

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Is the Internet going to increase or reduce the gap between the rich countries and the poor ones in the world?

1.1 Introduction

The Internet has to date been one of the most extraordinary human creations and even may be one single most important inheritance of the 20th Century. It had never been imagined before the invention of the Internet that it would become a simple reality to communicate directly with millions of men and women at practically any location on Earth and beyond; nor was it imaginable that it would become a manifested reality to exchange information, documents, opinions with the rapidity and the kind of freedom that are typical of on-line communication.

The growth of the Internet has been surprising both because of its rapidity and because of the anarchic and puzzled, still extremely successful, way in which it has developed. Without this spontaneous impulse, probably it could have never been possible to create a network of such potential. Furthermore, if this task had been assigned to the international governments, the kind of unprecedented rapidity achieved to date would still be lagging, perhaps along the way to a possible realisation of a global web.

The Internet, like all great innovations, implies a new culture and a new language. This new way of communicating will bring huge advantages to those people and organisations that are able to exploit the opportunities provided by the Internet; while it will probably penalise the people who will not be able to come to terms with the new culture. This conclusion has recently led some authoritative voices to think that the Net is going to create new and different kinds of illiteracy; and even more, that all the people who are not able to use the information and telecommunications

technologies and those who have difficulties in communicating in English, the language increasingly establishing as the global 'lingua franca' of the planet, will be soon considered the new illiterate.

1.2 The Digital Divide

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) of the US Department of Commerce published in 1999 a series of reports called '*Falling through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*' [NTIA99]. These reports dealt with the situation in the USA with regard to the possibility of all American families being afforded access to telephones, computers and the Internet. The problem of the Digital Divide is perceived to be one of most important issues in economics and in the matter of the citizens' rights.

The Digital Divide may be perceived to be the *gap between those people who have access to the new information and communications technologies and those who cannot*. The report shows the existence, even in the United States, of this gap, which is apparently increasing. There are diverse *ethnic minorities, low income families, low literacy level families, rural area dwellers*, all of whom have unsatisfactory or no access to the resources of the Net. For instance, between 1997 and 1998, the gap between people with high-level education and people with relatively low-level education has been estimated to have increased by 25%, while the gap between people with high income and people with low income has increased by 29% in the same interval of time.

In the United States the Government has set up initiatives in the promotion of the new information and communications technologies in all sectors of society. To this end, it has promoted a great number of activities, many of which are concentrated on the *local communities*, such as *schools, libraries and public access-points* to the Net as attempts towards narrowing the gap.

In this book we will deal with another kind of Digital Divide, specifically with *the divide between the economically advanced countries and the developing ones*. Traditionally, the developing countries have always tended to base their progress on the capacity to absorb the technological innovations created in the more advanced countries and to this end have always been faced with the unsurmountable obstacle of the high expenses necessary to carry out this process of assimilation.

The developing countries would have to learn soon the new culture and the new way of operation imposed by the Net, otherwise they would keep on losing ground, with the result that the gap between them and the more advanced countries would tend to rapidly increase. For this reason, the aim of this book has been to attempt to collect and analyse information on and about the diffusion of the Internet in the Developing Countries and also about the activities and plans in progress in initiatives aimed at narrowing of the Digital Divide.

From the very beginning we have realised how Internet technology is offering a series of opportunities that can make it easier to participate and/or develop the Net in completely new contexts. The relative costs involved make it possible to adapt/adopt the technology at different levels of resource availability. Above all, the Internet can become a *crucial channel for the diffusion of essential information in those places where poverty implies not only lack of economic means but also lack of accurate information*

1.3 The Global Society

We are living in a global society. The transformation of the world into a global village has provoked some revolutionary changes in the concrete and social infrastructures, changes that make almost incomparable to think of the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution.

The emergence of the new information and communications technologies is complementary, perhaps a prime mover, to the process of globalisation. By virtue of the role of the inherent radical changes in the communication process, geographical closeness is no more a necessary requirement for collaboration and interaction in the development of the various economic and social activities. Globalisation of the information and communications technologies makes it possible to create new kinds of organisations, influencing both the business efficiency in firms, governments and public sector organisations and also the citizen's quality of life. The evolution of these technologies and their adoption in all countries will make it possible for countries to have, practically, *access to information and to knowledge from any place in the world, from any system, including mobile systems.* The global society is anticipated to routinely live in a world independent of space and time: information will be available for all the people wherever they are.

The Internet and the new information and communications technologies are helping the process of globalisation to a very large extent. It is to be remembered, however, that a global society with no differences would be a lost cause: for this reason the Net is envisaged to try and connect all the peoples, wherever they are, striving to keep their own cultural identities intact, keeping their dignities untouched and respecting their own traditions. To date hundreds of people in diverse communities around the world are living in abject poverty. A banal illness like dysentery, for which a cure was found many centuries ago, keeps on striking millions of children just because of their parents' lack of awareness of the cure. *Being poor means not only having limited resources, but also little or no adequate knowledge.* The Developing Countries (DCs), which traditionally took advantage of being recipients of consumer goods from the Developed Countries, would not now be able to take the same advantages for software and microprocessors. To date a country can learn and appreciate the potentials of the new information and communications technologies and, by consequence, become a member of the 'global village' only if a minimal threshold of requisite education and knowledge can be demonstrated in the majority of its population. To note is that the acquisition of such requisite knowledge can be really expensive, because of the need of continuous requalification and refreshing, which is generally within the reach of the Developed Countries and less so for the Developing Countries, which would generally have difficulties keeping pace with the Developed Countries.

Knowledge has now become a powerful factor of polarisation, hence increasing the inequities, a factor which acts counter to narrowing of the gap between the North and the South. By making use of the new information and communications technologies, Developing Countries can acquire knowledge from elsewhere or create it by themselves.

The Internet is a new *medium* spreading with an extraordinary rapidity in every country of the world, and through which large and diverse amounts of information can be found and accessed for various purposes, aims and uses as solution systems for large or small, social or economic problems, of the countries. With the rapid spread of this phenomenon, we can reasonably hope for a world where knowledge and power will not be the exclusive domain of a limited group of people. This, in essence, introduces the main theme of the work under the auspices of this publication. The publication is the product of two different concerns:

- (i) *the new information and communications technologies (ICTs)*, in particular relation to the Internet, the Big Net or simply the Net and its new applications, and
- (ii) *the Developing Countries*, to which the mass media have always paid a lot of attention in order to convince the world at large of the need to help these countries and their peoples.

1.4 Internet

The Internet, seen as a communication medium, has a number of features that distinguish it from the other media. It provides a way of communicating which is not one-way oriented but an interactive one. The user is no more a passive consumer: the user can receive any kind of information, including information necessary for the purchase of goods and services. One can talk about a *friction-free capitalism model*, namely, *a market in which the spread of the Internet will offer more choices to the consumers and will make it possible to reduce the costs by locating and buying directly the goods from the producer, avoiding the commercial middle-persons*. According to some scholars, however, the Internet can be perceived as '*a more level playing field*', a playing field for everyone because it reduces the access barriers that can be found in the other markets, without provoking the middle-persons disappearance, but only their specialisation in the services as a support in the activity of a firm, specialisation which is not directly connected with the final consumer.

The main potential of the Internet is, according to Giuseppe Richieri [Medi 95a], *'in the capacity of collecting messages of every kind actually coming from all over the world in one exchange network.'* This enables people to communicate, to exchange opinions and comments with other users, who can be sometimes unknown, while comfortably sitting in front of their own computers. From these observations it can be seen that the phenomenon of the Net implies different cultural dimensions, as it involves, on the one hand, politics, economics, and technological development; and on the other, everyday-life problems.

How does social identity change on the Net or, how can social identity be preserved on the Net? *Social identity on the Net is established by the communities. On the Net the notion of community is linked with the notion of communication* and so one has a certain identity because one can communicate through the Internet. *Unfamiliarity with the new*

information and communications technologies is one of the serious problems that have to be solved in order to create no further social differences among peoples and to avoid the fragmentation of society by the new technologies.

Do the new technologies represent an incentive to economic development? Or do they provoke a crisis in some kind of society or in the old jobs? According to Fausto Colombo [Medi 96a] *'investment in the new technologies and in the opportunities they provide is increasing, and certainly this increase is partially or totally in an even greater proportion to the advantages and it can create disadvantages for the employment and for the investments'*.