



Editorial

In Search of a Democratic Information Age

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There is a great deal of enthusiasm for the information age ushered in by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Almost everyone from world leaders to small-scale entrepreneurs selling handicrafts in rural India is excited about the new information and communication order. As Nelson Mandela stated: 'This is a special moment in the world's potential for transition to a truly democratic information age.'

ICTs are perceived as revolutionary tools that are transforming society in all aspects of our social, economic and cultural life. However, as Mandela goes on to add, '... but if we cannot ensure that this global revolution creates a worldwide information society in which everyone has a stake and can play a part, then it will not have been a revolution at all'.

The articles in this journal share with Mandela some of those forebodings about just how transformative the new ICTs can be.

To begin with, as Roberto Savio reminds us, half of the world's population does not have access to the Internet. The unevenness of the information gap is predictable: Africa and the Middle East together have less than 2 percent of Internet users, whereas almost 70 percent of Internet users live in Europe, the USA, Canada and Japan.

Another issue is that even when people have access to the new information and communication technologies there is no guarantee, as Cees Hamelink points out, that an effective dialogue can take place between people whose lives are threatened, who are not free to speak or to assemble, who have no means of expressing their voices, who cannot speak in confidentiality and privacy, or who are denied basic forms of education and cultural participation.

The core concerns in the journal articles are not about how to ensure access to ICTs but about how to ensure the necessary fundamental changes in political, social and economic processes that would allow people to participate fully in the

new information and communication society. This, as Philippe Quéau suggests, ranges from concerns around education and intellectual property rights to governance processes.

ICTs are demanding new modes of management, new forms of technical knowledge and expertise, new concepts of privacy and time management and also new hierarchies of knowledge cultures. There is a strong interest from the UN Secretary General onwards that ICTs improve the development process, whether it be sharing of critical documents and freeing up bureaucratic processes or allowing broader participation of people in remote areas in economic and social life. But as these articles illustrate, this is not a simple process, and certainly one that goes far beyond technical and economic criteria.

On the other hand, even given these reservations, ICTs are strengthening new political processes that are helping to bring about change. The journal carries examples of how ICTs are helping to create processes that are opening spaces for new political actors, principally members of civil society, to become more actively involved in their own development. Sally Burch, from her experience in Latin America, argues that the presence of social movements in an interactive space such as the Internet is reviving the historical link between communication and action and is challenging the passive acceptance of business and government controlled mass media. Articles from Africa, India and Malaysia illustrate how ICTs have enabled civil society to build networks, alliances and engage in political actions in national and international agendas that would not have been possible without the Internet and the new technologies. Gillian Youngs reflects on the potential of ICTs to close the present gender gaps in society. Other articles show how ICTs mixed with other media, such as community radio, are also

improving civil participation in knowledge sharing and decision making at the local level.

What comes across most hopefully in the articles is how new types of political actions and challenges to injustice are emerging with the spread of information, speed of communication and new ways of networking. As Savio underlines, young people, wherever possible, are finding their news through the Internet rather than newspapers. Nevertheless, there is a concern about who are making the economic and political decisions that determine the investments behind the new information society, and it clearly is not civil society leaders or community-based organizations who are determining those decisions.

The fundamental issues still to be addressed are: how can the right to communication lead to social development that enables people to manage and control their own lives? And, rather more sinisterly, what do we make of the fact that ICTs are used not only by governments and civil society but also pornographic rings and right-wing and reactionary groups?

Ultimately, our experience of many of these issues is new. Information, data and ideas are still being gathered as the development community explores the potential of the new ICTs. The World Summit on the Information Society, in Geneva 2003 and Tunis 2005, will offer unique moments when such thorny issues of governance, economics and political decision making will be addressed in order to tackle the ongoing issues around the digital divide. They will be important moments when a shared vision among world leaders, the private sector and the NGO community on how to bring about sustainable development through ICTs can be discussed. We hope that this journal issue has helped to raise some of the important issues that such a shared vision will address.

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