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AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

New-Tech Society: Where all citizens should be free to meet

22 February 2002

In a six-page special, *The THES* looks at the impact of new technology on our society and the degree to which we control it or it has come to control us.

An ever-growing number of people have access to the internet but, says Robin Mansell, more needs to be done to empower these users.

The development of internet-based applications and services can be used to help empower the majority of citizens in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The new spaces created by the internet offer a means of encouraging the kinds of learning that are necessary for making sense of the on and offline worlds. But "new media" policy is discussed mainly in terms of promoting "access" to the internet. The government now sets targets for public access to the internet. But this does not go far enough. The public's right to engage in the production and use of digital information needs to be at the heart of policy. A cultural exchange model of information transfer is needed to guard against the rise of digital information elites - people who not only have access to global networks but who have opportunities to hone their capabilities for creating and interpreting digital information. Policy needs to focus on promoting acquisition of new media literacies by the majority of citizens.

In *Development as Freedom* (OUP 1999), Amartya Sen says that people should be entitled to acquire capabilities for discriminating between alternative choices in their lives. These capabilities must be learnt. They are the foundation of the freedom that allows people's needs to be met, such as remaining healthy or interacting with others. If the development of internet space is inconsistent with helping the majority of people to acquire such capabilities, if the emphasis is merely on access and the passive consumption of information, then policy action is necessary. Sen argues that these capabilities are a fundamental human right.

Once connected to the internet, it cannot simply be assumed that citizens will suddenly be empowered to conduct their lives in ways that are responsive to their needs or to participate in democratic dialogues. New media literacies involve far more than knowing how to read, set up an email account, download digital information, or create a web page. Citizens need to be able to discriminate between information that has a known provenance and that which has become detached from its originator. Citizens need capabilities for assessing the value, truth and reliability of digital information. People living within an increasingly internet-mediated world need new media literacies, because without them social problems of alienation, poverty and ignorance are likely to worsen.

The commodity transaction model for information exchange is the predominant model today. It promotes the broadcast or advertising-supported mode of digital information provision within the spaces of the internet. Global opportunities for exchanging digital information suggest to some the need for stronger and ever more extensive ownership rights in digital information. Copyright protects the creation of digital information that is distributed through the internet.

The protection offered by copyright enables a price to be set for information so that it can be exchanged as a commodity. But copyright provisions need to be considered in the light of the social and economic interests of all groups within society. Some important communities of interest are ill-served by the prevailing dogma that insists on the universal extension of copyright protection in the realm of the internet.

The standard argument is that digital information is a commodity that should be transferred through explicit contract. Efforts to create a global framework supporting copyright are aimed at improving the conditions of trade in information. As efforts to enforce copyright legislation increase, there is a need to defend the scope for personal information sharing and to protect the public's interest in the public internet. Success would encourage more opportunities for learning and developing new media literacies, for example, by exploiting the internet's interactive functions, and would deepen citizens' capabilities for engaging in a critical discourse about the origins and validity of information provided through their access to the internet.

Finding an appropriate balance between the interests of citizens in digital information and those of companies seeking greater protection is difficult. But that balance is crucial to whether citizens can assert their right to experiment and learn new media literacies within internet spaces. The commodity transaction model for information exchange supports the creation of new business models for enterprises that base all, or some part, of their business on the internet. But digital information is created for purposes other than making it into a commodity. It may be created and shared, for instance, to preserve language or culture, or to promote science or the democratic process.

Producers and users of digital information in the public sphere generally want to make their information contributions freely available to others. They may include researchers who share data, citizens who exchange political viewpoints, or teachers who share their insights about the educational applications of new media. Encouraging widespread use of the internet as a site for acquiring new media literacies means taking the interests of citizens into account. The unlimited application of the commodity exchange model threatens to reduce the social and educational value of the internet.

Many alternative new media projects operate on a cultural exchange model basis but they are often inadequately funded compared with their commodity transaction model cousins. The Hansard Society in London is developing new media applications that give citizens a chance to learn capabilities for participating in new forms of electronic democracy.

In the United States, new media developers are offering free "toolkits" for producing and sharing information in the public spaces of the internet. The Internet Scout Project, supported by the National Science Foundation and the Mellon Foundation, is one example. The software allows people with a minimum level of technical expertise to set up and manage websites. This project uses open source software and provides access to public domain information.

Even after the first wave of enthusiasm for dotcoms, many digital information producing firms are setting up sites on the web. The majority of these are "walled" sites for members only. The trend in commercial new media services is exclusivity, as organisations seek to make money from the web. Often new media e-services for citizens in the health and education, and many other sectors, provide information that is mainly "pushed" at users. Few websites are designed to enable citizens to contribute their own information or to participate in learning that helps them to acquire capabilities for deciding how the information should be valued or acted upon.

Yesterday's media and communication technologies were expected to help all people to improve their social and economic condition. The same hopes are being pinned on the internet. These hopes will not be fulfilled without a strong focus on the potential to promote a cultural exchange model over a commodity form of exchange. Little progress will be made unless a rights-based approach to new media policy (that goes beyond access) is joined up with a policy to encourage an innovative cultural exchange model.

Policies that encourage new media projects that enable more citizens to acquire capabilities to become critical, informed participants in democratic processes is one place to begin to assert the public's right to learn. Some citizens are using websites to find and assess information about treatments for illness, about new skills and jobs, or simply for finding like-minded people. But many are unable to use the new media in these ways. This means that much human potential is being lost.

A rights-based approach to developing new media literacies will not spring from the market's invisible hand. Those supporting the cultural exchange model include participants in the open-source software movement, members of scientific research communities, and many of those engaged in cultural production. But so far, despite the millions of people who are online, there is not enough investment in internet developments to help promote the acquisition of new media literacies that are needed by all citizens. Extending and deepening all citizens' capabilities for critical discourse about the origins and validity of information provided on the internet should become an urgent policy priority.

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