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The Third World and the paradox of the digital revolution

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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 leveling effect and put different people on an equal footing, enabling them to engage in dialogue amongst 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, innovation and create its public domain. It should be noted, however, that the new "Virtual Reason" consists mainly of programs and technological procedures and not only of the apriori principles, as in the Enlightenment Reason.

New Technologies of Information and Communication (ICT) 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 worlds' unity, ICT increase differences and hierarchies both between the first and the third world and within each one 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 equipments, the facility to access the world of internet, the ability to understand its complicated programs, the skillfulness of interpreting their data and pose the 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 following indicators of the digital divide (such as the Tele-density 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 within the same nation is increasing, for instance the percentage of 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 civilizations. This is so because these technologies all try their best to nibble at the nations' sovereignty over their cognitive and information space in favor of the worldwide market. Despite the resistance of the third world to ICT, 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.

Even if the world has witnessed the birth of new technologies for more than four decades, the spread of the information knowledge in the nations of the south is still very limited. Concerning the African nations, apart from the use of Internet in public institutions, industrial sites and private information services, the educational institutions, illiteracy in the electronic information remains wide spread among people. This illiteracy is not due only to the difficulty of acquiring the new technological revolution tools (hard and soft) or the sophisticated ability to use them, but it is also a consequence of illiteracy and poverty (moral and material).

Some people think that people's lack of responsiveness to the digital revolution products 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. This fact has, consequently, led some people to think that the use

of these technologies in general is linked to falsification and oppression of political beliefs and freedom, and this of course made people turn away from these technologies. Whatever the pressure of globalization 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 carrying out researches.

We cannot deny that digital technology has indeed affected economy, employment structure and even the way of thinking and feeling among the young generation. Even though this influence was not 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 organizations of the civil society in penetrating the countryside (e.g. handcraft). These associations have developed light industries, business and other services that aim to ensure human development in the end.

In spite of this, the effect of digital technology, which can help to achieve this development, is still very restricted because of the computer illiteracy and poverty, as mentioned before. This illiteracy does not prevent in a way the large use of the cell phone, which has been proved efficient so far.

The knowledge society does not leave any room for illiterate people. An example of this can be seen through the persistence of illiteracy in the Arab World (where the percentage is more than 45% of the population, that is about 111 million, 74 million of these are women). The propagation of poverty and lack of suitable informatics programs concerning education and training 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 fundamentalist against the ICT, 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 as it leads to more cognitive discrimination. On the contrary, we believe that it is an opportunity that we must seize 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

re-train professionals and also take care of the citizens' health...).

All that has been mentioned above reveals that the digital divide is not only a mere difference between those who can or cannot afford to buy and use a computer but 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 man as a starting point to any development process. Thus if we do not find solutions to the problems of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, education and lack of democracy (i.e. if we do not reevaluate the status of men) 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 the gaps: 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. Introducing computers at schools and universities will not lead automatically to a better level of education unless we restore and improve the educational system. Otherwise, this introduction of computers may in a way cause the level of students to go down. Similarly, equipping administrations with computers cannot give an effective result if employers are not re-trained or promoted culturally and materially so that they can cope with the new culture brought by these new machines. Spreading the culture of computer and new technologies must start in primary schools, youth organizations, and local authorities and not only in ministries and public administrations.

A total view does not require regarding the ICT accidentally, that is not to consider these techniques only as an instrument to resolve our temporary economic and social problems, but it implies regarding them as a strategic instrument to build a knowledge society based on abundant information. In short, we have to pose the human element in the centre of any development concerning the ICT.

The ICT revolution has created its own culture and values. Our devotion to this culture is necessary to our adherence to the environment of the web, provided that we remain cautious and vigilant to the leveling and anarchy that it creates. The passage from the 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 standardization and eradication of cultural diversity, or for believing in the necessity of tutelage on the informatics space, but we only call for being open to the universal without ignoring local cultures.

The principle of transparency is essential for the information ethics, because we cannot fight corruption, violence and exclusion if there is an informatics blackout. Unfortunately, Africa has got a very bad rank concerning the 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, but if we apply informatics programs to this rich heritage, we can dominate and reconcile it with the new culture of ICT.

What is strange about this is that though there are more than 233 universities in the Arab World, 10 million students, and more than 1000 centers of scientific research, yet 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 geo-cultural informatics map, but it means that its contribution and participation are not transformed into a knowledge society.

The digital revolution has not only revealed our economical, 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 re-construct 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 endeavor to find it.