BASIC INCOME, INFORMATION SOCIETY AND THE *INFO-POORS*

Paper for the Basic Income European Network 10th Congress

Barcelona, 19-20 September 2004

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Abstract

The end of the "Cold War ", the democratization process set in motion on all continents by the fall of the Berlin Wall, together with the impressive process of information technology has brought us from the industrial society to the information society. Information and knowledge has become the major input for economic development. But a new way of social exclusion, the *info-poors,* will shape society, since real information is increasingly becoming part of the red list of species in danger of extintion. Brand new ways of poverty are paving their way into reality.

Present conditions in the market society turn people into mass producers and mass consumers, with no time available to gain knowledge and information which allow them to succeed. Today's society highly promotes confussion between information and *propaganda*. Well informed citizens are the base for a healthy society. Basic Income would empower people by providing time to gain degrees of freedom through education and IT literacy.

Resumen

El final de la guerra fría, el proceso de democratización general tras la caída del muro de Berlín, junto con el formidable desarrollo de las tecnologías de la información han transformado la sociedad industrial, dando paso a la llamada Sociedad de la Información. El conocimiento y la capacidad de identificar la información estratégica se han convertido en el principal factor de desarrollo económico. Una nueva forma de exclusión social va tomando cuerpo, los *info-pobres,* dado que la información de calidad se está convirtiendo progresivamente en una especie en peligro de extinción.

En las sociedades de mercado actuales las personas han pasado a ser productores y consumidores de masas y ese proceso deja muy poco tiempo libre de calidad para identificar, manejar y desarrollar la información relevante que les permita integrarse en el sistema social y productivo. La dinámica social actual promueve activamente la confusión entre información y *propaganda,* mientras que la base para una sociedad 'sana y robusta' pasa una ciudadanía bien informada. Una garantía de renta básica universal permitiría a la población obtener grados de libertad considerables a través de la educación y el uso de las tecnologías de la información.

Introduction

Knowledge-based and knowledge-led development holds the promise of alleviating many of the problems facing our societies. To achieve this, it is essential that tangible steps be taken in three main directions: first, to narrow the digital divide that accentuates disparities in development and excludes entire groups and countries from the benefits of information and knowledge; second, to guarantee the free flow of and equitable access to data, information, best practices and knowledge; and, third, to build international consensus on shared values and principles.

Much attention must be paid to the needs of remote and rural communities which, particularly in developing countries, often face additional difficulties in accessing education, health and other key services. Economic conditions in such communities tend to be difficult and are sometimes exacerbated by such barriers as inhospitable terrain and vast distances, which further restrict access to key services and stifle economic development. These conditions of hardship often induce people to migrate to urban areas, where new or deeper social problems occur such as overcrowding, unemployment and

What is Infopoverty?

Just as poverty is defined as the lack of sufficient funds or material possessions necessary to provide the basic necessities (food, clothing, shelter) required to live a healthful life (Askonas, Peter and Steward, Agne 2000), so infopoverty is the lack of access to basic information that will empower individuals and communities to improve their circumstances. When the lack of connectivity prevents individuals and communities from accessing information necessary to provide safety and a sense of belonging to the world, infopoverty is present.

Also lack of capacity to identify and analyse information (litteracy) in order to use it in market orientated societies leads people to social exclusion. This issue is at the spot-light at the moment, some authors even pointing that is more important than being connected. We will come back on this issue further on.

About the Digital Divide

For the last several years, we've all heard a lot about bridging the digital divide. Each day, more and more politicians, industry leaders, community activists and everyday citizens are becoming involved in the issue, especially at the local level. Despite the various experiences and backgrounds of these diverse groups of people, their end goal is basically the same: providing people with the technology, information and skills needed to help them reach their full potential, whether they're interested in getting a better education, seeking a better career, or building a better neighborhood. It's about using technology in creative, yet effective ways to improve the quality of life for everyone: our families, our communities and ourselves.

What is the Digital Divide?

The first step towards bridging the digital divide is understanding the divide itself: what it is, why it exists, and how it affects our everyday lives. The term "digital divide" is commonly used to describe an individual or community's lack of access to computers, training and online resources. The digital divide refers to a gap between those individuals who have reasonable opportunities to access technology tools and those that do not. The digital divide breaks among many fault lines including, but not limited to: education, income, ethnicity, geography, infrastructure, and disability. Digital divides may exist among those of differing income and economic levels, education, age and gender, race or ethnicity, location, single and dual-parent families, and disability. The key to understanding the digital divide is to look at it in broader terms - a digital divide exists anytime there is a gap in opportunities experienced by those with limited access to technology, especially the Internet.

The digital divide could be reduced and the economy advanced and prospered by the design and implementation of programs that provide economic resources, training, and access to at-risk members of our society that are without these critical tools. The absence of adequate economic resources, reasonable training opportunities, and access among some sectors of society needed to function, compete, and succeed in an information-based society provides a digital divide among those with the adequate resources and those without. The Internet is an

essential tool in our information-based society. Technology provides increasing options for citizens to conduct daily activities on line. More and more people all over the planet are going online to conduct day-to-day activities such as business transactions, personal correspondence, research, information gathering, shopping, even socialising activities are going on-line. Being computer savvy and digitally connected is becoming more critical to our educational, economical, governmental, and societal advancement. Because a larger percentage of people regularly use the Internet to conduct daily activities, people who lack access, knowledge, and training on how to use those tools are at a growing disadvantage, and will eventually be unable to function in an information-based society. Therefore, raising the level of digital inclusion by increasing the number of population using the technology tools of the digital age is a vitally important goal.

Digital Divide Basics

There has always been a gap between those people and communities who can make effective use of information technology and those who cannot. Now, more than ever, unequal adoption of technology excludes many from reaping the fruits of the economy. (Cisler 2000).

We use the term "digital divide" to refer to this gap between those who can effectively use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet, and those who cannot, the info-poors. While a consensus does not exist on the extent of the divide (and whether the divide is growing or narrowing), researchers are nearly unanimous in acknowledging that some sort of divide exists at this point in time

Access

Despite the incredible growth of the Internet since the early 1990s, many citizens still do not have easy access to basic IT tools, whether it's access to hardware, software, or the Internet itself. Access is an issue that affects people at home, at school and in the community at large. Neighborhoods with less technology access are at a disadvantage in contrast to those neighborhoods with more access when it comes to seeking better education, better jobs, even higher levels of civic participation.

Different groups often lack access for very different reasons. In rural areas the high cost of establishing a communications infrastructure has meant that these areas are often the last to

see the benefits of the Internet. The disabled community, including the visually impaired, the homebound, and millions of people with other disabilities, often find themselves lacking basic Internet tools because of the limited investments in assistive technologies development..

Literacy and Learning

When it comes to the digital divide, literacy is an issue that is often overshadowed by access. But think of it this way: if every family, every community had Internet access tomorrow, would the digital divide be solved? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Unless all citizens are able to learn and apply a wide set of literacy skills, mere access to technology will mean very little to them.

Because information technology evolves at an outrageous rate, it's becoming more important for people to have the skills to evolve with it. There's no way to avoid it - we now live in a world where it's vital to be a lifelong learner. From our earliest days in school to our retirement years, we must learn to adapt and apply technology appropriately. It's important that citizens have ample opportunities to learn these skills, especially when you consider the fact that within the next several years, fully half of all jobs will either be in the IT industry or will require IT-related skills. But for that they need time and resources to learn. However, in our market societies time and resources , in the optimum case you have them, must be devoted to gain the basics for living (e.g.: earn a decent salary). Only those having plenty of spare time could devote it to learn new developments.

Whether it's using technology effectively to improve student learning in a rural high school, or implementing successful IT adult education programs in the inner city, we must continue to explore strategies for improving literacy and learning opportunities. And a basic income, while guaranteeing a decent living, also would give people the opportunity to learn, if they want, obviously. If we cannot cultivate these skills, the digital divide will persist, and even worse, it will grow.

Like no other communications medium in history, the Internet allows for ideas and information to be shared freely from citizen to citizen, from community to community. In many ways, the overall strength of the Internet is a function of the number of people and organizations creating quality content for it. Unlike other media such as TV and radio, the

Internet is totally decentralized - since no single entity controls it, anyone with Internet access has the potential to contribute content to it.

If we are to solve the digital divide and avoid the info-poor exclusion, we must take steps to ensure that all citizens are able to receive diverse content that is relevant to their lives, as well as produce their own content for their families, their communities and for the Internet at large. And this is the ground in which basic income could help.

Consumers or Creators?

Most digital divide efforts have been aimed at enlarging the pool of receptive users of content, rather than at helping people learn to become active creators and distributors of information. And this is a key point. It is no accident that most U.S. federal funding initiatives to bridge the Digital Divide have been housed in the Department of Commerce, and that the largest funding for private initiatives have come from commercial sources. The thrust of these initiatives has been to create a new body of digital age consumers (Besser, 1995).

Education should not be about merely learning how to consume; education should be about becoming an active participant in the major communication functions of society. Just as we not only teach students to read, but we also teach them how to write, how to assemble their writings into forms others will want to read, how to speak publicly, etc., in a digital age we need to teach our students how to author and distribute digital works. Those with good access to the net will be able to explore their creativity and gain experience in becoming content producers (not just consumers of works that others have produced). This also has direct application to the ability of underserved communities all over the planet to produce information about their own communities. The digital divide also includes a gap between those who can be active creators and distributors of information, and those who can only be consumers.

Economic Development

Economic development and the digital divide go hand-in-hand for many reasons. Communities with the tools and skills to compete in the digital economy are at a distinct

advantage over communities that don't. In many ways, the situation in a given community can build upon itself, for better or for worse. A community with a well-educated, technology-literate population is more likely to attract and sustain new businesses, and these new businesses in turn attract more well-educated, technology-literate people into the area. Conversely, a community that lacks reliable access to technology and the skills to use it is less likely to attract and sustain new businesses that could potentially serve as a catalyst to economic prosperity. Simply put, if communities are to remain competitive in attracting, retaining and developing businesses in today's economy, they must develop modern telecommunications facilities and cultivate a well-trained workforce to stay viable.

International Issues

Bridging the digital divide is truly a challenge in today's developed world, but the obstacles faced there pale in comparison to much of the rest of the world. Less developed countries, especially those in the south, are often plagued by limited infrastructure, low income and literacy levels, and restrictions on free expression and democratic participation. (DiMaggio, Paul J. and Hargittai, Ezster, 2001.)

In countries where citizens still struggle for reliable sources of food, water, medical care and educational opportunity, bridging the digital divide may seem like a lofty or snobby goal indeed. Information and communication technologies will never be a magic bullet that eliminates the need for sound developmental investments, but they can serve as a crucial factor, enabling NGOs, governments and individual citizens to improve the quality of life at home and abroad.

Bridging the digital divide

The Internet has ushered in the greatest period of wealth creation in history. It's rocked the way we deliver and receive information and the way we do business. And so, for many, it is easy to accept euphoric claims that the Internet is also bringing about a brave new world replete with an "electronic agora" and "online democracy". It's not. More than 80% of people in the world have never even heard a dial tone, let alone surfed the Web. And the gap between the information haves and have-nots is widening.

In a speech this week at Telecom 99 in Geneva, Switzerland, UN Secretary General Kofi Anan warned of the danger of excluding the world's poor from the information revolution.

"People lack many things: jobs, shelter, food, health care and drinkable water. Today, being cut off from basic telecommunications services is a hardship almost as acute as these other deprivations, and may indeed reduce the chances of finding remedies to them," he said.

Technology for Social Inclusion Reconceptualizing the Digital Divide by Mark Warschauer
First Monday, volume 7, number 7 (July 2002),

Social inclusion and exclusion are prominent concepts in European discourse (Patterson, R. and Wilson, E. J., 2000). They refer to the extent that individuals, families, and communities are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies, taking into account a variety of factors related to economic resources, employment, health, education, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement.

Social inclusion is a matter not only of an adequate share of resources, but also of "participation in the determination of both individual and collective life chances" (Stewart, 2000). It overlaps with the concept of socioeconomic equality, but is not equivalent to it. There are many ways that the poor can have fuller participation and inclusion, even if they lack an equal share of resources. At the same time, even the well-to-do may face problems of social exclusion, due to reasons of political persecution or discrimination based on age, gender, sexual preference, or disability. The concept of social inclusion does not ignore the role of class, but recognizes that a broad array of other variables help shape how class forces interact. It could be argued that the concept of social inclusion reflects particularly well the imperatives of the current information era, in which issues of identity, language, social participation, community, and civil society have taken central stage (Castells, 2003).

Propaganda and Intoxication

It may seem a contradiction but in the knowledge society it is increasingly difficult to differentciate between information and propaganda (Abamedia, 1999). Given the large amount of information bits we are exposed to everyday, our brain needs to protect itself from that process. We receive partial information constantly, the sinthesis has to be made by each one of us. Very seldom we receive sinthetic info or approaches. In those circumstances we have to produce the overall sinthesis, but do we have background enough on every subject?. This same process is used extensively by the intelligence services when they need to create an "opinion stream" directed to their objectives. In the comunication jargon it was coined as "intoxication" (Duranden, 1995)

The point is that this process is taking place every second in our societies but, obviously, without the intentions mentiones above. In this context ability to sinthetise becomes critical, but for that we need literacy, and in order to obtain it we need time. Do we have it after 10-12 hours work-days?. That is why Basic Income may lead us to a scenary in which people have the chance to conduct their lifetime as they wish, and not as they are forced to.

Final Word

From a comunication point of view the extension and succes of the basic income set of ideas faces two major problems (and it is not an irony):

1. It is true
2. It is simple (the idea, not the implementation)

The forest of social comunication is extremely intricated. And the imaginary world which entertainment and marketing industry show us every second makes that passing on messages to the majority of people becomes an extremely difficult task. Specially if the fiction of consumption and 'the more the better' are not included in the message. The lattest performance of the system is the mass production of a second reality, with disguised or substituting materials interposed between we and the world (Verdú, 2003). In this context Basic Income has much say in order to come back to reality.

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