



29 June 2009

SWG – Subgroup n° 6

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### **The on-line future of Servas**

Please let me share with you some thoughts on our sixth subgroup (on-line future of Servas).

#### **⇒ Background**

In August 2009, 97 electronic host lists are available on the Dolphin Server: many of them are “small lists” but a certain number of longer electronic lists have been produced by Australia, Denmark, Portugal or the United States for example. The Italian list is also available in electronic form.

#### **⇒ A personal doubt**

Due to my lack of expertness on this particular matter, I don't clearly know if the fact that Dolphin and Whale coexist stops us from making headway in establishing an on-line future for Servas. Excluding this question, I'd like to share with you some thoughts on dematerialization of our procedures. Once again, let me stress on the fact that it's a question of paramount importance for the development (not to say the survival) of Servas.

#### **⇒ What could be our final objective**

I think it would be ideal if we could find a general agreement in Mar del Plata to say that:

1. Our common **Final Objective (FO)** is **to place the hosts of any national group on the Internet with an access given to any member of Servas (with an appropriate access-code)**.
2. **“Non-Internet” members: the traditional system should be maintained in parallel without restraint for some time.**
3. **Each member national group should have the right to put its host list (HL) into the final objective (FO) and to decide the level of its HL information to be made available on the Internet and each person may decide whether its name and address could be published on the Internet (FO, protected access).**
4. **The Servas interviews are not to be abandoned.**
5. Both big systems in the Servas world (Dolphin and Whale) are not ready to reach the final objective immediately. Specifications and developments are necessary to approach this final objective.
6. **An international solution (FO) should be found, comprising a unique database in order to avoid tricky synchronizations.**

## ⇒ Possible arguments of the opponents to these evolutions

1) *Dematerialization is not a relevant avenue to reduce the expenses of each national group.*

◆ It is possible that dematerialization doesn't generate a major cut in our expenses. In France, printing and shipment of our host list cost around €10,000 per year, which is a big expense in comparison with our yearly income. An electronic solution would undoubtedly enable us to save some money, even if it's difficult to say how much.

Furthermore, according to me, saving up should not be our major goal: the most important thing is to be on-line ASAP to attract younger members in order to consolidate the way we want to promote and serve our values.

2) *We should have the same rules for each member group and not allow the latter to develop its own criteria for its electronic host list.*

◆ The countries don't have the same legislation on the protection of private data. Germany seems to have strict rules to protect private data. Some other countries certainly don't have a comprehensive legislation on this matter. This is the reason why we should allow each member group to determine the level of its information that could be seen on the Internet.

3) *Maintaining the old system for some years will be a mess!*

◆ To my mind, this is a major problem in the process of change. It's obvious that maintaining the classical paper lists for a while can be tricky if some Servas members don't want their personal data to be put on the Internet. It would possibly compel some countries to maintain two slightly different lists. One could envisage completely abandoning paper lists but some members would probably leave Servas subsequently. Even if we maintain two lists, I guess a majority of travellers would look for hosts on the Internet so that the members averse to the on-line evolution would not be contacted anymore.

4) *Promoting an on-line future of Servas is just a way to unwisely align ourselves with Hospitality Club, Coachsurfing & co.*

◆ It's not true. The on-line future of Servas is a necessity if we want to preserve our ideals and the number of our members. In France e.g., we don't manage to attract young people partly because of an overmuch of red tape. For the young generation which I belong to, the Internet solutions can't be ignored.

5) *It would be a real progress if we could suppress the Interview or at least develop dematerialized or long-distance interviews*

◆ To my mind, the *ex ante* interview should be preserved: it's one of our big differences with other organizations like *HC*, *Coachsurfing* or *BeWelcome* within which the assessment of the members exists but is *ex post*. Besides French Servas members are predominantly attached to the principle of a real interview and subsequently reluctant to long-distance interviews which should remain exceptional in some biggest countries like the USA, Canada, Brazil, Australia, China, Russia, etc.

6) *What would be the cost of the international solution you point up?*

Well... I don't know but I bet the expense would not be insurmountable for Servas International. Of course one should distinguish the initial investment and the yearly operating budget which will be pertaining to the new on-line system. Choosing an appropriate solution with a reasonable budget should be a major task entrusted to a strong ICT. However the budgeting issue should be partly tackled in Mar del Plata (choice between increasing the income of Servas International and cutting some expenses).

⇒ **The recommendations we would like to discuss in order to reach the goal of an on-line Servas**

The recommendation could be the following ones:

- 1) The Dolphin system will have to find a new Internet provider, based in Europe. According to some members (I don't have any specific idea on this topic) the present provider (in Argentina) seems expensive and not efficient;
- 2) Servas needs professional help to achieve the development of an Internet-based system;
- 3) EXCO must create a strong ICT and give it the financial and human resources to write comprehensive specifications and supervise the progress of the project which will be carried out by a non-Servas organization.
- 4) Servas International should consider a temporary arrangement if no agreement on the FO can be reached in Mar del Plata (please see next point).

⇒ **A stopgap solution / a temporary arrangement: host lists in electronic form**

If no international solution could be found in Mar del Plata to achieve the afore-mentioned final objective, I bet some countries will be eager to use the electronic host lists which are already available. For example, in the event that the FO could not be reached and whenever possible, Servas-France would like the relevant Servas National Secretaries to entitle her to send soft copies of their host lists to travellers who would accept that. Similarly France will entitle the other Servas national groups to send soft copies of our own host list, as soon as we have the authorization of our Information Technology and Liberties National Commission.

⇒ **The US Servas/Coachsrfing alliance for technology**

The updated information from Couchsurfing is that they are currently having problems with their technology and can not at this time incorporate US Servas in their scheme. They and US Servas are still interested in pursuing avenues that would streamline the US Servas process but it looks like it is on hold for the time being.

It's important not to exclude any solution to reach our afore-mentioned final objective but we have to be careful: we should not completely lose the control on the dematerialized tool we could use. This is why many countries should be interested in the information item re the so-called "US Servas/Coachsrfing alliance for technology". It's necessary for the Servas delegates to have a comprehensive view of what it means./.