

Cultural Diversity as Human Capital

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Abstract. This paper is based on two recent reports for the STOA Unit of the European Parliament, on the relationship between Cultural Diversity and the Information Society. An analysis of the current crisis of consensus in Europe, further radicalised by a set of recent events, highlights how cultural diversity has become a central political issue. The argument then sustains that the Information Society can and should be an opportunity to valorise cultural diversity as a key asset and important component of Europe's collective human capital. Policies to promote cultural diversity in the Information Society need to shift from an industrial policy orientation to one based on social innovation, and focus evenly on the major elements of communicational capability – access, competence and motivation – mainly by intervening on the dynamics of technical literacy, cultural literacy and collective creativity.

1. Introduction

This paper integrates the main findings of two studies commissioned by the STOA Unit (Scientific and Technological Options Assessment) in the Directorate-General for Research of the European Parliament, on request by the Parliament's Committee on Culture, Youth, Education, the Media and Sport.

Both studies were carried out by an international research team co-ordinated by Jesse Marsh of Atelier and including Eric Barchechath (Paris, France), Thanos Contargyris (Athens, Greece), Matti Penttila (Helsinki, Finland) and Maggie Symonds (Cromarty, Scotland). This group was assembled on the basis of common criteria: a) previous work on information society issues; b) common research experience with at least two other members; and c) diversity of cultural backgrounds including personal multi-cultural life histories.

At the base of the methodology for both studies was a series of two-day brainstorming sessions interspersed with distance collaboration. The first project “Communications, culture and access to new information resources: an assessment of cultural and technological obstacles to Europe's transformation into an information society” was a 6-month effort that integrated the brainstorming approach with group feedback sessions, in-depth interviews, and open discussions with 47 external experts from 19 different national/cultural backgrounds. These experts were selected by the research team members on the basis of professional contacts and experience, as a reflection of the diversity of the core team itself. The synthesis of this work is presented in the report, “Cultural Diversity and the Information Society: Policy Options and Technological Issues” [1].

The second project's objective was to update a 1999 STOA study entitled “Cultural Diversity in the New Media” [2] in the light of two July 2001 studies: the above report and a third one on “Globalisation of the Media Industry and Possible Threats to Cultural Diversity” [3]. Again, a brainstorming session of the research team was held to develop new synthetic frameworks and policy options on the basis of the comparative analysis of the three studies. These outcomes are set forth in a draft report [4] presented to the Parliament Committee on May 23rd, together with the first Atelier study.

As the work of the two projects has been more political than technical in nature, the following pages focus on the insights, frameworks and policy recommendations developed rather than on technical or methodological aspects.

In general, we can say that the dynamics relating cultural diversity and the information society are driven by a bottom-up (which is where the link happens) rather than a top-down perspective. As an example, one could proudly refer to European cultural diversity by pointing to, say, the specific regional characteristics of Lapland, Flanders or Sicily. From a bottom-up perspective, however, cultural diversity only occurs when someone from Flanders *engages in communication* with another culture (for better or worse), be it Lapland or Turkey. Such an approach is indeed appropriate when the other half of the equation is the information society, which introduces radical changes in the way we communicate, resulting in entirely new social and institutional structures.

What has to be addressed is thus not only how cultural diversity can be an obstacle in the information society, but also *how new technologies can transform cultural diversity into an asset rather than a barrier as a function of how people act creatively in response to current conditions and opportunities.*

2. Cultural Identity and the Crisis of Consensus

Citizens around the world are becoming increasingly concerned about the way accelerating processes of globalisation and technological innovation are leading to cultural homogenisation and immense concentrations of financial power. As the opportunity gap between the top and bottom 20% at every geographical scale widens, the message seems to be "learn English and buy a computer or you're out." In Europe, this concern takes a particular dimension given the richness of its cultural heritage and diversity: the first seems to become increasingly commercialised while the second lives under a growing threat.

In this context, policy-makers are in a bind. On the one hand, liberalisation, privatisation and the deployment of the necessary infrastructures for the information society seem to be minimum requirements for at least survival in a competitive global economy. This is the approach that characterises most EU information society initiatives, from the Bangemann report to eEurope and beyond. On the other hand, by doing so, policy-makers appear to be in collusion with the industrial interests that, in the view of Europe's citizens, are arrogantly threatening their cultural identity, if not their lives.

2.1 Confronting the Unbelievable

Despite policy efforts to counter-balance these trends, the crisis of consensus is growing, fuelled by a series of events that have unfolded in the period since 1999. Those listed below all have to do with: a) cultural diversity; b) globalisation; and/or c) the information society.

- *The incredible growth of the "dot coms" and their Venture Capital Funds*, until the bubble bursted radically in mid 2000, with market capitalization falling from 8 to 2 trillion dollars. Here it is worth citing Mattelart's argument [5] that the Information Society is neither a historical trend nor a fact, but a simple rhetorical construction.
- *The Y2K non-event*. We were warned by all the information technology specialists that disasters would happen on the first of January 2000 due to obscure problems with programming languages that only retired computer experts remembered how to make work. Instead, practically nothing happened; yet the collective awareness wondered about the potential fragility of the whole technological infrastructure behind everything from air travel to sewers and elevators.

- *The rise of the no-global movement.* Starting in Seattle as a protest event, a broadly based social movement gathered force through successive meetings in Nice, Gotenburg, Naples, etc. to culminate in the scandalous breakout of violence at the G8 meeting in Genoa, July 2001. The message, synthesized in Naomi Klein's *No Logo* [6], can be summed up as an invitation to look beyond the merely financial and economic aspects of globalisation.
- *The 11 September attacks on the World Trade Towers.* Perhaps the most unbelievable event of all, for two reasons: a) the virtual terror constructions of the American film industry became mixed with the media-intensive truth of CNN, creating a short-circuit of believability; and b) three ceramic-blade cutters were demonstrated to be about as powerful as an atomic bomb, creating a short-circuit in the notions of national and personal security.
- *The sequence of collapsing giants: Enron, Kirch, Anderson, Vivendi...* Few had heard of Enron until it filed for Chapter 11; now it is the biggest bankruptcy in American history (for the moment). The accounting tricks and conflicts of interest call into question the American system of capitalism and the ethical foundations upon which the savings of 60% of its citizens is based. The fall of Kirch and Vivendi in particular reveal the fragility of the European media industry, where film rights, F1, football matches and pop singers all belonging more to the sphere of finance than culture.
- *The success of xenophobic parties throughout Europe.* It started with Umberto Bossi of Italy's Lega Nord, began to seem serious with Jorg Haider's entry in the government of Austria. But the second-place showings of Le Pen in France and Pim Fortuyn in Holland denounce a widespread uneasiness with immigrants, as well as an alarm signal to politicians currently in power that such uneasiness is not being understood.

2.2 The Political Impact

The above events have led to a generalized political impact on all the dimensions that invest the question of cultural diversity: economic, social, technical and cultural.

- *Economic impact*
There is by now a realization that globalisation does not necessarily have to be a purely economical, financial and market-driven phenomenon. People are searching for new possible – and more positive – value-based dimensions of globalisation. This in turn calls into question the narrow view of economics (“narronomics”) that only sees monetised transactions countable through GNP and similar instruments as being significant indicators of progress, quality of life, etc. [7]
- *Social impact*
The main social impact has been the emergence of self-organised communities of interest, partly as a reflection of growing distrust in the ability of established political structures to interpret needs. The early on-line communities (including the first green movements of the '70s) provided a model that has been adopted at both the global level (e.g. attac) and the local level.
- *Technical impact*
Here, there is a paradoxical trend occurring. On the one hand, the main response to generalised fear is an increase in technology: satellites, airport controls, monitors are all supposed to reassure us. On the other, the fragility of technology, or more properly human-technical systems, is increasingly apparent: we depend too much on technological systems that will never be 100% secure.

- *Cultural impact*

That cultural dominance is both a tool for and an expression of power has moved from backstage financial manoeuvring to front-page bombing attacks. If the first was leading to a gradual reduction of cultural “bio-diversity”, the second is simply increasing fanaticism on all sides with no apparent counter-balancing mechanism.

3. Cultural Diversity as an Asset

As discussed above, the prevailing perception by now is that the economic forces of globalisation pose a serious threat to cultural identity. Information technologies are not only the tools that accelerate the pace of globalisation, they are also becoming the key means of access to any product or service [8]. One could thus argue that cultural diversity – meaning any characteristic that does not conform to the homogenised target of the marketing experts (despite claims of “glocalised customisation”) – is an obstacle, particularly if that diversity includes the 97% of the world population with no access to the Internet. In this context, the main aim of our work has been to examine the relationship between cultural diversity and the information society, in order to identify the potential conditions for a more sustainable future with “cultural bio-diversity” as a key dimension of sustainability.

3.1 Cultural Diversity and the Information Society

As a first step, a simple matrix can be used to define our basic problem space along two axes: **cultural diversity** seen as an *obstacle* and/or an *asset* in the information society; conversely, the **information society** seen as a *threat* and/or an *opportunity* for cultural diversity. This gives rise to four non-exclusive stances:

- *Defensive Entrenchment*, a neo-Luddite position leading to isolation and communicational breakdown: information society “drop-outs”
- *Compliant Homogeneity*, the “learn English and buy a computer” stance characterising at least part of most national Information Society Action Plans.
- *Subtle Differentiation*, a critical stance aware of the potential drawbacks of new technologies even as they valorise cultural diversity.
- *Networked Interculturality*, the position essentially coinciding with the desired outcome.

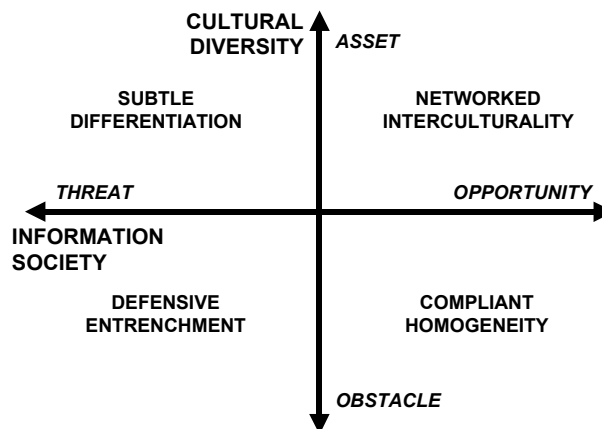


Figure 1. Cultural Diversity and the Information Society

Using this framework as a reference, the first STOA study incorporated an evaluation of the two axes into the expert interview questionnaire; we also asked the experts to express an opinion concerning “what you think people think”. The outcome was surprising: for each

axis, experts tended to provide a relatively optimistic view (asset/opportunity) for themselves, and then sustain that people think the opposite (obstacle/threat). One asks then: what do the experts have that “people” don’t? The answer is actually quite simple: being “experts” in the field of cultural diversity and/or the information society, our interviewees were generally a) knowledgeable about other cultures if not multi-cultural and b) well-versed in the evaluation and usage of information and communication technologies. In short, they are confident about their cultural position and able to communicate effectively with peoples from other cultures. They are also aware that most people are not so fortunate.

3.2 Cultural Diversity and Communication

A central issue that emerges is thus not only access to new information and communications technologies, but also the capability – for peoples of different cultures – to manipulate new media in order to participate actively in communicational exchange. Marja-Liisa Viheraa [9] of Sonera describes communicational capability as combining *access*, *motivation* and *competence*. In any exchange, if one of these elements is lacking communication can not take place.

A wide-ranging survey in Finland identified the indices for each element and the correlations between them. Access had a relatively low index, but with a strong correlation with competence; while motivation had the highest index, there was a low correlation with both access and competence. We thus asked the experts of the first study to discuss the relative role of each component, and the result was practically equal votes, with the highest rating for motivation.

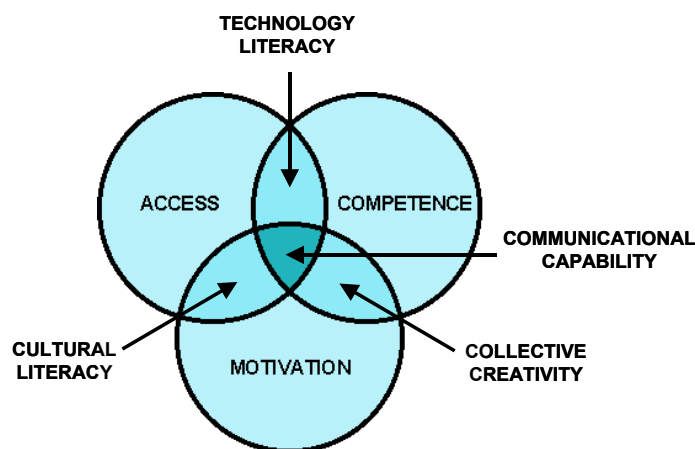


Figure 2. Elements of Communicational Capability

Each of the three components is thus essential, although policy actions primarily tend to target access (the main thrust of eEurope), with competence as a second priority and little attention paid to motivation. We argue not only that each requires equal attention, but that *policy can more fruitfully act on the correlations between the three pairs rather than on the single components*. As illustrated in Figure 2 above, we have defined these as: technology literacy, cultural literacy and collective creativity. The following section takes a closer look at the implications of such an approach.

4. Building Human Capital

We could synthesize our main strategy for maximizing human capital through cultural diversity as *empowering citizens and communities of whatever culture to engage in communicational interaction based on mutual respect*. The information society constitutes

an ideal context for implementation of this strategy, especially if we consider technology from an anthropological standpoint, i.e. as a social construction of practice and usage, rather than as a mere set of functional artifacts. From a policy standpoint, however, what is required is to *balance the prevailing industrial policy approach to both culture and the information society with one based on social innovation*.

How to do so is not entirely clear for anyone, although some recent developments point to possible directions for action. As an example, we develop approaches for each of the three components identified above – technical literacy, cultural literacy and collective creativity – in a comparison between the industrial policy stance and one based on social innovation.

4.1 Technical Literacy

Technical literacy stands at the intersection of Access and Competence, which currently constitute (separately) the two main information society priorities in Europe. From an industrial policy stance, the main concern is to close “gaps” in individual opportunities for access and skills in the most technically efficient manner. Specific policy recommendations within this logic include:

- Emphasis on vocational skills and individual development in educational policy (e.g. European Computer Driving License)
- Equipping all institutions with the required infrastructures, and providing public access in appropriate contexts.
- Placing specific information society decisions in the hands of industry “experts”.

From a social innovation stance, the emphasis would rather be on building human capital by taking advantage of existing competencies and facilities in order to focus on technology as a means of socialization. Here, policy recommendation might include:

- Encouraging “shared interaction spaces”, where devices are used by groups of people who learn from each other (e.g. University students coaching the elderly)
- Promoting coached public access to infrastructures where they already exist (schools, public offices, social centers, etc.) through programs at the local level.
- Local programs for citizen participation in defining information society strategies, in parallel with inter-regional co-operation and knowledge sharing.

4.2 Cultural Literacy

Cultural literacy (*alphabétisme culturelle*) is a term appearing ever more frequently, and refers to the ability of an individual (or perhaps community) to critically relate to another culture in a positive way. This means learning from both similarities and differences, being able to reject some aspects and accept others. Prevailing policy approaches, however, seem to emphasize the production and distribution of information about a given culture (“content”), without asking whether anybody understands or learns from it (human capital formation). Indeed, the industrial policy orientation depends on incentives and legal constraints to influence culture industry markets, with initiatives such as:

- Responding to citizens’ needs for cultural identity/security with “protection”: options range from broadcasting quotas to immigration quotas to airport security control.
- Financing local and linguistic “cultural industries”, from regional TV broadcasters to decentralized multimedia production centers.
- Digitalization of culturally-specific content and heritage as a means of preserving and distributing collective cultural “memories” through new media.

The social innovation stance, by contrast, aims to promote inter-cultural interaction and mutual understanding and respect. It might respond to the above issues with the following strategies:

- Responding to identity/security needs through reciprocal trust-building, from promoting cultural “imports” to opening “awareness centers” for immigrants to “tell their story”.
- Promoting nomadic open access as a means of supporting inter-cultural communication: multilingual local WAP services, open Wireless LAN services, etc.
- Supporting the development of new dynamic cultural memories (e.g. Algerian-French pop music) and inter-lingual support for peer-to-peer exchanges of cultural expressions.

4.3 Collective Creativity

Collective creativity is of great importance if we are aiming for a shift towards a policy of social innovation. Particularly if we consider technologies as socially constructed, then the building of an information society most appropriate to a given community will depend more on the collective creativity of its social and economic individuals and organisations than on the actual availability of state-of-the-art infrastructures.

In a study for the City of Helsinki [10], Charles Landry of Comedia identifies *creativity of milieu* as a multi-dimensional attribute of a physical place such as a region, a city or a neighbourhood. A causal link is identified between the vitality of creative and artistic activity, the availability of public spaces for interaction and non-programmed encounters, and the degree of innovativeness of local enterprises. Similar concepts can be applied to Internet-based networked communities – “civil networks” – and the practice and principles of the Open Source movement [11] [12]. In this context, there is a rather stark contrast between the industrial policy stance and strategies based on social innovation. The former tends to promote creativity by protecting intellectual and artistic rights as well as opportunities for commercial exploitation. Initiatives include:

- Defining new legal frameworks (technical standards included) for each emerging technology, to insure copyright protection.
- Subsidized “art centers” with a specific mono-functional orientation towards local cultural industries, especially multimedia.
- Adoption, within all European Union structures, of software systems that are bound by copyright laws.

A social innovation stance would instead start with a critical review of the role of copyright in contributing to human capital, in parallel with a serious reassessment of the potential of Copyleft, Open Source and similar approaches. Specific measures might include:

- Provision of legal and operational support for Open Source collaboration, and the extension of Copyleft principles to other fields of creative activity (arts, patents, etc.)
- Integration of creative activities in local development initiatives, including cross-fertilization of social creativity in practice and daily life.
- Legislation requiring public institutions at all levels to utilize Open Source products where feasible and competitive.

6. Conclusions

The forces of globalisation, the accelerating pace of information society developments and increasing cultural tensions throughout the globe all pose significant new challenges for

policy-makers. Building on fear of the “other” in order to gain political consensus is easy, just as counting on policy implementation dictated by industrial lobbies. Maximising the value of cultural diversity as a key contributor towards building human capital is not easy. Sooner or later however, some sort of believable and sustainable policy response must be given to Europe’s citizens.

The issue at hand is quite serious. Over the coming years European integration is taking on the challenges of enlargement towards both the Eastern European and Mediterranean countries. But citizens’ perceptions that political institutions can only achieve these goals by sacrificing their own cultural identity risks leading to an exponential growth of intolerance, separatism and racism based on fear, as is already happening in many nation states.

Perhaps it is most appropriate to conclude with the main Key Statement upon which the recommendations of the first Atelier study are based:

*“Europe needs to develop a clear and verifiable model of a **sustainable information society based on cultural diversity as an asset and cultural literacy as a main vehicle for development.** Such a model would help create consensus among Europe’s citizens in responding creatively to forces such as globalisation and immigration. In addition, it can be put forth as an example to other world regions in a “win-win” approach to world governance and in support of EU positions at global negotiation tables.”*

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