

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

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Building a People's Internet in Latin America

In this month's *Voices from the South* executive director in The Latin American Information Agency (ALAI) Sally Burch, reflects on how the major international digital corporations are controlling more and more of our daily lives, changing the power structures in society and challenging our right to privacy. ALAI calls for citizens to stand up and demand that norms and limits have to be in place to ensure that the new technologies operate in the public interest. Building on this, ALAI co-lead an initiative to build a "people's internet" in Latin America. The initiative and findings in the project is presented in the article.

The article is also especially important this month as the World Trade Organization (WTO) will hold their biannual ministerial conference in Argentina, starting December 10th. Here, topics of technology and e-commerce are thought to be a major focus. If some of the suggestions are implemented it could potentially have devastating effects on developing countries' own e-commerce sector.



By: Sally Burch, ALAI

For the half of the global population with access, the changes internet has introduced in how we do things have become so much a part of our daily lives that many pass unnoticed. So we barely re-

alize how dependent we are on the platforms provided by the mega digital corporations (Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple...) and how much data we feed them daily; much less how they transform these data into wealth and power.

Nonetheless, some worrying signs are becoming visible, such as the invasion of privacy; the way "fake news" is becoming a pretext to give censorship power to these corporations; manipulation of electoral campaigns and through digital social networks; unaccountable algorithms that determine aspects of our lives; or the way robots and automation are replacing stable jobs with more precarious ones...

Clearly, these issues are no longer a question for specialists or private business to resolve. As citizens, we need to have a say in how these

technologies are developed and what norms and limits must be in place to ensure they operate in the public interest and respect our rights. It was from this understanding that a proposal arose, two years ago, to organize an Internet Social Forum (ISF) as a place to debate these issues from a people's perspective and (following the World Social Forum principles) an anti-neoliberal standpoint.

While the plans for a global ISF continue to develop towards 2018, in Latin America a group of organizations agreed to launch, this year, a regional process, under the concept of building "a people's internet" (in Spanish, internet ciudadana – a citizen internet) so as to debate the implications from a regional perspective, as well as to facilitate exchange in Spanish and Portuguese. The initiative was led by ALAI (the Latin American Information Agency), together with the Forum on Communication for Integration of Our America and Medialab-Quito. An important milestone in this process was a regional meeting held at the end of September in Quito, entitled: "Dialogues for a people's internet: Our America towards the Internet Social Forum".

The meeting gathered around 100 participants (others followed the main panels online) including communicators, social



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<http://www.karibu.no>
voices@karibu.no

The Karibu Foundation
Kirkens Hus
Rådhusgt 1-3
0151 Oslo
Norway

alai
40
años

ALAI is an alternative communications initiative, that publishes information and analysis on the region provides training and counselling in communication with social movements; and develops advocacy on communications rights and democratization.

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movement actors, academics, students, people from the tech sector, from education, the free culture movement, trade unions, among others. Following an opening panel to situate the context and the main challenges, most of the work took place in discussion groups around three central themes:

- 1) Knowledge: including communication, education, culture, intellectual property
- 2) WTO/e-commerce: also covering labor, farming, the environment
- 3) Security, democracy and the State.

These exchanges gave rise to a series of proposals for action, focusing particularly on greater visibility and public debate on the issues; public policy challenges; and citizen initiatives for building the people's internet.

Two of the main concerns that came out of all the groups were human rights and data. Rights to privacy, to employment benefits, to nondiscrimination, to protection from hate-speech, among others, are becoming increasingly vulnerable due to the indiscriminate violation of personal data, the new economic models of the digital sector, or the use of nontransparent algorithms. Legislation

has been unable to keep up with the new areas of risk, or is inapplicable in a borderless system. The proposals focus on raising awareness; providing users with knowledge and training about safe software and security programs; and laws that oblige both companies and governments to respect human rights.

As for data, the participants concluded that, while it is an important component for human rights considerations, it also has much broader implications. At the core of the new digital economy, data is the basic input for value creation, whether through sale to advertisers, or processing en masse to feed algorithms and build artificial intelligence. Yet users give it away almost for free, and whole countries, particularly developing states, yield valuable data sets to transnational companies for scant national benefit.

A broad public debate on this issue is urgent, in view of adopting legislation to protect both users and national data sources, keeping in mind that many citizens may not wish to entrust all their private data to their government.

A closely related matter is the proposal from developed

countries to open negotiations on e-commerce in the World Trade Organization (WTO). This e-commerce agenda would impose open borders for unrestricted data flow and a reduced capacity for developing countries to promote their own e-commerce sector or to support their small and medium enterprises. Moreover, it would mean abandoning the development agenda the global South has been pushing for in the WTO for over 15 years. An immediate item on the agenda for follow-up to the Quito meeting is therefore to join the campaign to say NO to e-commerce negotiations in the WTO.

Other conclusions include support for the campaign against killer robots, public policies that prioritize human security above that of machines and property, and promoting South-South technological cooperation and sovereignty. It was also agreed to continue these debates at the World Social Forum in Salvador, Brazil, in March 2018.

For further information see: www.internetciudadana.net ■

Sally Burch is a journalist, living and working in Ecuador. She is the current Executive Director of ALAI-Ecuador.

ALAI is part of the Forum on Communication for the Integration of Our America, a network of media and social movement coordinating bodies.

Photos:
Regional meeting, “Dialogues for a people's internet: our America towards the Internet Social Forum”
Quito, Ecuador, September 2017.
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