

Community-Based Information Networking in Developing Countries

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INTRODUCTION

The information era refers to a period in this globalized world when economies, social dimensions, and demography are largely dominated and driven by information, in contrast to the previously industrial development driven society. *Information society*, *information network*, and *digital divide* are terms inducted in very recent days. The key element in this periphery, is the information, and it is the easy and free flow of information to the demand routes. Because of the information-based nature of the modern economy, the globalization of the telecommunication industry, and the interdependent global environment, the value of the global network grows and more users are interlinked.

The information society is driven by information, similar to the industrial society. This society is produced by a reliance on information as the most significant factor in the terms of production. Hence, it relies on the information economy to produce products, services, employment, wealth, and lifestyle on which the community depends. Ultimately the whole community of a country can be benefited by optimum utilization of information to be flown into each territory of the society. Given the right incubation, a community based information network molded by information can accelerate the pace of development.

Rapid advancements and convergence of information and communications technologies (ICTs) have a deep and far-ranging impact on economic, social, and political life. The increase in the speed of and variations in communication flows is catalyzing an unprecedented growth in the exchange of ideas, goods, and services. Government, organizations and businesses that ignore this development and lag behind in adaptation risk themselves becoming uncompetitive, marginalized and out of the game (ABDI, 2002).

Efforts have been given to accommodate propositions on fabricating nationwide information networks through utilization of the existing information backbones especially in developing countries, and a centrally driven content repository may eventually be established.

BACKGROUND

Rapid human development programmes depend on the formation of a robust civil society. Community members develop their capacity by integrating information and knowledge into the various development activities. Such capacity empowers people to solve intelligently the problems that exist in their community and eventually transform them into valuable assets of the society.

E-society or networked society encompasses the role of the Internet and other ICT services in everyday life, particularly related to interactions in the household, personal needs, and entertainment. It also encompasses the needs of individuals and the wider community in work, social relationships, leisure, and activities in other arenas that assist the society to be online. This interest is not only limited to the passive consumption of ICTs in these settings, but also takes into account the design, redesign, production, and governance of the multiplicity of old and emerging communication innovations that are reshaping the media habits and practices across all sectors of society.

When community information centres are supposed to act as a crucial tool for human development, community users are urged to cultivate and adopt a critical attitude towards the usage of information. Justifying the source of information they may evaluate, analyze, and adapt information and knowledge for their own perspective, economic, political, and social conditions. This process of justification of the content and source of content forms the basis for changing and transforming the community.

The UN General Assembly stipulated through a resolution, that “to marshal the global consensus and commitment required to promote the urgently needed access of all countries to information, knowledge, and communication technologies for development so as to reap the full benefits of the information and communication technologies revolution, and to address the whole range of relevant issues related to the information society, through the development of a common vision and understanding of the information society and the adoption of a declaration and plan of action for implementation by Governments, international institutions and all sectors of civil society” (UN General Assembly Resolution, 2001).

It is believed that rural community people everywhere are born intelligent enough to sustain in diversified situations (Edgemont Resource Team Report, 2004; OTA Report, 1996; Saga, 2005). Their ability and capacity in tackling difficult circumstances and finding solutions to the struggle of everyday life have been recognized. It is also believed that the intelligence of rural people is often underestimated and emaciated. Limited access to information and knowledge prevents the full use and potential growth of intelligence in rural communities. The structures (systems and services) supporting the information flow to rural areas and deprived urban areas are not always in healthy condition. Those responsible for putting resources toward such infrastructures have not considered it important to invest in and to set up information and knowledge networks. The time has come to involve the rural community people in identifying their own information needs for their community development.

While expanded infrastructure may ensure physical access to the global communications network, there are other non-physical barriers to access that also contribute to the digital divide. The right to access and use information is one that may be blocked only too easily, for example, by pricing, patents, or censorship policies. On the other hand, high-tech equipment may be necessary but it is useless unless people have the literacy, education, computer-training, and capacity-building required first to operate the equipment, and then make full use of the knowledge or information they access. Furthermore, developing countries' high levels of foreign indebtedness inhibits their capacity to contribute to the generation of knowledge, for example, through national investment in research (Accuosto & Johnson, 2004).

To overcome these issues, a common comprehensive consensus among the developing countries needs to be set up at the country level, integrating policies, implementation plans, usage patterns, and behavioral changes for the marginal communities by adopting the benefits of information and content for their own uplift.

Both the global communications network and the Internet exhibit network externalities—their value to any single user increases as they are expanded and as more users join. The higher the number of telephone users, the greater the number of interactions that become possible. On the Internet, each new user may be a potential supplier or consumer of goods and services, and can expand the global market (UNDP, 2002). Theoretically any number of users can simultaneously interact in cyberspace. By ratcheting up the necessary physical infrastructure—adding servers, increasing telephone lines, building additional satellite capacity—new users can simply piggy-back on the existing system: it is almost infinitely expandable (Spar, 1999).

In July 2000, the G8 countries adopted the Charter on Global Information Society at their summit meeting in Okinawa, Japan. This reflected the G8's recognition that information technology is one of the most potent forces shaping the 21st century. The charter discussed the creation of a global information society (ADB, 2003).

To become critical users of information and knowledge, a community would like to analyze both the knowledge that comes from outside the community, and its own inherited knowledge. The community would also like to study the cultural and social aspects of gender, race, tribe, class, and poverty. However, these studies need to be adjusted and formulated so that transforming information into knowledge can create real value-added services at the grass root level.

STRATEGIES TO ESTABLISH INFORMATION NETWORKING

A rise in per capita income cannot be the sign of digital literacy, but a well established vision at the central level with a dedicated workforce and commitment at the implementation stages would lead to a sustainable society towards achievement of development. Under no circumstances should governments try to over-regulate the growing ICT sectors, at least for the next ten or fifteen years.

The main challenges can be pinpointed as:

- integration and interoperability of technologies
- tackling the speed of technology obsolescence
- shortage of knowledge based manpower
- data and information security and privacy
- mobilization of funds

To face the challenges, the author suggests that a three-tiered effort may be initiated at the national level. It is scheme, evolution, and empowerment.

Scheme

A concrete strategic plan needs to be initiated at the national level incorporating possibilities of dynamic adjustments in each stage of development and action, resulting in optimum resource utilization and maximum benefit out of it. The new strategy requires an indigenous method, an open coordination concept, and a realistic measure by:

1. Identifying and defining common objectives; and
2. Simulating the quality and relevance of capacity enhancement programmes, to

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