



the race to embrace...

Who benefits?

by Sarita Ranchod

In many areas and initiatives, high-tech “solutions” are being delivered to places that have no telephony or electricity access. In celebrating “roll-out” these are the vital bits of information the press release forgot to mention.

The eagerness to find a technological “solution” to age-old ills has little to do with people’s lived realities. In my time working in the development sector – in the United Nations system, in local NGOs, in global networks of donor-paid activists, often preaching ICTs4D, I have not met an individual in any “poor” community who has a desperate need to get online, to be connected, to access the wonders of the Internet.

The development workers or their agencies would explain this away by arguing that people will not want access to something if they do not know about its usefulness.

Essentially, this view posits in more nuanced language that “the people” do not know what is good for them. They need to be shown and taught what is good and right.

Is that not the quest of modernisation, civilisation? To show the dark-skinned heathens The Way? Missionaries have taught us what is right in the absence of our knowing – taught us that what we know is wrong and what they know is right. And we have been complicit in our good manners, allowing them to, with a smile.

And so we place computers, sometimes with Internet connections in marginalised communities of the “poor” where people don’t know what they need, and hopefully they will learn or be taught that these technologies are indispensable.

If all works to plan, we will create a dependency (converts, markets) and call that development, progress. Just to be safe, we’ll also put an e in front of all socio-economic challenges (e-health, e-education, e-governance, e-employment, e-agriculture, e-environment) and those problems will immediately be under control. Between computers and the Internet all of the world’s challenges can be solved. Haven’t you heard the Word?

What I describe above is no different to discred-

ed models of “development” that have been labelled colonialist, racist, imperialist, top-down, neo-colonialist, disrespectful.

But that was then. We’ve learnt lessons now. We’ve learnt about putting people first: human-centred development, people-centred development, participation, sustainable development, inclusion.

And somehow, in the Race to Embrace, we seem to remember very few of our “lessons learnt”.

The one well-learnt lesson is that there is a great deal of money to be made out of poverty. Carrying the poverty/development torch is big business, especially if the ICT connection is made. Not making the ICT connection risks “marginalisation” and nobody can afford that. And so we are all bought.

The other lesson we have learnt well in the development industry is how to package well. The approach here is to do as has been done before, but include nice words like participation, community-driven, holistic, integrated, people-centred, sustainable...

We have learnt well from our brand-driven, consumer society to create the right image, to sell the product to the target market, to create needs, dependencies – ultimately, expanding the market. Business-as-usual. The rich get richer. The laptops get lighter.

In the ICTs4D sector, when we are not working from existing discredited approaches, we invent new ones, with our newer, smarter, faster toys. We dump cellphones on villages with no water, and we celebrate the technological breakthrough, the life-changing connectivity; we build high-tech centres of excellence in rural communities.

Just another white elephant. No big deal. Another tick. Another target met. Roll-out policy to rural poor effectively being implemented. (Must remember to book video crew and photographer to record happy natives playing with new toys.)

And then we bring in more technology, like satellite, to “leapfrog” our lack of telephony. And we call this progress. Access to satellite, but no roof over my head. A cellphone in my hand, but no drinking water. Welcome to the Information Society. Everything you need at your fingertips. Simpler, better, faster. Putting people first.

Which people?

To continue to pretend that we are speaking of “development” is dishonest. Who is being “developed”? Who benefits? The company developing, marketing and installing the satellite, or the nameless, poor “beneficiary”?

Unless development is premised on the exploitation of the many in the interest of the few, this is not development. Within this existing market-based approach to development, the historical “haves” continue to benefit.

They tell us what we need. We pay a great deal of money for them to tell us what we need. Or better still, their governments pay them from aid budgets earmarked for fighting poverty in the economic South, so ensuring the aid budget never leaves the shores of the giving country. Or we sign up to global compacts committing ourselves to their plans, forcing us to borrow (or risk censure), further indebting us to them.

Colonialism with a hand-shake and a smile? International co-operation? Development partnerships?

Who benefits? Whose development? Whose enrichment?

Experts demand expert-sized fees. It’s hard work flying around the world halving global poverty. Creating a better world. There’s a deadline to meet: 2015. Our jet-set ICTs4D experts, hopping from one expert group meeting or taskforce to the next with apparently no thought for the impact of those long-haul flights on the future of our natural heritage. Too busy fighting inequality, jet-fuel farting in the face of Millennium Development Goal (MDG) seven, which aims to ensure environmental sustainability by reversing the environmental degradation we continue to perpetuate.

Aid budgets do need to be spent somehow, and in the context of what the UN Development Programme (UNDP) calls “an acute development crisis, with many poor nations suffering severe and continuing socio-economic reversals”, long-haul flights and fancy hotels are a good way of meeting that reduction-of-poverty-by-2015 goal.

Continued on page 46

"And we call this progress.

Access to satellite, but no roof over my head.

A cellphone in my hand, but no drinking water."

Continued from page 45

According to the 2003 Human Development Report (HDR) published by the UNDP, 800 million people, or 15% of the world's people continue to experience chronic poverty.

We say to them, take a byte of your computer. Drink your network. If you don't have a roof over your head, too bad, but here, shelter under the satellites. We know what's good for you. Sign here. Believe us. We know.

In neo-liberal parlance we hear much of the "fundamentals" being in place, referring of course to the economic "fundamentals" of the post Cold War world, the New Economic Order.

Fundamentals of this order include market liberalisation, the wholesale selling off of public assets into private (often foreign) hands, the creation of a foreign investor-friendly climate. Fundamentally, everything is for sale. Everything is a commodity available to the highest bidder.

In the development sphere, what would the basics, the fundamentals be? And how close are we to achieving them?

HDR 2003 reminds us that more than one billion people continue to live on less than R7 per day. Most of these one billion people also lack access to basic health services and safe drinking water. Think about how much you've spent today, the water and the food you take for granted. Could you cover your online bill on R7 per day?

The WSIS Plan of Action envisages a computer in every village by 2010. The Millennium Development Goals envisage the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty by 2015, and the achievement of universal primary education by the same time. Currently one in three African children has a chance of finishing primary school (HDR 2003).

What is the morality of bringing high-tech computer equipment to a community with no water supply, without adequate shelter?

Perhaps they could join an Internet chat room with other communities who also have computers and no water supply and discuss the benefits of an Internet connection, a computer, access to satellite and cellular technology, no clean water and inadequate shelter. They could build a network of communities globally with similar problems.

Seeds for revolution? Theatre of the absurd? Or real life immorality in action?

During my interactions with South African community radio stations not long ago, many did not have access to a telephone line. Those who did have telephone access often had their services suspended due to an inability to pay the bills.

Since privatisation five years ago, South Africa's Telkom has secured a 160% increase in tariffs, with two million users cut off from services during that period for an inability to pay the ever-increasing tariffs.

Much acclaimed privatisation has ensured decreased access for the majority, and an increasing focus on the top-end of the market. So who benefits?

The latest model doing the rounds in the high-tech delivery of services to remote areas mission is to provide free short-term telephony access via satellite.

Why? To build an appetite, create a dependency? What happens after the one year, after the satellite company has secured its installation profits? The com-

munity finds money to pay the bills, or another white elephant? Go ask the community radio stations. Any lessons learnt?

What does the global corporate consensus have to gain from the WSIS Action Plan?

Well, somebody has to electrify those villages, somebody else has to roll-out (or dump, depending where you sit on the scale) infrastructure, computer hardware and software (new markets), somebody has to build the "capacity" of the ignorant masses, somebody has to provide "technical expertise", somebody has to provide financing (or increased indebtedness, depending on how you look at it).

And guess who can do that for us?

Missionaries, mercenaries... what's the difference? Modernisation, civilisation, globalisation, colonialism... all systems of surveillance and control... what's the difference?

I write from a position of power, of privilege. I am literate, and well fed. Not only am I a user of the Internet, but I can credit the Internet for introducing me to great contemporary African warriors like Tewolde Berhan Egziabher, to being able to read Arundhati Roy's angry truths and Thabo Mbeki in his own words.

The Internet can be a useful tool. But do I need the Internet to live my life? Do any of us need the Internet? Is it a basic need? A fundamental of well-being?

I don't think so.

Sarita Ranchod has worked in the communications for development sector for a number of years. She is interested in issues of media, power, globalisation and morality and can be reached at sranchod@worldonline.co.za



Anthea Garman congratulates the winners of the Innovative and Rayborn Bulley (accepting the award for Manu Herbstein's

New space, same



By Rudy Nadler-Nir

By allowing users to access resources otherwise off-limits and to communicate with people around the world, the Internet is supposed to blur the lines of race, ability, and age.

Yet discussions of the "digital divide" abound, with the world divided into technology "haves and have-nots", "doers and do-nots", and "knowers and know-nots."

In other words, not everyone has, uses, or knows how to use technology.

By the way, there is a fourth group of computer users, a very troubling category – these are the have-to-haves. Created by corporations wishing to increase their sales, have-to-haves are people who have to have technology, and they are know-nots of the worst sort: they know not why they are using technology. Have-to-haves do not think critically about technology or understand that the Internet may have serious drawbacks or downsides.

The "digital divide" is a popular catchphrase in circles such as these. And we find various interpretations of the term.

I'd like to offer an interesting – different – take on the issue of "have-nots and know-nots" in the hope that this will serve to open the discussion past the often-used interpretation of these terms.

In the United States, people like Joel Dreyfuss argued that the Internet is a cultural turnoff for African Americans. He saw the problem arising from what he calls "the whiteness of the web" represented by chat rooms filled with "a bunch of white guys talking to each other".

The emergence of such sites as NetNoir (1995) improved the situation only slightly, as the majority of the Net is still dominated, like television and other media, by white institutions: of the "100 Top Web Sites" selected by PC Magazine, not one represents or is owned by minorities. In this case, African Americans are have-nots, because the Net, by virtue of its current characteristics, excludes them from participating.

In an article in Salon Magazine, called "Is the Web

Technology

And the winners are...



By Kimala Naidoo

The gold at the Innovative Awards for New Media 2003 went to an online book about the Atlantic slave trade, an Arab newspaper, and a science website.

Manu Herbstein's www.ama.africatoday.com, which has published the book *Ama, A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, was announced winner of the individual category. In 2002 the book won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. Herbstein beat off tough competition from other finalists, including Herman Manson's Media Toolbox (<http://www.media-toolbox.net>), and Nandiphotos.com, a photo gallery of people in Uganda, developed by Vincent Mugaba (<http://www.nandiphotos.com>).

Al-Ahram Online (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg>), the online version of the Arab newspaper Al-Ahram, won the corporate category for its focus on science, technology and ICTs, and its independent coverage of the Middle East, especially the recent US-Iraq war. Al-Ahram beat competitors like eLink Publications (<http://elinkpublications.co.za>), and AfricaWoman (www.africawoman.net).

Janice Limson's Science in Africa (www.scienceinafrica.co.za), which won in the non-profit category, addresses scientific research in Africa. "It started off as a hobby to communicate science understandably," said Limson, a biotechnology lecturer at Rhodes University. "Now it reaches 50 countries."

There were 44 entries for the awards this year. Roland Stanbridge, journalism lecturer at the University of Stockholm in Sweden, a judge, said: "These awards are not just for sites that look good, but for those that address the needs of the continent."

For more information see www.highwayafrica.org.za.



New Media Awards: from left: Ahmed El-Gody (accepting the award for Al-Ahram), Janet Limson for Science in Africa *Ama, a story of the Atlantic slave trade*). Photograph: Trevor Crighton

disadvantages

too Cool for Blacks", African American writer Leonce Gaiter says that more problematic than the physical problem of access is the nature of the Net itself, which clashes with African-American culture.

Why is this? After all, the web is cool. The web is "new, chaotic, shamelessly undisciplined, alternately revolutionary and reactionary, the web, by nature, butts heads with entrenched Afro-American cultural truths. It mocks some of [American] fundamental beliefs, [and] core desires".

Gaiter says: "The web is considered a place. We call it cyberspace. We visit a website. The web is presented as a series of landscapes or neighbourhoods."

"...Through decades and generations of cross burnings and redlining and beatings and bombings and harassment, black Americans are wary of majority space. The web is no exception to the rule."

Some suggest that the web is the great uncolouriser, the great colour barrier dissolver, because in cyberspace, one doesn't know what colour one's audience or conversation partner might be.

"But suggesting," says Gaiter, "that black Americans would take solace in conversing with those

who would not show hatred or bigotry or cultural chauvinism toward them only because the other party didn't know they were black – that's insulting in the extreme."

We know of many examples of hate speech, hate blogs – or weblogs – and hate email online; this – in a way – is also a creator of the digital divide. In this case, access is not denied – but hate serves as a barrier to entry.

Rudy Nadler-Nir is a strategist-at-large and brain-for-rent. He consults, lectures, speaks and writes extensively on e-communication. He was a founding member of iafrica.com
rudyn@eclectic.co.za

References

- ♦ "Is the Web Too Cool for Blacks," By Leonce Gaiter
<http://archive.salon.com/june97/21st/cool970605.html>
- ♦ "Haves, Have-Nots, and Have-to-Haves: Net Effects of the Digital Divide", final paper by Elory Rozner, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 'Internet and Society' course, 1998
http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/fallsem98/final_papers/Rozner.html
- ♦ Review of Disconnected: Have and Have-nots in the Information Age by William Wresh. Rutgers University Press, 1996. 268 pages, including bibliographical references and index.
<http://www.uwec.edu/Library/ots/march99/discon.htm>
- ♦ Wider Gaps Between Haves and Have-Nots by Year 2015, Says US Intelligence Report" Published on Wednesday, December 20, 2000 by Inter Press Service
<http://www.commondreams.org/headlines/122000-02.htm>