

The digital divide within the European Union¹

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The first 'World Summit on the Information Society' (WSIS) was held in Geneva on 10-12 December 2003. Six thousand delegates from one hundred and eighty countries attended this conference, which was organised by the United Nations. The many topics discussed included; 'the availability of information'; 'safety and privacy on the Internet'; 'the spam problem'; and 'the right to knowledge versus intellectual property'. However, the central theme was 'the digital divide'. This theme was referred to again by Andris Viks, of the National Latvian Library, in the opening session of the Bobcatsss Symposium [1] in January 2004 at Riga. Also in 2004, a workshop was held in Brussels on 'The digital divide : opportunities and threats at the verge of EU enlargement'. Clearly, the digital divide is a very real and important topic, especially so in the European Union, which, as from May 2004, consists of 25 member states as compared with the previous 15.

The introduction of new media and some of the consequences

According to ancient Egyptian mythology, script was an invention of one of the gods, called Thoth. Hieroglyphs, meaning 'words of God', were considered to be a gift of the gods. Consequently, only priests were able and allowed to decipher the sacred signs. Thus we see that, after the introduction of this new medium, script, there was a sharp divide between information haves and have-nots: a divide which maybe we could call the Divine Divide.

Unfortunately, we see this situation again during the Middle Ages, when once more only the priesthood – now of Roman Catholic denomination - had the privilege to spend a lifetime in library and scriptorium.

This repressive role of script was only brought to an end, basically, through the invention of printing and the protestant Reformation. I say 'basically', because, as always after the introduction of a new medium, a conservative elite hangs on to the old medium and rejects the new one as an inferior substitute. In the case of printing, many rich people kept on preferring the manuscript book to the printed book. Secondly because certainly not everyone from the beginning could afford buying books.

So, after Gutenberg's invention, for some time there were information haves and have-nots, there was an information divide. Soon I'll explain why the present digital divide is much more alarming and less promising to be bridged.

What exactly is the digital divide?

Nearly seven years ago, April 1997, a United Nations Committee stated: 'We are profoundly concerned at the deepening maldistribution of access, resources and opportunities in the information and communication field. The information and technology gap and related inequities between industrialised and developing nations are widening: a new type of poverty – information poverty – looms.'

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This 'information and technology gap' is now better known as the 'digital divide', but what exactly is it? We seem to be lucky, since the just mentioned 'World Summit' of 2003 gave us a definition:

'We use the term "digital divide" to refer to the gap between those who can effectively use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet, and those who cannot.'

Or maybe we are not lucky, but disappointed, since this definition is rather too simplistic. I'll explain why.

It is true that the most dramatic kind of digital divide is the global divide: some countries can use Internet, and others cannot, because of the simple fact that the indispensable technological infrastructure is missing. But also, there are countries that do have, to some degree at least, the technological possibilities, but do not allow freedom of information and communication to all people, and consequently make Internet use impossible. Examples are Cuba, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), China.

But there are other manifestations of the divide, maybe amazing to some people and self-evident to others, but anyway too important to be ignored – since they exactly match the multiculturalism theme of this conference. Also, after the technological and political aspect, the psychological aspect must also be taken into account.

I am aiming at people, or cultures, that, as a matter of fact, can use new information and communication tools, such as the Internet – but choose not to do so. I'll give two real-life examples, one coming from Western culture, and one from the East.

The first example comes from the United States of America, to be more precise, from 'The National Leadership Network of Conservative African-Americans': 'The information age is here. Computers bring an exciting new frontier for research, commerce and educational opportunity. It also brings a new angle on victimisation. It's called the "digital divide". It assumes that millions of poor and black Americans are left behind while others enjoy the opportunities brought by the Internet.

Never missing an opportunity to expand the role - and subsequent control - of the federal government, presidential candidates and activists disguise their thirst for more power as 'solutions' in order to confiscate more money from taxpayers, launch new government programs, create massive bureaucracies and redistribute revenue into budgets that mostly pay salaries. We are told the government will close the digital divide by making sure the poor and minorities can access the Internet. The truth is that we are being hoodwinked again, with the government hoping we'll buy its latest excuse to raid our pockets. There really is no digital divide. This new victim syndrome was concocted to continue coddling the poor and minorities by saying they have been slighted and deprived of equal opportunity. It is nothing more than a scam to open up another door for federal intrusion and expansion. The goal is to foster guilt, and it milks us all to pay for it. (...) The "digital divide" is just another scheme being used to divide America and allow liberal socialists into our political system to devise new methods of incremental government expansion that may someday be impossible to reverse.' (Green)

The second example comes from Southeast Asia. A news editor of the *Bangkok Post* wrote the following: 'Many people nowadays, those at the United Nations included, see information and related technologies as if they are merely a neutral business tool in the same way that they see globalisation as opening up the world for 'free' trade. This misleading view of information is behind the drive to wire the entire globe to reduce it to some imaginary global village. But information is not neutral. It can never be. Information carries with it layers of human prejudice, values, loves, hates and fears. It may be desirable to wire the world but its goal must be questioned. The connotation of a global village, in its sense that it is being popularised, is that of a single community with a single set of values. To be crude about it, it's the McDonaldisation of the world. Because much of the information on the internet, as

well as in other popular media, is created in the Western world, it is inevitable that the entire world is being Westernised.’ (Techawongtham)

Opinions like these – which, to my opinion, contain utterly paranoid and stupid statements as well as true and wise ones – bring to my mind two very interesting and contradicting ‘basic information rights’, the first being ‘The Right to Remain Ignorant’. Dutch Information professor Cees Hamelink writes about this (p. 9): ‘The problem is complex: deficiencies on the supply-side and deficiencies on the demand-side mutually strengthen each other. The professional mechanisms of information mediation stand in the way of a comprehensive, and unbiased provision of information. Equally, the disinterest of the world’s citizens to be fully informed, obstructs the information flows. In their preference for third-rate video and TV products and popular magazines and newspapers, millions of people state they have the right to be ignorant. As a result, our expanding and complex world has a double problem: the means of information provision are highly inadequate and the users are largely uncritical.’

And, once having agreed on the right to remain ignorant, I think the other basic information right becomes very interesting too: ‘The first right of every man in civilized society is the right to be protected against the consequences of his own stupidity.’ (Edmund Burke, as quoted in McLuhan etc., p. 49)

By the way: I think that the space between these two ‘rights’ could be an interesting playing ground for a future (Bobcats) conference!

Digital divide in general, world wide

Some countries can use the Internet, and other countries cannot, since they don’t have the technological infrastructure. It is this technological problem that makes the digital divide much more alarming than other information divides that used to occur after the introduction of a new medium.

While Gutenberg’s printing press was a relatively simple wood and iron structure, the technology needed to be internet connected is complicated and expensive. And, although telephony was introduced 128 years ago, still today large parts of the world are practically deprived of it. As you can read in nearly every article on the digital divide, Manhattan has more telephone connections than Africa, though the black continent’s population is 500 times higher (and then: two out of three African telephones usually are out of order).

Alarming, and not promising to disappear, is the digital divide, because, as was stressed at the World Summit last month: ‘The gap between those with and without access to the Internet continues to increase throughout the world.’

For those who want figures to be convinced, here they are. (chart 1)

	% online July 1997		% online February 1999	% online December 2001	
The Netherlands	5,5	9,3	13,7	56,4	58,7
Sweden	11,0		37,8	64,0	
United Kingdom	2,0		18,5	56,0	
USA	19,0		30,7	58,5	
Brazil	0,6	0,4	1,6	5,8	3,0
China	0,001		0,2	2,4	
Cuba	?		0,3	1,1	
Egypt	0,05		0,06	0,85	
India	0,01		0,1	0,8	
Mexico	0,4		0,6	3,4	
South Africa	1,5		3,2	7,0	

CHART 1, source NUA

In 1997 the average connectivity in four industrialised countries was 9,3 %, in seven developing countries 0,4 %: a divide of **8,9 %**. Less than five years later in the same countries the difference was 58,7 % versus 3,0 %, i.e. a divide of **55,7 %**. And not only 'throughout the world', but also *within* every single country the divide is widening.

In India a giant divide separates an extremely small minority of urban net users from the vast rural majority, that may have to walk for days just to get to the nearest working telephone. But – maybe surprising – also in Great Britain in the year 2003, 95% of *urban* households are online, while only 7% of *rural* villages are connected. (Hirsch)

There would be much more to say about the domestic divide, if we had time to do so. Apart from this urban/rural division, for example, there are also divides noticeable along the criteria of race, and gender.

Digital divide in de European Union as it is today

It will be no surprise that also within the EU as it is today, there is a divide (chart 2). (I'm sorry that these figures are more than two years old, but September 2001 is the last time internet connections in all fifteen countries were counted.)

When we look at this chart, we see that between the first country, Sweden, and the last, Greece, there is a divide of over 50 %. Consequently also the divide between the top five and bottom five is significant: 33%.

The column to the right, with more recent data, shows the figures of most countries of August 2002, indicating that in the European Union in less than a year the average connectivity percentage increased with 7,5%.

15 EU member states	Sept. 2001		August 2002
	%	Average	%
Sweden	64,0	55,5	67,8
The Netherlands	56,4		60,8
United Kingdom	55,3		57,2
Denmark	54,7		62,7
Finland	47,0		51,9
Austria	43,5	35,8	45,2
Germany	34,5		38,9
Portugal	34,4		43,6
Italy	33,4		?
Belgium	33,1		36,6
Ireland	32,5	22,3	33,7
Luxembourg	23,8		?
France	23,6		28,4
Spain	18,4		19,7
Greece	13,2		?
Average	37,9		(45,5)

CHART 2, source NUA

The Digital divide in de EU as it will be from May 2004

Although the new members are only ten, even within this small group the divide is wide: 30% between Slovenia at the top and Lithuania at the bottom. The average figures for top and bottom fives are self-evident.

10 new members	Sept. 2001 (latest estimation)	
Slovenia	38,1	28,7
Estonia	34,7	
Czech Republic	26,2	
Malta	24,9	
Cyprus	19,6	
Poland	16,6	13,1
Slovakia	15,9	
Latvia	13,1	
Hungary	11,9	
Lithuania	8,2	
Average	20,9	

CHART 3, source NUA

And now the main point: how will the entrance of the ten new members affect the overall connectivity within the new enlarged European Union? It is striking, of course, that the average percentage of the ten new members is even lower than the bottom five of the actual member states: 20,9 versus 22,3%. When we merge all fifteen actual and ten new members into one chart (nr. 4) we see at a glance that the absolute divide between the top and bottom country increases from 50% to 56%, and that the over all average drops from 38 to 30%.

Of the new countries only two enter the top ten, six of them we find at the very bottom of the chart.

In other words: to witness a serious digital divide, we don't have to look at the third world or far away countries. The divide is right here in the middle of the European Union. It has been here all the time, but from next May on, it will be wider than it ever was.

25 member states as from May 2004			
	% 2001	Average	
Sweden	64,0	46,3	
The Netherlands	56,4		
United Kingdom	55,3		
Denmark	54,7		
Finland	47,0		
Austria	43,5		
Slovenia*	38,1		
Estonia*	34,7		
Germany	34,5		
Portugal	34,4		
Italy	33,4	30,0	30,3
Belgium	33,1		
Ireland	32,5		
Czech Republic*	26,2		
Malta*	24,9		
Luxembourg	23,8	14,4	
France	23,6		
Cyprus*	19,6		
Spain	18,4		
Poland*	16,6		
Slovakia*	15,9		
Greece	13,2		
Latvia*	13,1		
Hungary*	11,9		
Lithuania*	8,2		

CHART 4, source NUA

Conclusion

The ten new countries are supposed to benefit from a process that has been going on for more than fifty years in Europe and has resulted in economic growth, increased employment and improved social cohesion. At the same time, the new members will have to rise to the challenge of improving the competitiveness of their economies, so as to promote sustainable economic, social and environmental development. A key factor for achieving this, is the development of the information society.

So the next question is: how to realise this information society? This brings us back to the World Summit I started with, since at the end of the conference a *Declaration of Principles* and a *Plan of Action* were published. One of the principles is, not surprisingly: 'We are fully committed to turning this digital divide into a digital opportunity for all, particularly for those who risk being left behind and being further marginalized.'

And the corresponding Plan of Action goes like this: 'Infrastructure is central in achieving the goal of digital inclusion, enabling universal, sustainable, ubiquitous and

affordable access to ICTs by all, taking into account relevant solutions already in place in developing countries and countries with economies in transition.'

We learn that building a technological infrastructure is a central solution to the problem. So the next question is: how to realise this infrastructure? One way might be what was one of the main recommendations in a discussion paper of 2001 called *Potential for the digital economy in the Baltic states*: 'The prime objective should be the mobilisation of the private sector.' (Lindroos, p. 18),

But we always should be aware of what was stated one year before in the paper *Internet access in Central & Eastern Europe*: 'In much of Central and Eastern Europe, due to the influence of the European Union, telecommunications policy is focused on privatization and competition. It is apparent that these are *necessary* but not *sufficient* conditions for the expansion of access to both basic telecommunications and Internet services.' (GILC, p. 4)

As for the subject privatization, I'd like to remark that one should be very careful about this, since inadequate implementation can have all kinds of nasty and even dramatic consequences – as citizens of several West European countries will be ready to confirm.

Some of you, maybe now expect to see the mythical entity 'Globalisation' entering the stage of solutions. But not so. In a recent Polish book, *The faces of globalisation* (2002), one of the chapters deals with the relations between globalisation processes and information society. The author demonstrates that the developing global information infrastructure is 'excluding', which means that it is used only by societies with access to basic informational instruments – and so far, 'these societies constitute only a small part of the global population'. (Pietraś, p. 9)

This is no surprise to me, since globalisation in itself is not at all an agent of change. At its best it's the result of something else.

Anyhow, as you'll understand, the implementation of all this will take a lot of money and time. In the mean time – this as a warning and advise - as long as there is no up to date Digital Information Society, in order to provide every citizen of the European Union (and of the world at large) adequately with information, we should *not* close or neglect libraries. Dissemination of information should continue to be made not only by digital means but also by means of the analogue medium that has proved satisfactory for over 500 years - the printed book. I remind you also of what was said in the opening session by Mrs Inta Brikse, who stressed the continuing importance of libraries for the access of information, and by Mr Dennis Hanov, who said that in information society as well as in cultural life, libraries still are in the forefront. Or, as the 'World Summit' put it: [Not only digitality, but] 'The media—in their various forms and with a diversity of ownership—as an actor, have an essential role in the development of the Information Society and are recognized as an important contributor to freedom of expression and plurality of information. [Consequently, we] encourage the media—print and broadcast as well as new media—to continue to play an important role in the Information Society.'

In other words: in information society affairs we never should bet on one horse only.

Member states should help to bridge the digital divide by all possible means, which may differ from state to state. I *trust* they will do so, since it is of course in the mutual interest of both new *and* old members that *all* countries within the expanded Union can exchange information as well as other economical goods on a basis of equality and equivalence.

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