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"The developing world and the digital revolution - what to do"

Barry Mahon
Keynote Speaker

Abstract: The Internet and all it implies has pre-occupied many in the information community. It has revolutionised the ways and means of distribution of information. But what does it actually mean to the developing world? This presentation, based on personal experience, will explode the myth that the digital revolution will enable developing countries to catch up.

Introduction

Two items of information:

"The Massachusetts Institute of Technology announced yesterday that it is to make almost all it's course material available free of charge over the web over the next ten years, described as an unprecedented step in world-wide education….." *news item, April 2001*

"Before our very eyes witness the emergence of the information literate. The world is at their feet. The future is in their hands. Their hands are at the keyboard and their eyes are on the screen. It is they who are shifting the present and shaping the future. The Internet is their tool of choice.."
Gerry McGovern, http://www.nua.ie/newthinking/archives/index.html

Gives you a nice warm feeling doesn't it? MIT, arguably the world's premier technology learning place makes all its teaching materials available, one of the Internet's gurus says we are becoming information literate, the Internet is all pervasive.

Try telling that to the average individual in an underdeveloped country. Ask yourself - what exactly is an underdeveloped country?

The reality

There is no common denominator for an underdeveloped country, there are gradations. If you look at the UNDP's development index http://www.undp.org/hdro/98hdi.htm you will find a measure based on certain parameters, including such items as infant mortality rates, adult literacy, etc. These are typical Northern measures, in a developing country the ability to actually measure these things with any accuracy is of itself a measure of the development.

The information literacy of a developing country is not measured by "our" measures, but by a combination of items such as who owns the newspapers, radio and tv, is telecommunications still a government owned monopoly or contracted to a monopoly supplier, does the regime in power want people to know what is going on, etc. The answers to these questions, even in countries high up on the UNDP development index gives a much better idea of the real literacy situation.

In the majority of developing countries the electricity supply is erratic. Combine this with the fact that most schools will not have electricity in the classrooms and then think about how the Internet can be introduced to help education, one of the regular suggestions made by consultants from UN, World Bank, IMF, when asked to do something about the digital divide.

Try to suggest that a developing country should prioritise things and get the health, food supply and other "important" things sorted out first then people will be able to use the Internet and you will, quite rightly, be told you are trying to deprive the country of access to high technology.

What to do

Educate. That is the only long term solution.

- Start at the top – many of the political figures in developing country regimes are highly educated, that is how they manage to manipulate others. They need re-education, not in the old Marxist sense, but in the sense that they need to understand that support for their country from development agencies depends on their willingness to see things differently. Pressure donor governments to insist on this.

- Introduce courses for teachers at all levels on how to get and use information, they can then pass it on. In due course this can be integrated with access to the Net, but not before teachers are familiar with how to get the best from the Net. One quick way, for example in developing countries where the Net is already reasonably available, is for developed countries to make contact with schools in developing countries, for teachers in developing countries to be included in IT teacher mailing lists and newsgroups.

- Set up or develop existing information centres, libraries where they exist, community centres, regional development bodies, as centres where information and training are provided on new information technologies. These need reliable power and communications and experienced staff, so they can not be developed through ad-hoc programmes by development agencies. They also need credibility, they need to be supported both by local communities and government but also by having access to the best international support.

- Supply IT based solutions that have been shown to work elsewhere, where appropriate.

- Open up the telecommunications. In most developing countries telecommunications is a means of making money for the regime, the major users of the telephone and such like are the international agencies, importers, business. In addition, control of the means of communications is important to regimes who feel insecure. In countries where the average "income" is $1 per day a monopoly telecommunications suppliers prices for Internet access will only be for the rich.

There is no quick fix

The digital divide, in whatever fashion it is identified, will not be reduced or eliminated in the short term. It will not be solved by money alone, it will not be solved by showering technology on those who are "deprived" however that is measured.

What can (developed country) libraries do?

Identify a partner organisation in a developing country. Find out what the needs are to achieve improved information literacy. Do not be seduced by requests for money or trips to the developed world. Do not see it as a way of unloading surplus equipment or books. Agree a plan for what you can do, be realistic about the timescale and effort required and then do it.