

Internet availability and politics in Peru: a preliminary report on an apparent paradox

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ABSTRACT

As an underdeveloped country, Peru has faced many challenges regarding the availability of ICTs, especially Internet access and contents. Lacking coherent public policies, most of the current efforts to resolve these issues are limited in scope and with a heavy presence of private activists or investors. The surge of the *cabinas públicas*, the Peruvian version of telecenters or Internet cafes, is a singular form of response. These *cabinas* have been thought of as a promise of enhanced social use of the Internet, specially in the public arena and political participation. But this has yet to happen.

Both the lack of proper promotion from the government and the political elites of a vibrant public space on the Peruvian Internet, and the nature of the *cabinas públicas* can be considered as partial explanations. Taking into account that mere access to the technology does not provide immediate new services, nor new attitudes toward learning, communication and participation, the emphasis on consumption of pop culture and interpersonal communication resources appears as a case of the Internet in Peru that has been socially shaped in a direction that is not necessarily what the original promoters nor the very rustic public policies have intended. Some potential research paths and policy considerations are inferred from this reasoning. .

Keywords: Peru, Internet access, telecenters, social shaping of technology, government websites.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION: A PERUVIAN PECULIARITY?

Ten years ago, telecommunications suffered a significant change in Peru. Both the privatisation of the combined national public monopoly, CPT and Entel Peru, and access to the Internet occurred a month apart. While the need for private investment was one of the main points of policy of the Fujimori administration, and thus a priority for the government of the time[1], there was not a single government policy action towards the development of the Internet in Peru, being that all the efforts came from the private academic sector [2].

The Red Científica Peruana (RCP), as a NGO dedicated to developing connectivity, followed the pattern set in many countries of the region by official, state financed organizations, that had as a mandate the achievement of connectivity as part of a national policy of scientific and technological innovation or development. The particularity of the RCP was its private nature, that made it similar to other NGOs dedicated to further access to the Net but with different aims.

Social development, with initiatives for civil society empowerment, minority groups' economic opportunities, and better governance as complementary factors, has been one of the main issues in promoting Internet access in underdeveloped countries, and so was common to many initiatives in the region [3]; this became the main interest of the RCP, for instance, when the original conditions of existence, as a cooperative venture dedicated to bring access to academic and research institutions, became less and less relevant for a variety of reasons. As one of the possible alternatives for the RCP, the setting up of Internet community access centers, or telecenters, appeared as an interesting possibility.

While the RCP tried to establish a model telecenter, on its main offices in a middle class borough of Lima, the capital city of Peru, no real success in this venture came through, since the few instances of small telecenters set up in cities outside Lima were badly run by the mayoralties or local representatives of national government, and finally failed and withered away. But at the same time, the idea of accessing the Internet started to catch on with the general public, especially young, university and technical education students that were exposed to the Internet in their "institutos de computación" and discovered the potential attractions of the Internet and promoted it to the general public.

By mid-1998, first in Lima and afterwards in other provincial cities one could witness the opening of *cabinas públicas*, the name by which the telecenters came to be known. These *cabinas* shared only the slight connection to their communities, and were heavily promoted not by the RCP nor by the government, but by the telecommunications corporations, that found a ready-made market that demanded higher bandwidth and more sophisticated connectivity than the home market could not afford, a market that did not exist beyond big corporations or educational institutions; most of the SMEs were not able to pay for a service that did not offered any apparent, immediate benefit. The *cabinas* are not exclusive of Peru's Internet, since many countries in the Latin American region have plenty of these SMEs; but most are called, more traditionally, *cafés Internet*; but it can be stated, from both academic opinions [4] and anecdotal evidence, that the initial widespread rollout of the *cabinas* in Peru has no comparison in the rest of Latin America.

Currently, there are at least 1000 *cabinas públicas* in Lima [5], and estimates put a similar figure for these small enterprises outside the city [6], for a country with around 19.500.000 (72%) urban dwellers out of 27.000.000 inhabitants [7]. Around 10% of the urban population (the usual public for the *cabinas*) lives under "extreme poverty"; 33% is estimated to be under 14 years old; and about 12% of the total over-15 years-old population is judged to be illiterate. It can be postulated that the total potential public for the *cabinas públicas* (non illiterates

urban dwellers over 14) is around 12 million people. In Lima alone, where the concentration of wealth is higher, and with an estimated population of 8 million, the potential digital consumer public could be roughly around 4.5 million, of which an estimated 2 million regularly use the Internet, mostly through the *cabinas públicas*. It has been calculated that about 70% of access to the Internet in Peru is conducted through the *cabinas* [8].

As small business operations, the *cabinas* are not precisely up and coming, growth enterprises, most of them being rather shabby, with improvised facilities, working from garages or small, neighbourhood-store fronts; the *cabinas* come and go, making any estimation of their number quite difficult and thus approximate; results vary considerably from study to study. But they are a common sight everywhere, and have become an important outlet in terms of the opportunities offered to the public, especially youngsters using them both for study and leisure.

Currently, an hour of Internet computer time at a *cabina pública* costs about half a US dollar. There are some *cabinas* with a higher price, but they are usually located in areas next to tourist attractions and hotels; most of the *cabinas* for Peruvians have a similar cost, no matter the area of town nor whether concentrated in a neighborhood or if there are just a few. Outside Lima, the city where most of the wealth of the country is found, an hour of *cabina* may cost a bit more, mostly due to the absence of competition.

As a testimony of the widespread availability of the Internet in Peru, the Tax and Customs Administration has decided that the filing of tax forms should be done only by digital means (except only for extreme-poverty areas), with the software needed available for download from their website (www.sunat.gob.pe). Although there are reports of inconveniences at the downloading phase, the decision shows the confidence that at least this government office has on the ease of access to the Internet that the general public enjoys.

2. THE PERUVIAN INTERNET AND POLITICS

Certainly, the *cabinas públicas* are just one of many manifestations of the development of the Internet in Peru, but they are the most notorious. While commercial content is not comparable to that available at other countries in the region, and even domestic press websites are simple in design next to those in Chile, Colombia or Brasil, there is a significant number of government websites, designed consciously as an effort to take the "State closer to the Citizen". In this respect, Peru may consider itself on a par with the rest of the region and even the rest of the world.

But this assertion is only valid if the comparison uses the mere existence of the websites as the yardstick. These websites are generally designed using a very similar pattern, which is not precisely a very creative or user-oriented one. With the exception of a few noteworthy cases, like the Foreign Ministry's website, most of the official websites tend to have a very similar architecture, like based from a template. This template offers center stage to news related to the activities of the Ministry, Office or Department, focusing on public relations imperatives. Even when a news item is related to the public, like a new procedure for obtaining an official document, it is presented as a

news item rather than a proper, user-oriented introduction. Another notorious absence is cultural heritage-sites, quite bland and with little real content.

All the websites include a contact address, but most of them do not answer, not even with automatic responses, to the messages sent by the public, as this author can testify. And many of the government websites include a "poll", like those available at many news websites, as a medium to "learn about the public's interests"¹.

As opposed to politics, the government websites should be about policies; problem is, there is little of them at the sites. As mentioned, they are mostly dedicated to the diffusion of news, or rather public relations, and also include considerable amounts of documentation lifted "as is" from government documents, without any adaptation for use by the general public, or even by specialists of the private sector unfamiliar with the particularities of the government's procedures. These websites are rough at the best and totally useless at the worst, at least if they are considered as outlets looking to promote political interest and participation. When public participation is looked after, is mostly through unscientific "polls" similar to those in media websites, and contact email addresses with little or no responsiveness at all.

As shown, the current crop of government websites are quite away from being places that promote civic discourse and engagement in political discussion. There is little if any spaces left for political debate and no apparent connection between the issues of interest for the technocratic pundits and the population at large. Other spaces, like those on media websites, are designed as follow-ups to their programming, allowing mostly nonmoderated fora and the aforementioned non-statistically significant polls.

There are not many proper "political" websites, specialized on political activism or discussion, but for a few bulletin boards that are rather parochial in their scope. All in all, the political websphere is dominated by the same fragmentation and general absence of interest that can be mentioned as a continuing trend of Peruvian politics [9] The general media promotes or reflects (depending on your particular interpretation of the relationship between media and politics) the general public's disinterest and lack of trust on the political parties and the system as a whole.

It can be stated that the presence of an abundance of connectivity has not revitalized the public's interest on politics, as this activity is somehow trapped in a complicated situation: the public has a great distrust of politicians and politics, and in turn this makes the media, in all its forms, similarly disinterested; the lack of coverage resulting from this provokes even worse responses from the public. The only shining light till now has been the civil society movements that appeared at the end of Alberto Fujimori's regime [10, 11]; the Internet was used as a medium to convey the messages not welcome from the mass media, together with some specialized cable-TV outlets and some newspapers. But this sector has not fared well in recent years.

¹ A detailed analysis of Peru's government websites prepared by this author is available at macareo.pucp.edu.pe/evillan/pista/apendice1.htm (in Spanish).

Considering that Peru has a compulsory voting system in national as well as regional or local elections, the issue here is not if there is any relationship between the Internet and participation, but rather a more subtle discussion is at hand: is it possible to propose any kind of relationship between Internet access and public discussions and interest in politics? An abundance of connectivity and access to the Internet does not seem to be a problem; rather, as stated by this author elsewhere, the public in Peru massively uses the Internet in the context of elections, but for mere practical purposes, such as finding the exact place where they are due to vote, and more specifically, if they have to man a particular election board, or "mesa" [12]. The issue is why this availability and perhaps even familiarity with the Internet, coupled with the abundance of websites (notwithstanding their quality) has not created a proper, active Internet-based polity. One possible explanation could lie at the places from where the public does connect, the *cabinas públicas*.

3. SPECIFICS OF THE *CABINAS PÚBLICAS* AS LOCALES OF SOCIAL INTERACTION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH POLITICS

The argument to follow will try to establish that one of the main reasons for the inexistence of significant political activities on the Peruvian Internet has to do with the way the public accesses the Net, that is the *cabinas* as the locus of a specific, innovative social activity. While the quality of political websites is low, and the general attitude toward politics is at least one of disinterest and at the most one of rejection, and both contribute to the noted lack of participation, this is severely compounded by the places where these Internet resources are consumed. For the common citizen, the main place of contact with the Internet and the potential benefits of online interaction with the government at all levels is the *cabina pública*. And the nature of the experience at the *cabina* defines many of the possibilities and incentives for use of the Internet by the general public.

It is important to consider that the *cabina pública* is not a public service, but rather a small, for-profit private business. While there are some Internet access centers at public libraries and city halls, these are few and far between, and are modeled after the *cabina pública*, without staffers to help people navigate the Net, or any connection with specific learning activities. They are an end in themselves, whereby accessing the Internet is valued without any considerations of opportunity, relevance or even usefulness. As such, the standard *cabina pública* is geared towards the Internet consumer as a medium for communication, entertainment and some services, but not to the citizen actively searching for resources for better social and civic performance. The existence of a payment, albeit small, means that the public that uses the service is intent on an specific return, rather than just an experience, or any other undefined purposes.

From the perspective of the owner / manager of a *cabina pública*, the most important aspect is to get as many users as possible paying for screen time, since the competition has made the fees so low, while the cost of telecomm services has remained more or less the same. The average *cabina* has between 10 and 12 computers, and as in many other markets, the key is not letting any of them stay without any use. So the *cabina pública* is not only a place for conventional Internet access, but also for playing online games, doing commercial printing services, scanning or digitalizing materials, et cetera.

The public that demands the most services is the one that defines each *cabina's* profile.

Preliminary, non-statistically valid observations², coupled with previous studies [13, 14], can provide enough information to make a qualified statement here: most of the public at a *cabina pública* is composed of University and secondary education students, with some under-14 and adults making a significant number. While most of the respondents to surveys regarding uses of the *cabinas* tend to state that the primary use is for academic work, the observable pattern of usage tends to be short, specific service-oriented sessions for the adults (emailing, some online banking or governmental services like Tax filings, some specific browsing, and IP phoning to migrant relatives), online gaming for the under-14, and a mixture of online gaming, chat sessions, emailing and instant-messaging for the secondary and University students. This last group also conducts research, on a sporadic basis since there are not many resources in many topic areas in Spanish, although some specific professions may benefit.

The experience at the *cabina* is thus defined in two very different dimensions: for the youngsters, with time on their hands and less pressing uses of the Internet, the main intent is personal entertainment and leisure; for the student and adult, with specific needs and pressed for time, and not necessarily using "leisure money" for the service, the intent is result-oriented. Also to be included is the demand to communicate with relatives living abroad as economic migrants, that have found that the Net is the cheapest way for both parties to keep in touch; many of the older adults using *cabinas* are there because their relatives are available on line in countries where they now live. The "result-orientation" is valid even for students, that search for documents that can be copied or lightly altered and used as class papers, as many high school and university lecturers can tell; this is a very efficient use of the resource invested.

As a transient space, the *cabina* is defined by the coming and going of the public; but the specific approach to the management of time at the *cabina* also defines what the public usually will try to accomplish there, and how the *cabina* is thought of as a useful service. By extension, the uses of the *cabina* and the "imagination" of it as a public space will define how the public judges the Internet and its resources, since it is through the "*cabina* experience" that the Internet is available for most of Peru's urban population. This is seen in *cabinas* next to universities and senior high institutions, where it is common for students that have home access to the Net to go for specific activities, like sending their assignments or term papers, at the same time that they are chatting and emailing. The *cabina* is used as a complement, cheaper, more flexible and freer to use than home access, and sometimes also a point for socializing.

It can postulated that in its present state, the *cabina* is seen mostly as a young people's space, dedicated to leisure and entertainment, and also socializing and making friends; any potential use by adults is to be heavily weighted by the fact that "grown-up" activities are not expected at the *cabinas*, nor are the latter prepared to deal with them. The *cabina pública*, as a communicative and social space, has been transformed into the

² A preliminary report of the field observations (in Spanish) may be reviewed at macareo.pucp.edu.pe/evillan/pista/apendice2.htm.

antithesis of what its original creators intended, since it is not a public, knowledge-oriented social place, but it is a private, leisure and youngster-oriented space. Any exploration of its potential for communication, information or learning today has to contend with this fact.

We are thus faced with an apparent paradox. Peruvian citizens have plenty of opportunities to use the Internet at very accessible prices; and they do use the Internet, massively so. But they act not as citizens, but as consumers. The social locales for Internet use are not used for political or social expression and participation, but for consumption, socializing and study in a very efficient but rather short-sighted way.

4. PARADOXES AND POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS

The situation described in the preceding paragraphs is not specific to Peru. It is possible to say that many other countries in the region have both the *cabina* and the heavily youth user profile of these services. The particularity of Peru may be the widespread presence of the *cabinas* and the lack of a clear economic or social distinction between home access and *cabina*-based access (and the label itself is quite specific to Peru). So it is possible to draw some conclusions of interest both for the political uses of the Internet and the policies regarding the *information society* and the *digital divide* or *digital inclusion* from this particular perspective. The apparent paradox in Peru could be more of a norm.

Considering the presence of the *cabinas*, they have become an important mechanism not only for accessing the Internet, but also for the policies regarding websites and the uses that official institutions make of the Net. The commercial emphasis created by the *cabinas* is not to be taken lightly, since it permeates the whole Internet experience of the Peruvian public. Although the official discourse proposes the Internet as part of a development strategy [15, 16, 17], the fact is that neither the places from where the public consumes the Net and its resources nor the websites of interest for the general public take into account any other dimension than the commercial nature of a consumer-provider relationship.

This is more critical since most of the policy initiatives regarding the Internet in the Latin American region are influenced by the "access to infrastructure" emphasis [18], due to the objective lack of home and institutional access to the Internet. But the fact is that the needs for access at a personal level have been up to a point solved thanks to the *cabinas*, and that the institutional access at universities, SMEs and lower level government offices depends on more aspects than just the availability of connections to the Internet, or the absence of them; issues like training, organizational culture and internal structures / cultural traditions are probably key right now, more than the cost issues that are indeed important but perhaps secondary.

The contention here is the following: as a policy issue, and also as a research question, it has to be considered that the *cabinas públicas* are indeed an example of social shaping of technology, in this particular case in combination with other factors; but the shaping here is not only of the points of access, but of the whole Internet experience.

As defined by Williams and Edge [19] (but also considering the work of Hughes [20]), social shaping is not necessarily a conscious act of choosing among technical options for social reasons. Each particular choice changes the "trajectory", or potential path of development, that an innovation or specific technology subsequently takes. The act of innovation thus is shaped by those who accept and adopt the technology in question.

As a large technological system, the Internet was shaped by its original user community, the academic and research people from the developed world, a large part of which was not only well aware of the choices taken, but also consciously opting for an approach that privileged both the open systems model and the sharing of technical and social expertise [21]. But since the demise of the NSFnet in 1995 and the massive opening to commercial activities, the Internet has become a commercial venue, considered by many as the perfect channel for business and commerce, and a great opportunity for many entrepreneurs both in developed and undeveloped countries. At least for the new users that arrived to the Net after the opening of commercial-oriented services, this was combined with the ready availability of free contents in their many incarnations (from free sex-oriented material to Napster-like music and video trading services), to create an Internet that at the same time is commercially-oriented but free or quite inexpensive to use.

In the case of Peru, the main thrust behind the generalization of access has relied on the commercial side, SME entrepreneurs that created the *cabinas públicas*. Their practices, their ways to conduct business and propose a specific way of accessing the Internet, have shaped the Peruvian Internet, together with the forces that created a new standard of business for the Internet post-NSFnet. The emphasis on commercial opportunities for both the entrepreneur and the consumer, coupled with *on-demand and free* content still easily found on the Internet, has created a fertile ground for the new kind of Internet, the one found in countries like Peru and now massively consumed in places like the *cabinas públicas*.

Thus considered, the Internet has been socially shaped like a commercial, leisure oriented activity, one with indeed a lot of potential for the public, but geared towards private, individual activities, like emailing and chatting, with a clear bias to the younger section of the population. This segment is the least interested in politics, as many polls have found, since they do not consider politics to be a worthy endeavor, nor a potentially useful one, unless it is clearly used as a way to conduct private and possibly corrupt activities.

It is possible, however, to analyze this situation from a different, complementary perspective. If accessing the Internet is viewed as a three-tier process, where at the base level lies the infrastructure that permits the connection between computers; above this, the social conditions of access, that in Latin America are predominantly related to the *cabinas públicas* (or *cibercafes*, as they are called elsewhere in the region); and finally the services oriented to the social use of the Internet. As stated, both the second level and the third level (as referred in this paper) are consumer-oriented and geared towards a very transient and youth-oriented consumption. This is a very difficult combination to break, since the investment done in connectivity at the second level is significant but especially the customs and use habits of the Internet are essentially "designed", as Mansell

would say [22], by the public around these conditions and perceived needs.

Under this point of view, the *cabinas* are a homegrown, completely private solution to the needs of the second level of this process; however, they exist because there is a sufficient amount of connectivity, as traditionally understood, or of the kind that can be called "first level" under this model. The combination of leisure and entertainment oriented places of access with the absence of public interest resources, has created a set of social practices that establish the Internet in Peru as a consumer resource. The absence of third level services oriented towards the public interest is a question that has to be dealt with by analyzing the contents now offered online in Latin America.

This is compounded with the fact that, as McChesney states [23], the structure of content provision is similar in the Internet domain as it is in the media, with a high degree of concentration due to the presence of an oligopoly structure. This is valid not only for the international, U.S.A. dominated media arena, but also for the Latin American media, as most of the contents come from the Miami, Mexico and Caracas based content generating empires, when not streaming from the well known global ones; this is reflected locally through strategic alliances between local operators and content providers and the regional or international ones [24]. This creates a web content sphere quite similar and not differentiable from the traditional media sphere, and the communicational practices of the public in the *cabinas públicas* reflect it. Anecdotal evidence allows to insist on the very recursive nature of consumption of big media products by the users of the *cabinas*.

One of the unintended consequences of this situation is that most if not all of the Peruvian government websites think of the public as consumers and accordingly, create commercial-styled websites. It is not that useful and timely information is not to be found, or that some services are not provided, but that the whole ethos of these official websites reflect the clear influence of the portal-style generic website, created for commercial purposes and since turned into the most common, preferred way to enter the Internet and the World Wide Web. Since, as William Dutton states [25], it is common for those involved in designing and implementing technological solutions to face the lack of interest of the users by trying to change the way the users do things, rather than rethink the design, the public has to deal with poorly designed websites and with incomplete strategies. To keep the focus on the *cabinas públicas* as a magic bullet to the alleged problems created by the absence of connectivity is just an example of this tendency.

5. FINAL THOUGHTS: FURTHER RESEARCH AND SOME POLICY POINTS

It is possible to state that the *cabinas públicas* in Peru, and perhaps in other countries in Latin America, are today set into a model that is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. The combination of leisure and entertainment oriented points of access with the absence of useful public interest resources, has created a set of social practices that today define the Internet in Peru as a consumer resource; and the *cabinas* are the main venue for the continuation of this approach to the Internet, viewed as a private rather than a public, open domain.

Both politics and policy are affected. For the first one, it is quite difficult to gain an interest from the Internet-using public when most of the time they dedicate to browsing is directed to entertainment resources. To change this practice will require a significant effort or a very different set of political commitments, both unlikely in Peru at this time.

For policies, especially ICT policies, the consequences are mostly the need to shift the focus from connectivity to contents, not only the creation of contents but their effective use. As the public has instituted an approach to the Internet that facilitates the growth of consumption against potential personal and social interests, the *cabina* is the foremost place to perform this approach, and it is also the place where the specific contents that fit the approach are available. Any potential change on the way the public uses the Internet has to take into account both the existence of the *cabinas* and the social and communication practices that these places imply, together with the kind of contents now available at the *cabinas*. Such a change may promote new and potentially more socially relevant contents that also may change the outlook of the public and give the *cabinas* a new sense of purpose, perhaps connected with a more public-service oriented ethos.

Although it is indisputable that more research is needed, especially comparative research about Internet consumption patterns in different Latin American countries, it is possible to affirm that any policy to promote the *information society* must consider the meaning that the public attaches to this concept: both an opportunity for better learning, work and productivity, no doubt; but also free entertainment and easy interpersonal communication at very reasonable prices. As mentioned by other authors [26], a new divide appears on the horizon: between policy expectations and public realities, between the supposed benefits of connectivity and the effective uses of the Internet. There is an official insistence about connectivity that does not translate into the expectations of the public, since their collective image of the Internet as filtered through the *cabina* experience makes them more than satisfied both with the places of connectivity and with the activities allowed, promoted and finally expected of such a place.

Also, and although it may appear contradictory, the existence of the *cabinas* forces policy to consider changing the extant logic of access to connectivity, since the current, favored places for using the Internet are "tainted" with social practices that have shaped the Internet in a very different direction than intended. Lauded by some as a route to the riches of the *information society*, the *cabinas* look increasingly like the most inadequate place to make the public use the potential of the Internet, and just the right location to enhance opportunities for the international communication conglomerates. The potential to change the *cabinas* into a more socially responsive place, without losing its commercial pertinence and viability, is a big challenge for a country where a big part of the population is underemployed, in the informal sector, or directed unemployed. The *cabinas* are an alternative for many young people without a formal job; to incorporate a productive, learning and wealth-generating strategy with proper incentives into the *cabinas* is a complex policy issue to be dealt with as soon as possible.

As a conclusion, it must be said that the combination of the private, leisure oriented *cabinas públicas*, with the absence of an imaginative use of the Internet by the government and political agents, has turned the Internet in Peru into a very

constrained resource. This situation leaves very little manoeuvring space for political activists to try and use the Internet as a novel political tool, and that requires both government and civil society agents to re-imagine how to use the Internet for social development purposes, since in the eyes of the public, the Net is just a good source of entertainment and a very transient public access and for profit service.

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