



Global Mobile
Technology Initiative

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Information & Communication Technology
In Mexican Civil Society
Overview and Case Studies

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Over the past few decades, we have seen mobile and broadband networks extend their reach around the world, tying billions of people into a single information and communications network. In Mexico, as well, these networks have grown rapidly. Over 70 percent of Mexicans own a mobile phone, and while only 18 percent of households have access to the internet, that number is growing quickly—close to 20 percent annually.¹ Nearly half of all Mexican internet users have a profile on Facebook, and about 10 percent use Twitter.²

As in the rest of the world, new tools built upon this network have the potential to create positive change in Mexico, making the work of civil society more effective and engaging people in the important social issues affecting their country. Despite this potential, Mexican civil society lagged somewhat in the adoption and application of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to its work. Only over the past two years has the country seen real successes in this regard, with civil society beginning to successfully use technology to help create social change.

This paper is an investigation into how Mexican civil society—the civic organizations and social movements that exist separate from government and the private sector—has employed network technologies to enhance and improve its work of creating positive social change. The paper will begin with an analysis of how, theoretically, new technologies can be helpful to Mexican civil society. It will proceed with an assessment of the obstacles that caused a lag in the adoption and successful use of these technologies in Mexico. Finally, the paper will focus on the success that Mexican civil society has seen in the past two years, with a look at a series of case studies illustrating some of the movements and organizations that have been the most influential and groundbreaking in their use of ICTs to enhance their work. Not intended to be a comprehensive report, the facts and analysis in this paper are based on research and interviews conducted throughout late 2010 with members of Mexican government, media, civil society and business communities, based predominantly in either Mexico City or Oaxaca.

¹ OECD, ICT database and Eurostat, Community Survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals, July 2010.

² ComScore Media Metrix, May 2010.

What Can We Expect of New Technologies?

With the rapid adoption of mobile and internet technologies, there are two distinct ways we can imagine these networks helping address the challenges facing Mexican civil society.

First, mobile and internet technologies can serve as tools for NGOs, nonprofits, and other civil society actors to better organize, communicate, and conduct their work. Mexican civil society is relatively young—most organizations are less than 20 years old—and because of this, there are particular shortcomings that affect many groups working in a variety of fields—particularly in the area of communications. Few nonprofit organizations have much success advocating through the media, and few succeed in building constituencies to support their work. Whether using social media to build their base and share their ideas, mobile networks to dialogue directly with their supporters, or building their own web-based communications tools, the potential for ICTs to strengthen and streamline the public communications of Mexican social organizations is great.

Second, the online world can act as a second public sphere, serving as a new space for debate and discussion. The Mexican media—the most relevant public sphere of the pre-internet age—is dominated by a few large media conglomerates that do not, typically, take a particular interest in reporting on social issues, whether women’s rights, indigenous rights, environmental justice, poverty and inequality, or other problems in Mexican society. Rarely venturing into a watchdog role, large media companies tend to avoid covering the governmental corruption or governmental complicity with the violence that has wracked Mexican society in recent years, and do a poor job of protecting their journalists who stray in that direction. Not only is this sort of reporting potentially dangerous, but it’s widely seen as somewhat useless: without governmental accountability or trust in the justice system, there’s little hope of watchdog journalism causing positive change. Many smaller media, meanwhile, have been terrorized into self-censorship by drug cartels, and refuse to cover issues of corruption and violence. Even in today’s more democratic Mexico, there is little public space for discussion of some of the biggest issues in Mexican society.

In the online sphere, over time, intellectual leaders, social activists, and regular citizens could bypass inefficiencies and obstructions in the traditional media, shape the discourse around problems in Mexican politics, media, and society, and empower social actors.³ The potential for these conversations to be carried out openly yet anonymously may be a very useful attribute in Mexico, where public discussion of sensitive issues including corruption and violence has led to threats, intimidation, and worse.

To be sure, new technologies carry vulnerabilities and risks, along with their potential benefits. Particularly when criticizing governmental corruption, speaking out against gang-related violence, or advocating for unpopular causes—even when doing so anonymously—users of new technology can put themselves, their families, and their associates in serious danger. Mobile and internet transmissions move through an insecure infrastructure owned by private corporations with their own relationships and obligations, and it is extremely difficult to ensure the absolute privacy of any communication. Those who have reason to fear that their actions will put them in danger should not assume that technological tools will offer them more protection than their more old-fashioned analogues—in many cases, they offer less. That said, many of the most effective instances of using technology for social change in Mexico and elsewhere around the world have been conducted openly and in public.

What Are the Obstacles?

Before the past two years, Mexican civil society noticeably lagged behind other, comparable countries in its adoption and effective use of ICTs. The causes for this lag are no different from the issues that hinder the uptake of technology in any society, but certain factors were—and remain—more acute in Mexico. Particularly, cost of service remains the major obstacle to greater adoption of broadband internet and more effective use of mobile technologies by civil society. Digital literacy, a major hurdle to mastery of new technologies in every country, is equally a problem in Mexico; fortunately, the country benefits from the

³ Zuckerman, Ethan. *Internet Freedom: Beyond Circumvention*. My Heart's in Accra... 22 February 2010.

excellent work of a few organizations dedicated to addressing this problem. Additionally, issues of access to the necessary infrastructure remain a problem in rural areas.

Cost

High costs for telecommunications services in Mexico have prevented more aggressive use of internet and mobile services by civil society. The “mobile cellular prepaid tariff,” a basket of mobile services defined by the OECD, can be used to compare cost of mobile services across various countries. In Mexico in 2008, the tariff came to \$15 USD, compared to an average of \$9.90 in middle-income countries and \$9.60 in Latin America.⁴ Despite these costs, over 70 percent of Mexican citizens own cell phones, and many are active users. But the high costs have serious implications for how civil society is able to leverage mobile technology in their work. Communicating with a large group via text message becomes an expensive practice for organization and member alike. Particularly because, in Mexico, over 70 percent of mobile phone users have pre-paid plans, (which are more expensive but cater to those with irregular incomes), asking people to use their phones for advocacy, communication or organizing can be costly. Among mobile users in Mexico’s lower socioeconomic classes, over 90 percent of them have prepaid plans, and they spend almost 10 percent of their monthly income on communications, compared to 3.7 percent for middle class families.⁵ So while penetration rates are encouraging, mobile phones remain an expensive tool for Mexican civil society.

The “fixed broadband internet access tariff,” a statistic for comparing broadband cost, is \$37 USD in Mexico, compared to an average of \$26.30 in middle-income countries and \$34 throughout Latin America. Only 18 percent of Mexican households have access the internet, and just 14 percent have broadband connections.⁶ These numbers are comparable to Chile (a country with similar GDP/capita) in 2005. Broadband penetration rates in Mexico have

⁴ International Telecommunication Union, World Telecommunication Development Report and database. Accessed via WorldBank Data Catalog, November 2010.

⁵ de Angoitia, R., & Ramirez, F. (2009). Strategic Use of Mobile Telephony at the Bottom of the Pyramid: The Case of Mexico. Information Technologies & International Development

⁶ OECD, ICT database and Eurostat, Community Survey on ICT usage in households and by individuals, July 2010.

been growing quickly—at close to 20 percent annually, a rate comparable to other countries in Latin America—but obstacles of cost and access have set Mexico behind.⁷

High costs and lack of infrastructure access can both be traced to a single primary cause—the effective monopoly of the telecommunications sector by América Móvil and its subsidiaries Telcel and Telmex. Telcel is Mexico's largest mobile phone operator, and for many in the country, the only option. Over 70 percent of all mobile subscriptions in the country are with Telcel, and the company can charge exorbitant rates for its services, which has held Mexico back, relative to other countries.⁸ In India, which boasts a robustly competitive mobile industry, a 1-minute call costs about 7 cents (USD, adjusted for PPP), and a text message costs the same. In Ghana, a text costs 7 cents, and in Panama, where three robust mobile operators compete aggressively, it's only 4 cents. In Mexico, sending a text message with Telcel costs as much as 14 cents, and for pre-paid subscribers, the rates can be considerably higher, with voice costing as much as 50 cents per minute.⁹ Telmex, which provides high-speed internet access, has a market share over 80 percent in Mexico, and consumers have little in the way of alternatives. Again, without competitive checks, Telmex charges rates much higher than the average among middle-income countries, preventing many people from going online.

Digital Literacy

Everywhere in the world, digital literacy is a major hurdle for people and organizations seeking to make good use of new technologies. Without the skills to access and use the available tools, citizens can't take advantage of them, and this has been an issue in Mexico as much as anywhere else. Of course, in many parts of the world, people have learned to use social media, the internet and mobile technologies through their work and leisure activities, and the rising tide of Mexican citizens using these technologies for commerce and communication is a positive sign that the level of digital literacy in Mexico is increasing, and becoming less of a barrier today than ever before. Also promising is the high rate of

⁷ ComScore Media Metrix, May 2010.

⁸ de Angoitia, R., & Ramirez, F.

⁹ International Telecommunication Union, World Telecommunication Development Report and database. Accessed via MobileActive.org Mobile Data, November 2010.

internet adoption among Mexican youth: for people under age 30, about 48 percent are internet users, compared to an average of about 35 percent across the rest of Latin America.¹⁰

Digital literacy barriers exist in Mexico not just on an individual level, but on an institutional level as well. Many nonprofits, NGOs and movements are strongly resistant to adopting new media and technologies, both because they have no experience with the tools, and because they view advocacy and organizing conducted using new technologies as illegitimate and artificial. To overcome these barriers, training and capacity building on an individual and institutional level is necessary to teach civil society leaders about how to use the new tools. Further, evangelism by those who have already put the tools to good use will help demonstrate their effectiveness to the more skeptical elements of civil society.

What Successes Have We Seen?

Despite the barriers discussed above, in the past few years, a critical mass of Mexican citizens has come online, and civil society has begun to see successes in using new technologies in their work. Many NGOs and nonprofit organizations in Mexico have websites, Twitter feeds, and Facebook pages. While the quality of these online presences varies widely, their existence displays widespread understanding that existing on the internet is important for any organization's success. Only in the past two years, however, has civil society begun to leverage online platforms to create offline action and change. Since 2009, Mexico has seen remarkable and accelerating growth in the use of ICT by civil society, as technology-savvy, socially conscious citizens have seen success organizing and advocating through social media, especially on Twitter. Building on that success, innovative new platforms are beginning to take flight in Mexico, creating new opportunities for ICT to benefit civil society. In most of the following case studies, the technologies in question act in some combination as both tools for civil society and as public spaces for discussion among citizens and groups.

¹⁰ de Angoitia, R., & Ramirez, F.

Internet Necesario

In September 2009, the Mexican Senate proposed a new excise tax of 4 percent (later revised down to 3 percent) on all telecommunications, putting the internet and other telecom in a tax category typically reserved for luxury items, tobacco and liquor. After an initial blog post by Alejandro Pisanty, a professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, Twitter users in Mexico raised an outcry, all using the hashtag #internetnecesario ("the internet is a necessity") to express their objection to the tax. In a week in late October, thousands of irate citizens pushed the phrase into Twitter's trending topics and brought the proposed tax to the attention of the media and the Senate itself.

By week's end-- the last day of the legislative session-- "Internet Necesario" had become the country's top political story. With a group of citizens in the room for negotiations, broadcasting the proceedings live across the internet, the Senators' words were subject to instantaneous scrutiny, ridicule, or praise: an unusual circumstance for policymakers who typically operated at a distance from their constituents. In the end, the tax was voted down unanimously, and the idea of the internet as a "luxury" was cast out of the discourse with derision. At the time of these negotiations, only one member of the Senate was on Twitter; now over 40 Senators are tweeting and engaging with citizens over Twitter to an extent that has never been seen before in Mexican democracy.

Los Queremos Vivos

In July 2010, four Mexican journalists were kidnapped in Durango, and the journalists' respective employers—most notably Televisa, the biggest media company in Latin America— negotiated for their freedom, but eventually refused to capitulate from the kidnappers' demands and walked away from the table. For many Mexican journalists, the situation was too familiar: caught between vicious thugs who have killed 64 journalists in the past decade, a complicit government that fails to prosecute these crimes, and media companies that fail to protect their reporters. And so a group of them took to Twitter, uniting around the hashtag #losqueremosvivos ("we want them alive").

The journalists' simple demand spread like wildfire on Twitter, migrated to Facebook, and morphed into a full-fledged movement in a matter of days. The reporters planned a march in Mexico City for August 7, encouraged journalists around Mexico to host their own marches, and introduced colleagues across the world to their grievances. Over 2,000 journalists showed up to march in Mexico City, and 14 other groups held their own rallies around the country. The kidnapped journalists were ultimately freed shortly after the rally, and the kidnappers arrested. While it would be incorrect to give the Twitter-fueled protests credit for the reporters' release, this was the first time journalists had themselves rallied for the causes of press freedom and journalist protection on this scale. Building on the success of the Internet Necesario campaign, Los Queremos Vivos managed to take Twitter-activism to an issue less tailor-made for internet protest, and motivate people around the country and the world to take part.

Contingente Tuitier

In the summer of 2009, a group of human rights activists in Mexico City came together over their common interest in exploring how new technologies could improve their work. They called themselves "Contingente Tuitier," and initially came together to advocate for justice for the families of 49 children killed in a 2009 fire at a daycare center in Sonora. The group grew during the "Los Queremos Vivos" protests, and has continued to advocate in favor of laws that would legalize same-sex marriage and liberalize access to abortion in Mexico. The network of individuals communicated via e-mail, through their website, and of course over Twitter, and soon brought their online organizing into offline practice, using the technology to organize rallies and protests for the same human rights causes they had all been defending for years.

Jesús Robles Maloof, one of the founders of the network, identifies part of the group's mission as helping Mexican civil society become comfortable with new technologies. Many traditional activists, he says, view Twitter, Facebook, and other mobile and internet technologies as tools of the forces they're fighting. Further, these same critics see any activism conducted or organized over social media as illegitimate and meritless. These attitudes are part of a wider mistrust of new technologies that's common in civil societies

around the world as they begin to adapt to the coming change. The group has grown, with “branches” emerging in Hidalgo, Puebla, Guadalajara, Monterrey, and Nayarit, while the burgeoning Mexico City-based division has renamed themselves “Contingente MX” and continues to bring traditional activists into the technology-dense 21st century.

Cuidemos el Voto

In early 2009, with that year’s elections approaching, Andres Lajous and Oscar Salazar, two private Mexican citizens with experience in technology and an interest in increasing civic participation among Mexican youth, met online to discuss Ushahidi. Developed in Kenya during the violence that followed the 2007 election, Ushahidi is a tool that allows individuals to make brief reports via SMS that are mapped in a central, web-based location. Lajous and Salazar re-imagined Ushahidi as a tool that could be used for election monitoring in Mexico, and they set forth with “Cuidemos el Voto,” (“protect the vote”). Partnering with trusted NGOs, universities, and corporations, and remaining unaffiliated with any political party, Cuidemos el Voto was set up to receive reports of electoral fraud and malfeasance from anyone with access to a mobile phone, Twitter, or the web. When Election Day arrived, the site received hundreds of reports from around the country of vote-buying, ballot-box tampering, voter intimidation, and other misconduct. The reports were delivered to NGOs dedicated to monitoring the elections, and provided valuable, real-time information about issues at the polls. Additionally, the reports were requested by FEPADE, the division of the Mexican Attorney General’s office responsible for prosecuting electoral crimes (and a widely trusted bureau). FEPADE’s use of the Cuidemos el Voto reports was an acknowledgment of the system’s power, and a recognition that using mobile technology to monitor elections is a legitimate and useful addition to the state’s work.

In 2010, a group of students in Puebla contacted Salazar and Lajous, seeking to use Cuidemos el Voto to monitor the elections in July. These students sought to form a citizen group unaffiliated with any political party, dedicated to increasing youth participation in the elections. They called themselves “Activate por Puebla,” and set up the system to monitor elections in their home state, receiving more reports than in 2009, and again delivering them to appropriate NGOs and to FEPADE. In five other states, Cuidemos el Voto

was reactivated and worked as it had in 2009. In handing over control of the system to a new group, Salazar and Lajous felt they could declare their project a success; their goal was not to create a proprietary platform, but to build a tool to benefit Mexico and her people.

Mujeres Construyendo

“Mujeres Construyendo” (“women constructing”) is a blogging platform for Spanish-speaking women, created by Claudia Calvin Venero to address a “digital glass ceiling” she observed in Mexico. Venero has recruited over 350 contributors from all over the Spanish-speaking world, encouraging them to engage online, and teaching them the necessary skills; now, their writing covers issues ranging from international politics to the trials of being a mother. Over 4,000 women around the world are in the network of Mujeres Construyendo, many of whom have taken courses taught by Venero. Her courses touch on a range of women’s issues, but the message to her students is always the same: they must overcome the “culture of silence” that keeps many Latin women from engaging in public dialogue, and recognize that the internet is a powerful space to raise their voices about the issues that affect their lives. Next year, she’ll be offering a course exclusively for female legislators in Mexico, making them more aware of the “self-marginalization” of women, and encouraging them to raise their own voices online and in government.

Mujeres Construyendo is one of a handful of emerging online platforms for engaged citizens to share their ideas and experiences, and participate in public dialogue.

“Revolución con Letras” is another: without the specific focus on women and women’s issues, the site welcomes posts from citizens about social issues, and allows readers to identify the best, most useful articles. Sites like these are an important development for the engagement of Mexican civil society online, as they give platforms for even those people unaffiliated with any organization and without sophisticated technological skills to engage in public dialogue online. For the internet to successfully become a “second public sphere” in Mexico, sites like these will be essential.

CitiVox

CitiVox is a new project being led by Oscar Salazar to leverage the growing mobile network for positive change in his home country. CitiVox is a three-part software platform developed to allow Mexican citizens to report quality-of-life problems in their cities and towns to officials, and then follow the progress of their complaints and hold their government accountable. Targeting smaller problems—potholes, broken streetlamps, leaking pipes—rather than bigger issues of crime and corruption was a strategic decision by Salazar. Not wanting to put users in harm's way, the system instead seeks to lower tolerance for big problems by solving smaller, daily annoyance, and gradually build trust between citizens and the more effective parts of Mexico's government.

The first module of CitiVox is a suite of mobile tools that allows citizens to file reports through mobile apps and SMS messages, in addition to the voice reports that are already possible. The second module is software—a “citizen report management” system—to be operated by the government or an NGO allowing them to receive, assign, and track complaints, and ensure that the reports are acted upon. A third module updates citizens with the progress of their reports, informs them of the name and contact information of the official responsible for solving their problem, and allows them to track the progress of the government through a mobile device or on the web. The fourth module is a statistics analysis tool that will allow citizens to evaluate their government's work.

Like Mujeres Construyendo, CitiVox is a for-profit endeavor, and so does not belong to the category of “civil society.” Still, both organizations have a social mission to compliment their bottom line, and can be seen as endeavors in “social entrepreneurship” of some kind. With both organizations, there is great potential in the possibility of empowering citizens to become more engaged with their communities and country, and enabling civil society to be more effective in its work.

Digital Literacy Organizations

There are several organizations working to bridge the gap for groups that most need assistance in learning the skills to get online. The Committee for Democracy in Information

Technology (CDI) is an organization founded in Brazil in 1995, and has operated largely independently in Mexico for over a decade. The non-profit organization is dedicated to creating ICT community centers in rural and other underserved areas with the hope of empowering disadvantaged youth through technology and turning them into social actors. CDI has 45 centers around the country that, in addition to providing computer access and education for citizens, offer longer-term courses for young people. The courses teach students to take advantage of information available online, and make use of it toward positive social change. At one center in Oaxaca, student research into missing public funds led to the resignation of the municipal leader found responsible.

Centro Nacional de Comunicación Social AC (CENCOS) is another organization dedicated to bridging the digital literacy gap, but they work on an institutional, rather than individual level. Based in Mexico City, CENCOS works with nonprofits, NGOs and social movements to help them with their communications strategies and practices. Lately, much of their work has focused on online communications, helping small groups spread their message and build networks of supporters online through social media as well as more traditional media outlets. In addition to their work aiding civil society, CENCOS advocates directly for progressive policy, seeking to prevent continued monopolization in the media and telecom industries, and promoting freedoms of expression and press.

Conclusion

While Mexico suffered a lag in the adoption of new network technologies, and a corresponding lag in the successful use of those technologies by members of civil society, the country is today seeing rapid growth in both areas, and is quickly becoming a center of innovation in Latin America. The success stories in this paper are just a few of many movements, organizations, and groups that have begun to take advantage of the network that is connecting more and more Mexican citizens. They are representative of a progression, over the past two years, from cautious experimentation with global platforms, to the development of original, innovative tools and spaces built to benefit Mexican society.

The growth over the past two years was caused by a critical mass of people—mostly young, mostly in the middle and upper classes—gaining access to new tools and technologies. But many challenges remain in the development of Mexico’s ICT sector, particularly in connecting poorer people in rural areas. Nearly all of the 30 million people without cell phones are in the lower classes. And while cost is the primary barrier, anecdotal evidence suggests, despite reports that 100 percent of the Mexican population is covered by a mobile signal, many people in rural areas remain uncovered.

Despite the growth in internet access, 18 percent penetration is still very low, and Mexico will likely remain below 50 percent for years to come. Of the country’s Twitter users, over 80 percent live in the capital city, and while Facebook use is slightly more widespread, wealthier, urban people enjoy much more access, and are able to be far more active on social issues. Fortunately, there are groups in Mexico dedicated to bridging this digital divide, in addition to the digital literacy groups described above. In Oaxaca, an organization called Ojo de Agua trains young people, particularly those from indigenous communities, to create and tell stories through radio, video, and web media. Beyond the technical education, Ojo de Agua encourages young people to think about their indigenous identity, what it means to them, and incorporate their ideas into the media they create. Their work helps empower disadvantaged people with the ICT tools of the 21st century, while helping protect the culture that some of these same technologies are imperiling.

Civil society organizations like Ojo de Agua and the others described above will be essential to addressing the many difficult challenges Mexico faces today. Addressing problems from poverty and human rights to violence and corruption, Mexican civil society will need to be actively engaged if progress is to be made. New technologies can offer useful tools for social movements and organizations to better conduct their work, and the progress civil society has made in adopting these tools over the past two years is an encouraging sign for the future.

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The Global Mobile Technology Initiative seeks to better understand the myriad ways that mobile technology and global connectivity are changing our lives, and to explore how a growing information and communications network can be leveraged to improve our world. The GMTI serves as a center of thought and a forum for ideas on the power of global connectivity, and brings together prominent thinkers and actors in this space to share their work and engage our community.

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