

Information As The New Global Commons:
A Note From The Third World

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Information as the new global commons: A note from the third world

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Last century is marked by profound changes in global communication. Technology has drastically altered the manner in which information is processed, distributed and accessed. The resultant “free flow of information” has led to conceptualization of information as a “common good”. This new global commons is vast, complex, highly valued and open.

Its vastness can be gauged from the fact that humankind has generated more information in the last 50 years than it had done in its entire history. Further, the available stock of information is getting doubled every six years. Complexity of this resource stems from the linkages between its various subunits or subsystems and need for end technology to make it functional. The complex nature of today’s information is a result of convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and IT industries as against dependence on a single medium a few decades ago. Though clichéd, the adage “information is power” adequately reflects the value of the new global commons. It is valuable not only in an “end in itself manner” but also because of its high causality. In today’s world, access to information has been conclusively linked to distinct advantages in other spheres of life. On surface, information availability has increased due to “inclusive communication relations propelled by rapid changes in technology”. In this altered scenario, apparently anyone can enter the “public sphere of communication, hence the “openness”.

Despite this optimistic view, many communication scholars have pointed that the potential of communication to become a more inclusive process may not be fully realized. Just three decades ago, print and broadcasting media were assumed to add greatly to the flow of public information, thereby closing the gap and helping to modify differences in knowledge resulting from inequalities in education and social position. However, this prediction did not come true. Instead, it was found that there was a widening of the gap as the

media propelled information rich, with higher skills and more resources even further ahead of the informationally lower strata. Will the new information and communication technologies mediated world go the same way?

Rest of this paper is divided into three sections. Section One deals with the role and importance of information in today's world. The next section covers some of the innovative ways in which people have developed and used the communication media to ensure its democratic nature. Constraints faced in fulfilling this agenda are highlighted in the last section.

Access to the new global commons

The debate on production, flow and utilization of information in the present century at the international level can best be summarized in a single word – tempestuous. A lot of heat and ill will had been generated among nations on issues related to generation and transborder information flow. The developed nations from the North while agreeing that imbalances in information generation, transmission and access exist, argued that they were an outcome of uneven industrial development and different levels of economic development. Developing nations from the South, on the other hand, pointed out that information is too valuable a resource to be left to the logic of free market and the existing international communication systems have to be drastically revamped to ensure free and balanced flow of information.

To give some semblance of sanity to this highly charged and acrimonious debate, the 19th General Assembly of UNESCO called for setting up of an international commission to investigate the global communication problems. Among other things, the commission was asked to study the problems surrounding free and balanced flow of information and setting up of a new world information and communication order. The Commission was headed by Irish diplomat and Nobel Peace Laureate, Sean MacBride, included 16 members from different member nations representing the world's ideological, political, economic and geographical

spectrum. The final report titled “Many Voices, One World: Communication and Society Today and Tomorrow” was publicly available in 1980.

While the developing nations welcomed the recommendations of the Commission, reactions from the developed North ranged from cautious optimism to downright hostility. The long and heated debate on the Commission’s recommendations resulted in the withdrawal of United States of America from UNESCO in 1985, followed by Britain in 1986.

Why is the issue of information flow and availability a global hot spot?

☀ Information and knowledge are seen as the tools of empowerment. Social empowerment and information availability go hand in hand. It has been forcefully argued that groups that had been/ are deprived of information and knowledge due to cultural, social or economic factors remain the most exploited section of the society. Deprivation of information leads to lower utilization of schemes, programmes, services, etc. but most importantly of their rights. Dissemination of information through new ICTs can open up possibilities of access to a “global” pool of knowledge and can contribute to the reduction of information inequality due to cultural, social and economic factors. However, the need for the users to have adequate skills, money and equipment to access this vast information in the present times can counteract and outweigh the benefits of the new technology.

☀ Secondly, it is highly contentious because it is directly related to development. Earlier capital was viewed as the scarce resource and its transfer a necessary precondition for growth. This conventional view has undergone a sea change with knowledge now being seen as an equally important factor. It is felt that, in the years to come, knowledge application will drive development processes and create unprecedented opportunities for growth and poverty reduction. For example, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) has estimated that one percent investment in telecommunication results in 3% increase in GDP. Access to information via Information and Communication


Technologies (ICTs) saves transport costs, fuel, time and other expenditure besides providing timely assistance during disaster relief and rescue operations. However, as pointed out by the President, World Bank (1997), there exist significant risks of increasing inequalities between and nations due to unmediated use of the new resource. Imbalances in communication resources, combined with modern technological developments such as satellites and computer data banks, foster dependent relations among nations leading to exacerbation of existing inequalities.

☀ Thirdly, a major change that has come about in information access over the last few decades is the intervention of technology. The striking technological changes that have occurred over the last few decades is changing the way we send, receive and perceive information and communicate with each other. Gone are the days when one had to trek to the nearest library and painfully wade through book after book to find (hopefully) the required information. Happily for most of us information is now only a click away! This apparent ease of access often hides the obstacles concerning the use of this technology. While the use of conventional media was limited by a single skill/factor, use of new technologies is constrained by multiple factors. For example, use of print media is limited by literacy while a medium like T.V is constrained by high costs. However, the new ICTs are pro literate, pro rich, pro English and pro technology savvy. Most of the information today is available in written form in English, which seriously limits its use by women and non-English using sections. The high technology input makes it biased in favour of young and innovative groups and limits it to urban centers. These groups also have fewer opportunities to training and learning technical skills to bridge the gap. Cost is also a major constraint, as few people have the resources to independently own the technology necessary to access this vast pool of information. Hence, it is argued


that high technology mediated information, widens the gap between the resource rich and resource poor, rather than closing it.


Innovations in accessing global information resource

Over the last decade, debate has shifted from free and fair flow of information between nations to making information available to ordinary citizens. The ease of communication and unrestricted information flow across boundaries due to technology makes the concept of information sovereignty of nations a redundant and irrelevant issue. What still remains a major concern is who has access to this vast global resource? It has been realized that communities that do not have access to this vast repository of knowledge have contributed in a significant way in generating it. In that case is it not logical to make it available to these communities even if they have little voice to stake their claim over it? The earlier call to make media more accessible and localized so that they reflect and fulfill the needs of nations states is now applicable to individual communities and groups. Over the past two decades, civil society groups and community based organizations (CBOs) in the developing world have begun to articulate the need making information more participatory and democratic. This belief has led to many innovative experiments in media use. They range from community newspapers to computer based information kiosks. Only modern ICT based efforts are summarized here due to their high potential, reach and complexities.


 Computer based information provider services are of four types. The first category of programmes are what can be called as government sponsored projects. These projects mainly provide the rural people with information on government schemes and services. They also provide dynamic information with the help of interactive services besides having static content on the site. Most of these projects harp on transparency and participatory governance besides citizens' involvement. Some of these e-governance initiatives also provide direct linkages between the people and the government. In line with the millennium development

goals of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) many third world nations are spending huge resources on establishing a network of computer based information services. For example, during the next five year plan India is planning to connect all the villages with the help of a computer network. Under this ambitious project, information kiosks will be set up in each village and managed by a self-help group. Besides providing employment to the local youth, these centers will enhance their entrepreneurial ability. The government is also planning to upgrade Public Call Offices into “tele-info centers” equipped with latest ICTs.

 The second category of ICT based initiatives are related to commerce and trade. They are mainly initiated and run by private commercial organizations. Initial ventures of this nature in India centered around agricultural information. These initiatives aim at providing real time data on commodity prices, weather, scientific farming practices, agricultural inputs and related services (like agricultural insurance and kisan credit cards). A major difference between this category of initiatives and the rest is that they are entirely owned and managed by the group profiting out of the information. In most cases, these centers help the members of the group by providing updated information, reducing transport and transaction costs, etc. Further, the group is linked to the procurement agency or the buyer through this network. The *eChaupal* initiative of ITC and networking of NDDB milk collection centers are examples of initiatives of this nature.

 The third category of ICT based projects offline and online information. The most notable example of an initiative of this kind is the Information Village Project run by M.S.Swaminathan Foundation. In this case, a number of public information kiosks are established and they are networked, not only to one another, but also to other similar institutions. In such cases, required information can be accessed from the kiosks either on “pay-for-service” basis or by paying a membership fees. Such initiatives were initially set up for farmers in India but other specific user groups have developed similar structures. The

information available at these centers includes package of practices, relevant and new technologies, government schemes, crop and season wise recommendations. In some cases the content is simply dumped on to the site, whereas increasingly efforts are being made to meet specific requirements of the users through online services. Another feature of this category of services is the element of strong inter-institutional linkages. This not only expands the scope of services and information provided but also addresses the diverse information needs of the users. Another significant feature is that the use of media other than just computer and internet based technology. For example, in some cases the user group is connected to information provider via video conferencing and/or telephone line. In such cases call centers are established o lines similar to that of information kiosks.

 The last category of information projects is aimed at the marginalized groups and concerned with their capacity building and empowerment. These projects aim at use of ICT in education (Government of Uttar Pradesh,,India; IGNOU) training (SEWA, Ministry of Rural Development), legal literacy, etc. Most projects of this nature run open or distance learning programmes of the underprivileged groups. Some of them specifically aim at increasing the computer literacy of these people to help them cope with the changing technologies and to take maximum advantage of it. These initiatives are different from the other categories in a significant way. They stress on mastering the use of the technology by the marginalized group rather than merely giving them benefits that arise out of the technology (for example, Deccan Development Society). The premise is that empowerment includes the ability to handle the medium and tell ones' own story rather than rely on other to stand up and fight for oneself.

Constraints in managing the new global commons

Successful management of common goods is governed by certain principles. These design principles are necessary not only to check undue exploitation of the resource but also

for building enduring institutions that govern them. Ostrom identifies six design principles that are necessary for enduring common pool management institutions. However, information as a common good differs significantly from other common pool resources. This is both a challenge and an opportunity to those who view it as an essential component of success in today's world. What are the constraints that govern the management and use of information as a global commons?

✚ The first requirement is the need for well defined boundaries. In other words, the extent of resource should be quantifiable. Information due to its dynamic nature defies any measurement. One may attempt to quantify based on the number of research publications, but it is quiet evident that such estimates are vague and grossly underestimated. Most information and knowledge from non English and non western societies never gets listed. The seriousness of this problem can be estimated from the fact that even today many of the path breaking works (especially in language other than English) of scholars from non European countries is rarely available to academicians. What compounds the problem is the fact that information by and large does not diminish over time but has an add on effect. In other words, the owners and users of information are often different.

✚ This brings us to the second constraint regarding lack of consensus on use of the resource. Just as the amount of information is beyond quantification, so are its users. At present, only that minuscule part of information that finds its ways to refereed publications is governed by rules. The vast mine of information that lies beyond this scope is often used on a first come first served basis. In fact, the international laws (especially those related to patenting) in this regard are not only one sided but down right exploitative. The bitter battle over patents is a stark reminder of the acrimony over information dissemination by transnational news agencies in the seventies.

Under these circumstances, consensus on collective use of the resource remains elusive and a huge chasm exist between those who use the resource and other who are silent witness to the information revolution.

✚ In case of other conventional common pool resources, there is a provision of sanctions against those who overexploit the resource. But, in case of information those who access the resource are so far ahead of others in terms of other resources that they are beyond reach of those who are not able to utilize/access information. Besides the non users are not united in any manner to counter the advantages derived by the users of the resource.

✚ Existence of conflict resolution mechanisms is another essential ingredient of enduring common pool resources. The case of information as a global common pool presents a very interesting situation. In this case the conflict is often between users rather than those who are exploiting the resource and those who are being denied access. This is due to the fact that those who have taken advantage of information to leapfrog in other spheres of life realize its value and fight over it. On the other hand, those who are enmeshed in the daily grind of fulfilling their basic needs, rarely make an issue of who is using information. This provides a pointer at two aspects. Firstly, information itself is not a valuable enough resource to out weigh the disadvantages in other fields. In other words, information can provide an advantage only to a limited extent. Equally important are economic, socio-cultural, political and other dimensions. Secondly, for people overburdened by other limitations, information is not of much value and is hence not a resource.

Information has conventionally underpinned all forms of development-economic, social and political. There had been dramatic changes in quantum of information and the manner in which we accessing and use it. As mentioned at the beginning, it is a gigantic resource that

can alter the way we live if other preconditions are present. While it is true that information availability can change lives and provide distinct advantages, equally true is the fact that the principle of excludability does not concern this unique resource. Information is not diminished by the number of users. Hence, what is urgently needed is a protocol to govern the access and use of information at the international level. The medium might have undergone a change but the issue of free and fair flow of information remains the centre of controversy.

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