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Information Systems And Technology
In Local And Regional Development

by

Charles Morrow
Today’s Challenge

As never before, we are challenged at the end of the 20th century by enormous opportunities and enormous dangers. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of Soviet communism and the widespread movement towards democracy and economic reform present the opportunity to create a new form of human-centred development; under this new paradigm our children will benefit from a sustainable future in which the earth’s finite resources will be shared more equally and protected as never before through new forms of global cooperation.

The reverse of this is almost unthinkable: a world in which the lifestyle of all is eroded by environmental degradation, and in which a tiny minority of the rich live in increasing isolation from the mass of their poor, fellow citizens.

It is in the minds of people - men, women and children - that this issue will be decided. What is needed is nothing less than a new form of global learning which will develop and increase our capacity to learn - not merely the capacity of individuals but that of institutions and even societies. That is what is meant when we employ - increasingly - the concept of capacity building for sustainable development.

The educational crisis facing all countries has been well documented, most recently by the World Conference on Education for All (Jomptien, Thailand, 1990). Over 100,000,000 children worldwide have no access to primary school and almost a billion adults are illiterate; more than two-thirds of this total are female. The findings illustrate that the traditional learning systems have not succeeded in providing the most basic education let alone preparing our young people to absorb and employ the exponentially growing volume of information generated by the knowledge explosion and the new technologies of knowledge generation, transformation and transmission.

As the World Declaration on Education for All stated, "We need an expanded vision that surpasses present source levels, institutional structures, curricula and conventional delivery systems..."
Ploman (1) has pointed out that the communications and information revolution affects not only patterns of learning but also the nature of knowledge and scientific enquiry itself. The computer has transformed the way in which we create knowledge, and the time scale of its evolution.

The traditional concept of literacy in the printed and written word has been replaced by computer literacy, visual and over-all media literacy.

How will our children be equipped for these new literacies?

Three channels of approach have been identified: improved formal primary schooling (the first channel); skills training, literacy and non-formal education for youth and adults (the second channel) and planned but more informal learning opportunities for meeting basic learning needs for survival, development and living (the third channel).

I am going to suggest to you today that there is a Fourth Channel which is no less important. That is the life-long learning provided through the mass media, principally television. What I suggest is that we need an expanded vision of education, one that encompasses the medium that is becoming, increasingly and universally accessible.

Impact of Television

The social and cultural impact of television is generally underestimated. In fact, it is often discounted as unimportant owing to its commercial, entertainment "look" and purpose. At the same time, some leading educators have called television programming the "hidden curriculum". Whether we like it or not, this medium increasingly engages the mass of people and forms beliefs, attitudes and social learning patterns. Regrettably, its primary message is often one of "consumerism" and its industrial, northern base has caused it to be regarded as a form of "electronic colonialism" by some in developing countries.

I and my colleagues believe that an alternative satellite television network devoted to issues of sustainable development and the environment can have a major impact on raising public awareness of these critical issues. There are several reasons why.

First of all it is important, in development terms, that the growing number of television sets and their pervasive influence with populations in developing countries begin to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Therefore, cultures and communities need to reflect and be reflected on this medium. They require access. Television should be harnessed to provide new opportunities for social and cultural self-expression, as this is central to sustainable development.
Second, when properly used, this medium has enormous power for putting important matters of public and global concern on the social agenda. Television has become the great legitimizer of issues.

What is the Likelihood of Employing this Medium?

Communications technologies are changing. Digital equipment, digital video compression, and new satellite systems are increasing accessibility at reduced costs. Clearly, in this decade, direct satellite to dish systems will be penetrating even poor, rural areas of many developing countries where the number of television sets is growing exponentially. This is both good and bad news. It is good when alternative systems such as that we propose may be affordable, technically possible, and within reach. It is bad if the only response is a proliferation of new commercially driven northern services, that effectively disenfranchise developing countries.

It is, therefore, important that new alternative systems be explored now to exploit new technologies in innovative and developmentally sound ways.

The system now being developed by the International Development Research Centre and a number of partners, called WETV, is an alternative access service dedicated to Agenda 21 and related issues -- part of the solution.

The WETV Service

A two year research and development phase (1993-95) will precede the start-up of the service. A Steering Committee will guide an IDRC based secretariat during the R&D phase.

International agencies and national broadcasters are invited to take out a form of membership or partnership in the R&D process. A base fee will entitle each partner to a number of benefits, including preferential access to the resulting WETV service for their own programming ends. Those partners on board the R&D process will have an important role in shaping both that process, and the resulting WETV service.

In basic terms, the network will consist of a number of uplink locations around the world which will provide programming to a satellite which, in turn, will distribute it worldwide through signals that can be received by conventional broadcast systems in participating countries, through cable systems where they exist, and very soon, through home based satellite dishes. Programming for this service will be provided by those agencies and broadcasters who come in as partners, independent producers, existing broadcast services, and non-government agencies interested in public outreach.
The service to be launched in 1995-96 will begin small with only a few country partners on line. The program block to be provided will also start small, approximately three or four hours of originated programming, to be repeated eight times around the world. As the number of partners increases, the amount of program time will also increase. The intention is to begin in a manageable way, going from strength with participating partners, and learning by doing.

A unique program formula is proposed. The programming will consist of two types: Mosaic and Cornerstone. Mosaic will be provided by partners who will purchase time on the service at reasonable rates for the carriage of their programming. Cornerstone will be provided by the network, primarily through the commissioning of independent producers in developing countries.

In addition to issue-oriented programming on the environment and sustainable development, the programming will include quality children's, drama, music, as well as other forms of cultural expression. The service could well include a commercial advertising based stream of programming which will help to underwrite overall costs and fund some of the partners' public service productions.

WETV's revenues will thus come from three sources: 1) Mosaic time sales; 2) a commercial program affiliate; and 3) sponsorships.

WETV's revenues will be applied in three ways: 1) Cornerstone programming, primarily through commissioning independent producers in developing countries; 2) training, fundraising, management and program support to Mosaic partners; 3) ongoing research, particularly in broadcast policy matters in partner countries.

During the R&D phase, start-up costs will be established and funds will be sought. The network will operate on a lean/structured basis with a five year business and growth plan, with no large studios or buildings, but with portable equipment and limited staff. New satellite technologies, digital video compression and digital production and post-production equipment will make this possible.

Ownership and Control

It is proposed that the service be vested in a non-share capital corporation. The corporation's board will reflect partner, broadcast and development interests. This board will be designed to be at arm's length from partners and will be served by a number of committees including a program management group responsible for Mosaic programming, made up of those who use the service. The board will deal with broad policy issues, empowering a small management team to run the day-to-day affairs of the service.
Who Will Benefit?

Viewers, in the North, will be exposed to the reality of the South, through the eyes of Third World producers. The same productions will be seen across the Southern hemisphere. Through this service, viewers will see themselves along with others around the world, and not be exposed only to narrow, commercially-driven perspectives from northern sources.

Independent Producers, particularly in southern countries, will have a vehicle for expression, particularly on issues of the environment and sustainable development.

International Institutions, such as U.N. agencies, national aid donors, NGOs and foundations, and agencies involved in matters of the environment, will have access to a global service permitting them to present their programming and perspectives, and their interests in public education and information.

National-level Broadcasters, particularly in developing countries, will receive from WETV a block of quality programming and will be able to gain global exposure to their choice programs.

Agenda 21 Decision-makers. This service will help focus collaborative efforts in the production of film and video for sustainable development including training and support to independent producers and other efforts in public education and awareness-raising.

In this connection, one may ask, why a global service? Would it not be in the interests of developing country partners to establish regional services first? Clearly, the global service envisaged will be compatible with alternative, regional satellite operations. We believe the global service has some advantages. It will be able to tap new sources of funds from partners seeking global impact. It will also offer an outlet for regional services, providing them a "voice in the sky" in those countries which they now find difficulty penetrating.

IDRC has committed to housing an international Secretariat to coordinate the partnership R&D effort to create the service. For its part, IDRC will also provide a substantial financial contribution in the expectation that the combination of partners will provide an additional matching amount for the two year effort.
Every major advance in information and communications technology has suffered from our inability to perceive its full potential and benefits. Thus there is a time-lag in development and, as always happens, the least advanced societies suffer most. In television, the danger is that once again a major innovation for global knowledge generation and dissemination, will continue to out-run social control, and so will benefit the few rather than the many. The Global Access Television Service project is designed to make a modest contribution towards confronting these problems.

Edward W. Ploman, Vice-Rector, United Nations University