# Information divide, information flow and global justice*
## Soraj Hongladarom

*There is a significant information divide between the countries in the North and those in the South. This is detrimental to economic growth, as information feeds into knowledge production. The divide is exacerbated by a series of uneven and unjust flows of information between the North and the South. Two related patterns of this flow are explored, namely the flow of biological resources and information, and the flow of rare manuscripts and published materials. This chapter argues that the concept of global justice is an appropriate tool for comprehending the situation; this is an addition to the ideas offered in Britz & Lor (2003). Furthermore, the need for increasing the intra-South information flow is discussed. This will strengthen southern countries as a whole, as the flow will link the countries together so that they have a stronger voice and have the opportunity to learn from each another directly.*

## Contents

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## Introduction

Information has become a precious resource. It is commonly known that today's economy is being driven by knowledge and information, and that today's advanced technologies in many fields are deeply infused with information. However, it is also well known that this type of information lies mostly in the hands of the highly developed Western countries that generate the information to serve the needs of their industries and enterprises through basic and applied research. These industries, in turn, feed the economies of these countries, which come back to provide more funding for further research. Thus, a cycle has developed whereby industrialised economies are able to sustain their pace of economic development and progress.

On the other hand, the countries and economies in the developing world do not seem to fare as well. The same kind of virtuous cycle that has already taken place in the developed world has largely not found its way to getting started yet. The key to this "non-starting" is the apparent lack of information. Without effective research, development facilities and infrastructure, countries in the developing world seem to lack a means of generating information and knowledge that are necessary to fuel their own industries. Without these industries, there is little that these countries can rely on in order to provide their own funding for research and development.

I would like to call this situation an "information divide". It is broader than what is commonly known as the digital divide, in that the latter is focused more on the actual access to information technology and the global computer network, whereas the information divide here is more a matter of a society's capability of generating its own information that could be harnessed in its economic development. The digital divide, as commonly known, is then only part of the wider information divide. Many scholars have agreed that a way to solve the digital divide problem is to increase the flow of information. Nonetheless, there are some serious problems concerning this, most notably involving certain types of injustice that are involved in the flow of information, especially between the North and the South.

What I aim to do in this chapter, then, is to lay out a conceptual map of the whole issue, firstly by outlining the ethical issues involved, then by providing some conceptual clarifications – it is clear that the very concept of information needs to be clarified. I contend that the concept of global justice is necessary as a tool to understand the situation where there is disparity and injustice in the flow of information. Then I conclude by suggesting some concrete means by which this information gap can be reduced.

## Ethical issues

As for the first part of the ethical conception, I argue that the disparity in information between the developed and developing world is not simply a matter of one side having more information than the other. On the contrary, it is actually a matter of the capability of "harvesting" or "mining" the information that is already there, everywhere. This capability has, in fact, spilled over from the territorial confines of the developed world when, for example, biologists and pharmacologists from the West come to countries like Brazil or Thailand searching for biological samples that could be developed into new drugs. The information is already there, but some expertise is needed to extract it. This issue, known as "bioprospecting" or "biopiracy", has created controversy and protests from those in the developing world (as well as their allies in the developed world), who see this to be an injustice, as the drugs that will be developed will often cater to the interests of rich consumers in the West. Hence, the sharing of information has become a crucial issue in the relations between the developing South and the developed North. What needs to be ironed out now is how this sharing of information (from biological resources and otherwise) should be spelled out in detail in practice.

Apart from biopiracy or bioprospecting, authors Johannes Britz and Peter Lor (2003) have also examined the case of information flow from Africa to the North in the form of library materials that are purchased by rich Western libraries. Not only is this happening in Africa, but it also occurs on a significant scale in Thailand, as libraries in the West and Japan are buying up precious books and rare manuscripts from the country, leaving that country with fewer products of its own intellectual tradition than in the Western countries.

The key ethical issue here is that of international

or global justice – is it just for Western libraries to buy up intellectual resources in the South? It might, however, be argued that buying up such resources could be necessary in case they are in danger of disappearing altogether. In Thailand, for example, rare manuscripts found in rural temples may not be appreciated by the local people, who either do not understand them or do not regard them as important. In any case, the manuscripts might not be well taken care of. Hence, it is likely that the precious information found in these manuscripts might be lost forever if not for the effort of Western libraries to care for them.

The same line of argument can also be made regarding the mining of biological resources. If the value of these resources were not recognised and developed into medicines through sophisticated techniques found yet only in the North, then what is the use of keeping them there in the jungle? However, the question is to which group of people the benefits will go. In the case of rare manuscripts and published materials, the benefits usually go to those who have access to those libraries themselves, and these usually are scholars in the North. As for the biological resources, in many cases they are developed into medicines that are geared towards the needs of those in the West, who are better prepared to pay for the medicine than those in the South (Schüklenk & Kleinschmidt, 2006). In both cases those in the South are left out, even though they could be said to be the custodians of the very resources that are developed to benefit those in the North.

Thus, it is imperative that a just and equitable scheme of benefit sharing be devised and fully implemented. For the library resources and information flow, this could mean that those in the South should be compensated in some way for the information that is taken from them. It is, however, important to note here that such a compensation scheme should be the last resort. It should be enacted only in the circumstance where the southern locale in question is unable to take care of its resources, or where the information resources are in danger of being lost otherwise. Such circumstances are very few, and it would be more beneficial to everyone involved if rich libraries in the North entered into a form of information sharing through the building up of networks of libraries between the North and the

South. Hence, the compensation needs not be in monetary form only, but could also come as programmes for building up the capacity of the southern communities so that they are better equipped to cope with the increasingly complex world.

One specific way in which this could be done is perhaps by funding educational effort by national governments in the South, or funding local governments directly. One should not forget that information resources, such as rare manuscripts or books published in the South, are integral parts of the people's lives and traditions. If possible, therefore, such books and manuscripts should remain within the communities of readers for which these books and manuscripts are intended. As information flows from the South in an apparently unjust form, information should then flow back to benefit the South in order to redress the situation. Thus, I agree broadly with the proposal by Britz & Lor (2003:162) that the concept of justice should be one that governs the South-North flow of information.

## Global justice

In their paper, Britz & Lor (2003) argue that three concepts of justice, namely commutative, distributive and contributive justice, should be put forward as a scheme to ensure a fair and just flow of information from the South to the North. Basically, the first is the kind of justice that obtains when there is fairness in exchanging; the second concerns fair distribution of resources, while the last is about giving and taking between individuals and their community. However, these three concepts do not directly address the issue of disparities and unfairness *among nations.* Commutative, distributive and contributive justice is relevant in all instances of dealings between people or groups of people, but none of them addresses the issue of global justice needed for the global disparity in resources or capacity. I would therefore like to propose that the concept of global justice be added. This will point to the fact that the ethical issue in question is an international one and, consequently, requires international effort to provide a solution.

When global justice is added to the picture, what emerges is that the distinction between North and South as groups of countries is highlighted. In commutative or distributive justice, an

instance of injustice can be solved within the boundary of a nation state. When one party fails to follow up on its commitment, such as failing to honour a contract, the offended party can go to the national authority to help redress the matter. The authority in question has jurisdiction over both parties. However, in the case of global injustice, it is unclear who should be turned to in order to help redress the situation. The United Nations, to take the supreme example of an international organisation, does not have authority over the sovereign states.

In this situation, global justice is markedly different from other types of justice. In fact, the international and cosmopolitan dimension of global justice is the subject of lengthy debate among theorists, as to whether it deserves a totally different set of conceptual tools to address it, or whether the same tools used in the more familiar types are adequate (see, for example, Mandle, 2006; O'Neill, 2000; and Pogge, 2001). An adequate discussion of this difficult topic would obviously be beyond the scope of the present chapter. What I propose here, is that global justice be considered as one of the concepts that are relevant to the discussion on information flow. Depriving local communities of their precious intellectual resources, such as books and manuscripts, without due compensation clearly constitutes an injustice, and in order to redress this concerted international effort is needed.

The putative fact that local people may not be taking adequate care of their own intellectual resources might not be tenable in support of an argument for taking local resources out of the area, unless it can be demonstrated that these resources stand to be in grave danger if left with the local people. Yet this attests to the fact that the local people need to be empowered, so that they have the means to take care of their intellectual resources. So, rather than removing these resources from the communities and arguing that they would be safer somewhere else, the local people should be provided with capacity-building schemes that enable them to take proper care of the resources. Moreover, national governments should be the ones who protect these documents (in case the local communities are actually unable to do so), rather than the Western libraries, as they stand as intermediaries between the local population and the wider international circles, and should protect the intellectual resources within their countries.

Talking about sharing information and justice also implies that one should talk about the flow of information from one region to another. Hoping that the problem of the information divide could be solved simply by letting information flow from the North to the South will not work, because that would mean the information that is already there in the South is not put to use, a point also agreed to by Britz & Lor (2003; also Lor & Britz, 2005), as we have seen.

Hence, I propose a system of flow of information that also reflects global justice better. Instead of the one-directional flow, and in addition to the scheme of just information flow from South to North discussed above, information needs to flow in and out in both directions, including among the southern countries themselves. In order for the South actually to be strengthened, information also needs to be able to travel from one part to another, all within the South itself. This, unfortunately, is not happening on a significant scale, as developing nations still look towards Western countries for models and for knowledge and expertise.

For the above to be feasible, there has to be a network of southern developing countries. This is not as easy as it might seem, for a number of obstacles need to be overcome, such as different languages, cultures and, perhaps more significantly, the idea that there is nothing to be learnt from one's counterpart in another developing country. Another important point is that there has to be an effective way of "mining" or "extracting" information so that valuable information in the South is not lost to the whole world. This also involves looking towards the traditions of cultures of the South (and indeed those of the North) in order to find insights and even expertise in dealing with contemporary problems.

## Means of reducing the information divide

Let us look at how all this is done in a little more detail. Firstly, strengthening the South-South information flow is facilitated by the people in the South themselves getting more connected to one another. A vestige of colonialism that is still

visible today is that former colonial countries usually interact with their former master countries. Thus, Indonesia interacts quite a lot with the Netherlands; and South Africa and Australia with Britain, for example. These are historical ties and in principle there is nothing wrong with them. However, when these ties, also those between the South and the North, are exclusive, South-South interaction and communication suffer. A clear disadvantage of this is that the southern countries then are forever dependent on their former colonial masters, and there is no chance for them to get together in order to form a united front to strengthen themselves.

The picture is like that of a planet with a number of satellites orbiting it, where the satellites are in no way able to break away. The alternative picture I am proposing is that of a number of former satellites banding together to form a larger unit, thereby strengthening each part. This is one way to redress the global injustice problem, because strengthening southern countries through increasing the channels of communication and information flow among them is a prerequisite for southern countries to help one another. Without this help and connection, there is little chance of breaking away from the pattern of dependency that afflicts most southern countries today.

Secondly, people in the South need to free themselves from the mindset that tells them there is little to be learnt from their peers across the borders or in other southern countries. This is a strong misconception, because most in the South have learnt that the path to development lies through following the North's lead. In fact, a further advantage of focusing on intra-southern information sharing is that it dissolves the global/local dichotomy that seems to be prevalent in today's discourse about information flow, where the "global" is represented by the North and the "local" by the South. The North is global in the sense that it acts like the planet around which "locals" orbit like satellites. This picture clearly illustrates that the West (or the North) is the hegemonic force that is capable of dominating the world, becoming global in the process and thereby forcing non-Western cultures to be the locals. This is clearly an instance of global injustice.

On the contrary, developing a South-South flow would mean that everywhere is global and local

at the same time, and nowhere is it exclusively either global or local. However, Lor & Britz (2005:73) point out that the prospect for a robust South-South information flow is currently poor and will not take place on a large scale any time soon, although there are some "bright spots". It is indeed true that the South-South flow has a great many obstacles to overcome, but we should not forget that we are not talking about the satellites becoming a big planet. Instead, we are talking about the satellites linking with one another. So, the flow takes place between two southern countries, for example, on a much smaller but more intimate scale. The Internet can be of tremendous help in this regard (Lor & Britz, 2005:73), so too personal dialogues and communication in other forms.

Strengthening an intra-South flow of information is possible, because the South does have its store of information that is ready to be shared for the benefit of the world. The challenge is only how to bring that out in such a way that does not require being dependent on the North.

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