

Access and participation in the discourse of the digital divide

The European perspective at/on the WSIS

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The digital divide: *c'est quoi finalement?*

The discourse on the digital divide is characterised by a complex set of articulations. Some of this complexity can already be found in the diversity of commonly used definitions of the digital divide. Rice (2002: 106) defines the digital divide as the '*differential access to and use of the Internet according to gender, income, race and location.*' At the launch of the UN ICT Task Force in November 2001, established to '*lend a truly global dimension to the multitude of efforts to bridge the global digital divide, foster digital opportunity and thus firmly put ICT at the service of development for all*' (UN ICT Task Force, 2002), Kofi Annan (2001) links the digital divide to development, and the reduction of poverty and inequality, as he states that "*one of the most pressing challenges in the new century*" is to "*harness this extraordinary force [of the new technologies], spread it throughout the world, and make its benefits accessible and meaningful for all humanity, in particular the poor.*"

In the 'Digital opportunities for all' report of the DOT Force (which was created by the G8 heads of state at the Kyushu-Okinawa Summit in July 2000), the need for a "*rapid response to the so-called 'digital divide'*" is deemed '*essential*': "*Access to, and effective use of the tools and networks of the new global economy [?], and the innovations they make possible, are critical to poverty reduction, increased social inclusion and the creation of a better life for all.*" At the same time it is added that the digital divide is a "*reflection of existing broader socio-economic inequalities and can be characterised by insufficient infrastructure, high cost of access,*

inappropriate or weak policy regimes, inefficiencies in the provision of telecommunication networks and services, lack of locally created content, and uneven ability to derive economic and social benefits from information-intensive activities.” (DOT force, 2001: 4)

At a more European level, a similar articulatory diversity can be found, although few recent high-level policy documents explicitly focus on the digital divide. The eEurope 2002 Action Plan³ (EU, 2001: 4) for instance calls on the member states to “*draw the attention of citizens to the emerging possibilities of digital technologies to help to ensure a truly inclusive information society. Only through positive action now can info-exclusion be avoided at the European level.*” Only in the manuscript for an information brochure on eEurope 2002 – targeting the ‘general public’ – its objectives are more clearly linked to an element of the digital divide, when these objectives are (re) presented as seeking “*to create a digitally literate Europe and to ensure that the whole process is socially inclusive, builds consumer trust and narrows the gap between the haves and have-nots in European society.*” (DG for Press and Communication, 2002: 7)

The eEurope 2002 Action Plan does not only refer to the ‘European society’, but also (at least briefly) mentions the need for a more global contextualisation when it calls “*closing the digital divide between developed and developing countries [...] a key goal for the European Union.*” (EU, 2001: 4) The commissioner responsible for Development and Humanitarian aid – Poul Nielson (2002: 34) – also takes this position when he defines the digital divide as “*unequal access to ICTs among and within countries.*” In the introduction of the @lis-brochure (EuropeAid, 2002: 3), Erkki Liikanen (responsible for Enterprise and the Information Society) writes that “*the European Commission attaches great importance to developing the information society in an inclusive manner, and fighting against the digital divide, both within and between the regions and countries.*” The €85 million @lis cooperation programme – the Alliance for the information society – aims “*to extend the benefits of the information society to all citizens in Latin America and reduce the digital divide between those who have access to the new information technologies and those who are excluded from the information society.*” (EuropeAid, 2002: 2)

Finally, the European position that was advocated at the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee (PrepCom 1 – Geneva – July 2002) of the upcoming World Summit of the Information Society also emphasised the importance of the digital divide, which will be “*a central theme of the Summit.*” (EU, 2002a: 3) This position was also echoed by the statement of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2002), who spoke on behalf of the European Union: “*Our objective is to reach a balanced*

approach that deals as much with bridging the digital divide as with other key questions for the development of a common vision of the information society.” These other key questions are mentioned in EU PrepCom 1 document (EU, 2002a: 3), where it is stated that “*Actually, the debate associates all the actors concerned, and includes, in addition to the questions of infrastructure/access, regulation/competition, and applications, the following topics: content (respect of languages and practices and local socio-cultural sensitivities; development of local contents), knowledge (training of the human resources required by the Information Society), and participation (implication of the civil society in the economic and technical local and international choices).*” In the EU position document for PrepCom 2 (2002b: 7), which took place in February 2003, this nuanced position is repeated, at the same time articulating a definition of the digital divide: “*The potential benefits of the Information Society for citizens and companies are undoubted. At the same time, there is a possible threat of a widening gap between info-rich and info-poor, a concept known as the digital divide. This divide reflects and exacerbates existing inequalities, not only between countries but also within each country.*”

As most of the definitions mentioned above illustrate, the core of the digital divide discourse is based on the articulation of three elements: 1/ the importance of access to on-line computers, 2/ which use results in increased levels of information, knowledge, communication or other types of socially valued benefits 3/ that are in turn so vital that the absence of access and the resulting ‘digibetism’ (or computer illiteracy) will eventually create or maintain a dichotomous society of haves and have-nots. Especially the element of unequal access to on-line computer technology plays a crucial role and functions as a nodal point (to refer to one of the basic concepts of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory (1985)) of the digital divide discourse. As a nodal point it creates the stability and fixity that every discourse needs to maintain its coherence. The centrality of the signifier access is well illustrated by the rather enormous amount of research aimed at documenting socio-demographically based differences in ICT access⁴.

Lines of critique

This specific articulation of the discourse of the digital divide, with access as its nodal point, does the same time exclude a series of other meanings. As is the case in any discourse, a specific set of elements is linked in a way that their identity is modified by the articulatory practice (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985: 105). The discourse of the digital divide can be analysed, and in a way deconstructed, by

focusing on the specificity of the articulation of the different elements that compose the discourse, and by focusing on what meanings and elements become excluded by these specific articulations. This exclusionary aspect of the digital divide discourse can trigger different discursive coping strategies, when for instance the discursive limitations are simply accepted or attempts are being made to rearticulate it. Some of these rearticulations simply add new signifiers or superimpose new layers of meaning to the digital divide discourse, without criticising the specificity of this discourse, whilst other (re)articulatory practices are targeted at broadening the meaning of the discourse (or its nodal point access) itself.

In this chapter, three lines of critique towards the digital divide discourse are discussed and illustrated by referring to the position the EU formulates in their two PrepCom documents⁵ for the World Summit of the Information Society (EU 2002a; 2002b).

Line of critique 1: broadening access

A first line of critique of these discursively exclusionary practices is based on the argument of the multi-dimensional character of Internet access. Steyaert (2000 and 2002) for instance argues that '*psychical access*' (stressing the materiality of access) should be complemented with the different necessary skills required for the interaction with ICT (informacy). He distinguishes three levels of capabilities: instrumental, structural and strategic skills⁶. This argument is complemented by the emphasis on user practices. As Silverstone (1999: 252) remarks on the domestication of ICT: "*The more recent history of home computing indicates that individuals in the household construct and affirm their own identities through their appropriation of the machine via processes of acceptance, resistance, and negotiation. What individuals do, and how they do it, depends on both cultural and material resources.*"

A third broadening of the scope is performed when the focus is placed on both the relevance of on-line content and on the possibilities of feedback towards the content producing organisation. A clear illustration of this position can be found in the definition of (media)access proposed at the 1977 Unesco-meeting in Belgrade, which has been reproduced in Servaes (1999: 85): "*access refers to the use of media for public service. It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organisations.*" More specific content-oriented approaches focus on 'missing content' from a user perspective. The Children's Partnership (2000) analysis, for instance, points to the

absence of content of interest to people (living in the US) with an underclass background, with low levels of literacy in English and with interests in local politics in culture, in other words: *“underserved Americans [that] are seeking the following content on the Internet: practical information focusing on local community; information at a basic literacy level; material in multiple languages; information on ethnic and cultural interests; interfaces and content accessible to people with disabilities; easier searching; and coaches to guide them.*

Comparing the meaning(s) access is attributed within the digital divide discourse and the ‘other’ articulations and definitions of access discussed above, the following elements have become disarticulated from the digital divide discourse: 1/ the possession of skills (and not only of equipment), 2/ user practices, 3/ relevant content and 4/ feedback (and not only the mere use of the equipment).

When analysing the EU PrepCom documents for these potential shortcomings, several attempts to broaden the digital divide discourse can be found. First, a clear emphasis on ‘*developing human capacity*’ (EU, 2002b: 4) is present, although some of the segments on training in the PrepCom 1 document tend to instrumentalise the acquisition of skills, as for instance in the following fragment defining knowledge as the *“training of the human resources required by the Information Society”* (EU, 2002a: 3). In the EU PrepCom 2 document, the need to (discursively) broaden the nodal point access is addressed in the discussion of e-Learning (one of the four priorities for action, next to e-Inclusion, e-Government and e-Business). e-Learning is defined as *“the development of skills to access knowledge”*, which is in turn seen as one of *“the foremost issues for bridging the digital divide”* (EU, 2002b: 7). Also the need to include access to content is acknowledged, thus avoiding another type of reduction to physical access. Here the emphasis is on *‘cultural diversity and identity’* and on *‘varied’* (EU, 2002b: 7) and local content: *“ICTs and media as a whole can and should stimulate linguistic and cultural diversity, including through the facilitation of exchange of local content. [...] In this respect, production and exchange of appropriate local content available in the user’s mother tongue is of vital importance.”* (EU, 2002b: 4) The problem is that although the EU clearly postulates in their PrepCom 1 document that it is *“one of the major challenges [...] to convey to [...] the average citizen and small and medium enterprises that the ongoing changes related to the Information Society are not just about technologies and sophisticated financial market mechanisms, but also about their daily way of life and working process”* (EU, 2002a: 12), these documents hardly refer to the complexity and contingency of user practices and user needs. The meaning of the nodal point access remains well locked within the boundaries of a macro-approach to informational benefits, blatantly disregarding potential disadvantages⁷: *“The potential benefits of the Information Society for*

citizens and companies are undoubted." (EU, 2002b: 7) Despite the recognition that these actors "*should be part of the political process in which they have their own voice*" (EU, 2002a: 12), the EU PrepCom documents hardly utilise a bottom-up perspective to content and use.

Line of critique 2: challenging the truth claim

A second line of critique touches the very hart of the digital divide discourse, challenging the truth claim this discourse inherently carries. More gentle criticisms are oriented towards the notion that a two-tiered division is not tenable. Van Dijk (1999: 155) pleads for replacing the 'gap' or 'divide' by a 'continuum', when he says that: "*a better representation would be a continuum or spectrum of differentiated positions across the population with the 'information elite' at the top and a group of 'excluded people' at the bottom.*" Others point to the dynamic character of innovation, the role and specificity of early adopters (and implicitly or explicitly to Rogers' (1996) theory of the diffusion of innovations) in order to account for the reduction or reinterpretation of the 'divide'. Frissen (2000) takes this position and refers (a bit less gently) to the '*myth of the digital gap*'. One of her arguments for this position goes as follows: "*The term 'gap' suggests that the identified differences have a static character. There are enough empirical clues that this is not the case. Certain groups such as women and elderly do not belong to the vanguard, but are rapidly catching up.*" (Frissen, 2000: 9-10 – my translation) In the USA similar arguments have been used stating that racial and gender differences are decreasing or disappearing (Katz et al., 2001; Hoffman et al. 1999). The triumphant 2002 U.S. Department of Commerce report "*A nation online: how Americans are expanding their use of the Internet*" concludes: "*those who have been the least traditional users – people of lower income levels, lower education levels, or the elderly – are among the fastest adopters of this new technology.*" (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002: 92)

An even more fundamental version of this critique is that the digital divide discourse articulates a



Source: BBC News Online (1999) – Special report:
'Bridging the digital divide'

dichotomy between information haves and information have-nots, between information rich and information poor or between those who use or benefit from ICT and those who do not⁸. Not only does this dichotomy imply a static approach

to technological innovation, but it also offers a structuring of the social on the basis of a technological criterion, both in explaining contemporary and future societies. Especially when the introduction and/or increased access to these '*technologies of freedom*' (de Sola Pool, 1983) is seen as the motor for social development, a technological deterministic ideology is seen in operation. ICTs in general are articulated as beneficial and their possession as enviable. For this reason so-called 'non-users' or 'want-nots' (also see Heinderyckx' contribution in this volume) are often considered as being in a transitory phase, which can be illustrated by the following statement in the UCLA report: "*Many people still don't have a computer at home – nearly 40 percent (39.7) of respondents.*" (UCLA, 2000: 24) Wolf (1998: 26) links this articulation with commodification: "*calling the Internet the Great Equalizer helps to sell more computers. The metaphor masquerades as a quick fix to social inequality while ignoring the factors that lead to inequality.*"

Moreover, at the epistemological level the foregrounding of information forms again a specific articulation that is closely related to the more liberal approaches towards a free flow of information as a democratic practice. The fetishisation of information (to the detriment of knowledge) is based on a very mechanical approach to human learning and knowledge acquisition. One of the major reasons for this can be found in the lack of adequate philosophical reflection on the concepts of information and knowledge (Karvonen, 2001: 50). Stehr (1994: 92) argues here that especially the concept of knowledge has been treated as a black box: '*although many and elaborate definitions of knowledge are offered, an equivalent effort toward a theoretical analysis of the decisive phenomenon "knowledge as such" is not thought necessary. The new qualities of scientific knowledge and its social consequences are merely postulated. In short, knowledge is essentially treated as a black box.*' As knowledge is more closely related to the (knowledgeable) subject, this can also account for the secondary role of the user. Yet another problem is that the possession of the tools of connectedness as a state of being is conflated with the possession of information and even knowledge, thus further advancing the commodification of information.

In the two EU PrepCom documents under scrutiny, only one reference is made to the "*possible threat of a widening gap between info-rich and info-poor*" (EU, 2002b: 7). The use of signifiers as 'e-Inclusion' (EU, 2002b: 7) and 'digital opportunities' (EU, 2002a: 13) allows the EU to avoid the dichotomous connotations of the gap-metaphor. This is further strengthened by the attention spent on the societal context of the digital divide – where the divide 'only' '*reflects and exacerbates existing inequalities*' (EU, 2002b: 7) and where technologies are '*not an end in themselves*' (EU, 2002b: 6). At the same time the two documents breathe technological optimism, which in some cases approximates technological

determinism, for instance when it is stated that “[the World Summit] takes place at a moment that there is world-wide recognition that the society has, and continues, to change as a result of the past-paced changes of information and telecommunications technology and thereby driving economic, social, and cultural changes to extend never held for possible.” (EU, 2002a: 2) In other cases a technological deterministic position is only avoided by the use of words as ‘could’ and ‘potential’, as for instance in the following fragments: “in a development context, e-Inclusion could contribute to the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger [...]” (EU, 2002b: 7) & “ICTs have great potential as a tool to meet development policy objectives; such as the achievement of the Development goals set out in the UN Millennium Declaration.” (EU, 2002b: 8) Other elements which expose the EU position to this line of critique are the strong emphasis on the potential benefits of information, the conflation of information and knowledge, and the lack of a theoretical substructure supporting the use of these concepts. An example of the first element is the statement that “multilingual and affordable information can powerfully contribute to developing and sustaining democracy, and to economic development.” (EU, 2002b: 3) The conflation of knowledge and information can be illustrated by referring to the rather nonsensical and even tautological description of the topic ‘access to knowledge’ – next to ‘access to knowledge’ (see above) and ‘ICT policies aiming at poverty alleviation and economic wealth creation’ and ‘participation and new mechanisms for governance’, one of the key topics that constitutes the EU’s proposal for a ‘Global Deal’ – “access to knowledge which would address numerous access issues such as in relation to telephony, Internet, information, and knowledge, and in a variety of dimensions.” (EU, 2002a: 4)

Line of critique 3: decentring the divide

A third line of critique attempts to decentre the digital divide discourse. A more modest attempt is oriented towards people with disabilities. In Kearns’ (2001) paper, which can be found on the ‘International Centre for Disability Resources on the Internet’ web site, people with disabilities are simply added to the more traditional list of socio-demographic categories that are said to be concerned, when the digital divide is defined as follows: “The “Digital Divide” is an obstacle that looks to segregate many groups of people from these technological developments simply due to their socio-economic status (SES), their geographic location, their education level, or because they have a disabling condition that is physical, sensory, or cognitive/psychological in nature.”

The second and more important attempt to decentre the digital divide discourse is oriented towards a more international perspective, and aims to de-westernise the

digital divide. An example of this position can be found at the Bridges.org web site (which includes the frequently used visual representation of the need to overcome the digital divide, which is rendered on the next page) where it is stated that: “*the*



digital divide’ means that between countries and between different groups of people within countries, there is a wide division between those who have real access to information and communications technology and are using it effectively, and those who don’t. [...] More often than not, the ‘information have-nots’ are in developing countries, and in disadvantaged groups within countries. To bridges.org, the digital divide is thus a lost opportunity – the opportunity for the information ‘have-nots’ to use ICTs to improve their lives.”

As Servaes (2000: xi) remarks in the introduction of *‘Walking on the other side of the information highway’*, many developing countries’ governments have attributed a leading role to ICT in their strategies for economic growth and are being encouraged by the IMF and World Bank⁹ to do so. The involvement of these Western-oriented development agencies still embedded in the paradigms of modernisation (Burgelman et al., 1999: 16), nevertheless strongly nuance the claim of the de-westernisation of the digital divide discourse. This implies that the same specific articulations that characterise the Western digital divide discourse, can be found in many (but not all) of the more ‘global’ reorientations of this discourse. Due to these similarities the ‘global’ digital divide discourse remains vulnerable for the previously outlined lines of critique.

The EU PrepCom documents incorporate both elements of this line of critique. Firstly (and not surprisingly¹⁰) clear emphasis is placed on the specific position of disadvantaged – or even ‘*marginalised*’ (EU, 2002b: 9) – groups, for instance when it is stated that “*another important aspect is to make ICTs equally available to men and women, and to the benefit of disadvantaged groups (elderly, disabled, youth, indigenous people, etc.)*.” (EU, 2002b: 6) A similar statement can also be found when ‘access to information and knowledge’ is elaborated: “*Notably, information in the public domain should be of high quality, easily accessible for all, including the disabled.*” (EU, 2002b: 4) Secondly, due to the nature of the Summit, focussing solely on the West would be virtually unthinkable. Some of the fragments mentioned above have already illustrated that the digital divide is (also) seen in a

'development context' (EU, 2002b: 7). The second key topic of the EU's proposal for a 'Global Deal' is the development of "ICT policies aiming at poverty alleviation and economic wealth creation" (EU, 2002a: 4), where the following 'description' is given: "*debate between industrialised and developing countries in a relatively neutral field, a number of interests are shared, the perspective and the speed of growth in the sector give the feeling that there is still openness and a margin for a win-win exercise.*" (EU, 2002a: 4) Despite the repeated use of signifiers as openness, dialogue, partnership and co-operation vis-a-vis the developing countries, their position and specificity (with the exception of the EU's emphasis on respect for cultural diversity) remains virtually absent, while the European eEurope 2002 Action Plan features prominently as an example of the road ahead.

Participation as a complement to access

Another group of attempts to decentre the digital divide discourse, which are aimed towards a more political¹¹ rearticulation of the divide, are discussed separately. An example of this position is Gandy's (2002) article entitled "*the real digital divide: citizens versus consumers*", in which he sees "*the new media as widening the distinction between the citizen and the consumer.*" (Gandy, 2002: 448) The main concern here is that the 'new economy' will incorporate and thus foreclose the democratic possibilities of the new media (Kellner, 1999). The basis of analysis is provided by a distinction between a 'consumer' and a 'civic model' of network activity; the balance between both models will eventually determine the role of the Internet in post-industrial democracy. This political rearticulation of the divide offers major opportunities towards the inclusion of power and empowerment within this discourse, avoiding at the same time the technological deterministic, media-centred, westernised and epistemologically biased position, and safeguarding the important notion of social exclusion. This rearticulation also implies the inclusion of yet another signifier in this debate, which has always (to a very high degree) complemented access: participation.

In order to achieve this broadening of the scope, we now turn to the field of participatory communication for inspiration, bearing in mind that access does not become completely discredited, but continues to play (together with interaction – see Carpentier (2002)) a crucial role, especially as a necessary condition for participation.

The following overview of the interpretation(s) of participation is structured by Servaes' (1999: 84) thesis that the field of participatory communication is

characterised by two points of view: Freire's dialogical pedagogy and the already mentioned Unesco debates on access, participation and self-management in the seventies.

Despite Freire's focus on the educational process and the struggle against illiteracy and injustice, where the (mass)medial context is only minimally taken into account, Freire's theory has had a considerable impact within the domain of participatory communication. Freire's pedagogy of the hope is initially aimed against the traditional educational system, which he regards paternalistic and non-participative, since this system considers knowledge to be passed on as a ready-made package instead of as the result of a dialogic meeting between subjects. In this fashion the educational system maintains and supports existing power imbalances. Freire aims to transform this system, allowing students (together with their teachers) to develop valid knowledge in a process of 'conscientisation'. *"Authentic participation would then enable the subjects involved in this dialogic encounter to unveil reality for themselves"* (Thomas, 1994: 51). Participation is, in other words, situated in a context of the reduction of power imbalances, both at the broad social, political and economic level (the relations between oppressors and repressed) and at the level of the educational system, where students and teachers strive for knowledge in a non-authoritative collaboration that fosters partnership.

The second point of view within the field of participatory communication has to be situated in the context of the Unesco debates about a 'New World Information and Communication Order' (NWICO)¹² and a 'New International Economic Order' (NIEO). These debates, with the report of the 1977 Belgrade-meeting as transcript of this discussion, are among others oriented towards defining of the concepts access, participation and self-management. In this report *"access refers to the use of media for public service. It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organisations."* (reproduced in Servaes, 1999: 85) Participation and self-management are in the Unesco debates defined as follows: *"participation implies a higher level of public involvement in communication systems. It includes the involvement of the public in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems. Participation may be no more than representation and consultation of the public in decision making. On the other hand, self-management is the most advanced form of participation. In this case, the public exercises the power of decision making within communication enterprises and is also fully involved in the formulation of communication policies and plans."* (reproduced in Servaes, 1999: 85)

Participation and em/power/ment

The above discussed approaches to participation might give the impression that the definition of participation goes uncontested. The opposite is the case, as for instance Pateman (1972: 1) remarks: *“the widespread use of the term [...] has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; ‘participation’ is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people”*. This widespread use (or the floating) of (the signifier) participation has prompted the construction of hierarchically ordered systems of meaning in which specific forms of participation are described as ‘complete’, ‘real’ and ‘authentic’, while other forms of participation are described as ‘partial’, ‘fake’ and ‘pseudo’. As the illustrations that follow will illustrate, the defining element of this categorisation is the degree to which power is equally distributed among the participants.

An example of the introduction of the difference between complete and partial participation can be found in Pateman’s (1972) book ‘Democratic theory and participation’. The two definitions of participation that she introduces are the definitions of ‘partial’ and ‘full participation’. Partial participation is defined by her as: *“a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only”* (Pateman, 1972: 70), while full participation is seen as *“a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions.”* (Pateman, 1972: 71)

Other related concepts construct a hierarchically ordered system within the definitions of participation on the basis of the real-unreal dichotomy. In the field of the so-called political participation, for example, Verba (1961: 220-221) indicates the existence of ‘pseudo-participation’, in which the emphasis is not on the creating of a situation in which participation is possible, but on the creating of the feeling that participation is possible: *“participation has become a technique of persuasion rather than of decision”*. An alternative name which is among others used by Strauss (1998: 18) is ‘manipulative participation’¹³.

Also in the field of participatory communication this difference between real/true participation on the one hand and pseudo-participation on the other hand is acknowledged. White, for example, refers to a paper of Deshler and Sock (1985) who have analysed the literature on development and participation, in function of the applied basic concepts. In this context they introduce the difference between ‘pseudo-participation’ and ‘genuine participation’. White (1994: 17) summarises the definitions used in this conference paper as follows, where (again) much weight is attributed to the presence of equal power relations: *“People’s participation in*

development in which the control of the project and the decision-making power rests with the planners, administrators, and the community's elite is pseudo-participation. [...] When the development bureaucracy, the local elite, and the people are working cooperatively throughout the decision-making process and when the people are empowered to control the action to be taken, only then can there be genuine participation". A second author working within the tradition of participatory communication that uses terms as 'genuine' and 'authentic participation' is Servaes. In 'Communication for development' (1999) he writes that this 'real' form of participation has to be seen as participation *"[that] directly addresses power and its distribution in society. It touches the very core of power relationships."* (Servaes, 1999: 198) The concept of power is in other words again central to the definition of 'real' participation. White (1994: 17) also emphasises this central link between power and participation: *"it appears that power and control are pivotal subconcepts which contribute to both understanding the diversity of expectations and anticipated out-comes of people's participation."*

Participation at/in the WSIS

In December 2001 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution¹⁴ that (among other things) asked for the active participation by non-governmental organisations, the civil society and the private sector in the WSIS. This active participation in the Summit also includes the preparatory process and (thus) the PrepCom 1 and 2 meetings. In the European PrepCom 1 document, *"the preparatory process is [considered] very important and representation from all interested groups should be sought in order to give a clear signal of an all-inclusiveness."* (EU, 2002a: 8) This document refers to the public resentment *"based on the perception that policy making processes are not sufficiently transparent and are taking place behind closed doors. Time has come for a political reaction: this UN Summit offers an excellent occasion to experiment with a new formula and show the public at large that inclusive processes are not only of interest to them, but also possible."* (EU, 2002a: 8). A few pages further, the document raises the stakes even higher, as the Summit itself is seen as a model for the future role of civil society (and commerce): *"the preparatory process is almost as important as the political outcomes of the Summit itself. The format and positioning of the Summit will be key factors for an event which will attract attention and activate a decentralised follow up process, not only at political level but also in society at large."* Also in the European PrepCom 2 document, the decentralised nature of the follow up process is emphasised: *"the Plan of Action will constitute a common reference and framework for implementation for all stakeholders, to be promoted in a decentralised way, under the lead of a multitude of stakeholders."* (EU, 2002: 11)

In relation to this position three major critiques need to be formulated. Firstly, concerning the participatory nature of the preparatory process, the Interim Civil Society Plenary Coordinating Group has written a letter to the WSIS Secretariat Executive Director (Pierre Gagné) to raise two concerns regarding this process, which are summarised in the two following statements: “*civil society participation is discouraged*” and “*civil society inputs are not receiving enough consideration*”. At the CRIS web site (an acronym for Communication Rights in the Information Society), the following statement can be found: “*The WSIS: A vessel adrift: For lack of leadership, clear vision and real political will, preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society are off to a difficult start. Although frustrated, civil society is getting organized.*” (CRIS, 2002) When taking these statements from civil society representatives into account, it can hardly be maintained that the preparatory process is a model for future civil society participation. In this light the EU statement that “*civil society involvement is vital in the take-up and social acceptance of the Information Society*” (EU, 2002b: 6) might even be read as instrumental and cynical.

Secondly, when analysing the articulation of the signifier participation in the two European PrepCom documents – and disregarding the strong discursive presence of civil society participation in the World Summit of the Information Society – it is surprising how little emphasis is placed on the participation of civil society and citizens in the Information Society as such. There are (only) two exceptions: one is the potential role ICT can play in the domain of e-Governance, as its “*underlying goal is to meet the challenges of modern governance: efficiency, i.e. to enable public administration to reach a higher productivity, equality, i.e. to serve all citizens without discrimination, while being responsive to individuals’ needs, and active citizen participation through the use of ICTs.*” (EU, 2002b: 7) More generally, the empowering potential of information is highlighted: “*Information has a key role in strategies oriented towards empowering people with a special emphasis in this regard on the equal participation of women and men in the Information Society.*” (EU, 2002b: 10) The second exception is the rather vague statement (which is also the third key topic of the proposed ‘Global Deal’) concerning ‘participation and new mechanisms for governance’. These mechanisms are situated “*at global and national levels encompassing a) issues related to the sector like electronic communications regulatory frameworks, data protection, network security and Cyber Security, legal aspects of e-commerce and internet governance as well as b) more general issues related to the new citizenship in the information age.*” (EU, 2002a: 13) These two exceptions only further illustrate the weak articulation of citizen and civil society participation in the two European PrepCom texts, which do not address the power imbalances that characterise the relations between

governments, civil society and commerce, and between the industrialised and developing countries.

Finally, the lack of attention for the existing structural power imbalances that result out of economic processes (both in industrialised countries and in the relationships between industrialised and developing countries) and the related tension between the people's articulation as citizens and/or consumers in the new economy (discussed by Gandy (2002)), becomes apparent when the role of business is addressed in the second PrepCom document. With some optimism it is stated that the Bucharest Conference¹⁵ has not only shown a change in the perception of civil society, but also in the perception of *"business [which] defines itself not only as a market player but sees its role in a wider political and social context, i.e. helping countries to develop ICTs and overcome the digital divide."* (EU, 2002b: 6) At the same time the EU – especially in relation towards developing countries – articulates users as consumers and pleads for their integration into the *'international market'* and into a *'competitive economy'*, through the development of non-protectionist (or so-called *'non-discriminatory'*) legal and policy frameworks: *"An trustworthy, transparent, and non-discriminatory legal and regulatory framework for electronic communications, including the conditions under which consumers have access to services, is a necessary condition for the mobilisation of private sector investment and the development of effective communication infrastructures and services, which in turn are the basis for a competitive economy."* (EU, 2002b: 4-5) This issue is explicitly included in the EU's considerations for the WSIS action plan, when they suggest to *"promote the establishment, by developing countries, of appropriate regulatory and policy frameworks including in particular areas affecting consumers, which would facilitate their integration into the international ICT market through increased foreign direct investment by the private sector."* (EU, 2002b: 9) Again, there is an exception to the lack of attention for the structural power imbalances, as the EU promotes the use of open source software, and creates a link to citizenship (and not to consumption). *"widespread access to information and knowledge at affordable cost for citizens should be promoted also through a broader use of open source software with a focus on the eventual use and further development of the UNESCO software CDS/ISIS; along the same line use of a multiplatform approach and use of open platforms, and interoperability increase the freedom of choice."* (EU, 2002b: 4)

Conclusion

The digital divide discourse is considered problematic in many regards, because of its unilateral emphasis on access, and because of its specific articulation of the signifier access. As a first line of critique has shown, this articulation results in the exclusion of user skills and practices, relevant content and opportunities for feedback. A second line of critique is even more vital, as it challenges the truth claims of this discourse, on empirical, conceptual, ideological and epistemological grounds. A third line of critique attempts to decentre, de-westernise and politicise the digital divide discourse.

Despite these different lines of critique some elements of the digital divide discourse are worth saving, more specifically a broadened notion of access, and the emancipatory discourse of a struggle against social exclusion that lies hidden somewhere behind the discursive complexity of the digital divide discourse. Although social exclusion cannot be reversed without tackling the factors that lead to inequality (following Wolf (1998) and many others) and '*inclusive politics of inclusion*' form a necessity, access to ICT remains one of the many tools to achieve this aim, but not without broadening its scope and connecting the digital divide discourse to another signifier: participation (and the inseparable discursive elements of power and empowerment).

In the documents for the meetings of the preparatory committee of the WSIS, the EU has succeeded in partially broadening the scope of the digital divide discourse, mainly by complementing the gap-metaphor with signifiers as 'e-Inclusion' and 'digital opportunities', and by their focus on the acquisition of skills, the respect for cultural diversity and the need for local and varied content. This discursive broadening of the meaning of access has not reached its full potential, as the EU's articulation of citizenship does not take the citizens' (democratic) needs as diversified users communities into account. The fetish of information (sometimes called 'knowledge') is seen as the sole mechanism for empowerment, thus strongly reducing the democratic potential of ICT, at the same time embedding ICTs within the divide's technological optimism (or even determinism). Information and knowledge have become interchangeable concepts, and are used without a theoretical substructure. Moreover there is hardly any critical reflection on the prevailing power/knowledge relations, and their impact on for instance the production of content at the level of the '*microphysics of power*' (Foucault, 1997: 42).

At the level of participation, the EU has demonstrated the keen will to include all relevant actors in the decision-making process of the WSIS. The EU wishes to provide the “*developing countries [with] an opportunity to be fully associated to the debate and decision process*” (EU, 2002a: 4) and hold the opinion that “*the various stakeholders [... including civil society ...] should be part of the political process in which they have their own voice*” (EU, 2002a: 12). By doing so, the EU has expressed the intention to support the creation of a new model for decision-making, for the future role of civil society (and commerce) and for “*citizenship in the information age*” (EU, 2002a: 12). Despite these (discursive) efforts, civil society’s frustration has shown that even their partial participation (using Pateman’s (1972) vocabulary) at the Summit remains problematic. Furthermore the EU does not address the matter of citizen participation in the Information Society as such (with some minor exceptions) and does not thematise communication as a human right, bottom-up processes as a valid political decision-making tool and structural power imbalances (generated by a diversity of political, social, cultural and economic mechanisms) as a threat to the propagated new models of citizenship. Because of these shortcomings, the EU does not manage to supplement the nodal point of access in these two PrepCom documents with a conclusively deepened articulation of participation and (at least partially) fails to live up to the expectations created towards civil society participation.

Notes

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² This chapter does not directly deal with the construction of signifiers as the ‘new economy’ and the ‘(European Information Society) and their truth claims. Others in this volume do take on this issue.

³ Recently the European Council of Seville endorsed an eEurope action plan for 2005.

⁴ See for instance Krumme (2002) and Bridges.org (2001).

⁵ The analysis of these two PrepCom documents is complicated by their strategic nature and by their place in the ongoing processes of negotiation. For this reason the use of these two documents remains illustrative, and cannot be extrapolated to the entire EU IS-policy without further analysis.

⁶ Instrumental skills deal with the operational manipulation of technology, while structural skills relate to the use (and understanding) of the structure in which the information is contained. Strategic skills include the basic readiness to pre-actively look for information, the information-based decision-making and the scanning of the environment for relevant information (Steyaert, 2002, 73-74).

⁷ In the PrepCom 1 document one reference to the potential threats is made in the introduction, and it immediately countered by pointing to the potential benefits of ICT: '*despite the pervasive effect of ICTs, their impact on societies and economies is still only at the first stage. These changes are accompanied by a number of new challenges and threats but at the same time, they offer new potential and new models to deal with.*' (EU, 2002a: 3)

⁸ Users of these discursive elements often bracket them, signifying their unease with the signifier. In other cases even the signifier 'digital divide' is bracketed. Despite the implied conditionality, the signifiers are still articulated as described in the paper.

⁹ The World Bank has for instance established GICT (the Global Information & Communication Technologies Department) in January 2000.

¹⁰ In the eEurope 2002 Action Plan, "eParticipation" for the disabled was already one of the priority areas (EU, 2000: 17).

¹¹ Political is used here in the broad sense, not being restricted to a specific sphere and/or system, but as a dimension that is '*inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition*' (Mouffe, 1997: 3).

¹² Or also: '*New International Information Order*' (NIIO).

¹³ The well-known rhyme, which according to myth appeared sometime around the beginning of the seventies on a Paris wall, also takes advantage of this dichotomy between 'real' and 'fake' participation: '*Je participe, tu participes, il participe, nous participons, vous participez, ils profitent.*' (Verba & Nie, 1987: 0)

¹⁴ Resolution 56/183, adopted by the 90th plenary meeting of the General Assembly on 21 December 2001.

¹⁵ This is one of the regional preparatory conferences, for the Pan-European countries, held in Bucharest from 7-9 November 2002.

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