



# Putting Information Back into the Information Economy

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A funny thing has happened on the way to the information society. We got sidetracked. We became distracted by the technology: mesmerized by the whiz-bang nature of the Internet. We forgot that information and knowledge are what improve people's lives and drive innovation. Computers, telecommunications equipment and software are tangible outputs of the process. They are also the facilitators and tools for development, utilization and communication of information and knowledge. That is why everyone buys them. But the social and technological innovation that spurs human growth and economic development comes from information and knowledge. And innovation is what drives economic growth and development.

Thus, my answer to the question of the most important policy issue is information policy – in the broadest sense.

Our traditional concept of “content” is part of my broad definition of information policy. Information must be made available and few, if any, restrictions placed on access to that information or to one another. As Vinton Cerf has eloquently stated, “the Internet is for everyone.”

This raises issues of censorship and lack of information freedom. It also raises questions about intellectual property rights. Private control over information can be used to cut off its access and availability. Payment for use of intellectual property is fine; discrimination and control over use is not. As has been said, the issue is “free” as in “free speech,” not “free beer.”

I include “applications” in my broadest definition of information policy. Applications are the use of content, or the way content is structured in order to be useful. Applications must be specifically useful in development and in rural areas. One exciting area is in education, where technology can be used to enhance both formal and experiential learning (a key point discussed below).

The power of advanced ICT is the combination of information and communications. Interaction – with both the information and the sources of information, i.e. other humans – is what makes this technology different. Thus, the potential for ICT as a learning tool is tremendous.

The interaction potential has another powerful characteristic. It allows users to become producers. ICT is not just a consumer technology; it is also a production technology. To be successful, telecenters must be more than access points. They must be production points and mechanisms to facilitate entrepreneurship and home-based businesses.

This is a more subtle point than simply using telecenters as code factories or website production points. If you ask professionals in the field of knowledge management – the folks in companies who design systems to capture and utilize knowledge – they will tell you the most important resource is tacit and social knowledge. It is also the hardest knowledge to get at because it is different. It is not formal “book” knowledge – the type created in universities and research institutes. It is what’s inside people’s heads (tacit) and shared collectively by the group (social). It is often experienced, not taught – transferred from one person to another by show-me more than by tell-me.

Tacit and social knowledge is key to successful economic development. It must be utilized in combination with formal knowledge. Yet, we tend to look toward the formal (“content”) and forget about the informal in making public policy.

The next phase of the Information Revolution is upon us. In this phase, we need to focus on utilization of technology, not just its creation. We need to focus on the value of information, not just on hardware and software. And we need to focus on informal and tacit knowledge as well as on formal and codified knowledge.

My policy initiative is to turn telecenters into learning centers – which can capture and harness local tacit and social knowledge for sustainable economic development.