

# Diversity of Urban Development and Urban Life

Inn Kim

Young-Woo Nam

Jae-Heon Choi

Seoul National University Press

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Edited by

**Inn Kim**

Department of Geography,  
Seoul National University

**Young-Woo Nam**

Department of Geography Education,  
Korea University

and

**Jae-Heon Choi**

Department of Geography,  
Konkuk University

Seoul National University Press

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# **Urban Social Problems and New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT): The Spanish Approach<sup>1</sup>**

Manuel Valenzuela and Carmen Vázquez

## **Abstract**

From recently, the current world economy is characterised by globalisation processes, which are in turn driven by innovations in information and communication technologies. Having in mind social relations, the NICT's diffusion has forced a new kind of virtual communities free from spatial requirements. Up to now, only upper classes and educated population can afford to operate in such a kind of virtual networks. Language and cultural abilities also contribute to divide and exclude here even more than the classic material inequalities. Moreover, the cyberspace is hardly suitable for the protection, through laws and trade regulations, of the more deprived groups. Therefore, it is just here where different institutions and public administrations can meet their engagement with the social cohesion. The cities and metropolitan regions are obviously at the forefront of advanced economies social contradictions as they are the setting where the future of our most outstanding values will be decided: the solidarity and the good citizenship.

In this contribution, we will present some of the Spanish experiences on the diffusion of NICT's, in order to improve the everyday life conditions in some Spanish urbanised areas. Following the path of American freenets, the Spanish experience of civic Networks turns out illustrative, as far as it means an attempt of civil society, supported by public institutions, to take and integrate new technologies with the purpose of reaching socio-spatial cohesion and integration. The civic Networks are performing with uneven results in those fields where deprived groups must be supported in order to reduce the current gaps in urban society. That means to apply target policies just there where social cohesion must be improved: democracy and citizen engagement, educational, professional and labour integration policies, "new leisure time" possibilities, etc.

## **Introduction**

It is assumed that the NICTs stress the potential of urban relation as far as they make possible and favour the meeting of social, cultural and ideological diversity of the cities, having in mind the spatial and social dimensions. It is also obvious that the NICTs are a useful tool to better solve people problems dealing with concrete aspects of everyday use of the city (information, social services, etc.).

However, it is obliged to agree that the NICTs advantages are not equally widespread among the different social groups living in the cities; just on the contrary, the existing social inequalities of our urban model are being reproduced in the use trends of the NICTs possibilities; that is why the most deprived groups and communities can increase their segregation or exclusion problems in the virtual city if no specific programs are implemented in order to fully integrate them in the Information Society benefits.

In our contribution we will focus on the Internet use as a tool to improve the living conditions in the cities from a community perspective, having in mind mainly those initiatives stemming from the social movements, which are devoted to topics than can be classified following A. Fortin and D. Sanderson (1999) as:

- a. Internet as a tool to disseminate the possibilities and services of social organizations.
- b. Internet as a way to channel project coordination.
- c. Internet as introduction to a wide range of information on line.
- d. Internet for making easier to provide social services.
- e. Internet for improving the democratic dialogue between citizens and institutions.

Anyway, the economic as well as the social urban matters face open perspectives due to the NICTs, which worth an ambiguous valuation (positive and negative). That is why the citizens and institution final decisions will condition the last results of NICTs application.

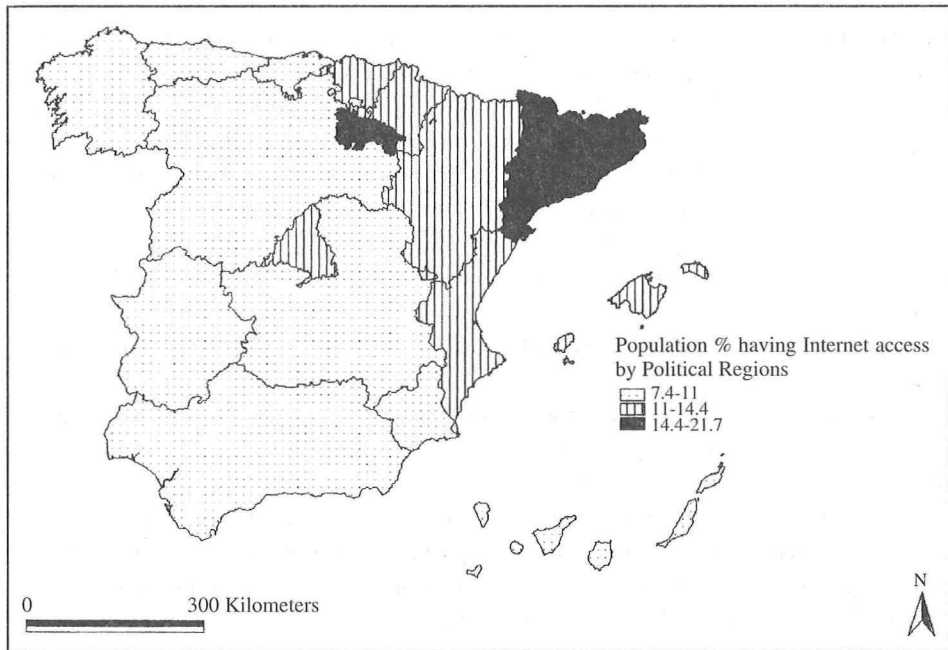
## **The NICTs Possibilities to Fit the Citizen's Demands**

Since the NICTs widespread, the physical city with a territorial scope is being enlarged and filled in (but not substituted) with new kind of community relationship, the "virtual community", following the concept coined by H. Rheingold (1993). Further contributions to that of the author above mentioned (Mitchell 1995; Echeverría 1999) have included a comparison between the relations through the NICTs and a new type of "Public Square".

More recently, dealing with the space of flows, Castells has revised his classical approaches to the urban social movements (Castells 2000). He distinguishes between

the relations through the network in order to transmit information avoiding any spatial constraint, those telematic communications proposed from the perspective of solidarity or the search of solutions for the most urgent social struggles and the communications through the network devoted to the increasing relations among people and institutions. As far as the first type is concerned it must be emphasized the creation of a new kind of “virtual community without propinquity” that in some way can be set up against the public spaces of the Euclidean geographic reality. This communication capacity provided by the NICTs is far from being available for the whole population; on the contrary, it is probably the place where the risk of intensifying the social segregation or exclusion processes is higher, having in mind the access difficulties which face concrete social groups preventing them from a fully integration in this new “electronic habitat”.

That is why the need of gaining access to the space, virtual or real, for every community member is absolutely essential. The point is how to build this cybernetic space in order to fully open the network to the whole community of citizens similarly to the public spaces such as squares, parks and the City Hall. It is necessary to mention here again the contribution of Castells as far as he deals with the critical point of the network use as a solidarity and cooperation tool for social groups who face specific difficulties to enter the welfare state; as a point arisen from this thesis we must also keep in mind the



Source: Internet Users Association. ([www.aui.es](http://www.aui.es))

**Figure 1.** Internet Users by Political Regions (% of population total).

Internet potential to channel urban social movements with a more vindicating profile. Lastly, it must be noted the increasing use of NICTs in order to improve the relations between institutions and citizens even though it is still out of the question to talk of a real electronic democracy resulting from interactive relations among institutions, civil society and social movements; in this sense the above mentioned contribution of Castells could be criticized of being maybe too optimistic (Castells 2000, 297-300).

### **The Answer to Urban Social Problems, the Big Challenge of NICTs**

In this contribution we have decided to focus on the analysis of how the virtual networks can influence the society functioning, from the perspective of groups as well as from the local one, assuming they can smooth (but no remove) the inequalities arisen from our urban model along decades of social and spatial segregation. We agree that this is a big challenge to social scientists, experts and politicians for the XXI century. In the last analysis, it must be considered a cybernetic revision of the "right to the city" proposed by Henri Lefebvre in the 60s. Through these new technologies, we can realize sizeable advances to reinforce social improvement initiatives, such as the urban social movements, the local economies or the volunteer activities. Besides them, the fact of spreading the information about public services or even improving them must be highly valued. In order to organize the following contribution, we will consider two development possibilities for the community networks serving the citizen concerns: the thematic networks dealing directly with targeted groups, segregated because of ethnic, sex, age, illness or drug addiction reasons; and the community networks, label reserved to those networks devoted mainly to social situations noticed at specific geographic areas (in our case cities, districts or neighborhoods).

#### *The Policies of Life Quality Improvement for the Most Deprived Groups*

This is by definition the solidarity and cooperation scope trying to meet problematic social situations. In Spain, as well as in other developed countries, wealth is not always the synonymous of justice. Hence, the need of using as much technical means as possible in order to solve poor or even urgent social situations. We must point out the information gaps we have faced to write this contribution, that is why our approach must be considered incomplete and temporary, even though the appearance of initiatives in the network devoted to help the most deprived groups is encouraging and the trend keep increasing. For the sake of a more systematic presentation, we will enumerate next some recent initiatives addressed to those groups who risk being the losers in the present diffusion of NICTs:

- a. Immigrants: Their situation in the arrival countries is specially weak, that is why the support to make easier their settlement in the new country is always welcome

to surmount the oppositions to their presence and prevent any segregation process. At this moment, we have been able to find some web pages where legal advice services and personal help are being offered to the immigrants (<http://www.extranjeria.com>; <http://www.workersonline.com>). In other cases the non-government organizations offer specific sections devoted to immigrants.

- b. Elderly people: They are undoubtedly the group who face more difficulties to integrate into the virtual or informatics relations. Hence the initiatives are more urgent but more complex and the result pretty unclear. Even though, we have met some projects attached to the "International Year of Elderly People" (1999). We will emphasize the program named "Jointly liable elderly who navigate in Internet" which strongly supported by the public administration (City Hall) and private institutions (Telephone Company and Savings Bank) has started two complementary projects: the settlement of Internet connections in an district's elderly center and informatics and Internet access training courses for elderly people. They intent to actively engage the elderly into the current life change, to look in Internet for solutions and resources devoted to social needs and create an information exchange network.
- c. Handicapped people: The situation diversity of this group is so wide that we only will try here to outline superficially the introduction of new technologies restricting ourselves to the Madrid's case:
  - Within the scope of information, the BIT Program (Informatics and Technological Data Bases) (June 2000) is devoted to handicapped people with the Down's syndrome and intent to provide access to the NICTs to 40 students with different handicap degrees.
  - The virtual labor market for handicapped people has since the month of June of the present year 2000 a specialized web gate ([www.merc@dis.es](http://www.merc@dis.es)) with the collaboration of enterprises, enterprise associations and handicapped organizations. Right now, it offers advise and information services for entrepreneurs.
  - To make easier for handicapped people the use of Madrid's city is the goal of the "InfoTech" web (Mars 2000); the strategy to reach this goal is the creation of a guide useful to manage and put in relation with the city. The mentioned page offers any kind of accessible services, a list of professionals and places where it is possible to exchange material. In this case the initiative is fully private with the support of the "Spanish National Blind's Organization".
- d. Support to the housewife: Every day more and more web sites appear dealing with women and topics such as general information, labor and social matters. As far as labor market is concerned it is worth to mention the web pages of public institutions, which fight against social and gender segregation. An increasing concern focuses on housewife, for whom it has been set in operation a private project promoted in Madrid's southern neighborhoods by Non Government Foundation with the support of enterprises and the European Union. Firstly, this

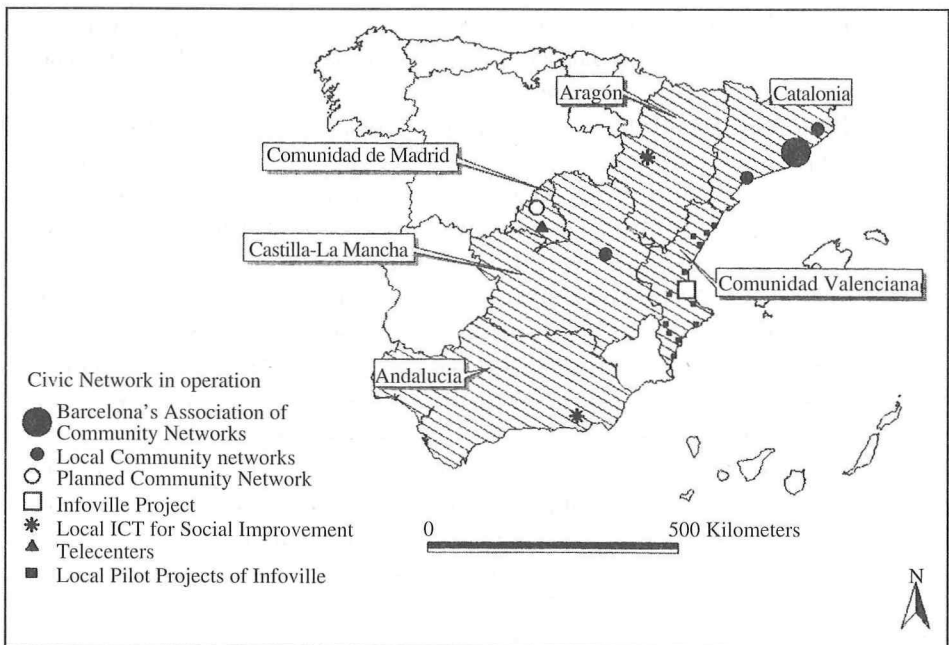


project tries to take the housewife out of their home isolation through Internet courses.

- e. Support to ethnic minorities: Having in mind that Spain has become an immigration destination for people coming from quite different places, it is basic to avoid the reproduction of racist and xenophobic reactions like those happen in other European countries which older immigration tradition of people coming from places beyond Europe. Moreover, Spain has an ethnic minority settled long time ago but quite difficult to integrate; the Spanish citizens who belong to the gipsy minority amount to nearly 500,000 people. They have been considered by the EPITELIO Program, which on behalf of the European Union is devoted to social groups in trouble. Within the framework of EPITELIO several projects have been developed, among them it is worth to mention: the web site of the Spanish Gypsy General Secretary's Office, where it is possible to find an observatory filled up with data bases of news dealing with the gypsy community.

*The Spanish Community Networks, Two Case Studies: The Barcelona's BCNet and the Community Network of Cuenca*

The context of the present contribution is related with the emerging phenomenon of the Community Networks as a strategic tool for economically and socially sustained local



**Figure 2.** First Steps of Community Networks in Spain.

development (Fig. 2). Community Networks offer possibilities and opportunities for the launching of a multiple range of services to the community, for example the management of processes such as electronic democracy, telesales, telework, multi-discipline distance consultation, etc. These employment possibilities, launched towards an emerging market are especially sensitive to their consolidation thanks to the geometrical progression in the annual increase of users of information Technologies both at local environments as well as worldwide. Co-operation between suppliers of services to the communities, the local administrations and the firms in Europe is becoming an opportunity, which the Third System has to make profit of.

The two cases we will present here are different enough to provide a good approach to the NICTs possibilities for social integration in a first-rank national metropolis like Barcelona, and a little service city like Cuenca. Both linked through the EPITELIO and Netizens Projects, the later being basically a demonstrative action with the aim of identifying, promoting and spreading the possibilities of creating long-lasting jobs in the Information Society, with the direct intervention of the Third System. The chosen scenario to achieve this aim is the Community Network, if this is understood as a shadow of the city and its citizens in the Internet Network.

Barcelona is the second Spanish national metropolis with a population of 1,505,581 inhabitants (1998) living within the municipal boundaries and around 3 millions people gathered in the metropolitan area. The 24<sup>th</sup> April 1996, under the EPITELIO European project, BCNet (<http://bcnet.upc.es>) was born as an initiative of the Barcelona's Computer Sciences Faculty and the Catalonia's Polytechnic University, working together with Pangea Association and Isoc-Cat (public institution in charge of spreading the information society). The first goal of the project was to provide the students and the whole Polytechnic University's community with free access to digital networks, and later on, this Civic Network has tried to favor the increasing living quality of the citizens by means of digital communication at local as well as global scale and the creativity and dynamism of civil society. BCNet is a non-profit Civic Network, supported by volunteer workers and financed by private enterprises, institutions and private donations. During 1997 and 1998, similar initiatives have risen in different districts of Barcelona (Fig. 3). Every district's Citizen Network decided to reproduce its own territory and to specialize depending upon its own needs and neighbor features. Obviously, the socio-economic profile of neighbors such as The Raval, located at the city's historic core, is quite exceptional.

Ravalnet, it is the Community Network of The Raval neighborhood in the city of Barcelona. Problems of prostitution, drugs, poverty, strike, alcoholism, violence, absenteeism school, in fact of social exclusion stigmatize the Raval. RavalNet intends to increase the quality of life and the possibilities of communication for the citizens of The Raval neighborhood in Barcelona using the new technologies of the information and communication. RavalNet intends to create a social communication space within reach of everybody and take advantage the wealth of the associations of the neighborhood and

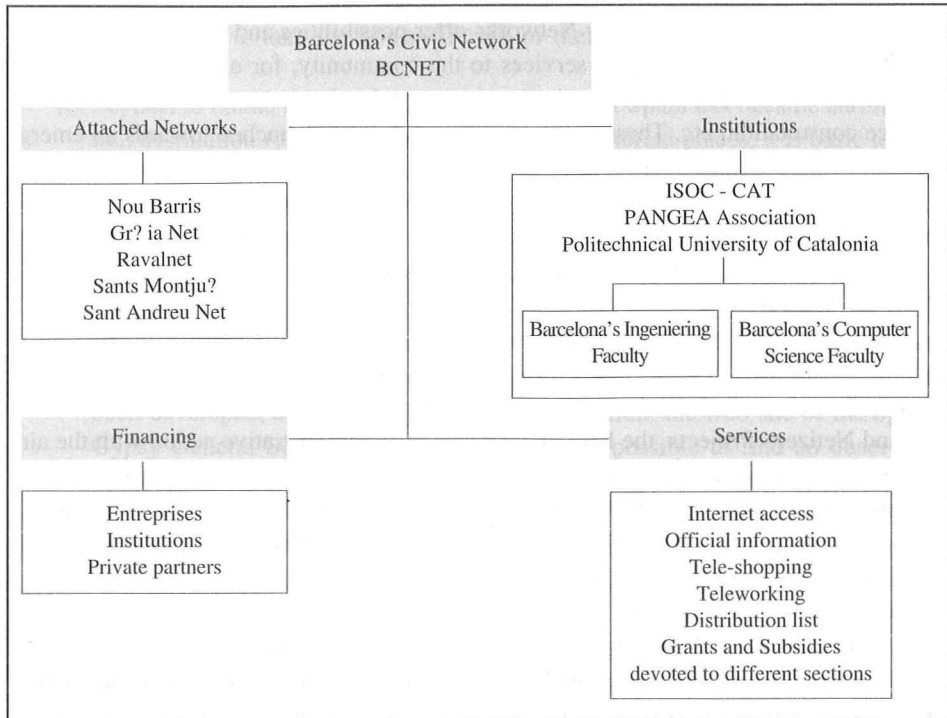


Figure 3. Barcelona's Community Network.

its dynamism to impel the introduction of the citizens and the entities in the society of the information. It is basic objective of RavalNet to develop the occupational training in new technologies of information and communication, having the goal of creating employment. At this time has three fixed associates and it is the driver of the Workshop School "Xarxa".

One of the first district Civic Networks was that of Nou Barris Net, which was born as a new relation tool devoted to support the open and participating citizen entrance into the Information Society, avoiding potential exclusions. The project was supported by the non-profit association Projectart, the Barcelona's City Hall through the Nou Barris District, the Information Society Town Councilor, the Jaume Bofill Foundation and the Catalonia's Institute of Technology. The goals of this Community Network could be used as an example for the whole BCNet project:

1. To improve the possibilities of communication, dialogue and information access for the Nou Barris neighbors as well as for its organizations, administration, enterprises, commerce's and social agents.
2. To avoid new segregation process stemming from social exclusion of the most deprived groups lacking access to the new technologies.
3. To profit from the rich association tradition of Nou Barris, its history and

- dynamism to launch the neighbors and organizations introduction into the Information Society.
4. To provide useful district information tool, with current news, cultural activities and social and community initiatives.
  5. To open and show Nou Barris to the world.
  6. To create a social exchange space through the virtual community devoted to improve the quality of life of the real community, with a social, economic, cultural and education benefit for the citizen.
  7. To enhance the electronic democracy, the relations between administration and citizens and to define new control, debate, access and democratic engagement tools.
  8. To favor the creation of new working possibilities and enterprise projects dealing with telematic, teleworking and information and communication technologies.

In order to achieve these goals Nou Barris Net has spread out a strategy including:

- a. Free access to Internet for the Nou Barris organizations. During 1999 nearly 50 associations have been able to connect to the network. In the future, the goal is that every social agent has Internet access, an email address and the possibility to have a web page.
- b. Low cost access to Internet for the Nou Barris neighbors.
- c. Training and technical support for the non-profit organizations.
- d. Creation and maintaining of web pages.
- e. Electronic newspaper, with the Nou Barris news, updated by the information services of the Nou Barris television.
- f. Agenda including all the activities in the district.
- g. Services directory and district resources list.
- h. Discussion forums dealing with topics of interest for the neighbors, the movement association and social agents.
- i. Distribution lists.
- j. The space "connecting to cooperate", devoted to support the district entities and organizations working on international co-operation and solidarity matters. The possibility to link with the project partners, including to donation of computers and maintaining services through Internet to Nicaragua, Cuba, Bolivia, El Salvador and Honduras.
- k. A Telematic Resources Center offering supporting services, advising, computer room and public high-speed connection points to Internet.
- l. Coordination with other similar projects of Civic Networks, electronic democracy and strengthening of telematic for the civil society.

Cuenca is a provincial capital located in a deprived inland region (Castilla-La Mancha), which fits, according to the Spanish urban ranking, the position of a very small city (44,558 inhabitants in 1998) whose most characteristic functions are the com-

mercial and service ones, both fitting the provincial demands. Among the most relevant problems it can be remarked the lack of transport and NICT infrastructures, the unemployment (poor economic background), the survival of a few slum areas and the ageing demographic structure. The most recent politics have focused on the development of improved transport and NICT infrastructures (high speed train) in order to shape a new and more modern urban image combined with a tourism plan which takes into account the outstanding urban heritage (the Cuenca's historic core has been declared by the UNESCO as Human Heritage).

This characterization as a marginal city shows a high correlation with the low level of NICT infrastructures. At the local administration the intranet and the urban information system is underdeveloped and in the city all the attempts to introduce the optic-fiber network have failed due to contract requirements and the low profitability expected. Bearing in mind all this situation recently the Social Services have decided to introduce the Community Network as a recovering and socially revitalizing tool.

In the case of Cuenca, the Community Network (<http://www.cuenca.org>) or (<http://www.epitelio.org/cuenca>) model has been chosen for two basic reasons: first, It offers a low-cost and controlled technical solution animated by the citizens themselves. Second, it allows the confluence of the local development strategy at all levels (social, economic, cultural, ...) and both at local and international scale.

For the city of Cuenca, the Community Network is interpreted as a tool, which facilitates the actions, integrated in its local development strategy. The creation, improvement and support of employment is specially relevant within this strategy, through plans of excellence in tourism and urban refurbishing of the city, as well as the exploration of new forms of work for the inhabitants of Cuenca in the way of European partnerships, and linked to social European Fund's plans such as INTEGRA and YOUTHSTART.

Thus, the Community Network everywhere is being constructed among other functions, as a support:

1. To foster social citizen to citizen dialogue where in some cases one represents the local administrations or a company, and the other is member of a gypsy community or a neighbors' association. This dialogue makes decisions richer for all in favor of the city as a whole.
2. To serve as an operational framework to launch teleworkers who will offer their services to the companies and institutions in full telemarketing packages in the network or by way of a service catalogue.
3. To facilitate the citizens a one-stop-shop system, with the possibility of completing or following special administrations procedures.
4. To empower sites to practice electronic democracy, with the possibility of consulting political programs, participating in debates on local issues opened up by the citizens themselves or by their political representatives, etc.
5. To have access to advertisements on job offer and demand and to support the

local markets with publicity in the local shops network and the opening of tele-sales services.

6. To liven up the integration of distance training and tutoring services in collaboration with the Universities and the local training centers.

This plan was born as a result of the arrangements between the Cuenca's municipality representatives and the EPITELIO European Project in 1997. Agreement by both institutions as to the use of Internet for fighting against social exclusion gave way to a joint study to search for the adequate solutions to be implemented within a local environment, as is the city of Cuenca. This previous study led to finish up the design and launch the Community Network as a joint operational framework.

Actions for the creation and first launching of the Community Network were focused during 1998 on the work with local trade unions and business organizations and involving from the start the local company SERVINET, dedicated to supplying access and services related to Internet. Work with these organizations was geared to training those responsible for Internet resources in their organizations, and the Community Network itself and to the continuous evaluation of opportunities, menaces, weaknesses and strengths of the Network itself. Since it was launched up to the present moment, a lot has been done, especially in the field of services adjustment and their promotion at local, national and international level.

In the case of Cuenca Community Network, the promoting group started from a basic configuration of three entities (Fig. 4). The City Hall, being the promoter of the Community Network has to take up a facilitating role, to avoid it from turning into a new public company far from citizens' control, and far from the feeling of ownership

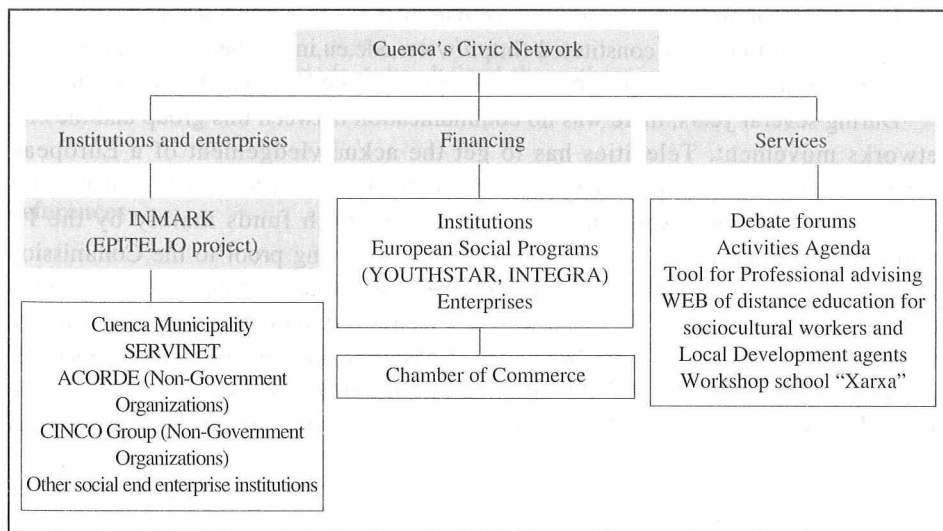


Figure 4. Cuenca's Community Network.

that would make it function spontaneously. Thus, in the same way it happens with the Cuenca Community Network, the founding members of the Community Network are members of the social and economic organizations previously mentioned. Adhesion by public institutions or other public and private administrations will be produced according to concrete projects and as collaborating entities.

Contents and services to the citizens are the foundation of the Community Network. A few of the city pages and its offer to tourist cannot be enough for the social and economic development of the city. The contents have to be useful for the people and satisfy their needs. In the Cuenca Community Network the first thing was the creation of pages with links to existing web pages of the different city bodies, provincial institutions and those regional and national ones that have something to do with Cuenca.

From there on, and with the pages elaborated by the social and economic organizations, there is already enough amount of information that can go on growing as long as new things about and from the city are created in Internet. Together with this static content level, and starting from the experience of the Cuenca Community Network, there is another dynamic type level, which is related with the dynamic services of Internet. These dynamic services are of two kinds:

- Services orientated to facilitating access to the resources of Internet by the citizens, via web, for example, managing one's own personal e-mailbox, or the creation of web pages with a Community Network web tutorial. In these cases, it is a personal use of service by the user, to facilitate him a particular service.
- Services orientated to sharing information with other citizens. Here the Activity Agendas, the Debate forums, the Campaign Area, the volunteers' pool and the access to consultants.

In order to improve the reader's information it could be added that in 1993 the Telecities Consortium was constituted (<http://www.edc.eu.int>), where a group of well-known European cities get together, with the support of the European Commission.

During several years, there was no communication between this group and the city networks movement. Telecities has to get the acknowledgement of a European Commission more worried by economic competitiveness than to create telematic services for the citizens. And what Telecities does, with funds mainly by the IV Framework Program is a group of projects geared to giving proof to the Commission that the City halls are capable of creating such services, which in some of the cases they get to prove. The Barcelona City Hall web was mentioned in the Bangemann Challenge in 1997, thus providing so (<http://www.bcn.es>). But we are yet far from the open cooperation among Telecities and the different city networks. A downward view of the local Administration is not easily compatible with the initiative, which gets moving just the opposite way.

## Conclusion

The initiatives devoted to build a virtual reality, parallel to the real city, with the goal of improving the current relations and life quality of the urban society arise everywhere. We have tried to realize how web pages can help, therefore, to rethink the social dynamics and to channel them towards new directions most coherent with social desires; furthermore they disseminate the use of NICTs.

The possibility of replacing the relations stigmatized by inequalities or even exclusion problems with others characterized by opportunities and integration defines a new framework to understand and value the NICTs bearing in mind their social usefulness.

We should keep paying attention to find out how, far from utopian or willful positions, appear the local communities in the electronic space, which questions are given priority and to which extent are community networks engaged with the concrete place and social environment they are devoted to. Even worse than their lack could be the reality manipulation or the intention to make social engineering through NICTs, or in other words, a telematic determinism. The attempt of replacing radically the space of places with the space of flows will arrive at a failure.

## Notes

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