



Pacific
Ocean

The Watchdog Generation:

Wired Politics

Around the hemisphere, an increasingly Internet-savvy public is scrutinizing data traditionally kept secret.

It's all in the name of greater democracy, but it carries a political price. **By Monica Campbell**

Where is Latin America Heading?

but a Mexican government freedom-of-information initiative introduced in 2003 to make once-private government data available upon request is slowly changing that country's political landscape.

Welcome to politics in Latin America's information age.

The veil over Latin America's political secrets is lifting across the region, as an increasing number of wired citizens create blogs that post everything from news of upcoming street protests to simple spaces for unfiltered debate.

Some of the toughest tests faced by the region's politicians in recent years have been posed by journalists taking advantage of the wealth of public information now available on the Web. In Mexico, the three-year-

far Mexico is judged to be the most user-friendly and is the only on-line system. In 2006, IFAI received some 60,000 information requests, of which 90 percent were made online. Of those the IFAI responded to 53,000; the bulk of the remaining 7,000, according to the IFAI, were left unanswered because the original filer failed to respond to a request for more information.

"Politicians are now aware that every penny they spend may be reviewed by somebody at some point in time," says María Marván, a commissioner and former president of IFIA. "That's never happened before." According to Marván, the fact that Mexicans can head to a cyber cafe and ask for information from more than 240 government offices is revolutionary. "We're using the Internet to push for accountability and give citizens

In Costa Rica, access to government data online helped the daily *La Nación* uncover a web of high-level corruption

old Federal Institute of Access to Public Information (IFAI) provides for the first time an online system that can process anonymous requests for information on politicians and government agencies that has long been hidden from the public.

IFAI rules ensure that those requests, no matter how politically sensitive, are not ignored. Staffed by five-independent commissioners—often academics—the IFAI has 20 days to respond to a request. Similar open-information procedures have been established by governments in Peru, Panama, and Costa Rica, but so

a new source of power," she says. "This may not seem special in the United States, where you have this wonderful ability to write your congressman in D.C. and get a response. But that type of communication doesn't really exist in Mexico or most of Latin America."

In Costa Rica, access to government data online helped the daily *La Nación* uncover a web of high-level corruption that eventually sparked investigations of three former presidents. "The Internet has helped our reporting quite a bit," says Alejandro Urbina, executive editor of *La Nación*. "Institutions are slowly putting information online, and there are more private databases to tap."

Urbina admits that some key information, such as government procurement records, still remains unavailable on the Internet. Still, he points out that

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the web “is an invaluable complement to our reporting, especially when it comes to following the money.”

Expanding Blogosphere

Meantime, Latin America’s expanding blogosphere is creating a new generation of watchdogs, as well as an unconventional new forum for political debate. Nobody really knows the exact number of Latin American blogs. Blogs in Spanish still only account for some 3 percent of all blogs worldwide, according to Technorati, the blog tracking organization based in San Francisco, California.

Folks writing in English and Japanese still dominate the international blogosphere, with Chinese blogs in the number three spot. In Latin America, the growth of blogs will be slow because online chats and e-mail are still more popular ways to communicate online than webpostings, says David Sasaki, Americas editor of Global Voices Online, an international network of global blogs coordinated through the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard Law School.

The Who’s Who of bloggers in Latin America may be a short list for now. Indeed, Latin America’s online establishment only began to emerge a few years ago. The blog operated by Eduardo Arcos, ALT1040, is considered the most widely read in the Spanish-speaking world. [see Box] Growing up in Guayaquil, Ecuador, Arcos started coding Basic at six years old and C++ at age 14. Now, Arcos, 28, never far from his Blackberry or MacBook Pro, can be found blogging at the Starbucks near the U.S. embassy in Mexico City or running Hipertextual, one of Latin America’s more successful weblog enterprises.

There’s also Leo Prieto, 27, founder of FayerWayer, Chile’s leading tech blog. Like Arcos, he is young, well traveled, bilingual, and one of the few bloggers in Latin America who actually makes a living from his web pursuits. In 1993, at age 13, Prieto was online using the Web server at the University of Chile. In high school, he was already earning cash by building Web sites for local Internet service providers, heading to corporate offices in his school uniform. At 21, Prieto shook hands with computer heavyweights like Microsoft’s Bill Gates and Oracle’s Larry Ellison when he was part of



The Tech Wizard of Mexico City: Eduardo Arcos

www.alt1040.com

www.Hipertextual.com

With 40,000 hits a day and 7,543 hyperlinks to other sites, Eduardo Arcos’ technology and politics blog is the most visited in Latin America. The Mexico-City-based Arcos, a 28-year old native of Ecuador, writes about almost everything—at length, with up to fifteen new postings daily. On a sample day, Arcos will argue that Orkut is superior to MySpace (with graphics to prove his case) and link with YouTube to show Jon Stewart interviewing Bill Gates.

But it is commentary on Mexican politics and pointed criticisms of the federal and city governments that raises temperatures. “I always say that those who hate me read me more than those who love me,” he says. When he’s not tapping away at his own blog, Arcos judges blog competitions around the world and is frequently quoted in the media on technology.

Arcos’ opinions resonate in the small world of Spanish-language blogs not only because of his acknowledged technical expertise but because he is a veteran in a still-young field. He started his first personal page in 1995, “when there were only six of us blogging in Spanish,” he recalls proudly. In 2005, he decided to make the leap from personal blogger to commercial entrepreneur. He brought the region’s sharpest bloggers on subjects ranging from computer technology and cellular phones to music and film under one virtual roof. The result, Hipertextual, was the highest revenue earner of all Latin American Spanish-language blog-for-profit sites in 2006. In 2007, advertising profits are expected to reach \$1 million. And Apple, Dell, Intel, and Telcel are already knocking on Arcos’ door to take out cyber ads on his site.

—TÁBATA PEREGRIN



Copyright This: Ariel Vercelli
www.arielvecelli.org

Ariel Vercelli warns from the start: "My blog is not entertaining." He's not lying. Still it's extremely popular. The personal blog of this Argentine lawyer, an expert in copyright, does not discuss gadgets, politics, or soccer. Instead, Vercelli's blog concentrates on one of the Internet's most complex issues: how to protect intellectual property rights in cyberspace.

Vercelli's focus is on the new alternative of "tailored copyright licenses" through Creative Commons, or *Bienes Comunes Creativos*, a system that already operates in 43 countries and has generated millions of licenses worldwide. Vercelli started his own blog in April 2004 to mark the release of the first Latin American book licensed by Creative Commons: his master's thesis on the impact of Creative Commons on the Internet. The innovative licensing system is designed to create a middle position between the classic "copyright" and the radical "copyleft" (in which materials are open source).

The flexible Creative Commons system allows an author to retain certain rights and restrict others, providing a regulatory framework to better facilitate the fluid exchange of information on the World Wide Web. For his on-line thesis, Vercelli opted for a license that permits free circulation but requires author attribution and prohibits merchandising. The result: more than 30,000 downloads. "My book is an excellent example of the economy of attention," Vercelli explains, "upon being allowed to circulate freely, it attracted all of it." — TP

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a Chilean delegation visiting computer industry hubs in the U.S.

Prieto has teamed up with Senator Fernando Flores, [see Sidebar] who maintains his own blog and is considered one of Chile's—if not Latin America's—most plugged-in politicians. Flores, 64, a former finance minister in Salvador Allende's government, was jailed by General Augusto Pinochet for three years before moving into exile in California, where he studied computer science at Stanford University. Today, Prieto and Flores, who has represented Chile's northernmost Tarapacá since 2002, are a traveling duo, lecturing students across Chile about the opportunities of the Internet era.

"We're all very passionate about the idea of the democratization of information and technology," says Prieto. "But it's a joke when the government boasts how advanced Chile is on the technology front." Internet access, he explains, is only available in certain areas of the country. Downtown Santiago offers high-speed connections, but strong signals can be rare a few miles outside of the city. Antina Chile, one of Prieto's projects, is spearheading a movement to provide broadband access to all Chileans. "The government should have a master plan to offer real Internet access to its citizens," say Prieto.

Some small towns in Chile are already taking the lead. In September 2006, Salamanca, an agricultural community of 12,500 located 200 miles north of Santiago, became the country's first WiFi town. A local copper mine, Los Pelambres, paid \$56,000 to install 10 telecommunications antennas, in partnership with Antina Chile and local mayor Gerardo Rojas. Free wireless Internet connections are now available around the clock. Chilean President Michelle Bachelet celebrated the project as a crucial step toward closing the "gap between rich and poor, between the capital and regions, between the large and small cities."

Commentary on sites run by Arcos, Prieto and other blogging heavyweights in Latin America, such as Buenos Aires-based Mariano Amartino [see Sidebar], typically covers technology, media and pop culture. But politics is becoming a major preoccupation. In a first for Mexico, Arcos blogged live from Mexico's

Federal Electoral Institute on the eve of the country's presidential elections in the summer of 2006. In their own way, the geeky boys (yes, they are overwhelmingly male) of Latin America's *blogosfera* are agents of change by advocating freer Internet access and scrutinizing the likes of Spain's Telefónica and Teléfonos de México (Telmex), two major gatekeepers of Internet access in Latin America.

In a series of posts during 2005 and 2006, Arcos detailed his "Telmex odyssey," which centers on his wrenching—and sadly, common—experience with the company's faulty customer service and infrastructure. Other posts questioned whether Telmex attempted to block VoIP, freely available software that allows broadband connections into inexpensive phone lines. (The verdict is still out.) In Mexico, Arcos offers consumers one of the best online sources for straight answers about how Latin America's biggest telecommunications company physically works.

High Costs

So far, Latin America's online audience is heavily skewed in favor of affluent city dwellers and internet-savvy students. Only 16 percent of Latin Americans are currently online, according to Internet World Stats, a Web site that tracks global Internet usage, and they represent 8 percent of the global total. That's a dismal record compared with other regions. Asia, with 36 percent, has the world's highest percentage of regular Internet users, and Europe is in second place, with 29 percent. The U.S. lags behind at only 21 percent, even though its online penetration rate is 69 percent.

One factor holding the southern hemisphere back may be cost. In Ecuador, fees for basic Internet service start at \$50 a month. Compare that to the country's average monthly income, which hovers between \$150 and \$200, and it becomes clear why cyber cafes are the most affordable Internet outlets in poorer parts of Latin America. And they are typically jammed with teenagers working on their homework, playing video games, or chatting online.

"You can't really bookmark your favorite sites at an Internet cafe or get involved in a blog on a daily



Buenos Aires On Line

<http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/blog/pasaenbsas/>

The blog hosted by Buenos Aires' municipal government and mayor, Jorge Telerman, is like a neighborhood meeting where everyone comments on everything, from the winners of the most recent short-film competition organized by the city to the rumored rebirth of Calle Florida. Under the leadership of its philosopher-journalist-mayor, Jorge Telerman, the federal capital's municipal government is doing something rarely seen in the world of politics: directly interacting with its citizens.

The blog is an extension of Buenos Aires' website, which was recently declared by a consortium of eight Hispano-Portuguese business schools as the best webpage hosted by any Latin American capital city. And city residents have responded. The site received 15 million visits in 2006. Mayor Telerman, a true believer in the power of the Internet, regularly communicates with Buenos Aires residents through, "*Intendente Online*," which includes a webcam in the mayor's office to allow online viewers to watch him at work and personal e-mail access to the mayor. The project, he says, is part of an effort to bring "state and society closer together."

The mayor's enthusiasm for the power of the Internet has, since August, translated into a major renovation of the city's website. Now residents can get updated information on the courts, lodge a complaint, gather information on the city's cultural events and buy tickets for them, and find the best dance clubs in the capital's 48 neighborhoods. And that's just the beginning. — TP

Top Blogs *en español*

www.uberbin.net ARGENTINA

Started by Mariano Amartino, a consultant at Uberbin I/A, this website and blog focuses on Amartino's opinions and reviews of technology related to the Internet. As a source for up-to-date techie information, this site has become a recommended link in thousands of blogs all over Latin America.

www.fernandoflores.cl CHILE

Fernando Flores has become the leader of the blog movement in Chile. His blog is a cut-and-paste site with news, events and everything else he considers important, including technical news and politics. The blog, however, is only a sideline: Flores is also a Senator for the PPD.

www.dixo.com MEXICO

The journalists of the defunct radio station, *Radioactivo*, have found the Internet as a new space to express their opinions on music, videogames, culture, and politics. Podcasts from well known voices such as Fernanda Tapia or the controversial Warpig are available on the site. One of the most popular places for Podcasts in Latin America, visitors have downloaded over 30,000 of the different Podcasts available.

www.briefblog.com.mx MEXICO

Freelance marketing expert Arturo de Albornoz maintains an updated, technical blog for those interested in marketing and advertising. The site pulls together the latest news and information on new marketing techniques.

www.coberturadigital.com ECUADOR

One of the best sources on how the media are adapting to the Internet, this blog by award-winning Ecuadorian journalist Christian Espinosa monitors the Internet strategies of media and journalists. In a reflection of the modern-day reality of the Internet, Espinosa also reviews personal sites and blogs run by cyber journalists. — TP

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level," says Sasaki of Global Voices Online. "There's a reason why we're not reading blogs from places like Chiapas."

Still, the number of Latin Americans in cyberspace is growing steadily. Ecuador's current Internet penetration rate was barely 6 percent in 2006, according to the World Bank. But that represents a jump of over 200 percent over the past four years, an increase that parallels other Latin countries.

The nascent state of Latin America's wired world explains why it has nowhere near the clout of the political blog-mobs in the United States and Europe. There are no Howard Deans and no broad, online activist network like MoveOn.org (although Chile is rumored to be creating something similar). Still, bloggers in several Latin America countries—blogs México, PerúBlogs and BlogsChapines (Guatemala), for example—are banding together to form Web site directories, which are portals that bring together bloggers in a single online community rather than leaving them to dangle alone as isolated points in the blogosphere.

The blogging communities have already had a political impact, says Alvaro Ramírez, an expert on Latin American blogs. "We're seeing bloggers unite behind a candidate," says Ramírez, who teaches media studies at the University of Bergen in Norway. In Colombia, a number of bloggers banded together to back candidates Carlos Gaviria and Antanas Mockus, who ran opposite winning candidate Álvaro Uribe in last year's presidential election.

Still, politicians are unsure how to respond to the attention they get from the blogging community. "I don't think they spot the possibilities. . . the ability to collaborate," says Ramírez. No Latin American candidate, as far as anyone knows, has appointed an Internet campaign manager—yet—but that only increases the influence of bloggers, says Sasaki of Global Voices Online. "It leaves it up to the bloggers to help shape public opinion."

Blogging The Vote

Latin America's elections in 2006 generated a rise in political blogs and an uptick in readership. In Mexi-

co, the disputed July 2 presidential election, coupled with more and more Mexicans going online, put the country's bloggers on the map. In a cyber-first, Mexicans—mostly twenty and thirty-somethings in the larger cities—turned to blogs by the thousands for the blow-by-blow account of the presidential race and its aftermath, in which the conservative Felipe Calderón squeaked ahead of his leftist opponent Andrés Manuel López Obrador by 244,000 votes.

The most popular site for the pro-López Obrador camp was *senderodelpeje.com*, which was awash with videos and anti-Calderón propaganda. It clocked some 60,000 hits on July 3, the day after the election.

Last year's presidential contest in Venezuela put the blogging culture there in higher gear. Luis Carlos Díaz, 22, who studied journalism at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas and has blogged for two years, hatched *Elecciones en 3D*—a one-stop shopping site that carried 150 blogs from every part of the Venezuelan political spectrum. A similar project was launched in Ecuador during last October's presidential election.

The Venezuelan experiment really picked up steam when one of the country's largest blogging networks, *to2blogs*, signed on. "We brought together the Chavistas and the opposition, along with expat Venezuelans," recounts Díaz. "The political protests on the street come

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Senderodelpeje was heavily criticized for serving as a platform for shrill attacks against Calderón rather than in-depth analysis, but Víctor Hernández, the site's 32-year-old co-founder, argues that blogs in Mexico report what the Televisa-TV Azteca broadcasting duopoly black out. "When the big media only shows one side of the story, blogs become a replacement for providing real, raw information," says Hernández.

Fernando González, an international business student, ran *TodosConCalderon.com*. It was billed as one of the more popular pro-Calderón sites during the election (and he built a sizeable archive of Calderón's televised interviews along the way). Built on a whim and maintained from his bedroom at his parent's house, González eventually realized that hundreds of people were following his site. "It was good to see ordinary people having a place to speak up online," says González. "That's still new in Mexico."

alive online." Díaz believes the venture helped ease some of the strains of Venezuela's polarized politics. "The Internet is one of the few places where people from all sides of the political spectrum can gather in peace," he says.

For that reason alone, Latin America's cyber-dynamism could be one of the region's healthiest political developments in many decades. And there are signs that the number of online players will increase. The One Laptop Per Child program, a non-profit U.N.-supported initiative to provide a barebones computer to kids in developing countries for \$100, has already received pledges of support from Brazil and Argentina. In Chile, bloggers Prieto and Flores are lobbying their government to join, and more may follow. If successful, the initiative is sure to create a wider audience for the *blogosfera*—not to mention a new generation of bloggers to go after Latin America's next crop of politicians. ■