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Editorial

Another form of information

Dwelling on vague concepts can keep us away from the exact reality. In matters of information, the merit of Lily Razafimbelo's article is to remind us that the great influx of news and information is less important than their content.

The fact of being many behind our screens and keyboards does not suffice to constitute an information society worthy of the name. We are kept alert, it is true. We are also more and more easily contacted and pinpointed by the business sector which dominates the new technologies. But, what of our capacity to express ourselves and make ourselves heard, especially in our own language? The information society, as it is today, is a one-way concept, of which we are too much recipients and not transmitters enough.

The main question concerns the means. Though information may be smoother and the passing on of information much easier today than yesterday, it is anything but free. Without subscription – paid or offered – the internet valve closes. Without a paying public, sponsors or subsidies, reviews like the one you are holding, are condemned to close their doors. In this resides the principal inequality. Today, it is easier to get funding to sell detergents or coca cola to the whole world rather than to express an original idea and diffuse it. This leveling off from the bottom, in guise of egalitarianism because it talks to all, is a bottomless pit of inequalities and future divide.

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In the Digital era, the Right to Communication is Confiscated

By Lily Razafimbelo*

In terms of information, there is a growing disparity between, on the one hand, private media and public authority and on the other, the majority of the population. A "digital divide" that Lily Razafimbelo denounces.

These days, as soon as someone tackles the information issue, most people automatically link it with other concepts such as: monopoly, power, force, law, democracy, liberty, information and communication technologies (ICT), information society, digital divide and/or inequalities.

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Many thought that the two world summits on the information society (WSIS), in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005, would solve all the problems concerning these questions and those of our society in general. The miracle did not happen. The reason being that: the two Summits did not tackle (or not enough) the essential questions around this multidimensional and complex concept.

True enough, it is important to be aware of the issues of the numerous mutations undertaken by the ICTs, and their magnitude. But this realisation cannot ignore the power struggle in which information and the ICT find themselves. They are subject to this on industrial, cultural, communication production markets, and in the territorial dynamics, firstly of the State and of territorial collectivities. This communication area has become the major issue of an economic competition, on the international level, with its national, regional and/or local repercussions.

Here, we want bring another view, give another dimension to this « subject » which has invaded all our societies' relational aspects, sectors and systems, of those of our lives and which we call information. Should we substitute it to “culture” or “knowledge”¹? An information with what aims? Information from whom, for whom and why ? In the context of interpersonal relations or of a social system in general?

The right to information: a social right

Straightaway, we say that, it's the extraordinary inequalities that exist, in matters of information between private media and public authority on the one hand and, on the other the majority of the population, and between those who have access to information and those who don't, which deserve to be dwelt on and denounced, even more than the digital “divide”. We therefore prefer to talk of “information divide”. It is on this level that our combat should, in priority, be directed. But the right to information cannot be dissociated from “the right to inform”, for both are the basis for the freedom of expression and opinion, and constitute a social right which should be universally shared.

It is not our intention to shrug off the reality of this digital « divide », but the point we want to insist on is that this right to inform must not be subjected to the supervision by a political power nor subjugated by the commercial objectives of financial groups. This right to inform and the right to information are compromised not only when the political authority directly exercises supervision over media but also when the concentration and “financing” of media (their subordination to the logic of profit) permits the combination of all forms of domination: economic, political and media. The right to inform is confiscated and the right to information mutilated by concentrated and “merchandized” media which confuses freedom of press with freedom of commerce. We must answer this major question: *“In the service of whom must information be made and what quality does it require?”*

It is also clear that we cannot claim that the right to inform is fulfilled when the majority of citizens are excluded from it and that the right to information is guaranteed when it is arbitrarily mutilated. This is why, the question of the content constitutes the central point, that is to say the element which is fundamental in building information societies. The increasing privatisation of the knowledge production puts into danger the access and sharing of universal knowledge and understanding. It is vital that the diversity of knowledge is preserved for the survival of our humanity.

This situation, which makes the question on the right to information more than fragile, is aggravated by the precarious conditions of a important part of the world's population. True enough, it is not realistic to expect a country with public health and nutrition problems to solve, to give priority to the right to information problem. Access to the right to information must be accompanied by a great number of conditions linked with economic, social, cultural and political progress.

¹ Knowledge can be viewed under three different finalities: content, to describe the industrial stakes ; information, to evoke micro-economics, that is, the competitiveness of companies; and finally knowledge, to describe the social and cultural consequences of the Information society.

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

The language issue, a fundamental one, is juxtaposed with what was previously mentioned. If the World Summit on the information society (WSIS) affirms in its resolutions that « the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity, the freedom of media and the protection and extension of the public domain of world knowledge are as essential, for information and communication societies, as the diversity of our natural environment», the “imperialism” of English as the sole linguistic vehicle of knowledge (particularly in the sphere of research) and communication categorically contradicts this great declaration.

This is why, being concerned by communication, by its invasion in all the sectors of life, is of course necessary but not sufficient. We should, first of all, care about the disruptions it causes. It's not the performances of communication techniques that count, as if it left everything else unchanged, but its *content* and its consequences. What communication passes on, that is to say information concerning all sectors of everyday life: public administration, commerce, education and training, culture and art, health, employment, environment, agriculture, food and sciences. In our opinion, this is where the two WSIS failed in what should have been their primary mission: on the one hand to concentrate debates and resolutions on the means of creation, of sharing and utilizing information, cultural production and knowledge, and on the other hand, to solve the question: “how to secure concretely a fair, just and open access to knowledge, to education and to sources of information and this, whatever the technical means used may be, to elaborate, stock and transmit them?”. Without reducing the inequalities between languages and cultures, the “information society” will stay in the realm of dreams and imagination.

This is even truer since it is proven that all peoples who have since developed in the history of humanity, have not done so through a foreign language. As professor Cheikh Anta Diop² so justly puts it, in 1984: “It's an illusion we must lose: each time we choose a foreign language to administer a State, we automatically lose the battle for development! For, by so proceeding, only 10% of the population who have been schooled can act and they are obliged to drag like cannonballs, the other 90%!”. The information society would make sense only if societies integrate in the practical life of their population a conceptualization of all notions relative to development, political administration and governance.

The « Great market of ideas »

All the declarations and resolutions concerning the two WSIS (following the example of a good number of authors and specialists) attribute all sorts of good qualities to the information and communication technologies (ICT). Considered like sesames for the market and the great leap forward, and like tools for individual liberation, they are supposed to improve the quality of life, stimulate political participation, promote social cohesion and equality in all regions of the world. This linear vision of technical progress bringing social progress has been conveyed by the UNO rhetoric for more than a decade. It prevents the creation of a close link between, on the one hand, the unequal distribution of sources of information and the unequal distribution of world resources in general, and on the other hand, poverty and the dominant mode of development.

There are always differences in cultures and ways of life which are far from being made uniform or standardized, supposing that this perspective is generally desired or desirable. Finally, in the expansion of the “global” territory which disregards the “local” and its frontiers, we cannot apprehend the great “market of ideas” as we would do for material goods.

As for the magic word, digital «divide », at the same time shared and badly defined, everyone, in

² Senegalese intellectual and humanist who died in 1986, Cheikh Anta Diop, in a context of the accelerated marginalization of the African continent, was a man of integrity who refused compromises. He marked the return of the historical conscience of Africa, calling on the permanence of fighting all forms of racism and in particular that which preached the inferiority of the black race, the exclusion of Black African world from universal history. Certain ideas of Cheikh Anta Diop, mainly the historicity of African societies, the anteriority of Africa and the Africanity of Egypt are no longer put to question.

particular politicians from all political backgrounds, has seized it. International financial institutions like the World Bank and the G8 claim to resolve it whereas civil societies worry about it.

The idea of joining the doubt spread by some who are wondering if the “digital divide” really exists is far from our minds. The problem is that the studies, debates, seminars which are devoted to it have centred their reflection on the lack of access to infrastructures (throughput capacity, networks...). True enough, these are important but, as Jean ZIN³ insists, not enough to multiply access, accelerate debit, to extend the network nor carry out a simple technical adjustment. And he adds: we would have to totally reconceptualize the organization of social relations, build up a cognitive level.

It is in this context that we have to apprehend these concepts of information society and digital “divide”, that is to say, pay particular attention to the social dimension and social inequalities which they engender. In fact, why speak of “divide” and not of “inequalities”? Why “digital” and not “informational?”

A mainly social divide

Inequalities first relate to the level of life and education. It has been observed that forms of cultural exclusion always arise when the level of knowledge needed to master the tools of knowledge increase. This generates new forms of illiteracy and functional illiteracy. Characteristic features of African society are there to prove it: 80% of illiterates, oral tradition, communal life, one sole phone, one sole television for several people; with information often going from the top to the bottom with no interactivity. This means that three fourths of the population among less advanced and developing countries have no access to written information. This considerable gap, which according to certain people tends to widen rather than diminish, separates the less advanced and developing countries from the industrialized countries.

There are as well geographical inequalities; first of all between North and South, but also in the heart of the industrialized world. Concerning the digital divide, it is essentially and firstly informational and cultural, in the sense that it is on the cultural and linguistic levels that it is built on. As we previously said, if we want information societies, based on dialogue between cultures and on international cooperation, to develop, linguistic and cultural diversities must be preserved and promoted. This diversity would guarantee the promotion of a scientific and democratic culture, equitable and supportive, particularly in the whole African continent.

The digital « divide » is also mainly social. The expansion of digital technologies demands an increased level of competence which increases the disparities in the use of or access to these techniques, even if the material possibilities were given to everyone. Thus, if illiteracy constituted a heavy handicap in the written world, people are more and more penalized by their incapacity to use a computer or the Internet, producing a new social divide, for the poor and socially excluded as well as for the more aged who have much difficulty in adapting to new technologies, which increases in this case the “generational divide”.

The « digital abyss » can neither be solely measured by the North/ South gap, even if the figures which prove it are numerous, in particular for the internet access (we can refer to the article of the newspaper La Croix, 27 March 2006). Basically, we have to get out of this dictatorship of figures concerning the digital divide which, too often, serve as added argument for enterprises to incite people to buy a computer or to subscribe to a supplier of internet access. Therefore, to be simply a commercial argument which naturally invites us to make up for the “digital divide” by investing on equipment.

It is therefore undeniable that the digital « divide » covers real inequalities of great magnitude, and that to these inequalities, it is urgent to provide real answers, for they represent a real problem. The problem at the base is underdevelopment, the digital divide simply reflecting the inequalities it implies. To the notion of digital divide, one must associate that of “social divide”. Solving digital divide can facilitate access to information and education and help in economic transformation but

³ Jean ZIN <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/marxiens/politic/ecolinfo.htm>, 2005

cannot in any way be the principal motor force of sustainable development.

A real inversion of values

Of all that has been said, in the first place, we are saying that it is essential to fight against the great inequalities that exist in matters of information, between private media and public authority on the one hand and, on the other, the majority of the population. And not to confirm them in the way the defenders of a *status quo* do and hope to profit or hope to change by the sole means of dismantling the public sector of radio-television to benefit only the commercial media.

It is important to find viable answers to these major questions: what kind of worker, which relations of production and which forms of social protection are required by the emergent economy? What type of organisation in society is needed to profit from the digital revolution?

Therefore, rather than focusing ourselves on the techniques (multiplying accesses, accelerating throughput capacity, extending networks) and wanting to accelerate the process of communication networks' domination, one should first of all pay more attention to the *content* and *actors*, to questions of organization, to pertinent laws, to the required trainings. It is through new social services, reinforced cooperation that we shall more surely reduce digital divide. It is not only about making a simple technical adjustment, but also envisaging a radical and total reorganization of social relations, constructing a superior cognitive phase which mobilizes our human goals and the responsibility towards the consequences of our actions or the consequences of our production.

Wisely taking advantage from the information technology which is born out of the "treatment of information" (computer science, robotics, digital telecommunication, biotechnology) basically means going through a real inversion of values: from competition to cooperation, from hierarchy to informational friendliness, from intolerance to the acceptance of others.

Lily Razafimbelo

Counter-point

Between imposture and nightmare

People say that the new information and communication technology is the driving force of globalized economy. Post-industrial economy in which information becomes a product which is more and more strategic. The existing process of internationalization and concentration of great actors in the sphere of information clearly underlines the stakes of power. This is as true in the domain of, traditional and new, medias (see internet and the battle around the motor forces of research), as in that of biotechnology and intellectual property (bio-piracy, patents on the living, generic medicine...).

How to reply to this democratic challenge of which « digital divide » is only one of the issues? Access to technology will no more suffice for this, if we do not, at the same time, lift the linguistic, cultural, economic and social barriers. In which case, the leap into the society of information and knowledge promised to us will remain a mass imposture... Unless it transforms into an Orwellian nightmare. Which makes us think about the "cognitive level" too briefly evoked by Lily Razafimbelo.

Because, over and beyond simple access to information, two crucial questions must be raised. Who will have the power to participate in the production of world information, that is, in the literal sense of the term, in forming the world? And who will have the capacity to sort out and decipher this increasing influx of information? Since all monopoly in these domains can only be manifested by the confiscation of the shaping of reality and therefore a worrying standardization of the world.

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