

By **Giuliano Gennaio**
IAPSS Vice chairman
giugen@tiscalinet.it

Bridging the Global Digital Divide

The phantom menace

A new threat frighten the world population; the new Millennium Berlin Wall, the new iron curtain : the digital divide menace.

The success of Digital technologies makes some nation grew but does not help less developing countries that still can not even afford the electricity for the normal phone call. So, the difference between haves - the on line population- and haves not - the off line population- increases always more and more.

Some countries have privileges and multiple choices on different field like health care and Tele-medicine, direct democracy and privacy regulations, e-learning and home-teaching; some others can not even afford teachers for normal education, do not have infrastructure and money for hospitals and do not have democratic governments. On this case much has been done by volunteers and NGOs more than by computers or similar.

In the western World, we await the new mobile phone generation, which will allow us to link internet and mobile, leading us to the perfect interaction ever between computer and phone.

In third world countries, the debts to be paid to Western World, the lack of infrastructure and of primary sources do not allow people to think about tomorrow, to have hope to handle a mobile, to have the chance to check e mails from Switzerland.

The world opener than ever, the chance for American citizens to talk to Russian are today more than ever.

On the other hand the world is going two speeds, has got new border lines, new "limes" that cut it on two different categories: the info- rich and the info- poor.

Some numbers from the United Nation Developing Programme Report 2000: 70% circa of mankind never heard about Internet; only 5% can be on-line.

95% of servers, 97% of websites and 88% of Internet Customers are in the Western World (U.S.A and Canada have 57% of server while Africa and Middle East together less than 1%).

International sources like the world bank, the UN and governments give us the vision of riches always richer and poor always poorer.

Today the world has more than 6 billion inhabitants.

60% are in rural areas. Half of Human being (circa 2,8 billions) lives with less than 1 dollar in complete poverty.

1,5 billions do not have water,

1 billion is unemployed or without human wages conditions.

125 millions kids do not go to school, 10% of the Population consumes 70% of resources.

Abstract:

New technologies enhance the difference between "haves" and "haves not" world wide.

Something born to be widely useful (Internet) is used today without a solidarity and clever politics.

The United Nations followed the American way for different reasons but for sure gains.

The new map of the world draft by the digital divide starts to fear governments.

Gaps between South and North are today so huge that only the solidarity of all the planet could narrow the dividends.

The 3 richer persons have income and funds more consistence than the 48 poorest countries annual production.

1,2 billion people live in the developed countries,

4,8 billions in the developing countries.

In 25 years the developing countries will have 6,8 billions people and 4 billions of them will have to live with 2 dollars while 1,8 billions with less than 1 dollar.

The digital divide moreover will enhance all the already existing gaps.

Who is leading the technological world?

This question can be easily answered: the United States of America.

The U.S. have got 41% of Internet customers with 192 billion people connected to the net!

English (U.S.A., Canada, United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India) is the most spoken language on the net with 47,6% of websites while the other European Languages reaches 29,2% and the Asiatic languages reaches 23,1% (total non English is 52,4%) (Source: Global Reach,2000 www.glreach.com)

In America (U.S.A. and Canada) there are 56.005.129 hosts (78% of the total host servers) with 684,56 hosts per 10.000 inhabitants, while in Africa there are only 184.726 hosts (0,3%) corresponding to 2,41 hosts each 10.000 citizens.

In the U.S.A. and in Canada there are 21,34 Personal Computers each 100 citizens, in Africa instead, PC are 0,88 each 100 citizens.

(Source: ITU 1999 www.itu.int)

Why the U.S.?

Surely they have some technological advantage that step by step, year after year they reached; moreover the U.S. used a lot of military technologies (their leading sector) like the Internet, converted for the civil society; but also the governments from 60s to nowadays made special policy to advantage dot.com, to liberalise the market and to free companies from taxes.

Technology is not only internet, indeed, but a lot of companies working on related fields and on different subjects like telephone, media, TV, radio, advertising companies, school, university, foundations, institute technologies and important NGOs, that exploited also the great growth of the economy to make business following the overlapping Japan and the awake Europe.

First, the U.S. spied Japan, leader in this field, then Japan fell on the second floor followed by Europe.

Now the Geo-economy of Information Technologies is changing but it is very difficult to make better than the U.S.

What kind of divide are we talking about?

The Digital Divide, or Digital Dividends or still Digital Apartheid (as called by Colin Power, American Secretary of the state), is a gap, a theoretical division where the "haves" can afford commodities that the "haves not" can afford to have.

Education for example, today is based also on peculiar technologies like the elearning or the use of the web, which allows students to be part of the information society, to handle debates with fellows and to do the homework.

Technology, today, making all these things that some days ago were to be made by men, gives people opportunity to have spare time, to create other things, to have ideas and projects, to enhance their social condition.

In the third world, instead, technology do not exist and even more, digital technology is useless cause still there is a lack of primary sources, services: lack of water, food, health!!!

When shall I think about my vacation or spare time if I can not even think what to have for lunch, given that my illness keeps all power out.

It is like a spiral, a circle. In New York my primary needs are satisfied, my secondary needs can be satisfied, day by day, and still have time to cure my person and to organise my free time in order to be happy.

In Rwanda, first I have to find strengths to open my eyes every morning and to search for hope, then the water to be drunk and maybe, after, the food not to starve.

This is the gap!!!!

In some countries as Ted Turner said in the conference "Sharing the Wealth" (Silicon Valley foundation May

2000): we have to forget the Digital Divide. First we have to give them water, food, clothes, a house and education.

So, how can the bridging of the gap helps the developing countries?

Technology based on digital, the Internet, telephones, information technologies can help those society educating them, letting their government be more democratic, giving third world population special glasses to watch out of their conditions and raise the head to the world.

But this create a problem: in globalise time, when the American culture is so dominant, do not we risk that the world will have only one face?

If American business companies let technology reach third world countries, do not we risk a new colonialism? Colonialism of way of life (the American way of life), high perspective of living and equality of thoughts?

The role of governments, Seattle People and civil society

To answer to this questions we can not avoid the debate to fall on the democratisation of the political structure of third world countries.



When we surf on the net, we are attracted by a new tool, a new world and we are completely not aware of what the result of our unconsciousness can be.

Indeed we are so amazed and captured by virtual realities that we start believing those values like ours, not being critical towards that virtual society.

This is what happen to people not having the chance to look at their real world and to compare it with the new reality.

This is what can happen, indeed, to third world countries.

These population can be easily captured by the new way of easy richness, of easy money and

easy living because the world they live in is poor and the world the net offers them is attracting.

If they were enough educated to be critical, this would not happen.

Good education comes in democratic countries and not in totalitarian countries. Values of freedom, equality and justice. Totalitarianism gives a strict education, to be follow cause it gives all values and principles....given by only a man.

That is why the first thing to do is to boost governments to lead countries towards democratic principles.

Seattle people movement is going towards these queries, this direction. Boosting western countries and western civil society to teach the developing countries society how to become democratic and how to compare their world with the Western one, being critical.

Also the western societies must wear glasses to see how the third world is done.

The role of the United Nations

In the Millennium Report (We, the People. The role of the UN in the 21st Century) there are a lot of proposals on how to bridge the digital divide and moreover there is a red line to be followed to narrow the gap: following the U.S.A. example and developing technologies but with a Human Face.

3 Proposals, moreover, fit clearly with the Information Problems in third world countries:

- 1) building cyber troops (volunteers) to teach developing countries to use new technologies.
- 2) building a Health Inter network to link 10.000 hospitals websites
- 3) a satellite and digital net (first on the ground) to face natural disaster or similar emergencies.

Where shall the UN get the funds to finance all these projects?

In the Millennium Report there is a new financial architecture draft where, besides governmental funds, of rich countries (like Japan), UN search for links with the Business

companies like the International Chamber of Commerce (1998), the Rotary clubs, the fashion industry and the flight and assurance companies.

Working together is the key word used by Kofi Annan.

In July 2000 Annan proposed a Global Compact: a global pact with private companies on specific fields like working rights, human rights and environment.

Working together, with UN as director of the orchestra.

Specifically related to the Digital Divide there has been the creation of a task force (Dot force) which shall be a divisional UN agency like UNDP or UNESCO.

UN can only be the moderator of a new debate on the future of the world and much more on the future of the digital divide bridging.

Conclusions

The narrowing of the digital divide is a huge opportunity to create a human globalised world.

Different models in different countries, must be the slogan; but all countries with the same opportunity.

Giving education, food, health and experience to third world countries is not easy but it is still the goal to be achieved in the New Millennium

It is no more possible to be proud and selfish of our world, not caring about our brothers in the South of a single, unique world.

If I shall answer the question: who can solve the Digital Divide problem, I would say:

We, the People.

SOURCES AND USEFUL LINKS ON DIGITAL DIVIDE:

- Limes, Rivista di Geopolitica Italiana, articolo di Paolo Morawsky, I signori della rete, 2000 Limes, www.limesonline.org
- World Population Prospect: The 1998 Revision, United Nation Population Division, Department of Economic and social affairs, www.undp.org/popin/wdtrend
- Prb- Population Reference Bureau, www.prb.org
- How many on line, NUA Internet Surveys, www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/index.html
- Internet Indicators, ITU-International Telecommunication Union, www.itu.int
- Information Society Index 2000, Measuring the Global Impact of Information Technology and Internet adoption, World Times/Idc, www.worldpaper.com/ISI/intro.html
- Venture Capitals, Wired magazine, www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.07/silicon.html
- Falling through the Net, NTIA- National Telecommunication and Information Administration, www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/digitaldivide
- The digital divide and American Society, Gartner Group, www.gartner3.gartnerweb.com/public/static/aboutgg/pressrel/pr20001002a.html
- Who is not online, Pew Internet and American Life, http://63.210.24.35/reports/pdfs/Pew_Those_Not_Online_Report.pdf
- State of the Internet 2000 Usic-United States Internet Council, www.usic.org/papers/stateoftheinternet2000/intro.html
- Africa Internet Connectivity, www3.sn.apc.org
- The face of the Web: Youth, Angus Reid Group, www.angusreid.com
- Surveying the Digital Future, UCLA Center for Community Policy, www.ccp.ucla.edu
- We, the People: The role of the United Nations in the 21st Century, United Nations, www.un.org/millennium/sg/report
- Understanding the Digital Divide Oecd- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, www.oecd.org/dsti/sti/prod/Digital_divide.pdf
- World Development Report, World Bank, www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdpoverty/report/index.htm
- Digital Divide, www.iste.org

FOUNDATION AND INSTITUTE, TREATING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE:

- Benton Foundation: www.benton.org
- Digital Divide Network: www.digitaldividenetwork.org
- AOL Foundation: www.aolfoundation.org
- AOL Time Warner Foundation: www.aoltwfoundation.org
- Digital Partners: www.digitaldivede.org
- Bridges.org: www.bridges.org
- Digital Dividend: www.digitaldividend.org
- Iicd, International Institute for Communication and Development: www.iicd.org
- Information society observatory: www.unesco.org/webworld/observatory/index.shtml