IN PURSUIT OF A CHIMERA: MAKING INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE ACCESSIBLE TO "ALL"

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Overview: setting the scene

Information and knowledge are keys to social development. Information and knowledge are sources of power and productivity. The information society has been characterized as the use of knowledge, research and technical expertise within the production process (Heiskanen and Hearn 2004). There is growing perception that the current accumulation of knowledge and information is changing the ways that we use to conduct business. Hence, there is talk of the information and knowledge-based societies. We are told that the industrial society is declining and its place is taken by the information society. But is it easy to have an information society, especially in Africa? Is the information society global? Is the periphery part of the information society? Has knowledge been not vital all along? If knowledge has always been vital, so why this fussy about the knowledge society? Do we have a knowledge explosion? Whose standards and indicators do we use to determine a knowledge explosion? Are we contextualizing the concept of knowledge explosion or we are looking at it using lenses of the developed world? Answers to these questions are very elusive. If we were to answer these questions honestly we will realize that in trying to establish an information society in Africa, we are in pursuit of a chimera, a dream which is hard to come true.

In order to appreciate the foregoing, let us take a step back and describe what was considered by Castells (2000:72) as a model of an information society. Castells (2000:72) suggested that Finland was a good example of an information society in that:

> The Finns have quietly established themselves as the first true information society, with one website per person, internet access in 100 per cent of schools, a computer literacy campaign for adults, the largest diffusion of computer power and mobile telephony in the world, and a globally competitive information technology industry, spearheaded by Nokia.

It is clear from the quotation the majority of the Finns have access to information and one can safely argue that all Finns have access to information. On the other hand, Africa is very far from being part of the digital era owing to the fact that a limited number of people have access to ICTs (cf. Lankes, 2003). Not everyone in Africa has a computer, and that out of 605,6 million Internet users in the world only 6,31 million (1,04%) are in Africa (Nua Internet survey, 2004; cf. Da Costa, 2002:41). In that regard, thinking of providing information for all in Africa is like rowing upstream. It is a difficult slow process.

Rowing up stream

Thus far, the discourse on the information society has tended to focus on technology. That approach has been negatively labeled as technological determinism. It is clear that in order to achieve an information society we do not only need technology. We need transformation in the industrial structure, technology policy, labour market relations and cultural traditions (Heiskanen 2004:7). However, the industrial structure in Africa is very weak. Technology policies are a recent phenomenon and Africa has a culture of high illiteracy rates, low telephony connectivity, and limited computer power and internet presence. In that regard, establishing an information society in Africa is like rowing upstream. Initiative to make information available to all have been made, however, they have led to social exclusion and inequalities. The disabled, elderly, women and the poor are becoming increasingly marginalized in the information society. Women are playing an active role in the promotion of technology as the major tool of widening access to

information resources, but studies have shown that they "participate less than men in the construction of computer programmes" and related technologies (Vehävilinen 2004:51). Furthermore, the gap between the information haves and information have-nots is widening. The digital divide is widening. However, some strides to make information and knowledge accessible to all have been made despite the gloomy picture painted in the foregoing texts.

Institutional repositories: closing the information gaps

Making information available for all in the digital space raises questions related to relevance and context. Most of the information that has led to the so-called information explosion emanates from the West. Indigenous and local content is very limited. African scholars produce a lot of research, but the knowledge they produce is not accessible due to limited avenues they can use to disseminate it. However, the building of institutional repositories is reversing the dominance of information generated from the West in the Internet. In other words, institutional repositories are:

- Increasing local content in the cyber space
- Publicizing research from Africa
- Helping Africa participate in the information society

In addition to building institutional repositories, there is need to formulate strategies to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems. By so doing institutional repositories will be relevant to all people. There won't be the dominance of the "other" in the information society that is mirrored by the Internet.

Open access and making information available to all

Open access has been touted as one of the initiatives that would increase access to information and research. But does it really enhance access or is another ploy to foster the dominance of the West in the production of knowledge? What knowledge is available in the open access platform. Can African scholars afford to publish in open access platforms in view of institutional policies and the costs involved? Does open access really benefit "all"? What is the ideology of the open society? Is this not another ploy to control the flow of information? Let us remember that indigenous communities by their very nature

operated in an open access regime. In that regard, open access is not a new concept. The West is realizing the futility of their intellectual property regimes. They are championing the open access movement so that they remain in control with their hands on the ball.

Literacy and advocacy

A lot of information resources are available, but they are not adequately utilized. There is need to promote the use of the existing information resources in order to realize the dream of making information accessible to all. Marketing of information resources should go hand in hand with literacy programmes. The information may be available, but it would be of little use if the society cannot effectively use it due to limited capacity.

Language and the availability of information

English is the language that has dominated the information society. That has tended to limit the ability of many societies to participate in the information society as defined by the developed world. Consequently, most of the information that is available in the cyber space cannot lead to poverty reduction and the attainment of Millennium Goals because it is not relevant and context specific. It is generally agreed that what counts as information should be context specific socially and societally.

Alliances, partnerships and joint ventures

The problems faced by information professionals in making knowledge and information available to all are many. In that regard, it would be futile for them in trying to accomplish the task on their own. They must form partnership with all the stakeholders. They must know the needs of the information needs of the information society that they would want to create. They must also take into cognizance the fact that as information specialists from different societies, they are creating information societies rather than one information society. Information professionals should create their own benchmarks that are context specific rather than becoming part of the Western bandwagon. Information professionals should create an information society that is brewed in Africa rather than subscribing to externally driven initiatives. Alliances and partnerships may be made with the developed world but that should now cloud our definition of our information society.

For instance, computing power and the use of information and communication technologies has defined the Western information society. The question that arises is: How much IT is required in order to identify an information society? In our context is it possible to make information available for all without overemphasizing the role of IT? IT enhances access to information, but it is not the ultimate answer to creating an information society. People are the key to building an information society. As Thomas Watson, Jr., Chairman, IBM, 1952-1971 commented:

> All the value of this company is in its people. If you burned down all our plants and we just kept our people and our information files, we would soon be as stronger as ever. Take away our people, and we might never recover (Curley and Kivowitz 2001:9).

Information and people create the information society, even if we left technology out of the equation. This calls of a reassessment of our strategies in making information and knowledge available to all. Which lenses should we use to view our information societies?

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