The *"digital divide"* could lead to the creation of a gigantic "*cyber ghetto*" in the developing countries

Alain MODOUX

The imbalances that exist between North and South in the field of communication and information cannot be properly grasped without placing the problem in its historical perspective and seeking to understand how it is that those imbalances are more serious at the beginning of the twenty-first century than they were in 1980, when the report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems ("*MacBride Report"*) was published. This look back at the past is all the more essential since, at the time, communication occupied only a marginal position in the programmes of Western development agencies. Indeed, helping the countries of the South in the highly strategic field of communication in the 1970s and 1980s amounted to providing the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes installed in most of those States with the technical and financial means to strengthen their ideological and political propaganda machines and thereby to consolidate their monopoly in the media field, the better to control their populations after reducing them to submissive silence. The end of the "Cold War" and the democratization process that was set in motion on all continents by the fall of the Berlin Wall, together with the remarkable technological progress which, with the passage of time, has brought us from the industrial society to the *information society*, have confirmed the strategic role of communication, making it a key component of all human activity. However, while millions of individuals, mainly in the industrialized countries, have access to information and knowledge through electronic networks, hundreds of millions of others in the developing countries are deprived of those facilities and are today confined to a kind of "*cyber ghetto*" in which they are cut off from the emerging *information society*. Reducing this glaring inequality has today become a priority concern of the whole of the international community, comprising intergovernmental organizations, governments, the private sector and civil society.

Alain MODOUX (Switzerland) is a former Deputy Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). As the official responsible for the communication and information sector, he represented UNESCO inter alia on the G8 DOT Force charged with drawing up, between 2000 and 2001, an action plan to narrow the digital divide. After retiring from UNESCO in June 2001, he opened a communication consultancy in Geneva, and in that capacity is assisting the Swiss Government among others in connection with the organization of the World Summit on the Information Society (Geneva, December 2003).

Communication, a key weapon in the ideological confrontation between East and West

The "Macbride Report"[1], published in 1980 under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), had laid bare the imbalances that were already to be found between the industrialized and the developing countries in respect of information flows and of capacities for active participation in the communication process. The report led the United Nations, and in particular UNESCO, to promote the establishment of a *New World Information and Communication Order* (NWICO), the implementation of which was meant to remedy those imbalances. Despite being based on a worthy intention, the NWICO very quickly became a major "Cold War" issue, since, with nuclear deterrence having ruled out any direct armed confrontation, East and West both clearly understood that communication was now the key weapon in their battle of ideologies. Control of this weapon would enable them either to conquer the hearts and minds of the other side, or to ensure that their own populations remained impervious to the influence of the opposing camp. As the philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote: "*the force possessed by totalitarian propaganda lies in its ability to shut the masses off from the real world*"[2]. However, the Soviet Union was also well aware of the potentially decisive advantage that technological developments would offer to the Western camp, particularly in the area of the transmission of information, and with satellite television high on the list. The events of the second half of the 1980s, culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall, confirmed that those fears were justified!

Thus, the USSR and the countries of the Communist bloc, supported by the totalitarian and authoritarian regimes of the South, quickly recognized the NWICO as an instrument enabling them to legitimize both control of the media and the imposition of obstacles to the free flow of information, a twofold requirement seen by them as essential to countering the planned media invasion by the West, spearheaded by America. Arguing that there could be no truly free flow of information for as long as the dissemination of that information was so strongly skewed in favour of the North (read West), the Soviet Union and its allies skilfully took advantage of the legitimate frustration of the developing countries to impose within UNESCO their interpretation of the NWICO, the objective being to limit and, if possible, hinder the penetration of the Western media giants into their sphere of influence.

Twenty years after the publication of the "*MacBride Report*", the North/South imbalances are as stark as ever

The "Cold War" now belongs to history, and yet no one will be surprised to learn that, twenty years after the appearance of the "*Macbride Report*", the imbalances observed at that time between North and South are as conspicuous as ever all over the world. However, some qualifications should be made to this statement. In the 1970s, most States were governed by totalitarian or authoritarian regimes primarily concerned with stifling any penchant for protest, mainly by exerting strict control over the information media within their borders. Since then, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in particular, many States of the South have embarked on the path of democracy, admittedly with varying degrees of success, since some have slowed down or, indeed, halted this trend, and have reverted to authoritarianism. In the countries in democratic transition, one of the first steps taken by the newly-elected authorities was to liberalize the media by creating the necessary conditions for freedom of the press, pluralism and media independence to become key components of the new democratic society. Thus, in sub-Saharan Africa, the independent press enjoyed a remarkable boom

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1 Report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, "*Many Voices, One World*", UNESCO, 1980.

2 Hannah Arendt, "*The Origins of Totalitarianism*" (Part 3, "*Totalitarianism*"), 1951.

in the 1990s, in most cases at the initiative of local editors and journalists who, more often than not, had extremely limited resources at their disposal but were inspired by a fierce determination to make their voices heard. This extraordinary turn of events was given international legitimacy by the *Windhoek Declaration on promoting an independent and pluralistic African press*, which was adopted in May 1991 at a seminar organized jointly in the Namibian capital by UNESCO and the United Nations (Department of Public Information). The declaration, which defines the necessary conditions for the establishment of a free, independent and pluralistic African press, has become a reference text of universal scope, especially since the UNESCO General Conference, on the proposal of the African member States, endorsed it at its 28th session in November 1995.

On the other hand, the electronic media in Africa have developed much more slowly and diversely. While television has remained a State monopoly almost everywhere, radio, in contrast, was rapidly democratized in a number of countries. Acting on the principle that radio is, and will long continue to be, the most popular medium of communication among the poor and illiterate populations of Africa, a continent with an oral tradition, several national and international development agencies have encouraged and supported the establishment of rural and community radio stations. Thus, by organizing and running their own media, hundreds of disadvantaged and isolated communities today offer their members, particularly women, the possibility of making their voices heard, expressing their views on policies and decisions which affect their lives, demanding that those policies and decisions reflect their priorities, holding their leaders accountable and, in so doing, participating in political life and assuming real responsibility for their own development. In this connection, rural and community radio stations may be considered a genuine instrument of *governance*.

While international aid to the media of the South remained very limited up to the end of the 1980s (and for good reason, since assistance would have had to be given mainly to propagandist media in the hands of dictatorial regimes), it is interesting to note that, from the early 1990s, assistance to the independent media became a fully integrated component of numerous development aid programmes, even though in absolute terms it still lags far behind the other fields of assistance.

The dominant position of the major international multimedia groups

Returning to the North/South imbalances in the field of communication, although substantial gains have been made in a number of countries in democratic transition in the South where the traditional media, the written press and particularly radio are concerned, even more significant gains have been made in the industrialized countries of the North as a result of technological advances. Unfortunately, therefore, it seems likely that the imbalances became even more marked between 1980 and 2000, particularly in respect of production and broadcasting capacity. The influence of the major Western press agencies, so heavily criticized at the time of the NWICO, has today given way to that of the major international multimedia groups, which have the capacity to combine under a single banner the production, broadcasting and distribution of a range of products meeting all media requirements (text, voice, image, data, etc.). These international multimedia groups are in a position not only to provide live coverage for major world events, but also to broadcast them on a real-time basis, anywhere in the world, disregarding both natural geographical obstacles and the political borders between States. Thanks to satellite systems, information which previously had to pass through the censor's office in certain countries, "falls from the sky and enters through the roof" directly into the user's home, by means of a TV dish aerial, cable or the Internet.

While the dominant position of the major multimedia groups is particularly noteworthy at the time of international crises and exceptional events, it is also a very real feature of daily programming in the context of information and entertainment, not to mention educational programmes. However, attention should be drawn to an interesting phenomenon: it is no longer just the major Western companies, particularly those of the United States, that are the main providers of audiovisual

programmes. For some years now, various countries of the South, such as Brazil, Mexico, India and Egypt, to name but a few, have gained a firm foothold in the international audiovisual market, particularly at the regional level, thereby disrupting the traditional North/South dichotomy which has characterized trade in the media field. The great regional nations of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Arab world have, thanks to their demographic potential and their cultural and linguistic homogeneity, become important centres of creation, distribution and broadcasting. They in turn are sometimes accused of "*cultural imperialism*" by their "small", poor neighbours, and even by those that are not so poor! Indeed, the small countries of Europe are not far from sharing the same feelings with regard to their bigger neighbours - France, Germany or Russia!

Information and knowledge at the core of all areas of human activity

With the advent of the *information society*, information and knowledge are at the core of all areas of human activity: information on prices and goods enables markets to function; information on diseases, disease prevention and treatment is the basis of any health policy; information on the world in which we live is a source of education; information shapes good governance. However, it is precisely information which is most lacking in the countries of the South, and it is increasingly recognized that this deficiency will, and already does, constitute a major obstacle to their development. Thus, the perennial gulf between the affluent and the poor will continue to widen as the developed regions of the world establish the *information society*. The North/South divide characterized by social and economic disparities now has an added dimension, commonly known as the "*digital divide*".

Billions of people today have no access to information and communication technologies. In this connection, the inadequacy of telecommunication infrastructures is obviously a crucial factor. According to the most recent data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 83 countries have a telephone density of ten lines per 100 inhabitants, and there are still 25 countries with only one line per 100 inhabitants[3]. In addition, the cost of the electronic equipment (PCs) and software found on the international market is out of proportion to the wretchedly low income of the vast majority of men and women living in developing countries. Moreover, the equipment in question is considered by many to be ill-suited to the real needs of potential users, because it is too sophisticated and offers possibilities that more often than not remain unused and are therefore superfluous. In addition to these barriers, there are those created by the frequently prohibitive tariffs for telephone calls and Internet access. It is nevertheless paradoxical that these tariffs are constantly falling in the industrialized countries, while they remain high in most developing countries, where telecommunications remain a State monopoly and are therefore not subject to competition. It is imperative that the tariff policies and the prices applied to Internet access should be in line with the economic capacities of developing countries and of remote and disadvantaged areas.

The human dimension of the *digital divide*

While the problem of infrastructures partly explains the existence of the *digital divide,* it would be wrong to believe that the issue is limited to that aspect. The *digital divide* also has a human dimension that has to do with the problems that individuals may encounter when faced with technology. Mention should first be made of training in the information and communication technologies (ICTs), which is partly dependent on the level of education of the person concerned. An illiterate, uneducated man or woman will obviously have great difficulty in familiarizing him or herself with these technologies and in making optimum use of them. The language barrier is also a

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[3] June 2002 data.

real handicap for anyone who does not speak one or other of the major international languages, particularly English, which has become, *de facto*, the universal language. This predominance of English must not discourage cybernauts from creating content in their mother tongue, however minority its status may be! Multilingualism on the electronic networks, particularly the Internet, is a *sine qua non* for safeguarding cultural diversity in the *information society*.

Another delicate problem is that of the integrity of the public domain, which has been undermined by the growing commercialization of information and knowledge. A great deal of information which was hitherto considered essential to the education or cultural development of the individual and which, for that reason, belonged to the public domain, is no longer accessible to all, as it is now protected under intellectual property or copyright rules. Access to such information has thus been made subject to payment and hence remains unavailable to the poorest users, most of whom are in the developing countries. Conversely, many creative or other works produced by artists or technicians in the countries of the South remain unprotected, given the cost of the procedures for securing such protection. This deep-seated inequality, which is of concern to both the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and UNESCO, constitutes a serious ethical challenge for the international community. The laws of the marketplace cannot by themselves provide the solution. A fair balance must be struck between private interests, geared primarily to the commercialization of information, and the public interest, which requires that part of that information should be in the public domain and hence remain accessible to all throughout the world.

Be that as it may, the protection of the rights of those who create material is a legitimate concern. Nevertheless, it is just as essential to preserve the already widely accepted exceptions to those rights, including the doctrine of fair use. Some would like to see these exceptions curtailed. Thus, even as we enter into an environment of electronic networks facilitating access to knowledge, the delicate balance inherent in the intellectual property regime has to be maintained if we are to be able to reuse certain works without risk of violating copyright rules. Moreover, it is well known that intellectual property rights are concentrated in a small number of industrialized countries. For that reason, the requirement of cultural diversity could be seriously jeopardized by the reinforcement of those rights in the electronic environment, as it is clear that they generate uncertainties for the participation of most developing countries in creative activities. The reinforcement of these rights could also come to constitute a major obstacle to distance learning, the global expansion of which is hampered by the current licensing system.

The Internet is frowned upon by a number of established authorities

Last but not least, a number of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes in the South, motivated in particular by political or security concerns, themselves contribute to exacerbating the effects of the *digital divide*, by preventing their populations, through all manner of restrictive measures, from having free access to the information available on the Web. Indeed, the Internet disturbs, or even alarms, some of the powers that be. However, unlike traditional means of expression that rely mainly on paper or film, controlling the Internet is a much more haphazard affair, as its intangible nature makes it virtually impossible to pin down. This probably explains why, in several developing countries, the Internet is treated much less restrictively by the authorities than the traditional media (see "*Press Freedom Survey 2001*" published by *Freedom House*, New York[4]).

Measures restricting Internet access take many forms. They may be financial (prohibitive taxes and tariffs), technical (imposition of filtering softwares or barriers in servers), administrative (obligation on users to register with the national authorities) or legislative (laws forcing access providers to

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4 www.freedomhouse.org

render inaccessible sites whose content is deemed contrary to certain moral, political, security, religious or other requirements). Thus, the Internet has joined the long list of the means of expression that are subject to the censor's scissors. In a number of countries, failure to comply with restrictions may result in offenders incurring severe sanctions, including imprisonment, as in the case of China. The latter country, moreover, offers a profusion of paradoxes: while it severely regulates Internet access, the number of Chinese cybernauts is increasing at a spectacular rate. Estimated at 37 million in January 2002, it should reach 50 million by the end of this year.

Although the Internet is subject to more or less severe restrictions depending on the country concerned, it represents a tremendous source of hope for millions of individuals who, in the past, were kept in silent restraint and condemned to remain without a voice by the will of their leaders. Thanks to the Internet, these men and women can now come out of their isolation or liberate themselves from censorship and freely exercise their right "*to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*", as stipulated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the sphere of information, they are in the process of winning their "personal sovereignty".

The fact remains, however, that these millions of cybernauts still represent only a small minority in the developing countries, and indeed a tiny minority in the most disadvantaged countries. According to UNDP, there were some 500 million cybernauts in the world in 2002, 72 per cent of them in the industrialized countries, which account for only 14 per cent of the world's population[5]. Hundreds of millions, not to say billions, of men and women thus remain excluded from the "*information society*". The gulf is widening not only between North and South, but also within the South, between the elites of the towns and cities and the more underprivileged populations living in the suburbs of large cities and in rural areas. On a smaller scale, this dichotomy is also to be found in the North, where unemployment and illiteracy (10 and 20 per cent of the population, respectively, according to country) have become the main factors of exclusion. In its *Human Development Report 1998*, UNDP estimates at 100 million the number of individuals living below the poverty line in the industrialized countries. It is not hard to imagine that all of them are excluded from the "*information society*".

The "*info-poor*", the new helots of the twenty-first century

The *digital divide* is now a subject of priority concern to the international community. It has become clear to all that this daunting challenge cannot be met by governmental and intergovernmental entities (political players) alone. It is essential that the private sector, which brings together the main economic players, and civil society, which primarily represents the different protagonists in society, should be closely involved in the debate. It was with this in mind that the G8, which groups together the most highly industrialized countries in the world, adopted at the Genoa Summit in July 2001 an action plan clarifying the role of information and communication technologies in development strategies and their contribution to the fight against poverty. Prepared by an international group of experts meeting under the title "*DOT Force*", the plan ("Genoa Plan of Action") advocates a series of concrete steps aimed at creating conditions such that everyone, in the years ahead, should be able to participate in the *information society* and share in its benefits. The United Nations, for its part, has established a working party known as the "*United Nations ICT Task Force*", composed of experts representing the different categories of protagonist and the different regions of the world. Several other similar initiatives have been taken in recent years, particularly by the business community. Examples are the "*Global Digital Divide*

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5 Human Development Report 2002, UNDP.

Initiative" launched by the World Economic Forum in Davos, with the participation of several large private sector companies, and the "*Digital Opportunity Initiative*", which arose out of cooperation between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Markle Foundation (civil society) and Accenture (private sector). But the most ambitious and politically sensitive initiative is that taken by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), with support from all States and from the United Nations system, in the form of the *World Summit on the Information Society*, which should bring together all the protagonists concerned, namely all United Nations Member States, intergovernmental organizations, the private sector and civil society. It is planned to hold the Summit in two sessions, the first in Geneva in December 2003, and the second in Tunis in 2005. The *digital divide* should be the core issue for this important summit meeting.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a legitimate fear that development aid in the communication field might primarily benefit the authoritarian regimes of the South, enabling them to strengthen their ideological and political propaganda machines. But on the contrary, at the beginning of the third millennium, such aid consists above all in giving men and women in the developing countries the means to access information and knowledge. However, the magnitude of the *digital divide* is such that reducing it calls for an enormous concerted effort on the part of the industrialized nations, as well as the establishment of a new partnership centred around a common objective and bringing together the political, economic and social players of North and South. This is what has to be done if we are to avoid the formation, on the fringes of a privileged minority, the "*info-rich*", of a huge "*cyber ghetto*", comprising the millions of individuals without access to the *information society*, the "*info-poor*", the new helots of the twenty-first century.

Alain MODOUX
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