The Third World and the paradox of the digital revolution

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The oneness of reason

We, the people of the Third World, greeted the revolution in information technology with great enthusiasm, perceiving it as the harbinger of an equalitarian and democratic society and the encapsulation of a new humanism. The question is whether or not this new utopia has effectively brought an end to the great divide regarding access to information and knowledge.

In principle, access to information has been opened up thanks to the advent of worldwide networks, to the extent that it escapes any religious, political and social control. The Internet has had a levelling effect and puts different people on an equal footing, enabling them to engage in dialogue among themselves.

Thus, we can say that the digital revolution has brought about a new phenomenon: the oneness of reason. This oneness seems to be very close to Averroes' concept of "virtual or potential intellect". Virtuality in the context of the Internet is digital. Though ubiquitous, it cannot be located anywhere, or be assigned one place or any particular place. It operates as an empty signifier that is detached from any signified or referent, and has no anchor. It is, in other words, a void, which paradoxically has fullness.

The new "virtual reason" encapsulated by the Internet is also similar, in many aspects, to the enlightenment reason, in the way that both of them encourage progress and innovation, and create their public domain. It should be noted, however, that the new virtual reason consists mainly of programmes and technological procedures and not only of the apriori principles, as in the enlightenment reason.

The digital divide

New information and communication technologies (ICTs) have brought about a new mode of life for human beings that should not be confined to the world of computer science and other related technological domains. This new mode of life is not shared by all humanity. Far from bringing about the world's unity, ICTs increase differences and hierarchies both between the First and the Third World and within each of these worlds.

The appearance of the digital divide urged us to review our optimistic enthusiasm about the digital utopia that promised to unify humanity as far as the right of information and development is concerned. In fact, the information and communication revolution, like all revolutions, carried along with it a new and more important gap between social classes and nations. The divide in the capacity to buy a computer and new technological equipment, the facility to access the world of the Internet, the ability to understand its complicated programmes, the skilfulness of interpreting the data and posing suitable questions ... these are only the apparent face of the digital informatics divide. Therefore, we start to see the limited influence of the digital revolution to bridge the gap between social classes and between individuals.

The indicators of the digital divide – such as the teledensity indicator, technical progress indicator, technical achievement indicator, network readiness indicator, media usage indicator, information intelligence quotient, standard number of digital access – inform us that the divide between nations and also within the same nation is increasing. For instance, the percentage of all Internet users in the Arab world has reached only 5%.

We cannot deny, of course, that the logic of the worldwide networks of the new technologies does not acknowledge the existence of borders between nations, cultures and civilisations. This is so because these technologies all try their best to nibble at the nations' sovereignty over their cognitive and information space in favour of the worldwide market. Despite the resistance of the Third World to ICTs, the ongoing technological revolution will eventually affect our part of the world and change it from a semi-industrial, semi-agricultural world into a computer-driven world, geared to advertise and sell its products. This affords us an opportunity to achieve progress and close this digital divide.

Continuing illiteracy

Even if the world has witnessed the birth of new technologies for more than four decades, the spread of information knowledge in the nations of the South is still very limited. Concerning the African nations, apart from use of the Internet in public institutions, industrial sites, private information services and educational institutions,

illiteracy in electronic information remains widespread. This illiteracy is not only due to the difficulty of acquiring new technological tools (hard and soft), or the sophisticated ability to use them, but is also a consequence of illiteracy and poverty (both moral and material).

Some think that people's lack of responsiveness to the products of the digital revolution lies in the fact that the spread of this revolution in Africa and the Third World started first in the security departments of these countries. Consequently, people felt that use of these technologies in general is linked to falsification and oppression of political beliefs and freedom, and this of course made them turn away from these technologies. Whatever the pressure of globalisation may be, the domains of use of these technologies in our countries have been limited to health, education and finance, and for those searching for jobs either in or outside the same country, or for carrying out research.

We cannot deny that digital technology has indeed affected economies, employment structures and even the way the younger generation thinks and feels. Even though this influence has not been visible enough to reduce the impact of poverty among people, we cannot reject the success of different experiments led by a number of associations and organisations of the civil society in penetrating the countryside (e.g. handcrafts). These associations have developed light industries, businesses and other services that ultimately aim to ensure human development.

In spite of this, the effect of digital technology, which can help to achieve this development, is still very restricted because of computer illiteracy and poverty, as mentioned before. However, this illiteracy does not prevent large-scale use of the cellphone, which has proven efficient so far.

The knowledge society does not leave any room for illiterate people. An example of this can be found in the persistence of illiteracy in the Arab world, where the percentage is more than 45% of the population – about 111 million, of which 74 million are women. The propagation of poverty and the lack of suitable informatics programmes concerning education and the training of workers, farmers, free traders – all these factors make the emergence of a knowledge society very difficult in our countries. If we add to this the violent reaction of Islamic fundamentalists to

ICTs, we will understand the extension and danger of the problem of the digital divide.

This does not mean that we are inviting people to reject ICT because it leads to more cognitive discrimination. On the contrary, we believe that it is an opportunity that must be seized so that we can develop new and suitable ways to reduce the effects of any severe and negative results of ICT on individuals and society. We can also consider these technologies as a tool that will help reconsider the distribution of mental and material wealth all over the world. For example, ICT can be used, in a way, to counter illiteracy, control administrations, train or retrain professionals and also take care of citizens' health.

A total approach

All that has been mentioned above reveals that the digital divide is not just about the difference between those who can or cannot afford to buy and use a computer, but it is also a total and complex phenomenon that requires total treatment. These techniques urge us to re-examine the human, cultural, economic and political development process, taking into consideration humankind as a starting point for any development process. Thus, if we do not find solutions to the problems of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, education and lack of democracy – that is, if we do not re-evaluate the status of people – we can never profit from the advantages of ICT in general. In other words, putting an end to the digital gap starts with the abolition of all gaps, such as social, cultural, health and employment gaps.

The digital revolution is not a magic wand that can solve all our complex and permanent problems. It is essential to find solutions first to the structural problems in order to provide suitable conditions that would allow us to profit from the advantages of the information and communication revolution. For instance, introducing computers at schools and universities will not automatically lead to a better level of education unless we restore and improve the educational system. Otherwise, the introduction of computers may in a way cause the educational level of students to go down. Similarly, equipping administrations with computers cannot give an effective result if employers are not retrained or promoted culturally and materially so that they

can cope with the new culture brought by these new machines. Spreading the culture of computer use and new technologies must start in primary schools, youth organisations and local authorities, and not only in ministries and public administrations.

A total view does not require regarding ICT accidentally – that is, not to consider these techniques only as instruments for resolving our temporary economic and social problems. It does, however, imply that we regard them as strategic instruments for building a knowledge society based on abundant information. In short, we have to set the human element at the centre of any development concerning ICT.

The ICT revolution has created its own culture and values. Our devotion to this culture is necessary for our adherence to the environment of the Web, provided that we remain cautious and vigilant to the levelling and anarchy that it creates. The passage from a traditional and particular system of values and conventions to the universal system that the Web imposes has to be smooth; otherwise, the "informatics antibodies" will attack this new culture and demand to impose restraints on the new space, which is to prevent citizens from having free access to the world of knowledge. The implantation of this new culture in our countries implies the reconsideration of all our educational and cultural systems. However, this does not mean that we call for the standardisation and eradication of cultural diversity, or for believing in the necessity of tutelage on the informatics space, but we do make a call for being open to the universal without ignoring local cultures.

The principle of transparency is essential for information ethics, because we cannot fight corruption, violence and exclusion if there is an information blackout. Unfortunately, Africa has a very bad ranking with regard to its level of transparency and democratic participation.

We believe that the entrance of the informatics discourse in our culture can refresh our development discourse so that it can go beyond its artificial contradictions. This is so because the informatics discourse does not raise any objection to joining opposites such as modernity and tradition, reason and revelation. However, our greatest and enduring problem is that our past is so voluminous. If, however, we apply informatics

programmes to this rich heritage, we can dominate and reconcile it with the new culture of ICT.

What is strange about this is that, although there are more than 233 universities in the Arab world, with 10 million students, and over 1 000 centres of scientific research, they cannot transform these scientific capacities into efficient capabilities in the world of ICT. We notice that even if the Arab world is rich in written and oral heritage, it cannot convert this heritage into a cultural industry. This does not imply that the Arab world does not appear on the geocultural informatics map, but it means that its contribution and participation are not transformed into a knowledge society.

The digital revolution has revealed our economic, political and cultural deficiencies, and given us a rare opportunity to catch up with the march of progress. It has also done more than this, as it is trying to reconstruct the human mind so that it can be fit and take up the new challenges of progress. In this context, is our African reason, though deeply rooted in heavy tradition and obsessed by fundamentalist and nationalist demagogies, able to be transformed in the light of the new methods and approaches of "virtual reason"? The answer is still to be found, and it is incumbent upon us to endeavour to find it.