

# Democracy, Digital Divide and Public Library<sup>1</sup>

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In the introduction<sup>2</sup> to this workshop we read that we are standing on the threshold of the knowledgeable society, characterised by digitalization, as well as Information and Communication Technology. It seems to me that we have been standing there for quite some time already.

In 1969, in Prague, there was a symposium organized by the ATypI (Association Typographique International) on the subject of: 'Typographic opportunities in the computer age'.<sup>3</sup> This symposium's main topic was mainly printed information. However, it certainly was related to the subject which concerns us. It would seem therefore, that we entered the aforementioned threshold at least 32 years ago. More recently, in 1986, Ann Arbor University, Michigan, USA, organized a symposium on 'Knowledge and Information Access', and, as one of the speakers, Mr. Richard Budd said it this way:

'Access to information costs money and requires special skills to acquire, and those capable of gathering and distributing it more efficiently, whether they are governments or multinational corporations or public or private agencies or individuals, gain enormously over those who can't compete. In these circumstances, then, [...] the problem of the haves and have-nots, which has forever plagued every economy and every society, will not be absent from the new information society. [...] Not only will an increasingly large segment of our society have less and less access to information, they will have less knowledge about how it is organized, where it is stored, or how to gain access to it. [...] Surely one does not need a crystal ball to see that

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion paper was presented Wednesday 31 January, 11.00-13.00, at a workshop which was part of the 9th BOBCATSSS symposium, *Knowledge, information and democracy in the open society: the role of the library and the information sector*, Vilnius, Lithuania, 29-31 January 2001. The workshop was conducted by: Ragnar Audunson (Norway), Audrone Glosiene (Lithuania), Sjaak Hubregtse (The Netherlands), Ramune Petuchovaite (Lithuania) and Magnus Torstensson (Sweden). The opening statement (i.e. this paper) was made by Sjaak Hubregtse. The text was not printed in the *Proceedings* (Vilnius University, Vilnius, 2001), but published in the digital Polish bulletin *EBIB* (= Elektroniczny Biuletyn Informacyjny Bibliotekarzy), nr. 7/2001 (25), URL <http://ebib.oss.wroc.pl/english/articles.php> .

<sup>2</sup> 'Public Librarianship: Yesterday's Institution or an instrument for the digital Society? Modern public libraries are children of the industrial society. Today, standing on the threshold of the information/knowledge-oriented society characterised by digitalisation, ICT and lifelong learning, we are facing new challenges. Are public libraries relevant also in relation to these new challenges, or are they outdated institutions, which need to be fundamentally reshaped or even replaced?'

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings: Typographic Opportunities in the computer age. Papers of the 11th Congress of the Association Typographique International, Prague, June 1969*, [John Dreyfus and René Murat, eds.], Prague: Typografia, 1970.

the wedge between the haves and the have-nots has the potential of being driven deeper and that the gap between the two will become greater, if not unsurmountable.’<sup>4</sup>

So, there still was, seventeen years later, on that same doorstep to the information society, this terribly pessimistic person, who didn't believe that, right from the beginning of the new millennium, we would be living in a global village, in a borderless society, where everybody would have access to all information, everywhere and always. Let us listen to the statement given six months ago by the representatives of G8 (i.e. the group of eight major industrial democracies) in the Okinawa Charter on the Global Information Society, formulated during their 'Summit 2000':

'Information and Communication Technology is one of the most potent forces in shaping the XXIst century. Its revolutionary impact affects the way people live, learn and work and the way government interacts with civil society. ICT is fast becoming a vital engine of growth for the world economy.

It is also enabling many enterprising individuals, firms and communities, in all parts of the globe, to address economic and social challenges with greater efficiency and imagination. Enormous opportunities are there to be seized and shared by us all.’<sup>5</sup>

As nothing can be farther from the truth than the above-quoted statement (and we know that the Internet is the topic in question), it is high time we took a hard and long look at the facts. In order to better assess them, let us compare some numbers. First, let us look at the percentage of people online in the so called 'eight major industrial democracies' (Dec. 2000):

USA	56
Canada	50
Great Britain	34
Japan	30
Germany	24
Italy	23
France	17
Russia	8

Some more data:

- On the African continent and in the part of Asia formerly known as Soviet Union, less than one percent of people use the Internet.
- In India, at present, the use of the Internet use (January 2001) stands at 0.4 percent of the adult population.
- Worldwide, the Internet access percentage is approximately 7 (seven) (Oct. 2000).
- Four billion people around the world are without a telephone.
- As an example of the former point: There are 44 million people living in Congo and there are 30.000 phones - of which only about one-third is functioning.

So what are we talking about!? We're **not** talking about enormous oportunities for **all**, but for an **extremely small minority**. We're not talking about the **World Wide** Web, but about the

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Budd, 'Limiting Access to Information: A View from the Leeward Side', in: *The Information Society : an International Journal*, Volume 5, Number 1, 1987 / Special Issue 'Information Access in the 21st Century', p. 41-44.

<sup>5</sup> *Managing Information*, Vol. 7, Nr. 7 (September 2000), p. 64-67.

**First World Web.** We're talking about an enormous **digital divide**. The report *The State of the Internet 2000*, published by the United States Internet Council in September 2000, says:

'Despite the bright outlook for continued Internet penetration, there is a significant global digital divide, primarily between North and South. For example, only 1.5 million people are online in Africa, 1 million of whom are in the country of South Africa. Poverty and inadequate telecommunication infrastructure in the developing world must be alleviated, in order for Internet use to become fully established'.

This digital divide is not just a divide in information access, but also, naturally, an economic divide. I found the following statement on the website of the 'Digital Divide Network', published in August 2000:

'At least some of the protesters got it right in Seattle and Washington [remember: meetings of the World Trade Organisation]: **the global market is widening the gap between rich and poor**. Selective as to country and as to people within a country, business globalization favors the economic elites. In response, development agencies such as the World Bank are increasing the social safety nets for those left behind.'

This brings me to an interesting statement made by the president of the World Bank, Mr. James Wolfensohn, during a meeting of the UN Economic and Social Council in July, 2000. Mr. Wolfensohn said that the ability of individual countries to cross the 'digital divide' depended, among other things, on leadership, which needed to be supportive of computers, and not afraid of them. Governments should create an environment in which information technology could function and where cheap connectivity was made possible.

Mr. Wolfensohn's statement is meant to discourage and contradict those Internet advocates who naively believe it to be one of the tools for the advancement of democracy. In fact, it is quite the reverse - first, one needs democracy, then development, to be followed by the implementation of censorship-free Internet. One of the reasons that there are nearly zero Internet users in large parts of Africa and in the countries like Myanmar (formerly known as Birma) is the simple fact that these are dictatorial countries, where the use of Internet is prohibited.

'If I were a dictator, I certainly wouldn't want my citizens to have Internet access.' These words were said by Alan Marcus, a professor of history at Iowa State University, USA, and an expert in the history of technology. And he proceeds:

'There are political hurdles as well as infrastructure problems that are keeping undeveloped countries from getting onto the net. [...] The problem isn't even computers, it's building roads in remote areas and then installing phone lines. It will take generations for this to change.'<sup>6</sup>

What are the other means of communication and information in the absence of political freedom and infrastructure required for implementation of the Internet? There are some, more or less, surprising answers. The rule is simple - when the new medium doesn't work, one has to rely on the old ones: Radio, Telex, Books.

- In May 1999, a coalition of 133 developing countries petitioned the United Nations for maintaining **the radio and other traditional media** outlets as means of disseminating information, rather than relying only on the Internet.
- In August of 1995 a report was published about alternatives for Internet in developing countries. It claimed that there were several areas where the only connection with the

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<sup>6</sup> Statement made on July 13, 1999, printed from: [www.zdnet.co.uk/news/](http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/)

outside world was **through telex** which provided a reasonably reliable service at relatively lower cost.

- In 2000, at a UN meeting in New York, one of the representatives said:

'We think it 's important to improve the facilities of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library.

**Developing countries are not always in a position to use costly services, and the role of the library should be strengthened to enable it to perform a broader mission.'**

And so we find, quite surprisingly, a perfect answer to the question whether libraries in the digital era are yesterday's institutions. Not much seems to have changed for thirty years, since the UNESCO publication of *The Book Revolution* (1966, Robert Escarpit) and *The Book Hunger* (1973, Ronald Barker and Robert Escarpit, eds.). This does not refer exclusively to developing countries.

While writing this paper two weeks ago, I read a short article in *The Washington Post* (on the Internet, of course), about the midwinter meeting of the American Library Association in Washington. The ALA-president, Mrs. Nancy Kranick, says:

'In America we have nearly 16,000 public libraries (which is more than there are McDonald's restaurants) and **we need them more than ever - to bridge the digital divide**. Only about 41 percent of Americans have access to Internet at home. The rest do not.'

I would like to add that not only the digital divide should be bridged, but also access should be given to all kinds of books and information one is unable to find on the Internet.

In 1995 Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, said:

'If we cannot ensure that this "global revolution" creates a world-wide information society in which everyone has a stake and can play a part, **then it will not have been a revolution at all.**'

I am afraid, that now, after more than thirty years, and **still** waiting at the doorstep of the so called global information society, we have to conclude that so far, **there has not been a global revolution at all**. On the the contrary, truly revolutionary improvements in the 'first world' only widened the gap of inequality.

#### **Additional sources and websites:**

- NUA Internet Surveys

<http://www.nua.com/surveys>

- UNESCO OBSERVATORY ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/observatory>

- United Nations 'Press Releases' and 'Press Briefings' (Daily! Full-Text Search possible!)

<http://www.un.org/News/>