultural identities are woven. In more general terms this vector represents a massive turning point, one which makes 'civilian society' and not the state the subject and the main player in terms of socio-cultural development, a turning point that forms part of the strategic displacement which puts *public matters* in the place, politically, where *state matters* were until not very long ago. But there is one significant difference, insofar as the state was always considered to be *one* whereas the public is clearly *plural* or, taking it a step further as Hannah Arendt did, *heterogeneous*.

The second vector is the *capacity of the community to take decisions that enable its cultural capital to be preserved and renewed*. What this means, in other words, is that the level of sustainability of a culture is proportional to its level of autonomy. We are talking, then, about a step that re-situates culture as something in which citizens participate politically and, in turn, repositions them within the formulation of *cultural policies*. It is a well studied and established fact that, unless citizens are involved in classifying their expectations and demands, and empowered as players in the decision-making processes, there will be no culture that survives the proposed exploitation by the market of all cultural *difference*.

Finally, the third vector is the *capacity to open up culture itself to exchange and interaction with other cultures in the country and the world*. What comes into play here is the twin movement of separation and reintegration that local cultures experience, moved by the flows and dynamics of economic and techno-cultural globalization. What should be highlighted in this context is the

critically important fact that that exchange, which is necessarily asymmetrical in terms of the movement generated by the globalizing hegemony of today's market, finds in communities not a defensive response in the nature of withdrawal (which, although justified, would be nigh on suicidal) but rather a *projective* response, capable of arguing the sense of changes without which not even a minimum level of sustainability is possible.

Within Latin American communities current communication processes are perceived as both a form of threat to the survival of their cultures and at the same time as *a possible means of breaking with exclusion*, an experience of interaction that carries risks but also opens up new possibilities for the future (see Alfaro et al., 1998; Quintero Rivera, 1998; Sanchez Botero, 1998). This in turn is leading to a situation where the dynamics of the traditional communities themselves are overstepping the boundaries of comprehension elaborated by folklorists and many anthropologists. In those communities, there is less nostalgic complacency about traditions and a greater awareness of the indispensable and symbolic reworking that the construction of their own future demands.

Digital Convergence in Cultural Communication

Virtual exchanges shape new cultural features to the extent that those exchanges densify and expand towards a growing range of spheres of people's lives. In this respect people speak increasingly of 'virtual cultures' in order to refer to changes in communicative practice as a result of interactive, distance media, which alter subjects' sensibilities, their ways of understanding the world, relationships with others and means of classifying and understanding their surroundings. Virtual cultures are a way of mediating between culture and technology, they represent systems of symbolic exchange by means of which collective meanings and ways of representing reality are formed. (Hopenhayn, 2001)

The intellectual, yet hegemonic view of the relationship between communication and culture is still one that separates the high plane of *culture* from and sets it up in opposition to the mundane and commercial space of *communication*. A form of purism, made worse by the trivialization of communication and the wicked commercialization of communication media on a massive scale, is turning culture into a bare, symbolic region, as if that sphere had not always been crisscrossed by

the heavy darkness of the social exchange that links creation to production and to exercise of power. Perhaps the best example of the unavoidable hybridization of culture and communication is found nowadays in the relationship between music and sensitivities among young people (García Canclini, 2002). Part of the most lucrative and biased form of media business, music forms part of young people's most expressive experience of appropriation, cultural creativity and, at the same time, social empowerment.

However, communication media are still regarded with suspicion not only among the elite but also in the *management of cultural institutions*, as a consequence of a cultural complex-reflex that is based more on nostalgia than history. This, in turn, is preventing the *heterogeneity of symbolic production* (Lahire, 2004; Maigret and Macé, 2005), as represented by culture today, from being taken on board fully in a way that facilitates a response to new cultural demands and enables the logic of the cultural industry to be faced without fatalism. This in turn involves assuming that the intervention of politics in communication and culture brings into play something that does not have to do simply with the management of certain institutions or services, the distribution of certain goods or the regulation of certain frequencies but rather with producing a sense of society and its means of recognition among citizens. There are some outdated concepts of communication out there, which continue to fail to recognize the communicative competence of citizens (see Alfaro et al., 2005; Winocourt, 2002). So, communication in culture ceases to take the form of intermediary between creators and consumers and takes on the task of dissolving that social and symbolic barrier, *decentralizing and de-territorializing* the very possibilities presented by cultural production and its devices.

Corroborating that overlap between culture and communication, two processes emerge that are radically transforming the *place* of culture in Latin American societies, the revitalization of *identity* and *technical* revolution. Globalization processes are reviving questions of cultural identity, whether ethnic, racial, local or regional, to the point of turning cultural identity into the leading aspect of many of the most violent and complex international conflicts of recent years, yet at the same time aspects of cultural identity, including gender and age, are reshaping the force and

meaning of social ties and the possibilities of coexistence at a national and local level. Moreover, as far as the process of inclusion/exclusion on a global scale is concerned, globalization is turning culture into the strategic space for compression of tensions that rip apart and reconstitute the act of 'being together', and into the place where political, economic, religious, ethnic, aesthetic and sexual crises all come together. From this stems the fact that it is in the cultural diversity of stories and territories, experiences and memories that one not only resists but also negotiates and interacts with, and will end up transforming, globalization. For what makes identity a fighting force is inseparable from the *demand for recognition and meaning*. And neither the one thing nor the other is capable of being formulated in purely economic or political terms, for both form part of the very heart of culture in terms of *belonging* and *sharing*. This is why, today, identity constitutes the force that is most capable of creating contradictions in the hegemony of instrumental reason.

On the other hand, we are going through a technological revolution whose distinguishing feature lies not so much in introducing to Latin American societies an unaccustomed quantity of new machines but rather in shaping a new environment or communicative ecosystem. It is in creating this *third environment* (see Echeverría, 1999; Fischer, 2001; Levi, 1998), which overlaps with the natural and urban/social environments, that digital technology is shaping our ways of inhabiting the world and the very forms of social tie.

When Technology Becomes Structural

What *technological convergence* makes us think of is, first, the emergence of a communicative reason whose devices (fragmentation which displaces and disorients, flow that globalizes and compresses, connection that dematerializes and produces hybrids) bring about the future market for the whole of society. In the face of the consensus with which Habermas (1989) identifies *communicative reason*, free of political contradictions that technological and commercial media bring, what we need to decipher is the *communicational hegemony* of the market bringing about a new model of society in which communication/information ends up being the most effective driver

in terms of excluding or including cultures, whether ethnic, national or local, into/from market space/time.

But globalization is not simply a manifestation of the economy and the market but rather a movement which, by making *communication* and *information* the key to a new model of society, pushes all societies towards an intensification of contacts and conflicts, exposing all cultures to one another as never before (Appadurai, 2001). Today, even the nomadic communities of the Amazon, who flee violently from contact with others, frequently encounter those modern nomads who sponsor 'ecological tourism', that form of anti-tourism that leaves its own world precisely in order to go and meet others, in search of the experiences of others! The anthropological shaping achieved by the relationship between culture and communication, is accentuated when some of the most decisive cultural transformations arise as a result of changes that the technological framework of communication is going through, affecting perceptions that cultural communities have of themselves and their ways of constructing identities.

The current reshaping of indigenous, local and national cultures is above all a response to *the strengthening of communication and interaction between those communities and other cultures in the country and the world*. From within local communities current communication processes are increasingly perceived as an opportunity for interaction with the rest of the nation and the world. And while there is still a fight for land, that fight today forms part of a struggle for the state, that is, the struggle to count when the country is built.

The very *place* that culture occupies in society changes when communication technology media cease to be purely instrumental, deepen and become structural. Today, *technology* refers not only (and not so much) to the newness of devices but also (rather) to new modes of *perception* and *language*, to new sensitivities and writings. Increasing the sense of separation produced by modernity, technology dislocates knowledge, modifying both cognitive and institutional rules of *conditions of knowledge* and *figures of reason* (Chartron, 1994), which in turn leads to a significant

blurring of the boundaries between reason and imagination, knowledge and information, nature and artifice, art and science, expert knowledge and profane experience. So, at the same time as we face a growing wave of technological fatalism coupled with the most radical political pessimism, we find ourselves facing technological change that has come to shape a community ecosystem. An ecosystem in which audiovisual experience thrown into confusion by the digital revolution points towards the shaping of a *cultural visibility* which is today the strategic setting for a decisive political battle against the *old and exclusive power of the letter* which, for over a century and a half, has failed to recognize the difference and the richness of the oral and visual elements of culture, those same elements that now link their memories to virtual imaginings in order to give new meaning and new form to cultural traditions.

From Convergence as Communicative Transparency to Convergence as Connectivity and Cultural Interaction

Digital convergence is the new name for a process and a model which, when it first appeared in the late 1980s, was known as 'communicative transparency'. It was a *fully integrated* model (in the sense that Umberto Eco has given to that word) given that what was really proposed was the ideology that 'everything is communication'. This, translated into *information* terms, came to legitimize the logic behind deregulation of the markets in a quite shameless fashion. So, the political importance of that first form of technological convergence is no more and no less than technical justification for economic concentration. In the redesign of Latin American states by neoliberal policies, the decentralization encouraged by new forms of technology has served as ideological cover for the most shameless concentration of media in oligopolies that would have been unthinkable a few years ago. From the purchase of Time-Warner by AOL in the US and the merger between Vivendi-Seagram-Canal+ in Europe, *hyper connectivity* (TV-internet-mobile phones) involves the same level of intensification in terms of economic concentration as *digitalization without boundaries* involves in the technical field.

But this whole process of convergence/concentration of media power cannot cause us to block out or devalue its other aspect, namely, the strategic impact of technological change that has

strengthened and deepened the new communicative ecosystem. Thrown into confusion by the digital revolution, the cultural and audiovisual experience points towards the establishment of new kinds of *community* (whether artistic, scientific or cultural) and a *new public sphere*. Both are linked to the emergence of a *cultural visibility* which is the scene of a decisive political battle. That battle is going through a displacement (in Spanish, *des-localización*) of knowledge, upsetting old, yet still overbearing hierarchies (Mignolo, 2001), disseminating the spaces where knowledge is produced and the circuits along which it travels, and making it possible for individuals and communities to introduce their everyday oral, sound and visual cultures into new languages and new writings. In Latin America never was the *palimpsest of multiple cultural memory* of the people more likely to take possession of the *hypertext* in which *reading and writing, art and science, aesthetic passion and political action* interweave and interact.

Technological convergence means, then, the emergence of a new *cognitive economy* governed by displacement of the status of the number which, from being a symbol of dominion over nature is becoming the universal mediator of knowledge and technical/aesthetic operation, which in turn comes to signify the primacy of sensory-symbolism over sensory-engine. For digitalization makes possible a new form of interaction between the abstract and the sensible (i.e. what is capable of being sensed or perceived), completely redefining the boundaries between diversity of knowledge and means of acting.

A *critical view* provides us with a sound warning of the risks involved in current technological development in its complicity with market logic and processes that aggravate social exclusion. And it is precisely because of this that our inclusion in new global technology cannot be thought of as a *socially inevitable automatism of change* but rather as a process that is heavily weighed down with ambiguities and contradictions, a process of advances and setbacks, a complex set of filters and membranes (Manzini, 1991) that regulate selectively the multiplicity of interactions between old and new ways of inhabiting the world. In fact, technological pressure is itself provoking a need to find and develop other rationales, other paces of life and relationships with objects and people, relationships in which physical and sensory depth become of fundamental value once again. The search for alternative medicines or attempts to reconnect with our own bodies and those of others speak of this, reinstating contact and immediacy in communication.

The speed with which mobile telephones and internet access have spread to the poorest strata of Latin American countries marks an unexpected process of connecting the majority to the digital network, who in this way come to inhabit the new *communicational space* where they can connect places to which people have emigrated with places in their own country, exchanging music and photos with their relatives and friends on the other side of the Atlantic and the world.

One particular and pioneering experience of cultural convergence that is achieved through digitalization, which is still not being given all the attention it deserves from an academic perspective, is that of teenagers and young people. For them, the computer is no longer a machine but rather a *cognitive and creative form of technology* (Barganza and Cruz, 2001; Dede, 2000; Scolari, 2004). Of course teachers have every right to wonder what happens to the body when someone spends so many hours in front of a screen, but the real problem is not what the computer does to the body but rather how new methods of inhabiting the body and new knowledge about the body, that is to say, techno-biology and genetics, affect the body, both in terms of possibilities and perversions.

This is the question that Donna J. Haraway (1991) had the audacity to ask herself when she thought not about the possibilities for transforming the body cosmetically but rather about the possibilities of the *cyborg body*, that hybrid that terrifies all the adults of my generation because it is the alloy that presents the greatest challenge to the rationalist story that we have told ourselves in the West. For while the whole history of the evolution of mankind is a story full of hybrids, of transfusions of nature and artifice, and vice versa, the rationalism that developed from old idealism has purported to keep *episteme* and *techne*, knowledge and technique, in separate worlds, endowing the former with all the positivity of invention and reducing technique to a mere instrument or tool. This has fundamentally affected our ability to think of the *constitutive relationships* that have always existed between science and technology but that have never made

Martin-Barbero, From Latin America...

themselves apparent until now. Hence the existence of *techno-science* challenges us to think not of the 'world of technology' in the singular but rather, as Heidegger (1997) noted, the *technology of the world*, that is, technology as a constituent dimension of humanity. Efforts to think of technological convergence as an *environment* and a *communicative ecosystem*, as strategic in social terms today as the natural ecosystem, are aimed at meeting this challenge.

Digital convergence introduces into cultural politics a far-reaching renewal of the communication model, for we have moved from the one-way, linear and authoritarian *information transmission* model to the *network* model, that is, to a model of *connectivity* and *interaction* which transforms mechanical forms of communication at a distance into an *interface of proximity*. This is a new model which finds its form in a policy that favours synergy between many small projects over the complicated structure of large, heavy equipment both in terms of technology and operation.

Towards Public Policies of Cultural Convergence

At the moment, cultural diversity is going through a very strange *situation*. On the one hand, digital convergence represents two crucial opportunities. First, the opportunity presented by digitalization, making it possible to put data, texts, sounds, images and videos into a *common language*, dismantling the rationalist, dualist hegemony that, until now, set what was capable of being understood against what was capable of being sensed or felt through emotion, set reason against imagination, science against art, culture against technology and books against audiovisual media. Second, the formation of a new public space shaped by social movement, cultural communities and community media. Both opportunities are made up of an enormous and diverse plurality of players who *converge* on an emancipating commitment or pledge and a political culture in which resistance forges both initiatives and alternatives. On the other hand, a growing awareness of the value of *difference*, of *diversity and heterogeneity* in the field of civilization and in ethnic, local and gender culture, is confronting a powerful movement to *standardize the social imaginary* in terms of ways of dressing, musical taste, bodily forms and expectations of social success, in narratives involving a wider audience such as the cinema, television and videogames.

The market has resolved that tension by converting cultural difference into a stratagem for *re-territorialization* and *personalization of social differentiation practices*. As David Harvey wisely observes, the mechanism works by means of ‘the paradox that the less decisive that spatial barriers become, the more sensitive capital becomes towards differences in place and the greater the incentive for places to make an effort to distinguish themselves as a means of attracting capital’ (1989: 297). A paradox that in the individual sphere translates into placing the *effort to distinguish oneself* at the centre of individuals’ battle to climb out of the social anonymity to which the system itself condemns them.

The possibility of public policies that purport to take on the complexity of these processes involves the establishment of *regulatory frameworks which have a global and a local reach*, being the two strategic spaces in which not only the economy but also technology and culture move today. Regulatory frameworks that will only come out of a *negotiation* between public, private and independent players, from national, international and local spheres. For, as evidenced by the Global Forums at Davos and Porto Alegre, and especially the preparatory meetings for the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), those players now have *bodies, organizations and associations* capable of representing the different interests in play. This means that the presence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is having an effect around the world that can only be comprehended, or predicted politically, through an *integral or all-embracing vision* that is capable of placing the *impact* and the *potential* of that technology in the context of *processes* of socio-economic development and practices involving democratic participation.

The above contrasts with the absence of the public sector in the carrying out of technological change, an absence marked by the leap from *legalistic* and *stubborn* policies during the 1970s and 1980s to the *purest and simplest deregulation* which in the 1990s left the market free to mark the logic and dynamics of ICT transformation. One particular obstacle lay in the fact that, at the same time as deregulation occurred in the field of telecommunications and large-scale media, the state stepped up massively the regulation of small-scale media, such as radio and local TV broadcasters,

multiplying the number of legal ties on their ability to function and expand. For this reason, in addition to the enormous gap between countries in North and South America, we find the most brutal indices of inequality in the largest and economically strongest countries in terms of opportunities for connecting to networks. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC): 'in 2003 the highest income group in Brazil reached a connectivity rate of 82% while the national rate was just 12%' (CEPAL/ECLAC, 2003). For the 'digital divide' is *really a social divide*, that is, it does not relate simply to the effect of digital technology but rather to the organization of society in such a way that the majority is prevented from accessing and making use of ICT not only physically but also economically and mentally.

On the other hand, we also come across certain situations in Latin America that provide a setting for strategic, public policy intervention, situations that are particularly appropriate for putting digital convergence at the service of exchange and empowerment of cultural diversity.

The most revealing scenario is the strategic potential already represented by digital networks which weave *socio-cultural integration in the Latin American space* mobilizing scientific research, artistic experimentation and community radio and TV media. From small rural towns to large urban neighbourhoods, popular sectors, whether through young people or in certain indigenous communities, we face an intensive *community* appropriation of radio and TV to put local communities in touch with one another and with others in the world, with the objective of reworking the collective fabric of memory and counter-information, mobilizing the imagination to participate in the construction of what is public.

A second scenario is that offered by networks woven by those who have emigrated, from networks formed by Ecuadorian emigrants in Spain who communicate in Quechua, to Mexicans in the US surfing the net in their own inimitable 'Chicana' style or the net-art of visual arts and music, which young people circulate not only among their own compatriots but also among all migrating Latins

or South Americans, and by means of which digital convergence becomes a constituent part of the Latin American cultural space that is under construction.

A third scenario, albeit one that has arrived late in the day and that is still somewhat precarious, is that of *public schools* which are starting to converge with digital technology and using it to radically reshape methods of producing and circulating knowledge just as it is reshaping the maps we use in our professional and working lives. The most far-reaching changes brought about by the information society are concerned with the new mental skills required for new roles or offices, new ways of learning, whether formal or informal, and new forms of relationship between work and play or between our domestic space and the workplace.

Finally, a fourth scenario constitutes the growing awareness that rights to information and knowledge are an integral part of human rights. We refer to the right of citizens and social groups to have *access to information* not only as receivers but also as producers; and also the *right to participate of and in knowledge*. For, on the one hand, the *hyper-valuation* of *information* is causing a severe devaluation of traditional knowledge that is not capable of being computerized, such as peasant survival strategies, the life experiences of immigrants, the cultural memory of the elderly and so forth. This means that ultimately, in Latin American countries, 'information society' comes to mean the expansion of a *society of ignorance*, that is, a *failure to recognize* the plurality of knowledge and cultural competences which, whether shared by the popular majority or indigenous or regional minorities, are not being incorporated as such into maps of society nor even their education systems.

Alongside that set of scenarios in which public policy can play a part, we wish to end by putting forward a map for strategic action (for the complete text of these proposals, see Martín-Barbero, 2005) to be set in motion so that the digital revolution serves as a revolution that makes possible the recognition of true value, of the richness that cultural diversity involves.

Map for Strategic Action

Virtual Literacy

Just as we find *technical infrastructure* at the point of getting information into society, in order to make use of the benefits of ICT Latin American countries are going to have to acquire a new *cultural base* which provides the majority with proper access to the various uses of ICT and its creative production. Making that *cultural base* available to Latin American societies as a whole will involve a project that is just as demanding, and involves just as much, if not more, effort as the provision of physical infrastructure. We call that project *virtual literacy*, and we understand it to be made up of a *set of mental skills, operational habits and interactive spirit* without which the presence of technology among the majority of the population would go to waste or be twisted by the use to which it is put by a minority for their own benefit. Just as, at another point in its history, the whole of Latin America set itself the basic social project of achieving adult literacy, a project designed by Paulo Freire, so now Latin American societies find themselves in need of a new project of *virtual literacy* not for a particular group but rather for the population as a whole, from children to the elderly, from urban communities to rural and indigenous communities, including workers and the unemployed, the displaced and the disabled.

This concerns a form of literacy whose principal peculiarity lies in being *interactive*, that is, learning takes place through *the very process of using technology*. A use that can and, in certain cases, must be *orientated*, but which cannot be supplied by mere conventional knowledge or wisdom. There is undoubtedly a *convergence* to be established between literacy and *virtual literacy*, so that the former is integrated into the latter as a dynamic factor in the process, but in the knowledge that *virtual culture* reorders the symbolic media on which formal culture relies by repositioning several of the time-space boundaries that the latter involves. *Surfing* is also reading but not from left to right or top to bottom and not by following the order of pages but rather by *crossing or passing through* texts, images and sounds that are interconnected by extremely diverse methods of articulation, simulation, shaping or play. These are means of *virtual articulation* that

form an indispensable part of the knowledge that is increasingly required nowadays by the worlds of work and culture.

The infrastructure of *public libraries* must become a strategic space, a point of basic access for the masses both to networks and to *virtual literacy*. *Convergence* between traditional services and new services, which introduce virtual networks, must be accepted as an *educational and social* challenge given that convergence plays out the strategic relationship between information, creative interaction and social participation.

Research into Means of Appropriating Technology

Along with the new *literacy*, the inclusion of Latin American countries in the challenges and possibilities of digital technology involves a shared research project surrounding *the ways in which local cultures*, whether towns, ethnic groups or regions *are making use of or appropriating virtual culture*, that is, the means of interaction with information networks which communities select and develop, the transformations that their usage introduces into community life and the new resources, both technical and human, that are required in order to render those interactions socially creative and productive. It is precisely because new ICT results in the cutting loose of *territorial* culture and its inclusion in the rhythms and virtualities of *cyberspace* that our system of education and culture needs to *monitor closely and continually* the ways in which various territorial cultures process changes, and to take account of differences in age and gender and distinguish between small and large cities and rural, industrial and underdeveloped areas for that purpose.

Digitalizing our Heritage

Today, putting our heritage onto a digital network offers a strategic possibility both in terms of *conservation* and in *democratization* of its uses. The former needs no further argument given the fragility of many documents and other cultural items and the fragmentary and precarious nature of a number of utensils. Digital conservation not only makes it possible to protect items but also

Martin-Barbero, From Latin America...

facilitates their study and permanent *activation*, by putting them in touch with others, whether in chronological, thematic, general or specialized terms.

Likewise, digitalization makes it possible to achieve *local and global visibility* of our heritage, and especially the *sharing* of diverse national and local Latin American heritage. On the one hand, it is a case/question of *democratizing*, that is of bringing the cultural heritage of Latin American countries to their own citizens for their knowledge and enjoyment, and for the preservation of 'real' historical memory that is not official or homogeneous but plural, and enabling its appropriation by even the remotest of generations and populations. On the other hand, it is a question of a *new way for our cultures to exist in the world*, showing the richness of history and the creativity of the present, debunking clichés and exotic stereotypes and attracting tourism. And this is possible in the multiple ways in which hypertext today permits, that is, in fixed and moving images, in soundtracks and music, codices and texts. Or through *databases*, images, oral narratives, music, songs, *thematic backdrops* or virtual exhibitions.

Expanding Creativity to the Net

Digital networks are not only a place for conservation and sharing of cultural and artistic items but also a space for *experimentation* and *aesthetic creation*. Hypertextual experimentation makes new art forms possible by means of forms of *architecture of languages* that until now were not possible. On the other hand, interactive connectivity challenges the *exceptional nature* of 'works' and blurs the *uniqueness* of the artist, displacing the axes of the aesthetic towards interactions and events, that is, towards a type of 'work' that is permanently open to the collaboration of creative surfers. A metaphor for new ways of socializing, creation on the web permits aesthetic performativities that virtual media open up not just for the field of art in particular but also for social and political participation, which activates various forms of sensing and socializing which before now have been taken to be incapable of acting and creating and interacting with contemporary technology.

Free Access to All Human Creation

One of the most profitable ways of stripping the majority of items that form part of human culture is the deceitful protection of *intellectual property*, a spurious and mystifying way of classifying the *rights of the author*, which involves reducing the intellectual to what can be appropriated commercially, a right that is definitively co-opted by the idea of *patent* and its pseudo commercial jurisprudence. We need to bring out into the open the way in which and the extent to which scientific knowledge and aesthetic experimentation are subjugated by the dismantling of the multiple forms of regulation that prevented the spread and invasion of *property* to fields of knowledge, practices and services previously considered public and which the internet today transforms into *common property*.

This is how the convergence of *cultural networks* (Finquelevich, 2000; Molina, 2001; VV.AA. 2002) operates, the newest and possibly one of the most fertile forms of cultural convergence currently in existence. It is spurred on, on a daily basis, by artists and administrators, trainers, municipal institutions and local communities. An enormous gain stems from the fact that one of the tasks assumed by many of the new players is that of overseers, intent upon supervising the projects and decisions that they take part in, money matters and the type of exchange that is promoted. *Cultural networks* have become the new *public space of intermediation* between different players in the same country; between players in the same sphere – for example of politics, management or training – in different countries; or mobilizing cross-disciplinary factors from the field of politics that enrich academic work or from the field of artistic creation that enrich the field of politics. We face the historic possibility, not only in terms of technology but also in social terms, of fundamentally renewing the political framework of interculturality, weaving networks that increasingly connect the world of artists and cultural workers with the world of territorial institutions and social organizations. And we are going to need that framework for only by bolstering and empowering the network of social and institutional players in our cultures to the maximum extent possible, and creating the most far-reaching alliances possible all over the world, will we be able to confront the offensive of political apathy and cultural manipulation that has been set in train by the globalization of fear and the new security industries.

I cannot bring this reflection to a close without linking it to the 'reasons for my hope' (of which Borges spoke in an early book entitled *El tamaño de mi esperanza*' (which in English means 'The Measure of My Hope'), which are the link between research and the political action described herein. I refer to the 'second chance' (García Marquez) which, for those who have lived through 100 years of solitude, can involve convergence between their oral cultural traditions and new forms of visual and cyber writing, if literal cultures will permit their authoritarian didacticism to be transformed into performative social mediation. For the subordination of oral tradition, sounds and visual experiences of the majority to the exclusive order of educated literacy is currently being eroded in a way that was unforeseen and that stems, on the one hand, from the displacement (in Spanish, *des-localización*) and spreading of 'traditionally modern' channels/circuits of knowledge and, on the other, from the new ways of producing and circulating languages and new writings that arise out of electronic technology, especially on the internet. Thus we stand before a new cultural and political stage which may prove strategic, first, in transforming an educational system that is exclusive not only in quantitative but above all in qualitative terms, and profoundly anachronistic in the relationship that it bears to the changes that everyday cultures are going through, and, second, in ensuring that the democratization of our societies reaches the cultural world of the majority, making it possible for people to appropriate new knowledge, languages and writings from their own cultures.

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