Chapter 7
Developing Electronic Information Resources to Promote Social Inclusion of Vulnerable Communities in Uruguay

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on multidisciplinary research about needs and the behavior of real and potential information users. The research is carried out in a university context to address social issues as well as to find solutions appropriate to the Uruguayan context, which is rather different from the one in developed countries. The chapter focuses on the discussion of the research results, on the developed electronic information resources, and on the impact on the target population and social mediators. The chapter also focuses on the multidisciplinary work experience, which carries out the research group through meetings and workshops with social actors and decision makers on social policies. This research constitutes a step forward in the development of information and communication sciences as well as to improve the information domain in Uruguay.

INTRODUCTION

Despite advances in incorporating communication technologies the information gap constitutes a serious issue in developing countries. According to the report delivered in April 2012 by the World Economic Forum, the digital divide persists between developed and developing countries. For one of the co-authors, Soumitra Dutta, "while technology and infrastructure are important, there are many other aspects that are crucial, including whether the environment is conducive for businesses to use technology and encourages innovation, whether regulations support or inhibit transparency, whether ICT is affordable and accessible, and whether people have the skills to use it." As these aspects have a crucial impact on the effective accessibility and usage of information, their lack generates information gap problems.

This presented work focuses on a multidisciplinary research about needs and the behavior of real and potential information users: adolescents living in disadvantaged communities. The research was carried out in a university context to address social issues as well as to find solutions appropriate to the Uruguayan context, which is rather different from the one in developed countries. The research also represents a scientific contribution to the development of information and communication sciences as well as to improve the information domain in developing countries.

The Republic of Uruguay is a small South American developing country. It covers an area of 176.215 Km^2 and it is the home of 3,251,526 people. Its political system is a presidential democracy. Until the 1960s, Uruguay posed one of the highest rates of social integration, development of middle classes, and literacy of Latin America. This was based on the development of state-based socioeconomic policies, based on a public education system which facilitated social mobility. Furthermore, policies on health and housing promoted the consolidation of the middle classes. The economic and financial crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, together with the authoritarian political regimes (1973-1984), lead to major changes in the social structure as well as in the role of political parties and the labor unions. The return to democracy in 1985 and its consolidation in the 1990s fostered the socioeconomic development, but the poverty levels did not decrease.

Since the end of the 1990s, the country suffered a process of economic and social decline, which led to a crisis in 2002 and 2003. As a result, up to 31% of the population went under the poverty line, provoking the impoverishment of children and teenagers. The Census of 2004 showed a marginalization of a third of the entire population and the lack of basic goods essential to the personal and collective development in the half of the underage population. This context increased the social gaps dramatically followed by digital and information gaps. Such processes strongly affected the most vulnerable communities, which generally live in slums.

In this context, the development of national and local policies to universalize the access to information resources constitutes a major challenge. The Digital Agenda 2011-2015 (ADU11-15) of the AGESIC (Uruguayan Agency for the Electronic Government and the Information Society) showed these strategic lines and action plans. Furthermore, the "Plan Ceibal" (Educational Connectivity on basic IT for online learning), the implementation of the one-laptop-per-child program in Uruguay, has the purpose of strongly reducing the digital gap by covering the entire primary and secondary education centers of the country.

The most recent report about "*El perfil del internauta uruguayo*" [The profile of the Uruguayan Internet user] (Grupo Radar, 2012, pp. 21-22) shows significant figures on Internet penetration in homes: 65% in Montevideo, 52% outside Montevideo, and 61% for the whole country. This

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