Digital Divide in Digital Age

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Abstract

Hi-tech hypesters claim that the 'Digital Age' is vastly improving the lives and opportunities of people around the globe, while public-interest hand-wringers worry that it is creating a Digital Divide - an enormous and growing gap between the "technology-rich" and the "technology-poor," threatening social and economic stability and progress. Who is right? In this paper we intend to answer two questions first one being to what extent developing countries are active participants in today's global information economy? And the second question if there is a worrisome Digital Divide, how can corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts help to bridge it?

With millions of people in the world's poorest countries still excluded from the right to communicate, our primary goal should be that the society we build must be open and pluralistic -- one in which all people, in all countries, have access to information and knowledge. "*Helping all of the world's people to communicate,*" was an integral part of the Millennium Development Goals, agreed upon by Heads of State and Government at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000. In particular, the eighth Goal aimed "*to develop a global partnership for development*" and, "*in cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications technologies*". UNCTAD's Information Economy Report 2006 like its predecessors in the E-Commerce and Development series has been in the forefront of supporting the efforts of developing countries to overcome the challenges they face as they strive to narrow the digital divide.[1]

Governments, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and business groups have long been concerned about Digital Divide and how to bridge it. In business communities, the bridging efforts increasingly fall under the banner of CSR - an issue raised in a 2002 report of the European Commission that called on companies to integrate social, environmental and ethical concerns into the heart of their businesses: "companies must develop its sense of social responsibility."

The fight against exclusion requires energetic action. Reducing the "digital divide" therefore has to be one of the key objectives CSR. However, for CSR to be effective, the role of corporations in widening access to ICT in developing countries needs to be enhanced by creating an enabling legal environment which encourages corporations to assume digital social responsibilities. This role is presently inhibited by corporate laws which are often geared towards encouraging corporations to maximize their profits rather than to assume social responsibilities. The laws, especially those in Commonwealth African countries, are also complex and uncertain which makes it difficult for company directors to understand the extent to which they may assume social responsibilities. This paper contends that global initiatives geared towards bridging the digital divide could be enhanced by reforming corporate laws in order to recognize CSR and to allow companies operating at the community level to realize its benefits.

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[1] UNCTAD (2006) *Information Economy Report: The Development Perspective,* (UN: NY and Geneva)