

The background of the image is a complex, three-dimensional abstract pattern. It consists of numerous red, glossy spheres of varying sizes, some of which are interconnected by thick, curved, tube-like structures. The overall effect is a dense, textured surface that recedes into the distance, creating a sense of depth and complexity. The lighting is dramatic, with bright highlights on the spheres and deep shadows in the recesses, emphasizing the three-dimensional quality of the pattern.

ORIGIN

OF INFORMATION SOCIETY

Digital Divide and the Origin of Information Society

Ladies and Gentlemen, honored guests and participants,

I would like to start by offering my respects to the honored patron of the initiative that brought us all here to Azerbaijan - His Excellency Mr. Ilham Aliyev, President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. My most sincere thanks go to our hosts: the Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Ministry of Communications and Information Technologies; for the work they have put into organization of this Conference, their warm welcome and their excellent hospitality. Finally, I extend my gratitude to the organizers, partners and sponsors, as well as to all of you, dear friends attending this Conference.

Although the meaning of the term information society may vary, generally it is understood as a society of unlimited information availability and free, unrestricted, intensive networking. Information technologies are viewed as the most important set of tools that make it happen, and bridging the digital divide as the process that secures the emergence of the global information society.

Now, before I go any further, I would like to beg leave to conduct a little experiment. (Pause)

I would like to know how many of us here know the name of this hotel's doorman?

(Pause)

Well, I am pretty sure that all of us here would have something to say on what this valuable person needs to bridge the digital divide. All of us usual suspects - UN and its projects and programmes, The World Bank, numberless organizations worldwide - we all believe that we have the know-how, that we know what it takes to do it and how it should be done.

Three generic models, or their combinations, are usually adhered to:

1. Access to Technology and Infrastructure; that is provision of technology in terms of hardware, software and accessibility to appropriate internet connectivity and network solutions;
2. Access to Education and Support Structures; that is provision of skills required to operate the technology;
3. Appropriate Content; that is provision of locally relevant content that would make the technology appropriate for the local community.

In our quest towards the global information society case studies are conducted and best practices pronounced. E-readiness is measured and global experiences copy/pasted to local conditions.

It seems as though society is viewed almost deterministically - the same initial conditions are expected to produce the same outcome. The underlying notion seems to be that it should be

possible to make accurate long-term plans and predictions so long as one knows the starting conditions well enough.

Not surprisingly, though, the reality often contradicts all these efforts. Years are going by and the digital divide seems not to be diminishing. Quite obstinately it seems to be growing ever wider.

With dynamic systems such as societies two sets of similar initial conditions result in entirely different situations down the road. Just a small difference in the initial conditions drastically changes the long-term behavior of a system. This phenomenon, common to chaos theory, is also known as sensitive dependence on initial conditions.

Or in other words: The butterfly flaps its wings in New York and next year there are floods in India. Someone in MMF makes a decision today and Argentinian economy collapses tomorrow.

Chaos theory teaches us that:

First, there IS an underlying order in chaotic developments of the society, but still, the only predictions that we can make with any amount of certainty is about what may lie in the short-term.

Secondly, we have to be in a perpetual look-out, with our ear forever on the ground: looking, listening, assessing and correcting our assessments. It is like driving through uncharted territories. There is high price to be paid for arrogance. The only way to arrive safely from point A to point B is to search for, recognize and follow the tell-tale signs.

Still, even with those valuable lessons on how to travel the path on our minds, the gap is still gaping and the information society seems to be equally elusive.

In my belief, what we really need to be asking ourselves is not how to close the digital gap, but rather where the origin of information society lies. The source from whence it emerges. The *raison d'être* that perpetuates it? Because, only when we know what causes it, can we work towards establishing it.

This brings me to one interesting story:

One morning after his public lecture the Dalai Lama was walking along an outside patio on the way back to his hotel room, surrounded by his usual retinue. Noticing one of the hotel housekeeping staff standing by the elevators, he paused to ask her, "Where are you from?" For a moment she appeared taken aback. Then she smiled and answered shyly, "Mexico". He paused briefly to chat with her for a few moments and then walked on, leaving her with a look of excitement and pleasure on her face. The next morning, at the same time, she appeared at the same spot with another of the housekeeping staff, and the two of them greeted him warmly as he got into the elevator. The interaction was brief, but the two of them appeared flushed with happiness as they returned to work. Every day after that, they were joined by a few more of the housekeeping staff at the designated time and place, until by the end of the week there were dozens forming a receiving line that stretched along the length of the path that led to elevators.

Not surprisingly, His Holiness seems to be building bridges and closing those gaps quite successfully.

And in my belief this is so because, notwithstanding the need to secure technology and equipment where it is lacking, no amount of equipment, tools or technology will ever be able to produce the openness of mind and the willingness to communicate that are the true source of information society.

To close my presentation I would like to remind you that what changed Rome from a tribe that it was into a nation that it became was the first bridge that they built.

And our dear friend the doorman's name is Elvin.

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