

Foreword: Towards a New Democratic Lingua Franca: Opening Speech at the ECCR WSIS conference, European Parliament March 1, 2004

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The notion of the information society carries the immense hope for a better world society. In one of the more optimistic accounts – by Howard Rheingold (1993) – the newly developed information and communication technologies are said:

- to support citizen activity in politics and power,
- to increase interaction with a diversity of others
- and to create new vocabularies and new forms of communication.

From this perspective, the emancipatory and liberating aspects of ICTs will have a guaranteed impact on our languages, geographies, identities, ecologies, intimacies, communities, democracies, and economies. If we believe these utopian believers, we have finally reached the end of history, as Francis Fukuyama (in a very different analysis) wrote in 1992.

But all is not well in the new information society, and we definitely (and fortunately) have not reached the end of history.

We need to remain aware that the belief in the newness of technology and in its magical capacity to change the world has more than once led to unwarranted optimism. A nice way to symbolise this point is the following poem that sings praise over the first electronic highway: the telegraph. It was written in 1875 by Martin F. Typper, and forms a good illustration of the technological optimism that accompanied the introduction of the telegraph.

Yes, this electric chain from East to West
More than mere metal, more than mammon can
Binds us together – kinsmen, in the best,
As most affectionate and frankest bond;
Brethren as one; and looking far beyond
The world in an Electric Union blest!

When dealing with the present-day information society we should – as always – remain sceptical towards all forms of technological determinism and economic

reductionism. ICTs have created a number of opportunities that we urgently need to exploit to their full capacity. They also have created a number of new problems, dysfunctions and distortions, which even need to be addressed urgently.

In short, technologies are only as good as the people that put them to use.

One of these problem areas that have captured our imagination has been called the digital divide. While the reduction of the differences in access to ICTs – both in Europe and at a global level – remains of crucial importance, we should keep in mind to include an emphasis on user skills, user needs and on content that is considered relevant by the users. Furthermore, we should also keep the societal context in mind: digital exclusion should remain strongly connected to the much broader phenomena of social and economic exclusion and poverty.

And social and economic exclusion (which includes digital exclusion) cannot be reversed without tackling the plurality of factors that leads to inequality. Creating access to ICTs is indeed one of the many tools for societal improvement but should be embedded in a more general perspective on inclusion, development and poverty reduction.

Moreover, access is not the only problem that puts a shadow over the information society's realisations. Here I would like to refer to Oscar Gandy's article in the *Handbook of New Media* (2002). In this article, which has the following title '*the real digital divide: citizens versus consumers*', he sees '*the new media as widening the distinction between the citizen and the consumer.*' (Gandy, 2002: 448) His main concern is that the 'new economy' will incorporate and thus foreclose the democratic possibilities of the new media. He continues by predicting that the balance between both models will eventually determine the role of ICTs (and more specifically of the Internet) in post-industrial democracy.

This prediction creates a serious challenge and requires a partial reorientation of our attention. The (democratic) needs of citizens as part of a wide range of diversified users communities should be taken more into account. This implies a more user – and needs-oriented approach that does not detach technological and economic development from the democratic society in which it takes place.

We lose too many opportunities to strengthen and deepen our democracies when we reduce ICT users to their role of consumers of commercial and government services. We also lose too much when we forget that we are living in an information and communication society, and not just in an information society. In other words, we should avoid that 'information' becomes our new fetish, but instead try to discover how policies can support and stimulate a sustainable and democratic dialogue in Europe and in the world.

In short, more than ever before, we need to put citizens, and not technology, first. When the United Nations' General Assembly adopted a resolution that (among other things) asked for the active participation by non-governmental organisations in the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the stakes were high. The usually inaccessible arena of inter-state negotiations, at least partially, became accessible for civil society and business actors. Before, civil society was usually seen marching in protest, outside the summit location, a situation that is symbolised by the name of that one American city: Seattle.

In contrast to this exclusionary approach, the World Summit on the Information Society was announced as a major step forward regarding citizen participation. In

one of the EU documents for the Preparatory Committee Meeting the summit itself is even seen as a model for the future role of civil society.

After the Geneva summit the disappointment of civil society actors can hardly be underestimated. I'd like to quote from their *Civil Society Declaration to the World Summit on the Information Society*, which is called *Shaping Information Societies for Human Needs* (2003). The civil society representatives have agreed unanimously upon the following statement: 'At this step of the process, the first phase of the Summit, Geneva, December 2003, our voices and the general interest we collectively expressed are not adequately reflected in the Summit documents.'

When I questioned Commissioner Erkki Liikanen on this matter, and on his plans towards stimulating and increasing citizens' participation in the next phases of the WSIS, Liikanen expressed his appreciation for the involvement of civil society organizations in the process leading to the summit and in the summit itself. Despite the fact that (according to Commissioner Liikanen) the WSIS remains an intergovernmental summit, within the framework of the United Nations, he has witnessed the growing emergence of a lingua franca between governments and their civil societies.

Our information society is indeed in need of a lingua franca that respects the cultural diversity in and outside Europe; that creates a new balance between Europe and its citizens, and that strongly situates Europe in a more free, peaceful and just world.

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