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www.wipchile.cl

WIP-CHILE: OBSTACLES AND PRIMARY RESULTS

Paper for the Oxford WIP Meeting, July 2003

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Abstract

Chile's incorporation to the World Internet Project (WIP) started officially in March 2003 after the Universidad Catolica de Chile got a grant from the National Fund of Science and Technology. While a national face-to-face survey will be conducted in October, a 600-case pilot study was done with private sponsorship in January 2003. The pilot study's aims were to pre-test the questionnaire, launch WIP-Chile publicly, and obtain further private funding for the project. The questionnaire used for the pilot contained WIP's core questions and was adapted from the Spanish version used by UCLA in the US. Other important adaptations were made, such as face-to-face application of the survey -mostly due to low, skewed telephone penetration in Chile. The questionnaire was also split into separate surveys for Internet users and non-users.

The contributions of WIP-Chile in the context of the Oxford WIP worldwide meeting are two-fold. One relates to inter-cultural research. The other rises from the comparison between Chile's results and those from the US, based on the last UCLA's 2003 World Internet Report.

In the first area, cultural differences explain misunderstandings and/or inadequate responses to some questions, eg. those about weekly averages of both online and offline activities, and those related to the interviewee's social life. In the latter case, they were considered irrelevant, intrusive, and tiring -and got high non-response rates.

Concerning the results themselves, there were some interesting differences and similarities between Chile and the US. Among the clearest differences were the shorter experience of Chilean users and the fact that they almost did not buy online. As in the US, non-users of the Internet spent more time watching TV than users. Even though both countries share six of the ten most popular uses of Internet, US-users tend to be more instrumental and utilitarian, while Chileans employ the web mainly as a source of entertainment and information. Another important difference is the stronger confidence of Chileans in this technology's power to change the world, whereas they are less optimistic about its ability to empower citizens.

Introduction

This paper describes the Chilean experience in relation to the World Internet Project (WIP). The Chilean version of the WIP is still in the first stages of development. Its official start was March 2003 after receiving a grant from the National Fund of Science and Technology for 2003 and 2004 (FONDECYT Nr. 1030946). Additionally, WIP-Chile is negotiating to gather extra funding from private sponsors. Albeit the first data will be collected in October 2003, a pilot study was conducted in January 2003 and its results presented in May 2003. This 600-case pilot study was financed by the Santiago Chamber of Commerce, and was slightly shorter than the original WIP questionnaire.

The pilot's main objectives were both academic and non-academic. Academically, it intended to pre-test the questionnaire, as well as data gathering and processing. Non-academically, the results were communicated in a press conference in order to attract additional private funding as well as to indicate that Chile was joining the World Internet Project.

This paper is based on the experience of this pilot study. It starts by giving background information about internet use and the context of social science research in Chile. Secondly, it discusses the methodological obstacles found by the WIP Chile team. Thirdly, it summarises the most relevant results of the pilot study. Lastly, it addresses some suggestions for the WIP project in general.

Internet research in Chile

Internet in Chile

Existing data suggest that internet penetration in Chile is lower than in developed countries, but it leads the field in Latin America (Mideplan, 2000; INE 2002; Camara de Comercio, 2001). Nevertheless, there is no official figure indicating the exact number of internet users in Chile. Lack of data, as well as different definitions of internet penetration and use, makes it difficult to study the phenomenon consistently. For example, some studies consider that a whole household (composed by an average of 4 persons) is connected to the internet if one member of the household gets connected to the web in any place. Others quantify the number of computers connected to the web, and so on.

A recent and more reliable source of data is the latest 2002 national census (INE 2002), which quantified households and their hardware. Thus, 21% of households have a computer, and 11% has at least one computer connected to the web. However when measurements are at the level of individuals older than 12 years, other research suggests that 38% of Chileans has access to Internet, while 21% has access to a computer (Mideplan, 2000). Given that many users get connected at educational institutions, cyber cafés or at work (Mideplan, 2000; Catalan & Helsper, 2003), the WIP-Chile team defined users as any person who currently uses the Internet, independently from frequency or location of use. Thus, we included users with no home access to the web.

Differences between socio-economical levels in Internet use are quite big. Among the 20% of Chileans earning over US\$ 12,000 a year, 48% has access to the Internet and 11% has a home connection. Of the poorest 20% earning less than US\$ 2,160, only 10% has access to this technology, and 0% has a connection at home (Mideplan, 2002).¹

Besides this socio-economic gap, there are gender and educational divides as well. Less educated people, notably women, are not only less skilled in IT but are also less likely to have access to the web. Yet it is interesting to notice that at a higher socio-economical level the gender gap seems to be larger than at lower socio-economical levels (Mideplan, 2000). Anyway, other studies show that having physical access does not mean that people actually use the internet (TMG, 2000; Catalan & Helsper, 2003).

A further gap is geographical. As many other Latin American countries, Chile is highly urbanised and centralised in its capital, Santiago, where 35% of its 15 million-

¹ Among those earning over US\$17,200 per year (4% of the population), 70 % has Internet access at home against 15% of those with incomes lower than US\$ 8,600 (89% of population).

population lives. Internet access varies between 14% and 29%, depending on the region (Mideplan, 2000).

Another relevant factor is Chile's relatively low penetration of fixed-line telephones in contrast to industrialised nations. Again, the way "penetration" is understood is confusing. If the indicator is taken from the ratio between households and existing connections, penetration of fixed lines is 52% against 51% of cellular phones, a technology that has grown much faster than the former in recent years. If the persons-per-line ratio is considered instead, as the Secretariat of Telecommunication does (SUBTEL), in December 2002 fixed lines had a penetration of 22,1% with almost 3.5 million connections, whereas the 6.4 million mobile phones reach 41,1% of individual Chileans.

According to SUBTEL, by December 2002, 571.445 Internet connections in Chile, i.e. 85% of the total, were through slow dialup connections ("commuted connections"), which charge according to seconds of usage (IDS, 2003). That fact may explain differences of usage with some developed countries, where users do not need to care about the minutes spent in front of the PC and where use is even easier given the higher spread of broadband connections. Broadband DSL/ADSL and cable connections are more scarce (188,514, a 15% of the total), yet they grew by 182.5% between 2001 and 2002. A number of providers are offering wireless Internet, but its reach, especially in rural areas, is still limited.

According to NIC Chile (El Mercurio, 2003a), the body in charge of Internet dominions, 5% of home users are connected to broader, "dedicated" connections. These homes represent 76% of broadband users in Chile. As can be seen in Table 1, Internet connections increased more rapidly in 2001 than in 2002. This may suggest a saturation similar to that of cable television, which has remained fairly stable since 1998/99 at about a fifth of households after most high-density urban areas were wired. Another possible explanation is the sluggish performance of the economy (2-3%) in contrast to the sustained annual growth of nearly 10% between 1985 and 1997.

Table 1 Evolution of internet connections in Chile 2000-2002

	Dec 2000	Dec 2001	Dec 2002
Commutated connections (narrow band)	578.316	633.653	571.445
Dedicated connections (broadband)	7.879	66.627	188.514
Total internet connections	586.195	700.280	759.959
% yearly growth		19,5%	8,5%
Source: Chile's Subsecretariat of Telecommunications, SUBTEL			

Furthermore, SUBTEL and other entities correctly point that the term “broadband” is ambiguous in Chile to say the least. In general, it refers to dedicated, non-commuted connections of 128 kbps or more, in contrast to the 500 kbps of Japan (El Mercurio, 2003a; 2003b).

Background information: social research in Chile

In contrast to the United States, telephone surveys are not very common. This is partly due to the lower telephone penetration in Chile as well as a lower familiarity with telephone interviewing in general. These two factors explain the widespread use of face-to-face surveys. Yet a growing problem is that higher-income groups are either reluctant to answer face to face questionnaires and/or are harder to contact physically. They usually work longer hours, live in fenced “condos” with guards, and have housemaids to get the door.

Another essential difference between Chile and the US is that it is not customary to pay for answering a non-commercial survey such as WIP. If the interviewer brings up the possibility of payment, participants might become suspicious and distort their answers. Chileans generally participate voluntarily in academic or public service research without receiving any payment, which normally leads to a response rate of 70%.

Another contextual factor relevant in the period of our pilot study was a high public concern about sexual harassment of children, triggered by some incidents exposed in the media. This complicated interviewing children under the age of 16.

Obstacles: Questionnaire construction and data collection

General questionnaire issues

The telephone questionnaire provided by UCLA presented several problems for the WIP-Chile research team. Firstly, it had to be adopted to face-to-face interviews. This meant considerable adjustments. One was to split it into two separate questionnaires, one for users and another for non-users. Instructions given to the interviewers had to be more explicit and cautious, since there was no automated computer system leading the sequence of questions and answers, such as the one used by UCLA.

Another obstacle found in the field was that the UCLA questionnaire was perceived as being too long, causing fatigue in both the interviewer and the interviewee. Yet the research team’s experience is that a questionnaire of less than 30 minutes should not cause any

problems. Even considering the fact that respondents were not paid for answering, fatigue can be mostly explained by the lack of experience of the company hired to do the interviews².

Another problem was that adolescents and children had difficulties to understand the questions properly. Again, the little experience of interviewers with youngsters partly explains this. For the definite survey this problem is solved, since trained staff from the Department of Sociology will conduct it. The questionnaire will be re-adjusted to make it more suitable for the face to face format, which requires the interviewer to go inside the home of the respondent.

Another problem was related to language. UCLA had a Spanish version of the questionnaire applied to the so-called “Hispanics” in the US, yet wording and grammar differed considerably from Chilean (and South American) Spanish. This was not only a simple translation problem, but also a matter of deeper cultural differences that changed the meaning of phrases and questions. The following paragraph is dedicated to this matter.

Specific questions that caused problems

Apart from the translation, other cultural differences emerged in questions related to personal issues like loneliness and sociability. Chileans are not comfortable talking about these inner feelings to a stranger within a face-to-face interview. In the pilot study, many people refused to answer these questions or thought them out of context, since they did not see their connection with Internet use. Once again, the lack of experience of the interviewers can partly explain this problem. But it also must be remembered that too many of these questions were placed at the end of the questionnaire, when participants were already bored or even irritated.

Other problematic questions were those asking to estimate average weekly hours spent on certain activities. Most Chilean polls ask for daily averages, and separate weekend from weekday use. Since the respondents were not used to this format the conversion from daily to weekly averages was difficult for them to make, which might explain some differences of “traditional” media use, discussed in the section on results. The same problem occurred in the questions related to income, normally registered in Chile as a monthly amount rather than a yearly figure (as in the US). In this case, the team changed the question to the Chilean format to avoid confusion.

² Given that this pilot was financed by the Santiago Chamber of Commerce, the field work was contracted at a very low price to a surveying firm known to the donor.

The question related to uses had another problem in the sense that some of the specific uses asked for (eg., reading books online) were practically inexistent and it did not make sense as an alternative for the participants. Another inconvenience was that the percentage of Chilean users who bought online was so low (less than 20 respondents from our sample of 600 cases), that generalisations in this respect were to be taken with extreme caution.

Additionally, those questions related to political empowerment had high non-response rates. It seems that the respondents did not understand these questions well. Another possible explanation for these high non-response rates is that the general pessimism towards the influence of citizens on politics in Chile caused the respondents refusal to answer (PNUD 2002).

A further obstacle arose with the questions about how social relationships changed after starting to use the internet. They did not distinguish well between types of users, or between users and non users. The wording did not allow respondents to discriminate how much the Internet vis-à-vis other factors had contributed to changes in their social life.

Results of the pilot study

Participants

The limited budget available to do the pilot study imposed some restrictions. In the first place, a maximum of 600 cases was planned, from which 38 were discarded based on a pre-testing of the questionnaire with a small control group. Secondly, the interviews were to be conducted only in the capital, Santiago. Thirdly, because of the low number of Internet users (estimated at 20% of the population, as discussed before), the higher-income groups were oversampled given that they constitute the majority of web users. In contrast, lower-income groups, where non-users are mostly concentrated, were undersampled. The sample was further stratified according to age and socio-economical level. Thus, of the definite 562 interviews, 61% were users and 39% non-users of Internet between 12 and 60 years old.

Results

This section summarises the most important results of the pilot study comparing them with the available data from UCLA. The comparisons between the United States and Chile were based on the results presented by the 2003 UCLA Internet Report available at the Center of Communications Policy's website.

Uses, users, and places of use of the Internet: 84% of Chilean users were on the Internet for less than four years, which meant they were less experienced than US users (29% fell into this category). This might explain some of the differences in use of the Internet between the two countries. Both coincide in six of the ten most popular uses, including e-mail, surfing, reading news, and playing games. Yet in the remaining four there are interesting differences: US users buy, make reservations, look for medical information, and check bank accounts, while Chileans engage in less “instrumental” activities such as studying, downloading music, checking classified ads, and chat.

The three most frequented locations to access Internet in Chile were the workplace (6,5 hours), home (6,2 hours) and educational institutions (5,8 hours).³ The latter is probably related to an ambitious effort by the Ministry of Education to provide public schools with Internet access in a project called ENLACES.

Internet and the use of traditional media: As in the US, users watch less TV than non-users. In contrast to the US, users spend less time off-line reading magazines, listening to music, and attending radio broadcasts than non-users. However, as in the US, users spend more time reading books and spend an equal amount of time reading newspapers as non-users.

Non-users spend more time listening to the radio and music than their North American counterparts. On the other hand, North American non-users read more books, newspapers and magazines. Again, since these questions were based on the weekly-hours-of-use format, comparisons between the US and Chile must be made cautiously.

When comparing among different types of media, Chilean users prefer television to inform themselves (54%) followed by newspapers (25%), while the Internet ranked third (11%). Chileans and North Americans agree that the web is a very important source of information. For 55% of respondents it is the preferred medium. Nevertheless, in Chile the Internet is given greater importance as a source of information (89% say it is “very important”, versus 61% in the US).

Concerning entertainment, television ranks first in preferences (52%) followed at a long distance by “other people” (19,8%). Similar to information, internet ranks third (16,0%) as a source of entertainment. The differences are bigger when internet is evaluated as an entertainment rather than as a source of information: 68% of Chileans give high importance to

³ Answering this question caused considerable problems for the participants, so international comparisons must be taken with caution. Anyway, one can assume that the relationship between different locations remains stable even though absolute levels may differ.

the Internet versus only 25% of US respondents. It may be worth noting that the majority of Chilean users who prefer the Internet as a source of entertainment were teenagers between 12 and 18 years old.

As a preferred means of communication with others, in Chile the Internet comes second after the telephone. The same applies when asking for the preferred means to “spend time” (although the meaning of this expression in Spanish is perhaps too close to “entertainment”). The higher the respondents’ income, the more likely he or she is to prefer the internet as a means of communication. Perhaps surprisingly, face to face communication was less popular than this technology: only 9,6% of respondents indicated “other people” as a preferred alternative.

Attitudes towards Internet, satisfaction and optimism: Both in the US and in Chile, the greatest satisfaction with Internet use was caused both by the possibility to communicate with others and by the ease to get information. Less satisfactory for Chilean users were the speed of their connection and the difficulties of online buying. As in the USA, Chilean users were more optimistic about the general influence of the internet than non-users. Perhaps because of their shorter experience with it and a hope of a better appropriation of the technology in the future, users and non-users in Chile were in general more positive about the internet than their North American counterparts.

E-government: Chilean users were more pessimistic than their North American counterparts when assessing the internet’s capacity to increase political knowledge, power, and influence. Added to this lack of confidence in the Internet as an empowerment tool, public service websites were not popular: only 4,9% of respondents said they had interacted with them in the previous year.

E-commerce: The biggest difference between Chile and the US was the frequency of online transactions, minimally developed in Chile. Of the total of adult users, only 6,2% made online buys in comparison with almost 40% in the US. Notwithstanding these apprehensions, 35% of Chilean users estimated that in the long run they would become active online buyers.

Internet and sociability: As in the US, e-mail is the most important internet activity in Chile. Apart from its widespread popularity, users indicated that thanks to email they were able to communicate with people that would otherwise be harder to reach. They also admitted frustration with those who do not have email. While Chilean users did not perceive a change in their social life caused by their use of internet, “experts” (with more than 3 years of use) acknowledged more frequently than novel users that they spent less time with their families and friends.

Internet and children: An interesting difference with UCLA's report was that Chilean parents were less likely than their US counterparts to punish their children by restricting television viewing (24% versus 46% respectively). Yet in both countries Internet is restricted to misbehaving youngsters by annoyed parents in a similar proportion (37%).

Discussion

Chilean users are relatively new on the Internet. They use it widely in places other than their homes, especially at work and school. The Internet is also surprisingly popular as a medium to spend time, something that might be related to cultural factors: in contrast to the US and Europe, working days extend well after 7 p.m. One of the ways to fill these working hours is by surfing the Internet and chatting to friends or colleagues (despite the long time spent at the workplace, per capita employee productivity is very low in Chile). Another interesting trait is that Chile is more close to Europe than to the US in terms of availability of mobile phones in relation to PCs, so perhaps the development of Internet will be less PC-centred.

Chilean users attribute greater importance to the internet as a source of information and entertainment than US' users. This gives rise to the following dilemmas:

- Does the Chilean's shorter on-line experience imply an ingenuous optimism towards the medium, something similar to an Internet hype?
- Or could this importance given to the net be explained by the lack of better information alternatives?
- On the other hand, this difference in optimism might be due to the relative stagnation of growth in US Internet access, and thus to a greater scepticism about the power of Internet.

The problem with the third explanation is that scepticism about the power of Internet, in terms of enabling the public to influence politics, is far greater in Chile than in the US. This might be in part caused by lower standards of Internet services available, which basically rules out the second explanation. So the most likely reason is the first one. As the Chilean user is relatively inexperienced, he/she expects a lot from the internet as a means of information and entertainment as well as its capacity to change the world. On the other hand, these high expectations can cause frustration due to the low speed of most connections and/or the difficulties to find useful data in the web.

The use of Internet in Chile is more related to surfing and entertainment than to practicalities such as buying online. This pattern is not only visible for commercial websites but also for governmental and public service sites. There are a number of possible explanations for these differences:

- The lower maturity of internet in Chile means a lower number of sites offering online transactions, apart from their safety and reliability.
- A buying culture associated with the “physical” store and a lack of experience with catalogue buying.
- Stronger apprehensions regarding privacy and confidentiality issues in relation to personal data.

This lack of confidence in the positive effects of the internet does not necessarily mean a negative evaluation of its social effects. Users did not perceive that they had weakened their contacts with family and friends. It even seems to be a more important tool of parental power than television. In the US television is used more often as a punishment tool, in Chile this relationship is reversed.

Some suggestions

Despite the inherent weakness of a preliminary pilot study, the WIP-Chile teams believes there are important lessons that can be driven from this experience. Perhaps the biggest strength of WIP is its international AND permanent character. Yet in order to make it yield optimum results, we suggest the following efforts:

- Strengthen the methodological collaboration aimed to develop a reliable comparative benchmark between countries;
- Make significant comparisons between countries by grouping them according to developmental stage and/or other relevant variables;
- Make international comparisons between sets of questions rather than by individual questions;
- Seek a common publication of results, hopefully each one or to years, in English, with worldwide distribution, both on-line and in print. In this context a central webpage where all individual studies are linked is indispensable. An interesting precedent is Szalai’s worldwide survey of uses of time in the 1970s (Szalai, 1972).

- Seek for international sources of funding. A possible alternative is the European Commission's "networks of academic excellence" for initiatives involving Latin American and European academic centres. Academically speaking, WIP seems to be working but we believe a lot can be done to attract private sector funding as well.

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