



The World Today

The Caribbean and the Digital Divide (Part I)

Gale T C Rigobert

Assistant Lecturer, The UWI Graduate Institute of International Relations, UWI St. Augustine

There is a common view that adoption of Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) will stimulate economic growth and alleviate poverty. The United Nations (UN), through its respective agencies, is actively promoting the socio-economic benefits to be derived from harnessing ICTs. However, significant differences between the techno “haves” and techno “have-nots” remain. These have been described as the “technology gap” or more recently as the “digital divide”.

The “digital divide” represents a substantial asymmetry between two or more populations in the production, distribution and effective use of information and communication tools and services, and the varying abilities of these groups to employ ICTs for development purposes. Despite the rapid growth of the Internet and associated technologies, many organizations and individuals still remain unconnected to its benefits.

The reality depicted above dulls the expectation that due to the high mobility of ICT capital and knowledge intensity, the new techno-economic paradigm may offer opportunities to “*leap frog*” the stages of development.

In assessing the dimensions of the digital divide in the Caribbean, the focus is on the most significant factors determining technology production, diffusion and use. These are the access divide; skills divide; social capability divide; knowledge divide and the technology production divide, all of which inform the economic opportunity divide. A clear understanding of these respective divides makes more intelligible the complexity of an emerging dimension of the broader “development divide” which is of primary concern to the developing world, and indeed the Caribbean.

Techno-economic shifts in the global political economy have historically promised to improve the lives of the dispossessed. The optimistic pronouncements about the development potential of the emerging ICTs in the current techno-economic paradigm are no different. However, the reality in much of the developing world, including the Caribbean, is that socio-economic development hinges on what the technological optimists describe as the transformative capacity of ICTs. There are, however, a host of prerequisites, succinctly captured in the concept of “capacity building” that determine the level of preparedness in responding to and capitalizing on the emerging opportunities. This is precisely where the greatest challenge to countries in the region resides.

The real opportunity for bailing out of our peripheral woes is a direct function of the extent to which Caribbean countries can increase the value added of their products and services. Nowhere is this more evident than in the “new” economy or “knowledge” economy, where knowledge has become a very important factor of production. The challenge for developing economies on the cusp of the Internet age is how to create real value out of the technological revolution sweeping our globe. The significance of extracting *real* value must therefore be underscored.

The Caribbean must participate effectively in the digital economy to avoid losing out to its competitors. However, the region is plagued by a host of factors - both endogenous and exogenous - that hinder its ability to not only bridge the digital divide but also to participate fully and productively in the new economy. What is evident is that while there is no shortage of rhetoric on the potential of ICTs to jump-start Caribbean economies, not enough attention is being given to the coordination of efforts in ensuring that the fundamental prerequisites are established to facilitate the anticipated economic transition triggered by ICTs.

A national or regional e-development strategy must first seek to address these factors. Moreover, the governments of the region play a critical role in establishing a well-regulated enabling and competitive environment for harnessing ICTs. Institutions must be equipped to embrace a more proactive and creative role in the new economy, and must be well-suited to facilitate the diffusion of a new techno-economic paradigm. The feasibility of employing ICTs into the existing economic and productive structures of these economies is assumed and also grossly overestimated due to the current “mismatch” between the institutional best practice that dominated the last techno-economic paradigm and the new.

The persisting divide in the current techno-economic context is the most recent mutation of global capitalism. As in previous mutations the plight of the developing world remains unchanged at best, or even worse, entrenched. Diagnosis of the digital divide has of necessity to be true to this most recent degenerative condition of world capitalism.

The emerging global competitive framework seems more unforgiving and unrelenting than seen previously, hence raising serious doubts about the feasibility of “leapfrogging”. The Caribbean has neither the infrastructure nor the institutions that it needs to compete successfully in the new economy. One can only hope that as ICTs assume a more critical role in global production and consumption that the region will not be relegated to the *external zone* of the global political economy. At best therefore, the region has to employ its resources to ensure that it is not further marginalized and impoverished in a changing global environment that is placing an increasing emphasis on ICTs. *This is the Part I of a series by this author.*