

SHARED SOCIAL SPACE OR DIGITAL DIVIDE? A GLOBAL AGENDA FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION¹

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about “the digital divide” but, generally, it is seen as a development issue. The word ‘development’ is in itself a difficult word, but it has some common usage which includes those things which can be done to improve the quality of human life. It is clearly important for a whole range of reasons, not the least of which is the moral imperative. As we become familiar with many of the human tragedies which beset our globe we have also come to understand that conflict is one of the greatest inhibitors of development. Democracy itself cannot take root and flourish in strife torn regions - for the ability to stand for election and argue different causes needs peace and a certain amount of stability. So democracy is hostage to peace and peace is usually hostage to development. It is no accident that some of the most strife torn arenas are the same arenas where resources are limited and people sort it out in the oldest way known to mankind. Development, in turn is often about education and it is therefore most appropriate that we consider what development means and, further, what it means in this technological world.

The phrase “digital divide” is one with which we are all familiar: it is almost a cliché, and the implication is that if it could somehow miraculously be bridged many of the development issues would be solved. Can we create a more just and equitable global society through the appropriate application of modern technologies, or are they much more likely to divide us yet more ruthlessly than in the past? Are we locked in some tragic struggle which has no fundamental hope of resolution? These are the issues examined in this presentation.

SOCIAL SPACE

Let us begin with the proposition that our perspective must be that of the globalised world, and I will use a definition of globalisation which I particularly like: it is ‘the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life – and a widespread perception that the world is rapidly being moulded into a shared social space by economics and technology’. (Future Survey, 2002)

I have used the phrase ‘shared social space’ as the global agenda for social inclusion starts from this proposition: that we all share this social space, that we all share the fate of the planet: that we share and increasingly understand that we are interdependent. Nature itself is delivering this message with great frequency but other social, economic and political events taking place in geographically remote parts of the globe are beginning to affect our everyday lives. No more potent example of this could be the events of the infamous September 11.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

The phrase ‘digital divide’ needs some definitional boundaries if it is to be useful to our understanding. According to the OECD (2000) “the term ‘digital divide’ refers to the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities.” (Molina, 2000: 5) The term ICT is not used

carelessly either. We need to understand that the word 'digital' covers such a host of applications, many converging, that it includes broadcasting and publishing (radio, television, newspapers, and so forth), telecommunications (including the telephone and its mobile variety, and satellite communications), computers in every shape and form, and (of course) the Internet. It seems almost unbelievable to people of my generation that every kind of information, whether conveyed through sound, text, voice or image can be reduced into the binary language of computers and we see a most remarkable array of capabilities and products – the most tangible being the Internet. So when we talk of the 'digital divide' we ought to be careful in evaluating the claims made for it and about it because the terrain is a highly complex one. I shall return to this later.

Let us examine the facts relating to this divide. That great human being, Kofi Annan, addressing the Millennium Assembly, spoke of a 'yawning digital divide.' He noted that there are more computers in the USA than in the rest of the world combined. There are as many telephones in Tokyo as in all Africa. "Visions of a global-based economy and universal electronic commerce, characterised by the 'death of distance'," he said, "must be tempered by the reality that half of the world's population has never made a telephone call, much less accessed the Internet." (OECD, 1999) The fact is incontrovertible: in 2000 there was 1 PC per 100 of the population in Africa and 60 per 100 in the USA. If you took South Africa out of the equation the statistic would be more startling. Access itself, can be much higher through the sharing of internet accounts and through projects which provide equipment – but, nevertheless, we get the message. Seventy per cent of the world's poor live in rural and remote areas where access to information and communication technologies, even to a telephone, is scarce. Most of the information exchanged over global networks such as the Internet is in English, the language of less than ten per cent of the world's population.

The statistics of poverty themselves lead us inexorably to illiteracy, one of the keys to understanding the problems associated with bridging this famous divide. Is it not strange that we talk glibly about a 'digital divide' but the phrase 'literacy divide' has never entered popular use in the same way? Yet literacy is clearly an issue if one obtains a computer and wants to use it! There are all sorts of studies which examine the notion of whether literacy enables development or whether unequal development (and corresponding unequal distribution of political, economic and social power) restricts people's access to literacy (Warschauer, 2002: 5). Either way, the point is that physical access to computers and connectivity is just as important as the other resources which allow people to use the technology well. But it does raise the issue of ranking such additional resources. There are places close to sophisticated facilities in Africa where any energy source would be prioritised for cooking, boiling water and such – not for other kinds of technology first. Bill Gates probably overstates the point when he says that poor people need medicine not computers – but we take his basic point nevertheless. The fact is that the 'digital divide' is simply an element of "a much wider and deeper problem of exclusion and relative poverty with all their manifestations." (Molina, 2000: 2)

To gain a concrete view of another dimension of the position for the majority of the world population² Hewitt de Alcantara argues that the ability to communicate is fundamental element in a meaningful life.

"Many would say that it is a universal human right. A mother in a small village whose child is sick should have the right to pick up the telephone and talk to someone at the nearest rural clinic, or to a friend. Migrants living thousands of miles from their homes should have the possibility of talking to their families. A mechanic with a small shop beside the road into the capital

city should be able to call his suppliers to talk about availability of a spare part, before spending a great deal of time and money going across town to look for it. This is a basic amenity, no matter what one's other problems may be. Yet it is a service still beyond the reach of most people on the face of the earth." (Hewitt de Alcantara, 2001: 25)

I must declare a very personal perspective in this matter. I lived in South Africa for most of my life and had the privilege of living through one of the most historical transformations in the history of the world. Nowhere before has a powerful elite handed over their power without civil war. Living in such an extraordinary country where first and third world lived so oddly and so cruelly side by side, where complete different cultures lived and many different languages survived, the transaction of this unique exercise was a profound learning experience. The years subsequent to freedom, years where 'reconstruction and development' was the political and economic mantra, where places of learning and working became more available to people who had previously lived in almost pre-industrial settings, where products like mobile phones became available to people who previously had been isolated from their rural families for years at a time, all this also gave one a unique insight into what people who are sufficiently motivated and encouraged can do in a relatively short time if they need to and want to – and indeed how the human spirit can triumph in the most unlikely of settings.

WHAT IS BEING DONE AND HOW CAN WE HELP?

First of all we should be aware of and support the goals of the Digital Opportunity Task Force (known as DOT Force), which was created by the G8 Heads of State at the Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in July 2000.

We must have some comprehension of the harsh reality of the present situation, and we also have to reaffirm the essential vision for one world, one shared social space and the essential strategies and structures towards its achievement: The G8 charter on the Global Information Society has a vision, one which describes a world which enables "people to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations. To this end," it states, "we must ensure that ICT serves the mutually supportive goals of creating sustainable economic growth, enhancing public welfare and fostering social cohesion, and (we must) work to fully realise its potential to strengthen democracy, increasing transparency and accountability in governance, promoting human rights, enhancing cultural diversity and fostering international peace and stability".

The move towards achieving this vision has been called '*the digital divide social movement*' and is part of the global push towards the UN Millennium Development goal of reducing poverty by half by 2015.

What is being done collectively? The International Community has set by consensus, a range of goals and political commitments to close some of the economic and social divides, for example in the reduction of poverty. Seven 'International Development Goals' have been identified, which broadly relate to health, education, income and sustainable development. As the DOT Force has agreed

"Harnessing the power of information and communication technology can contribute substantially to recognising *every one* of these goals; either directly (eg. through greater availability of health and reproductive information, training of medical personnel and teachers, giving opportunity and voice to women, expanding access to education and training) or indirectly (through creating new economic opportunities that lift individuals, communities and nations out of poverty.) Creating digital opportunities is not something that happens *after* addressing the "core" development challenges; it is a key component of addressing those challenges in the 21st century." (G8 Okinawa, 2001: 7)

The Report understandably gives the positives on ICT and of course there are positives. How could there not be? It lists “the poverty-reducing and empowering potential of new technologies”; ICT “by dramatically improving communication: ...can create powerful social and economic networks” which in turn “provide the basis for “major advance in development” (G8 Okinawa, 2001: 4)

However, the Report is also deeply realistic in recognising that the Digital Divide reflects existing broader socio-economic inequalities. It nevertheless offers “an action-oriented vision to all those who, in developed and developing countries, seek to make globalisation work for the poor.” (G8 Okinawa, 2001: 9) The Report urges: 1. Thinking differently, acting cohesively; 2. Making the best of the tools and experiences available; and 3. Being clear about who does what, emphasising partnerships and collaborative ventures. (G8 Okinawa, 2001: 10–12)

GENOA PLAN OF ACTION

The proposed Genoa Plan of Action is more specific and constituted by nine points:

1. Help establish and support developing country and emerging economy national e-strategies;
2. Improve connectivity, increase access and lower costs;
3. Enhance human capacity development, knowledge creation and sharing;
4. Foster enterprise and entrepreneurship for sustainable economic development;
5. Establish and support universal participation in addressing new international policy and technical issues raised by the Internet and ICT;
6. Establish and support dedicated initiatives for the ICT inclusion of the least developed countries;
7. Promote ICT for health care and in support against HIV/AIDS and other infectious and communicable diseases;
8. National and international effort to support local content and applications creation; and
9. Prioritize ICT in G8 and other development assistance policies and programmes and enhance co-ordination of multi-lateral initiatives.

The action plan is a reflection of many of the problems associated with efforts made to date. It may be helpful to our understanding if I highlight just eight of the underlying points:

Underlying points

1. There has been and still is a disconnect between on-the-ground efforts and policy-making processes. Some would say that the macro-level outcomes of the digital divide can be categorized as failures of development initiatives, failures of market forces and failures of government, all of which ‘need to be turned around if the divides are to be bridged with effective, practical applications of technology.’ (Bridges.org 2003)
2. Many of us know of the problem of replicating thousands of various development projects which, on analysis, appear to reinvent the wheel or are shown to be ‘one offs’, incapable of wider application. The same applies to the huge array of programmes involving the use of ICT in the developing world. One guru in the field, Kenneth Keniston, has cautionary information

from 20 visits to about 50 recent projects in India which attempt to use ICT in the service of ordinary people. You might expect, he states, that

“this rich Indian experience would have been studied, that sites with similar objectives would have been in touch with each other, that the lessons of each project would be shared with others, and that the whole world could benefit from the creativity of dedicated Indians in this area.” (Keniston, 2002: 5)

Unfortunately not.

“The fact is there are no comparative studies, no efforts to draw lessons, virtually no communication between projects with similar goals, but only, in some cases “stories”—invariably stories of success—from which any trustworthy generalisations are impossible.” (Keniston, 2002: 5)

He refers to the huge international effort to talk, plan and fund endless projects and concludes “all of this occurs in the absence of any empirically based knowledge of what works, what does not work, what is wasted time and effort, what is worth doing.”

ICT plans in most States of India are, he judges, “wishes, dreams, and promises”. (Keniston, 2002: 6) India abounds with ‘pilot projects’ which “almost never form part of any larger plan that includes thoughts about how they might be replicated on a larger scale... Unless sustainability is addressed on a realistic basis, most high visibility projects will simply fail in their purpose of showing the way to multiply their work for ordinary people.” (Keniston, 2002: 5)

3. Keniston’s work also makes it clear that at the very least three technical requirements have to be met if there is to be progress in the delivery of ICT for development purposes: breakthroughs in connectivity (essentially referring to the price of that last mile); a computer or other similar device available at low cost, accessible to millions, and, if possible, to those who cannot read or write; and finally, flexible, available, inexpensive local language software. He refers to some outstanding work in developing a common core artificial language in Hyderabad, where India is, in his opinion, at the ‘head of the pack’. (Keniston, 2002: 4)
4. Not all people on the wrong side of the digital divide are there because of poverty or geography. Many are there because of some other excluding factor such as disability or infirmity. There is, for example, outstanding evidence of work with blind children in Chile where Molina (2001) describes a project called ‘Hyperstories’ which exposes blind children to a learning methodology that uses a set of 3D sound interactive software to help them construct cognitive structures that allow the representation of their surrounding space. From darkness to ‘aural vision’ is what Hyperstories has begun to give disadvantaged blind children in Chile. The project suggests that there is now a marketable product, albeit for a niche market.

Professor Tom Vincent and many other colleagues at The Open University in the UK have done pioneering work in computing access for visually-impaired adults, dyslexic people, deaf and other disabled people studying with the Open University. The range of applications is remarkable, with over 9000 registered disabled students. The long-term evidence shows that, with careful attention to the specific needs of specific groups of individual disabled learners, the overall graduation rate is at least as good as for the more physically able learners. Technology has made possible what could not be done before. Another divide has been overcome in these settings at least.

5. The issue of local language, local content, local consultation and ‘customisation’ is very important indeed. If we are to help ordinary people overcome their daily problems as well as give them real opportunities then content needs to be as accessible as possible (Keniston, 2002 :19). Given the number of languages and regions in the world and the variation of local problems this is no mean task. However, the divide is not simply based on the question of access to technology; the divide is there and widening because of the ‘intellectual property industry’ that ‘owns’ and exploits the content is concentrated in centres within the first world and even within a specific language group, thus creating both a dominance in the creation of wealth and a cultural dominance of the knowledge media. (Leer, 1998: 134). People accessing material do not recognise the images and artefacts they see on the screens nor are they able to relate to the discourse or assumptions built into the texts of what they hear. This has profound social implications. Different societies produce, accumulate and transmit knowledge in different ways and we would do well to remind ourselves that information is seldom value-free and education is never value-free. Why would ordinary people hunger for this resource in the absence of local software and content?

Having said this however we do know that some ICTs are already making a dramatic difference in some places. The ICT revolution is lending old technologies new relevance. In many parts of the world, mobile telephones are transforming people’s quality of life. New digital radio stations are reaching a wide public in an interactive way through call-in programmes. Moreover, when reporters are equipped with mobile phones, their minute-by-minute monitoring of local elections—reported by radio—is making a significant difference in the transparency of electoral processes. Satellite television enormously expands the range of programming available to inhabitants of countries whose governments, until recently, could limit television reception to a few state-run channels. Video-cassettes perform a somewhat similar function, providing uncensored news to a network of viewers, at the same time that cassettes allow millions of migrants to stay in touch with their families back home. Even such relatively simple technologies as the fax and photocopier have profoundly transformed the climate for political mobilization in some regions.

6. We like to think that regional economies have been assisted by access to global markets through the use of ICT. Studies show that, in general, the participation of Third World entrepreneurs in global e-commerce is marginal. The UN Report tells us: “Like any other element in the relation between new ICTs and development, many other parallel improvements must take place in order for e-commerce to make any real qualitative change in the global structure of economic opportunity.” (Hewitt de Alcantara, 2001: 26) There are exceptions, for example in the booming software industry but, so far, there has been little linkage between prosperous software enclaves and the wider regional and national economy.

Indeed, one might argue that in many countries ICT plays no significant role in the economy at all. The essential requirements for progress are a strong and relatively efficient state and a commitment from national government to promote economic modernisation. There appears to be no necessary correlation between privatisation and efficiency. As far as numerous studies have pointed out, the quality of public service and public regulation are far more significant variables.

I want to take just two quotes out of the most recent edition of the *Journal of Science and Public Policy*. “A substantial proportion of the world’s science and technology is

devoted to armed conflict, which results in extensive poverty, deprivation and death.” (Senker, 2003: 2) “A very high proportion of the world’s technological resources is directed by major multinational corporations in the pursuit of profits. These corporations mainly seek to create and satisfy large markets among the relatively affluent populations (be they in rich or poor countries) because these offer the most profitable opportunities.” (Senker, 2003: 3) This is not to suggest that the private sector will not play a role in, for example, driving down costs, but if we wait for the private sector participation in the development world, we will wait in vain.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, what is the answer to the question as to whether we can create a more just and equitable global society through the appropriate application of modern technologies? I think that the answer has to be a positive one, even if it is seriously qualified. What are the qualifications, in summary?

1. We have to understand the harsh realities of local settings where development is most needed;
2. We have to understand that access to ICT is probably a necessary step to improving development but it is certainly not a sufficient step;
3. We have to understand that the role of governments and citizens are very important in enhancing the life chances of the less advantaged and the quality of social relations within society as a whole;
4. International policy forums have to understand also that ICT and development focus is still required in three key areas: science and ethics, macro-economic policy (debt relief, trade and investment, technology transfer), and global ICT issues such as intellectual property rights (Hewitt de Alcantara, 2001: 32)
5. We have to keep an open mind about what kinds of ICTs are likely to be most appropriate;
6. We have to keep at the forefront of our minds the fact that the digital divide is an intractable part of a much broader and more intractable development divide; and
7. We must not take it upon ourselves to make resource decisions and, in particular, ranking decisions, for other people.

The work that has begun on technology and development will crystallise in the World Summit on the Information Society, held in two phases, Geneva in December of this year and Tunis in November 2005. A series of Regional and Sub-Regional Conferences have been taking place since May last year. Let us hope that we move beyond rhetoric towards the mutual enhancement of our shared social space. It has been said that in our information-rich world it is not lack of knowledge that is the problem in these matters; rather it is a lack of concern. Perhaps this paper has offered a glimpse of an arena about which we do need more knowledge – and we should assist where we can to improve that situation.

What bothers me is how to improve our level of concern – for only if we are concerned will action follow. I reflect on the South African situation (and there are others similar to it elsewhere in the world) and wonder how different things might have been if White South Africans had been concerned enough to share their wealth and engage in education and development decades earlier. How different South Africa would be today and how much suffering would have been avoided. Donald Woods, in his remarkable book *Rainbow Nation Revisited*, opens his story with these words:

“Suddenly the long nightmare of apartheid was ending... and the horrors began to give way to the bright hopes that had seemed such a distant dream to so many for so long. Suddenly the whole world seemed changed, and the human race capable of so much more.” (Woods, 2000: 1)

It is my hope that by spending some small time reflecting on the possibilities for development which harnesses the power of technology, we will, once more contribute to a demonstration that the human race is indeed capable of so much more.

NOTES

1. Based on The Gladwyn Lecture: A Presentation given to the Council for Education in the Commonwealth, House of Lords on 8 May 2003.
2. Quoted from United Nations Report provided by Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara, Deputy Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

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