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At the beginning of telecommunications, Uruguay was a leader but it missed “a historic opportunity” to be a world leader.

(at the 70's) Calling a nearby city by phone could require several hours of waiting. Not to mention how expensive and difficult it was to acquire a landline. To communicate with a relative abroad you had to wait days for a letter with news to arrive. It seems hard to think that these things were happening just a few decades ago.

Telecommunications have advanced so much in such a short time that what was unimaginable 20 years ago is today part of everyone's daily lives. In Uruguay, the development of telecommunications accompanied global trends and there were times when it even became a leader in the deployment of digital technologies.

However, although in general it maintained adequate rates, the country missed some opportunities that could have positioned it as a world leader in the development of advanced technology and failed to generate a dynamic market in the sector, according to specialists on the subject consulted by Search. .

Today the objective of the authorities is to “take the leap” that the country needs to reduce the gap that separates it from developed countries in terms of access and quality of services.

First steps.

During the military dictatorship (1973-1985) the government made a series of decisions that would begin to cement the development of telecommunications in the country. In 1974 it was decided to remove telephony from UTE's (power Utility), and the National Telecommunications Administration (Antel) was created. “It was a very important, decisive step,” said the engineer and director of Interfase, Juan Grompone. "At that time it happened that they had different volumes: electrical energy was much larger than telecommunications, so these were always postponed."

So separating the companies “allowed communications to move at their own pace,” he said. As a consequence, Antel began to develop investment plans, and *the first was the digitization of Telex services (teletype network, for sending texts). Automating the Telex network made it possible to improve the service and eliminate operators. In 1976 Antel called a tender for national companies, which the consortium of the companies Interfase y Controles*

won. In 1979 the network began to operate, which completed the digitization process in 1985. Thanks to this initiative, Uruguay “became one of the six countries in the world that had the capacity to design and build digital Telex exchanges,” said the head of the National Telecommunications Directorate (Dinatel), Sergio De Cola.

The next technological leap occurred in 1984, when a tender was called to digitize Montevideo's telephone network. It basically involved transforming communications into bits. “The analog voice signal, upon arriving at the Antel headquarters, is transformed into a sequence of bits. What travels through the network are bits and when it reaches the end it is transformed again into an analog signal that reaches your house through the cable and you hear it through the speaker,” explained the academic vice-rector and former dean of the Faculty of Engineering of the Catholic University, Omar Paganini.

The centrals became large computers, which allowed many more communications than analog ones. While an analog exchange served 40,000 subscribers and occupied four floors, a digital exchange occupied half a floor and served 60,000 subscribers.

At that time, the Faculty of Engineering of the University of the Republic included digital technologies among its courses. When the first plants arrived in Uruguay, Antel went to the University to look for the first generation of engineers who were beginning to train in digital technologies.

Technological change “played an important role in starting to use digital technology in Antel's internal network. Not only the plants were digitized but also the interconnection between the plants. That digital backbone could later be used to set up data services,” said Paganini. Beyond the technological advantages, the episode generated a debate in academic, business and political circles, due to the fact that the tender was not assigned to a Uruguayan company, but to the Swedish company Ericsson. For some specialists, this was “a serious mistake” because it wasted the possibility of developing a national industry. National industry. “I think we lost a historic opportunity to have taken advantage of all that knowledge and know-how that had been generated from the experiences of digital exchanges in the data part, to have used it in developing telephone exchanges and that digitization would have been done with technology. national,” said De Cola. “There was a discussion and the dictatorship government did not trust any more the national industry.

