Abstract

A number of well-known assertions concerning developmental applications of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) rest on experiences in high- or middle-income countries, and are simply assumed to be valid in other settings, although that may not in fact be the case. There is no doubt that improved access to information and communications is central to improving the lives of people in the Third World. And institutions in many Southern countries, ranging from public bureaucracies and large enterprises to small businesses and NGOs, have obvious need to improve their efficiency and effectiveness through access to computers and basic software—even if these are stand-alone personal computers with no networking capabilities whatsoever. If there were no constraints (or relatively malleable constraints) on governments, communities and individuals attempting to improve the quality of life in the developing world, all of this would be done, and much more—just as it has been done in the advanced industrial world. Unfortunately, however, there are extremely serious constraints on using ICTs to improve the situation of most people in the Third World—constraints flowing not only from unresolved problems of poverty and injustice in particular countries and regions, but also from the structure and dynamics of the global economic system. The inhabitants of lower income developing countries do not have the same options that Northern counterparts take for granted. They do not confront the same structure of opportunity. Furthermore, whatever efforts may be made to improve access to ICTs in these countries take place within extremely varied cultures and social structures, which shape the outcome of technological change in particular ways. Both the need for certain ICTs applications and products, and the outcome of providing them, may thus differ markedly from what might be expected in advanced industrial societies.

There are special dilemmas surrounding the introduction and use of ICTs in Third World settings is highlighted. These dilemmas are only partially technical. To a far greater extent, they are economic, social and political; and when they are brought into the discussion, the futility of imagining that ICTs alone provide a way out of underdevelopment is patent .The network society is creating parallel communications systems: one for those with income, education and literacy connections, giving plentiful information at low cost and high speed: the other are those without connections, blocked by high barriers of time, cost and uncertainty and dependent upon outdated information. So a new map of the world has been created, this time based on technology.

Thus so far, the repercussions of the digital revolution have been confined to a comparatively small group of countries, mainly in the industrialized world. While they are already reflecting on what form a" global information society" will take in future, half the world's population has never even used a telephone. This highly unequal distribution of possibilities for using (new and old) ICT and participating in the efficiency gains it confers goes by the name of Digital Divide. It is the logical consequence, or rather symptomatic of the social and economic imbalances that exist between developing and developed countries.