Título de la ponencia: “Mapping Project Cybersyn: How Geographic Conditions Influenced the Implementation of Chile´s “Socialist Internet”

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Resumen: In my talk, I explore how aspects of a technological system built in Chile during the 1970s – Project Cybersyn – were deeply interconnected with Chile´s geographic conditions. Project Cybersyn was an ambitious technological project deeply interconnected with an ambitious political project. Salvador Allende had won the Chilean presidency in 1970 with a promise to build a fundamentally different society. His political program would make Chile a democratic socialist state. The problem of how to manage these newly socialized enterprises led Fernando Flores, a Chilean engineer working for CORFO, the government agency charged with the nationalization effort, to ask for advice. Stafford Beer was an international business consultant known for his work in the area of management cybernetics. Beer and Flores formed a team of Chilean and British engineers and developed a plan for a new technological system that would improve the government’s ability to coordinate the state-run economy.Stafford Beer attempted, in his words, to "implant" an electronic "nervous system" in Chilean society. Voters, workplaces and the government were to be linked together by a new, interactive national communications network, which would transform their relationship into something profoundly more equal and responsive than before - a sort of socialist internet, decades ahead of its time.

When Project Cybersyn was built during the 1970s, Chile had approximately 50 computers in the entire country, and most were outdated. Chile´s ability to import US-technology was strongly limited. As a result, the team used extremely outdated and old-fashioned electronic devices to create the data-processing network to link the country’s factories to the central commander center: telex machines.

Nevertheless, there were not only technological and political problems. The country’s geography and climatic conditions made it often hard to implement technical components. In my talk, I will explain how environmental and geographical conditions in Chile influenced the implementation of Cybersyn 1971- 1973. Looking at diverse historical maps, some aspects will become clearer, for example the difficulties with the installation of telephone lines. The geography of Chile is extremely diverse. From north to south, Chile extends 4,270 km (2,653 mi), and yet it only averages 177 km (110 mi) east to west. It has been rarely discussed how this unsual territorial shape influenced the installation oft he cybernetic network in the companies allover the country. I will how historical maps and photos can be used to document the development of this ambitious cybernetic project. With these tools, I will also discuss some aspects of the October Strike in 1972. Cybersyn was most useful in October 1972, when about 40,000 striking truck drivers blocked the access streets that converged towards Santiago.„Mapping“ the October Strike, one can see that the blockade also depended on geography: Santiago, Chile’s capital and largest city, sits in a valley surrounded by the snow-capped Andes and the Chilean Coast Range. Only few main roads converge to the city. Taking these facts into account, I will explain the strength of the blockade and the difficulties of the Allende administration and the Cybersyn team to react.