

COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION, AND ICT POLICY: TOWARDS ENABLING RESEARCH FRAMEWORKS

Keynote Presentation

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1. Introduction

In this presentation my aim is to set out a forward looking research agenda which I will argue can be further developed in a way that may contribute to a partial resolution of ongoing conundrums that confront those seeking to ensure that information and communication technologies (ICT) are put into service in ways that are enabling, rather than disabling. ICT-related policies and strategies are being developed by their stakeholders to support a range of important goals and aspirations associated with the wider policy agendas of low income countries. In such countries, there will inevitably be trade-offs among the competing claims of stakeholders for scarce resources of all kinds whether these are associated with investment in ICTs themselves or in the capabilities to design or use them in ways that are compatible with development aspirations, locally, nationally, or regionally.

Although ICT policies and strategies have become relatively well-accepted as components of broader policy making initiatives over the past decade – and despite the fact that ICTs are acknowledged as a target area in the Millennium Development Goals,¹ there is debate about how best to underpin these initiatives. Should they be informed by the outputs of research? If they should be, how should dialogues between researchers and practitioners be facilitated to ensure that all parties find such dialogues informative?

The first main section of this presentation draws on a “brainstorming” workshop which I chaired in December 2007 hosted by UNESCO. We brought leading researchers together to develop a research framework which would tackle issues and questions that we believe need to be given much greater attention if ICTs are to play a greater role in enabling a variety of development goals to be met. Our main questions were: *What new concepts are required to acknowledge*

¹ MDG 8: “In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies—especially information and communications technologies”, see: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/#>.

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difference and the distinctiveness of today's knowledge societies? And, what evidence is there of effective learning on the part of different stakeholders?

ICTs are clearly implicated in the answer to the first question. I want to acknowledge at the outset that all societies are “knowledge societies”. This point is often lost in the hyper reality that sometimes characterizes discussions about ICT policy. As Valerie Brown has argued, perhaps the most essential issue in debates concerning ICTs (as well as other innovative technologies and practices) is to recall the words of the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. He suggested that it is crucial to give close attention to the commonsense questions and answers. Commonsense requires us to ensure that all citizens are “not just using their eyes and ears, but using them collectively, judiciously and reflectively to understand their own locality” [2, p. 51 citing 9]. In a similar vein, it is important to emphasize that any discussion of the role of ICT applications and of ICT policy in the service of development needs to understand concepts like the “knowledge society” as being very fluid ones. This is essential if we are to overcome the risk that our research becomes caught between “a hegemonic Eurocentrism, and a counter-hegemonic but reactionary epistemological nativism”. In our discussions about what needs to be researched in the ICT field it is essential to keep this risk in mind, especially when we discuss theoretical standpoints and methodologies [6, p. 146].

The participants in the December workshop came from Bahrain, Benin, Canada, France, India, Mexico, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States.² Most of the participants were academics but many had strong links to practitioner and policy making communities in their respective regions. They were all members of a world-wide academic association called the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), a 2000-strong organisation founded in 1957 which has nongovernmental organisation status within the United Nations system and of which I was President until July 2008.³ Although there is little direct overlap between members of this association and that of IFIP Technical Committee 9, I suggest that there are many opportunities for these disparate communities with an interest in the relationship between ICTs and society to learn from each other. IAMCR and TC9 members have overlapping interests in policy-relevant research and in influencing policy agendas and practices beyond the boundaries of academic institutions. In this presentation, I will suggest some of the research areas where I think we may have common cause.

The outcome of the workshop hosted by UNESCO was a new research framework which was partly intended to inform UNESCO's Medium-term Strategy 2008 – 2013. UNESCO's strategy has an overarching objective to build “inclusive knowledge societies through information and communication” [24].

² Also represented were several members of UNESCO staff. For a full account of the workshop, see: [23].

³ See: www.iamcr.org.

This objective embraces efforts to enhance universal access to information and to foster pluralistic, free, and independent media and information structures.

Our aim in the workshop was to develop a forward-looking research framework that might provide guidance more generally in the commissioning of research that will provide critical assessments of developments in the communication and information field. Inequalities persist in knowledge societies at the local, national, and global levels and the research framework that we developed is intended to encourage work that will yield new insights for those involved in shaping ICT-related policy agendas and for those engaged in practical projects involving ICTs. We recognised that the strengths and weaknesses of research differs enormously in different places around the world and that any new research framework will need to be inclusive and to encourage the development of diverse theoretical and policy perspectives if it is to shape the future trajectory of work in this area. The next section sets out the central components of the research framework that emerged. The following section (s.3) highlights several areas within this framework which were deemed to be of very high priority.

2. An Alternative Framework for Knowledge Societies Research

In 2005, UNESCO published a World Report entitled *Towards Knowledge Societies*. This document gave strong emphasis to the plurality of knowledge societies historically as well as in today's communication and information environments. The authors posed the question below and sought to differentiate between "knowledge societies" and "information societies" and to clearly indicate that there are no ready-made, off-the-shelf models that can be adopted to ensure that ICTs are developed and used in enabling, rather than disabling, ways.

“Does the aim of building knowledge societies make any sense when history and anthropology teach us that since ancient times, all societies have probably been each in its own way, knowledge societies? ...

The current spread of new technologies and the emergence of the internet as a public network seem to be carving out fresh opportunities to widen this public knowledge forum. Might we now have the means to achieve equal and universal access to knowledge, and genuine sharing? This should be the cornerstone of true knowledge societies, which are a source of human and sustainable development. .. The idea of the information society is based on technological breakthroughs. The concept of knowledge societies encompasses much broader social, ethical and political dimensions. There is a multitude of such dimensions which rules out the idea of any single, ready-made model, for such a model would not take sufficient account of cultural and linguistic diversity, vital if

individuals are to feel at home in a changing world” (emphasis added) [21, p. 17].

In the light of this quotation, I want to argue that a high priority for any alternative research framework in this area is that it should mobilise research that challenges dominant paradigms that envisage a homogeneous knowledge society. Instead, a useful framework should be expected to critique the values embedded in ICT-related policies and practices, with the goal of redressing the tendency to privilege technology and to foster a narrow set of market-led values. A forward-looking research framework is required if we are to encourage a *rethinking of sustainable development in the context of knowledge societies*.

What might this mean? A rethinking or re-imagining of the kinds of knowledge societies which are more likely to foster enabling communication and information environments that contribute to greater efficacy, social justice, and well-being, is essential in the context of sustainable development goals. I am aware that there are some who would abandon the term “development” in order to move away from the progressive or neo-liberal value-laden perspectives embraced by Western traditions of research. This is an important debate that is ongoing within the wider community of researchers concerned with poverty eradication [8]. However, I suggest that the term “sustainable development” may be used to signal a departure from an uncritical stance with respect to the implications of strategies involving ICTs. In suggesting this, I also acknowledge that this terminology is itself controversial. However, I want to emphasise the need for dialogue aimed at encouraging translations between different meanings and interpretations of the goals of sustainable development and for ICTs. In the present context of developing a research framework that is sensitive to these issues, translation refers to the need for researchers to: “engage in, and try to connect to, knowledge formations and vocabularies that reside in other modernities and other temporalities that are either refused recognition, or are not adequately translated, in machines of knowledge production” [19, p. 3]. This suggests the need to encourage indigenous theory building and the development of models using a variety of languages.

There has been substantial critical analysis and discussion of the relationship between media and communication, and in the context of this conference, - ICTs - and development, since the work of Nora Quebral in the 1970s [20]. But, the mainstream research paradigm in this area is shifting towards a “social marketing” perspective which emphasises the ICT user as a customer/consumer.⁴ In contrast, we urgently need to give priority to research which embraces a concern for the “power of peace and tolerance”. Understanding the role of communication and information - and ICTs - in fostering mutual understanding, peace and reconciliation, arguably requires an effort to support the ambitions of others

⁴ Social marketing was first developed by Kotler and Zaltman [13] to apply marketing to the solution of social and health problems. In recent literature it has also been used in the ICT and communication “for” development contexts.

through the acknowledgement of cultural diversity as well as of the need for knowledge sharing. Therefore, ICTs and mediated social systems of all kinds need to be examined using *alternative* research frameworks that can facilitate debates about the values that should be at the core of the initiatives by stakeholders to build inclusive knowledge societies. It should contribute to debates that are aimed at a discovery of the common and distinctive interests of all stakeholders. At very least there is an ongoing need to prise open development debates in a way that acknowledges the values that are at stake and the fact that people need to be empowered to make choices with respect to how their knowledge societies should be organised.⁵

In this regard, Amartya Sen's work offers a good starting point for an alternative framework for research on ICTs in the context of sustainable development. Sen's interest is in people's functionings, where "functioning" is understood as "an achievement of a person: what he or she manages to do or to be" [18, p. 7]. Functionings are related to capabilities and freedoms as, for example, in the freedom to access resources that contribute to well-being. Such freedoms are also closely associated with human rights and ethical conduct. Following Sen, a research framework should emphasise investigation of the multiple ways in which knowledge societies may be contributing to the well-being and achievements of human beings.⁶

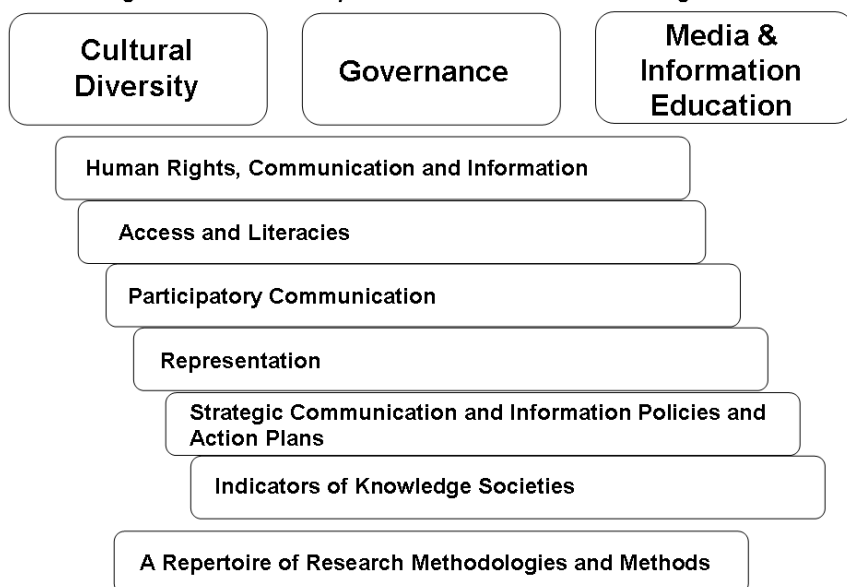
Research is needed that can help to inform all stakeholders in knowledge societies about the ways in which varying combinations of information and communication relationships in local and global contexts can contribute to sustainable development. The uneven characteristics of knowledge societies and the relationship between their development and discrimination and poverty must be taken into account [see 22]. To start with there is a need to depart from perspectives that envisage a linear, technology-driven approach to the issue of ICT policy. There has been a proliferation of ICT platforms and there are increasing numbers of producers and co-producers of information. One benefit of these platforms is that there is renewed potential to use ICTs as a "tool for eradicating poverty because it makes people aware they have rights. As such, they cannot be marginalized or excluded. They have the right to be heard and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives" [12, p. 10].

Figure 1 highlights a cluster of research themes that I suggest need to become more prominent in future research relating to ICT policy and practice in line with an emphasis on human well-being rather than market-led values exclusively.

⁵ For a comprehensive review of research traditions in the area of communication and media "for development", see [15].

⁶ I acknowledge that there are many issues with respect to Sen's approach that need to be developed and/or critiqued, but I do not have the space here to do so. See for instance [5].

Figure 1: Research Framework
Rethinking sustainable development in the context of knowledge societies



First, cultural diversity is inherent in the recognition of the plurality and variety of knowledge societies; second, governance, inclusive of all stakeholders, is an essential component of the processes and structures through which knowledge societies emerge; and third, media and information education are the means through which ICT applications can contribute to human well-being.

An alternative research framework should be informed by a consideration of, and sensitivity to, *communication, culture and context*. It needs to acknowledge that communicative environments of all kinds – ranging from interpersonal family relationships to large groups and organisations are mediated by older and newer ICTs in many different ways.⁷ In a world in which there is a tendency towards atomised individuals and fragmentation, a major issue is to understand the potential for new communities and civil society actions to emerge within ICT-mediated environments.

Understanding the implications of diverse media, communication and information relationships requires attention to culturally specific contexts. This is as much the case with respect to governance processes and institutions as it is with respect to measures to enhance or protect cultural diversity. Actions to foster ICT use more generally that respect human rights through a wide variety of education measures are also needed. Research needs to embrace cross-cultural studies, to acknowledge the differences in the framings of issues and to assess how values

⁷ Thanks to workshop participants for suggesting this phraseology.

inform specific norms of conduct in media, communication and information-related professions of all kinds.

Research is needed that develops theoretical and methodological approaches that focus on communication as a dynamic process involving power relationships and differences with respect to whether specific features of knowledge societies are empowering of individuals in terms of their well-being. Research should be transnational in its outlook and should focus on revealing the dynamics that give rise to the perpetuation of power differentials. These may be related to access to communication and information, inequality with respect to literacies, or to uneven capabilities for information and communication management.

Researchers need to avoid dichotomies between older and newer ICTs and between information “haves” and “have nots”. Research must be conducted in a transversal way that contributes to integrated perspectives and which understands contemporary problems in multiple ways. It is important to compare the results of research undertaken from mainstream perspectives with those undertaken from the alternative perspectives I am advocating. The former often focus on the impact of the production or consumption of ICTs without giving sufficient attention to sustainable development issues. The alternative framework suggest here puts the emphasis on the well-being of social groups, for example, with respect to health, education and literacies, and human rights. It emphasises the ethical and moral considerations raised by developments in knowledge societies.

For many researchers, the academic reference points are often those drawn from the United States or other Western countries. Many of those in the scholarly community who focus on the issues of concern here remain unaware of alternative research frameworks and the literature that is already available.⁸ Analysis of the relationship between ICTs, cultural diversity, and issues such as national sovereignty and independence, ownership and control, personal identity, and community participation, is essential, especially given ongoing tensions between the knowledge societies evolving within the global economy and those which are fostering indigenous expression. In this way we may move closer to understanding how ICT policy and practice can better contribute to sustainable development and peaceful human relations.⁹

Within this framework, there are several specific research domains that need to receive greater attention than they often seem to attract within the mainstream ICT research agenda.

3. Specific research domains

As shown in Figure 1 above, issues of human rights, communication and information; access and literacies; participatory communication; and

⁸ There are of course alternative research agendas being developed with the US, for example, see [16].

⁹ See UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by the 31st session of the General Conference of UNESCO, Paris, 2 November 2001.

representation together with critical assessments of strategic communication and information policies (and action plans) and indicators of knowledge societies, need to be emphasised.

3.1 *Human rights, communication, and information*

Given the emphasis on human well-being and the implications of ICTs, particular attention needs to be given to examining how, and to what extent, information and communication-related rights are being respected in today's knowledge societies [see also 25]. The adoption of the United Nations Charter in 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN UDHR) in 1948 obliged all States to establish, protect and enforce human rights at the global, regional, national and local levels. In particular, Article 19 of the UN UDHR declares that:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of expression and opinion; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

There is debate about whether there is a need for the formal establishment of a “right to communicate”, but it is clear that there is a strong relationship between recognition of the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all people and their right or entitlement to participate in communication and information environments. This relationship was acknowledged in the Millennium Declaration, 18 September 2000, which under “V. Human rights, democracy and good governance” resolves “to ensure the freedom of the media to perform their essential role and the right of the public to have access to information”.

In this area, policy-making would arguably benefit from greater insight into the legal conditions for free speech and a free press in emerging and other democracies and how these can be sustained. We need to better understand the legal and other conditions that are enabling or constraining access to communication and information environments by different social groups and the way different ICT-supported environments contribute towards the promotion of human rights. In addition, we need to understand how issues of communication and information rights are understood from different standpoints in different countries and regions and, in particular, how information and communication (including media) production influences moral conduct and our understanding of others.

3.2 *Access and literacies*

In line with an emphasis on well-being, research on issues of access needs to be combined with research on capacity building with respect to the literacies required for functioning in knowledge societies. There are issues of the accessibility and affordability of communication and information environments of all kinds, but

there are also issues of access to *relevant* content, not only by elites, but by all people.

Research in this area needs to move beyond simplistic and dualistic thinking. Investigations of the “digital divide” and counts of whether individuals have access to specific information and communication technologies are not helpful unless they are coupled with new insights into the dynamics of specific informational and communicative contexts. Access issues need to be rethought in terms of a wide range of communication and information capabilities or literacies, especially for young people. As Ulla Carlsson argues:

“Media and information literacy is needed for all citizens, but is of decisive importance to the younger generation - in both their role as citizens and their participation in society, and their learning, cultural expression and personal fulfilment. A fundamental element of efforts to realize a media and information literate society is media education” [4].

Literacies need to be investigated with respect to different social groups and their specific needs taking age, gender, class, ethnicity, disabilities, and minorities into account. Access questions need to be extended to include literacies related, for example, to education, political participation, entrepreneurship, and the management of new kinds of networks of partnerships. We also need to give greater attention to differences in access and literacy levels among groups such as migrant labourers and the conditions that prevail for urban as compared to rural workers.

3.3 *Participatory communication*

Research in the field of participatory communication needs to encompass a variety of perspectives including developments in “citizen” or “networked” journalism [1]. From a governance perspective research is needed to understand the sustainability of emerging forms of participation by civil society members and the extent to which new communication and information environments can contribute to democratic participation, e.g., social networking using Facebook, MySpace, and a host of related Internet sites.

Changing patterns of media and information production and consumption need to be examined with attention to different social groups, such as young people and marginalised groups. ICTs are playing an important role in contexts where there is a need to mediate conflict. Research has shown that it is not appropriate to assume that there is an automatic relationship between the presence of a free and independent media or ICT sector and the strengthening of civil society and democracy in fragile states [see 11, 17]. We need to discover more about what policy frameworks are consistent with enhancing sustainability and how these *differ* in different countries or regions. Research in this area needs to be extended beyond the Western countries to investigate how communication and information environments are being mediated by older and newer ICTs from radio, to

multimedia sites and through the growing use of mobile phones, with a focus on who is being included and excluded from these developments.

3.4 *Representation*

Today's societies are generating increasingly complex structures and systems for organising knowledge of all kinds. These embrace all forms of media and communication and information systems. They enable new forms of representation and entail many new conventions, norms, and standards. These are present in the mainstream and alternative media and communication systems. They are also embedded within the "codes" or conventions of the way information systems organise and enable access to information. Research is needed which focuses on the dynamics that lead to new learning systems and systems of knowledge production and consumption. We need to understand better what specific digital representations generate distrust and the processes through which authoritative voices come to the fore. Little is known about how new forms of digital representation of distant others, for example, have the potential to give rise to violence, conflict, suffering, and victimisation or about the implications of these representations for public opinion formation and for humanitarian action.

3.5 *Strategic communication and information policies and action plans*

The last three decades have seen the publication of many reports outlining recommendations for what have come to be known today as knowledge societies. In 1980 UNESCO published, *Many Voices, One World*, the report of its International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems also known as the MacBride Report.¹⁰ In the 1990s, and continuing into the present, numerous countries have been encouraged to prepare strategies for reducing inequality in access to ICTs. This work has been supported by many governmental and intergovernmental agencies. At the global level, the Action Plan of the World Summit on the Information Society¹¹ and the initiative of GAID (Global Alliance for ICT and Development)¹² are two of the most visible interventions at present. Each of these has parallel local or national instantiations.

There is an ongoing need to assess the barriers to progress in these areas as well as the signs of positive developments. What are the major barriers at the macro and micro levels? How are they perpetuated and what power relationships continue to sustain them? In this area we need a much stronger coupling of political economy perspectives with those that focus mainly on social processes without regard to power relationships. Special emphasis needs to be given to participation, continuity, and discontinuity between the multiple stakeholders

¹⁰ See [14] and [3].

¹¹ See <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/poa.html>.

¹² See <http://www.un-gaid.org/en/about/ict4d>.

including those entering partnerships, and enabling those at the local level to influence developments. We need to learn more about what the nature of participation and consultation has been, that is, how are people actually involved? How, for instance, has the development of ICT strategies and action plans influenced policy diagnoses in specific countries? What evaluation instruments have been, and are being, used? Where these are imported from other contexts, are they appropriate for various local contexts? The barriers and opportunities for bottom-up policy formation and implementation also need more systematic attention.

3.6 *Repertoires of methodologies*

All indicators - qualitative and quantitative - can be misleading if they are not interpreted in the light of contextual information. I suggest, nevertheless, that both have a role to play in providing informative maps of changes in knowledge societies. It is difficult, in the absence of empirical evidence, for stakeholders to consider the policy interventions that might be needed to enhance well-being if they have no information about the nature of communication and information-related inequalities and their expression in different places or at different times. Many of the global and universal efforts to develop quantitative indicators of knowledge societies are insufficiently fine-grained and they are often insensitive to differences within knowledge societies [7]. Ethnographic and related methods offer the potential to provide valuable information and insight because they can provide data about the myriad forms of communication and information mediation, community practices, meanings and representations, and perceptions of conflict or mutual understanding. In general, reflexive methods should be encouraged alongside the development of survey-based methods designed to produce quantitative indicators of knowledge societies.

Research is also needed to map deficits in qualitative and quantitative indicators. There are frequent differences of opinion about whether inter-country comparisons using various metrics are helpful. Some argue that such comparisons contribute to the notion that all societies should be progressing towards a homogeneous knowledge society, i.e., meeting similar indicator targets and benchmarks. Others argue that such indicators provide stakeholders within countries with a basis for choosing priorities for action. There are also differences of opinion about whether the highest priority should be given to developing indicators for transitional societies, taking into account what it is practical to achieve in these societies, or whether all countries should be included in such work. Notwithstanding these differences, I suggest that indicators need to be as people-centred as possible and that a wider range of indicators than we have at present is essential. The research community can contribute by developing

indicators for national and cross-country comparison and offering critical assessments of how such indicators are interpreted and received.¹³

4. Conclusion

The research framework that I have begun to flesh out here is concerned with transnational approaches to social change and transformation leading to human well-being in knowledge societies. It aspires to be holistic in the sense of inclusivity without privileging specific social science disciplines or methodologies. It is intended to be flexibly applied at the micro and macro levels of analysis and to encourage both context specific and comparative research. The goal is to promote understanding of knowledge societies as being distinct, but also, as being systemically interrelated.

As an alternative research framework to that which achieves visibility within the mainstream of ICT-related research, it is intended to encourage a strong commitment to critical assessments of standpoints that reflect only partially on the conditions and potentials for achieving well-being in knowledge societies as they are developing in specific places. The results of research conducted within this alternative framework are likely to yield counterintuitive insights which, in turn, may influence ICT policy decisions and actions in new ways and have a greater chance of contributing to sustainable development goals.

The second question I emphasised at the outset of this presentation was “*what evidence is there of effective learning on the part of different stakeholders?*” My overall assessment based on my own engagement with a considerable number of macro and micro level initiatives with respect to ICT policy and strategy, and with respect to bottom-up ICT implementations in low-income countries – in this case largely through the research of my PhD students – is that there is a continuing tendency to favour a search for universal models, to foster market-led values, and to privilege technologies over human aspirations and needs. However, more optimistically, there are signs of learning augmented increasingly by attention to the causes of inequality in society and to how those causes filter into specific ICT initiatives. Perhaps, awareness of power relationships is the first step on the part of stakeholders, including the research community, towards the shift in research priorities and towards the more context sensitive and enabling approach that I am advocating in this presentation. A further step, of course, is the active engagement of the research community with those whose everyday lives are preoccupied by the material conditions of people’s lives and their specific engagement with ICTs.

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