

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

**Intergovernmental Council for the Information for All Programme (IFAP)
Report on Thematic Debate on “IFAP’s Role in the Global Information Space”**

UNESCO House, Paris, Room II (Fontenoy Building)
3 April 2008, 9.30 – 12.30 a.m.

Background

Since the establishment of the Information for All Programme (IFAP) in 2001, the world has witnessed an explosion of digital technologies, including computers, the Internet and mobile phones, and the use of these technologies for information sharing and communication. As a consequence of the rapid growth in digital technologies, there has been a corresponding explosion in digital information. By 2010, it is projected that the amount of digital information created, captured and replicated will expand six-fold.

These developments have far-reaching consequences on strategies to reach the goal of “Information for All”, including those, for example, to enhance information literacy, ensure information preservation for the future, tackle issues related to information ethics, demonstrate the benefits of information for development and ensure information accessibility through open and multilingual content.

Addressing these challenges requires sound strategies, commitment from governments and the support of all stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector and intergovernmental organizations, as agreed by the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

In this context, the purpose of the thematic debate is to discuss the role of governments in creating equitable access to information in the post-WSIS multistakeholder environment, as well as the strategies to build national information policies. The panelists from civil society and the private sector will provide their perspectives on future technology, new skills and capacity required, and trends in content creation.

The debate was held to respond to questions such as: What models have worked well in creating equitable access to information? What is the role of Governments? What is the trigger for governments to prioritize “information” in the same way that many prioritize “education”?

Structure of Debate

Ms Miriam Nisbet, Director of the Information Society Division, welcomed participants and explained that the debate was being held within the context of the IFAP Council’s discussion on the draft IFAP Strategic Plan. The prime purpose was to expand the dialogue about future

directions for the Information for All Programme to include UNESCO's multistakeholder partners – professional associations, civil society and the private sector – and seek their views on how UNESCO can most effectively contribute to advancing the IFAP goal of equitable access for all to information.

The debate was chaired by **Laurence Zwimpfer**, immediate past Chair of the IFAP Council, and was structured with an opening keynote presentation on the global information space and technology trends, followed by an interactive panel discussion between invited speakers, Council members and other stakeholders.

Keynote Presentation

Janis Karklins, Ambassador for Latvia and former President of the WSIS Preparatory Committee for the Tunis Phase, introduced the debate with an informative and stimulating perspective on the rapidly evolving role of the Internet. As recently as 2001-2005 Internet access was dominated by sign-up (dial-up) services. Low speed broadband (512kbps) and wifi wireless services were just emerging. However, for the current period 2008 – 2010, the focus is on widespread broadband, super broadband (with equal upload and download speeds), wifi/wiMax and 3G mobile.

The rapid expansion of **wireless services** provides a unique opportunity for developing countries in Africa and Asia to leapfrog the need for fixed wire telecommunications infrastructure. In Africa for example, the number of mobile telephone users is doubling every 12-18 months, but this is creating a new challenge in terms of the availability of frequency spectrum. The shift to mobile applications is also having an impact on the size and format of web pages and this trend will benefit developing countries where the dominant end user device is increasingly a mobile phone.

The **convergence of television, voice and data** onto Internet platforms is another significant trend creating challenges for governments. Traditional regulatory environments treat content industries (television) in a different way to telecommunications industries; as these industries converge, governments need to adopt more flexible regulatory regimes.

The rapid growth in **video traffic** on the Internet is starting to create online “traffic jams”; the commercial response is to start giving priority to “paid” traffic, but this is being strenuously opposed by Internet advocates who promote a position of net neutrality. The solution, they suggest is to continue to expand the capacity of the Internet.

The most significant trend in terms of internet content is the explosive growth in the **social web** (web 2.0). Facebook generates more traffic today than the whole Internet in 2001.

Internet pricing is also undergoing significant change, with the major shift being from usage-based pricing to **flat rate charging**. This also encourages more local content production.

The world is facing a looming crisis – by 2010 it is projected that there will be no more IPv4 internet addresses (4 x 3 digit format). Governments need to create incentives for investments in **IPv6** (6x3 digit format).

In the spirit of the **multistakeholder** approach agreed at WSIS, a number of international and regional agencies are contributing to advancing the WSIS outcomes – ECOSOC and CSTD, ITU, UNESCO and other UN agencies, UN regional economic commissions, Internet Governance Forum (noting the next meeting is to be in India in December 2008). The real challenge facing the international community is how to maintain momentum in this new multistakeholder environment, which relies on collaboration and where no-one has a leadership role.

The specific role for governments is:

- Provide regulation, i.e. set some rules at the country level
- Engage with other stakeholders
- Define incentives and support actors
- Engage in regional and international cooperation

The three guest panelists were invited to comment on the issues raised by Ambassador Karklins.

Dr Peter Lor, Secretary-General, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, referred to the four pillars of information – the information infrastructure, the content (culture and language), the mediation (e.g. information literacy), and the conventional physical infrastructure. The UNESCO focus is clearly on the “content” and “mediation” pillars. The foundation for the pillars are the principles of freedom, fairness, inclusivity and social justice.

Mr Marcelo D'Elia Branco, Director, Campus Party Brazil 2008 referred to the present environment as the “post-internet era”. Social networking (web 2.0) has resulted in a revolution in the way that people relate to each other. While academics created the internet, innovation and creativity now lies in the hands of the users themselves (not in research centres nor in governments). There is a need for diligence to ensure that digital rights do not become more onerous and restrictive in the information age than they were in the industrial age. Downloading videos and music and sharing with friends should not be a crime. Governments have a duty to protect their citizens’ rights to privacy, their rights to use their own languages and promote democracy. Governments should embrace the internet by viewing it as an exciting new tool for promoting democracy and participation, rather than something to be controlled. Developing countries have a real opportunity to skip the industrial age and move directly into the internet age. Finland is an example of one country that has moved to the “top of the class” for the internet age by skipping the industrial age. Brazil leads the world with social networking – it is the “country of carnivals, football and the Internet”. Strong people networks, where users know how to relate to each other, contributes directly to economic development.

Ms Geeta Malhotra, Director-Projects and Strategic Alliance, Digital Empowerment Foundation, New Delhi drew attention to the challenges facing developing countries, where the cost of the internet is still far beyond the reach of poor communities. The digital divide is real and the solutions are not evident.

Discussion Topics

Two specific discussion topics were proposed, each with a set of questions. The first focused on the people skills (capability) and the second on content creation.

Discussion 1

“Information for All” is necessary to achieve “Education for All”.
“Internet for All” is necessary to achieve “Information for All”.

1. What are the information skills that people need for social inclusion?
2. What is effective in promoting and contributing to human capacity building.
3. What is the role of Governments in fostering access to information and information literacy?
4. What about the multistakeholder approach? What do you expect from it?
5. What is the role of UNESCO and IFAP?
6. Where will we be in 10 years?

Discussion 2

Digital technologies empower people to create and share their own information in their own languages from their own communities.
The internet is more useful for development than libraries.

1. How can we encourage local content creation and what are the benefits?
2. What are some examples of local content contributing to development?
3. Are the new social software content creation web 2.0 tools challenging the traditional role for libraries and archives?
4. The Internet was conceived as a global information store, but today it seems to be more used as a communications tool; what are the implications of this for national information policies and strategies?
5. What is the role of traditional and online libraries in the next decade?
6. How can governments encourage local content creation and protect the rights of the content creators?
7. How can UNESCO and IFAP in particular help?
8. What role can professional associations and civil society play?

Open Debate

During the open debate, among the points made were:

- A key challenge facing IFAP is to more clearly identify the incentives for stakeholders, including governments, to become involved;
- IFAP needs to be more visible in the post-WSIS fora, including the Digital Solidarity Fund, the IGF, Action Line facilitation meetings, CSTD, UN ICT Task Force (soon to be replaced by the Global Alliance on ICT for Development);

- National Committees should also take a more active role in debates at the national level;
- IFAP could host public consultations to increase visibility; a first step could be to consult of the Terms of Reference for the Working Groups;
- The digital divide is prevalent even in countries where some sectors of the population are at the leading edge of the information society;
- If communities couldn't keep up with the Gutenberg era, how can they leapfrog into the internet era?
- Governments are not keeping up with information policies; even those who have policies are unlikely to have updated them recently to take account of developments such as social networking;
- Cost of technologies continue to create inequalities in terms of access;
- Developing countries need to study and evaluate infrastructure solutions relevant and accessible to them;
- Capacity building of people to take advantage of the internet age must be a priority;
- Skills to access the internet are not enough; people need the skills to discern the information they access (information literacy);
- The Internet is neither “good” nor “bad”; it is simply a new public space;
- IFAP should focus on content issues; many other international and national agencies are concentrating on the infrastructure (connectivity) issues;
- Promote Brazil case study, where internet content is flourishing; what government policies have enabled or facilitated this? Or this a characteristic of the social (carnivals and football) culture of Brazil people?
- Cannot separate connectivity and content issues; both must evolve together;
- Governments of developing countries often do not appreciate the importance or value of information, suggesting an important role for IFAP;
- Technology solutions are rarely developed with the needs of poor people in mind; this then presents a real challenge when attempting to scale down solutions developed for rich economies;
- Insufficient to simply provide the technology; even with a computer in every village, much more support is needed to train local people in the effective use of the technology;
- Maybe time to move beyond information and knowledge societies to network societies;

- IFAP could help provide parameters/guidelines for translating government policies into grassroots action in local communities; for countries with large populations, a coordinated approach to reach all people is a huge task;
- IFAP should draw on the UNESCO brand to get the attention of policy makers at the country level;
- Some concern about the quality of user-generated content, but it was pointed out that there are more mistakes on the Encyclopaedia Britannica than Wikipedia;
- One strategy is to set up national committee to coordinate the implementation of WSIS recommendations;
- There is a downside to the Internet; individuals are less accountable and there are few controls on ethics and morality;
- The value of Internet content will always be a balance between the benefits and the negatives;
- The Internet does not replace libraries; in many communities, libraries are the means for accessing the Internet;
- Investment in information infrastructure and infostructure is in the hands of governments; it is simply a matter of priorities; the challenge for IFAP is to demonstrate to governments the benefits of investing in information infrastructure;
- IFAP should consider devoting some attention to digital copyright issues;
- Local digital content can generate income for countries, but only if the content is hosted on servers in the country of origin; many small island states are missing out on this economic development issue because their content is hosted in the USA;
- IFAP could help communities localise the MDGs.