

Information Society

by Richard Sidaway

Once upon a time societies were organised around religion, farming, trade or industry. In many parts of the world today this is still true, but something else is becoming more important - the exchange of information, and the technology that we use to do this. Twenty-four hour news, e-commerce, international call-centres, mobile phones, Global Positioning Systems ... all these are making the world smaller and faster.

The growth in telecommunications is now giving more and more people access to democratic ideas, to the principles of international law and human rights, to the science that will help their country to develop or to the medical knowledge that can fight disease. It is starting a real global village which people only dreamed of a generation ago.

But how can everybody in the world share the recent technological advances? Millions of people cannot read these words because they don't have access to a computer. They don't understand English either, the language that 80% of the information is written in. They don't even have a telephone. They are more worried about how far they will have to walk today to get clean water or if they can feed themselves and their families. For most people on this planet, information is not a priority.

The contrast between countries that have information technology and those that don't is called the 'digital divide'. Scandinavia and South East Asia have a high number of people who use Information Communication Technologies (ICT). Central Africa and the Pacific have almost none.

The United Nations is trying to make the information society a reality for more of the developing world. It wants to see rich countries transfer new technology and knowledge to poorer nations.

Ten years from now, the plan is that everybody in the world will have a radio or television and that 50% of the world's population will have access to the internet from schools and universities, health centres and hospitals, libraries and museums. This will improve medical care and education, science and agriculture, business opportunities and employment. At the same time, they say, local communities, languages and cultures will become stronger.

Just a dream? Certainly there are some contradictions. Does only good come with freedom of information? If information is power, why will people share it? Doesn't more technology mean fewer jobs? And how can the exchange of information keep local cultures alive if most of that information is only in one language?

It is much easier to get people connected to broadband or put government online in Europe than in South America or the Middle East. However, developing countries often leapfrog the process which richer nations went through, and avoid their mistakes. Brazil collects most of its taxes online these days. There are cyber cities in Dubai and Mauritius. And Taiwan and Hong Kong have better access to ICT than the United Kingdom. Maybe the English language isn't so important after all.

Perhaps the spread of technology means that the old centres of power are also changing. The United States introduced internet technology in the 1970s. But people are asking why they should continue to be in charge. Why should a small organisation in California tell the rest of the world how computers talk to each other?

The US says it makes the rules, but it doesn't control the flow of information. The domain name system (DNS) controls how internet addresses work, but not what a website or database contains. Many want a more international approach, however. But they also want the internet to remain open and free for all to use.

Can the world create an information society for all? If a farmer in Bangladesh can read this in the year 2015, then maybe the answer is yes.