

Chapter 3

Digital Divide, Data Trash, and the Commodification of Information: Discourses around the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to build a theoretical framework for new media within the African context, this chapter considers terminology that routinely surface around ICTs. Terms such as knowledge economy, information poverty, the digital divide, information, knowledge and data though used interchangeably or roughly to mean similar things, they are laden with value, meaning and reflect power relations within a global and local context. Routinely used terms in a field create discourses which in turn reveal sociocultural, economic practices and power relations which reflect certain hegemonies. This chapter attempts to review some of the terms in the field of ICTs in order to make visible the sociocultural and economic power relations embedded in them. The digital divide offers a key entry point into ICT discourses and the opportunities and challenges presented by new media technology within the context of Africa. The theoretical concepts of the digital divide are reviewed within the larger context of global constructions of information wealth and information poverty.

INTRODUCTION

At its heart, development – if it is to be sustainable – must be a process that allows people to be their own agents of change: to act individually and collectively using their own ingenuity and accessing ideas, practices and knowledge in the search for ways to fulfil their potential. It requires what economist Amartya Sen calls ‘real freedoms’, the capacity for people to participate in a diverse range of decisions that affect them, and to enjoy specific functional aspects that constitute a healthy life...Enabling greater

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numbers of people to speak, engage and respond to one another is ultimately equipping them to take political responsibility, which is a key ingredient to establishing deep and sustainable change. (as cited by Warnock, Schoemaker & Wilson, 2007, para. 4)

The heart of Sen's definition of freedom is self-determination. This theme reverberated throughout South Africa in the early 1990s. Post-1994, the transition from South Africa's apartheid past saw the hegemonic ideoscape¹ laid down by the State through the Bill of Rights and the constitution. It assertively promotes an all-embracing historical redress that seeks to remedy the legacy of Apartheid, which systemized discrimination and disempowerment across all facets of society. This reparation was intended to permeate through a series of legislation (Polity, 2004).

While these Acts in part address the communications industry, there remains dissent as regards the depth and actual 'transformation reach' of the various Acts. The Black Economic Empowerment ICT Charter (final draft, 2004) has been one response to absences in legislation (ICT empowerment charter working group, 2004, pp. 20 – 25). The Charter follows on from The Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act, with the central objective being to "bridge the digital divide".

The direct causes identified for the lack of development were numerous and complex. The lack of basic and supporting infrastructure resulted in a high cost of roll-out in rural areas. This has a knock on effect on the high cost of services in rural areas, which is complicated by ineffectual governance and regulation. This has led to the unfailing tendency of corporates to focus most on commercial rather than other clients (Gillwald, 2005, pp. 469 – 472).

The challenges identified by the ICT charter are lack of equity ownership, equity management and skills development². Certain areas have been identified as having critical shortages in skills. Research has been identified as problematic as it is either duplicated or inadequate and incomplete. There has also been a lack of promoting open source platforms. Given the infrastructural problems cited above, rural access was indicated as an area needing growth in addition to the urban poor. Finally, there was emphasis on promoting fairness, transparency and consistency in adjudicating matters related to the ICT sector, ownership and control (ICT empowerment charter working group, 2004, pp. 20 – 25).

If development and democracy are to be the cornerstones of progress in Africa, then New Media technology (ICTs) must be acknowledged as development catalysts if utilized in a carefully considered way. Former South African President Thabo Mbeki urged Africans, "to participate fully in the information revolution...to devise concrete ways of harnessing this new phenomenon for the advancement and enrichment of our democracies" (Mzamane, 2001, p. 15). Apart from improving quality of life, the most critical role ICTs could play is lending its potential towards democratic participation. Nicholas Garnham (2004, p. 358) rightly indicates that technology only facilitates participation but does not guarantee it. "The internet and related technologies have created new possibilities for conversation - how these potentials are actualized is not up to the technology itself, but to human decision and commitment"³. Ling and Donner state that, "as long as there are differences in income, skills, literacy and simple personal preference, there is likely to be some kind of 'digital divide'" (2009, p. 72). Hindman reviewing the US context confirms the lag present in the early dramatic growth of the Internet. "Disadvantaged groups—blacks, Hispanics, the poor, the elderly, the undereducated, and those in rural areas—continued to lag behind in their access to and use of the Net" (Hindman, 2009, p. 9). Hindman further indicates that recent statistics show a narrowing of the divide; however, important differences related to age, race and levels of education remain (Hindman, 2009, p. 10). Thus even in the first world contexts, ICTs mirror

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