

Closing the Horizontal Digital Divide

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Many speeches delivered at the UN's millennium assembly suggest that world leaders are becoming aware of and are trying to cope with what has been widely called the "digital divide" between nations, between north and south, and between ethnic groups. We might call this a "vertical digital divide." But there is another digital divide that is perhaps more important to close: the "horizontal digital divide" between social entities who are more or less equal in power if seen in the vertical dimension, but who differ greatly in levels of empowerment when examined horizontally.

For example, some intellectually empowered dot.com companies insist that they have the right to sell to third parties the personal information of customers collected during electronic commerce transactions. Yet these same companies resist efforts by consumers to use software agents to collect information from websites without leaving personal identity data. Similarly, some consumers fighting to keep their personal information protected see no problem with freely sharing and downloading copyrighted entertainment materials.

Such paradoxical or inconsistent social conflicts abound these days because of failure to recognize that a single social actor cannot be wholly empowered in all aspects of its intellectual activities. An actor may exercise power in one area, but likely will depend on other actors for support or on government regulation for protection in other areas.

Consider how once you are aware that you are empowered in some way it is only natural to try to capitalize on this empowerment by reorganizing and redefining your identity. You may attempt to redefine your goals of action, change your behavior,

reengineer the set of your means, or restructure your internal system of operations. However, if you do not fully inform other actors of your evolving empowerment in some particular area your intentions might easily be misinterpreted. Such conflicts arise often enough between existing governments or corporations, but even more frequently between newly formed NGOs and NPOs.

What specifically can be done to reduce the chances of social conflict and misunderstanding in the wake of empowerment processes? I would like to suggest four guidelines:

(1) Communication and understanding: An empowered actor should disclose to others as much as possible about its empowerment activities and changing identity.

(2) Accountability and collaboration: Merely announcing intentions and activities is not enough. An empowered actor must be keenly aware of its power and the possibility that its free exercise might harm others unfairly or even illegally. Self-restraint and accountability is necessary. Better yet is to collaborate with rather than compete against other actors whenever possible.

(3) Rule-making: Communication and understanding, accountability and collaboration will be more likely and more effective if driven by a set of widely recognized rules instead of being adopted individually and *ad hoc*.

(4) Governance: Responsible empowerment in the new information society demands not only new rules, but also a mechanism for coordinating new rules with existing rules.

However, despite the exercise of guidelines such as those I just mentioned, empowerment processes during the current Information Revolution--what I call "informatization"-- inevitably take place unevenly due to their complexity and scale.

In my view, informatization--the continuous empowerment of people and organizations--represents the third phase of modernization following militarization and industrialization. If industrialization fundamentally is economic empowerment enabled by mechanization and exchange of goods and services in the marketplace, informatization fundamentally is intellectual empowerment enabled by digitalization and sharing of knowledge and information in the intelplace--that is, the Internet.

It therefore is highly likely that new waves of social conflict and misunderstanding will complicate the early phase of new empowerment processes, whether industrialization or informatization.

Although social confusion and conflict may be inevitable during informatization, I am strongly encouraged to observe in the US the rise of technorealism and other movements that emphasize mutual trust and collaboration. Clearly, the US is not only dashing ahead of the pack, but also maturing as a world leader in the new century. I am also encouraged to recall that some of the core values leading informatization, such as pleasure and conviviality, are traditional values nurtured in Japan as far back as the Tokugawa era. This suggests that Japan has a reasonable chance to perform well once it begins to pursue in earnest a path toward an information society. As a recent Foreign Affairs essay vividly suggested, Japan's social landscape is still rocky due to discrepancies between its polity and economy. Precisely because of this unevenness, however, I feel certain that all-out informatization is at hand. I sincerely hope that I will live to see Japan contribute to the promotion not only of peace and prosperity, but also to the promotion of the coming information society.

Thank you very much.