

# Internet: The Electronic Apartheid?

By Alfonso GUMUCIO DAGRON

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Internet has been largely idealized as the new technology that will unite the whole world by the magic of computers. Few seem to realize that it has actually become the newest form of apartheid, an “electronic apartheid” bigger than any other form of discrimination as it pretends to cover the whole world. Whoever doesn’t read, speak and write English is out of the game, segregated, banned, and sent straight to the ghettos of Spanish, Hindi, French, Mandarin or any other underrepresented language. The “official” language of Internet has become the new skin colour of cultural supremacy and cultural domination at its best.

What are we doing about it? Why is it that there are so few even discussing the issue? For too many in North America it is just “natural” that everybody else should communicate in English, no one bothers about considering the implications of it. Globalisation at its best: “It’s here, so we can’t do nothing about it”. How convenient!

Is it fair that everybody in the rest of the world has to learn English in order to be part of the “electronic democracy”? Organizations in developing countries spend their time and energy “translating” web contents to local languages with the hope that Internet will eventually help people to sense that they are part of a modern society. We have seen computers and Internet connections pushed into rural areas where not even potable water is available, in the name of an ill defined “right to knowledge” -as if knowledge was only a privilege of industrialized societies graciously given to the “poor” via new “access” technologies.

The large majority of the population in countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America do not read or speak English. English might be at 90% the main language of Internet, but it is far from being the main mother tongue in our diverse world. It would be too easy to say, for example: “They speak English in India, don’t they?” Sure, go and check. Not even cabdrivers in Delhi manage well with English, let alone the billion that has no contact with the eleven million of English second language speakers in India. All the same for African countries like Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania or any other. In the “English speaking countries” and former British colonies the majority of the population do not speak let alone read and write English. Take Latin America, a whole continent struggling to be part of the “electronic democracy”. In the Internet world even Spanish and Mandarin

-larger than English in the real world<sup>1</sup>, look like small and nearly extinguished tribes.

Though idealized as a worldwide communication tool, up to now Internet mainly serves those that speak English. However English is just one side of the problem. Internet is currently promoted as a tool for development, which it isn't in a relevant scale, at least not yet in developing countries. There have been conferences and much talk about "rural telecommunications" and too many computers are parachuted in rural areas of Sri Lanka, Mali or Guatemala. Who will use them? Who will benefit from this patronizing trend? Do people really desire to have access to the Internet, when they have no access to telephone, to electricity or safe water? Isn't it an enormous contradiction? Of course it is, but some international travellers feel so good when they arrive to the most isolated village of Uganda or The Philippines with a laptop under their arm, just to show the magic box in action -as the Spaniards used shinny mirrors to subdue the Incas or the Aztecs during the Conquest of America.

When I first coined the term "electronic apartheid" and launched it through Internet while participating in a web-based debate, the reactions were interesting. Someone reacted arguing that English was the "fluid" that really made Internet

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<sup>1</sup> "Ethnologue" lists 6,500 living languages in the world. Mandarin comes first with 885 million speakers, Spanish is second with 332 million speakers and English is third with 322 millions speakers.

possible. I guess he was referring to the “right blood” needed to make the system function.

Other participants reacted defensively: “we are the ones giving out to the world this incredible technology, so take it or leave it”. In other words, everyone has to catch up or be left aside. Somehow it reminded me of those cultures where weak and sick babies were thrown to the sea in order to spare society from the burden of taking care of them.

A few reactions were condescending: “Do not worry; we will get to your problem soon. In the future there will be software that will automatically translate web contents to other languages”. Sure, we have some already and they are getting better, but a technical solution does not evacuate the cultural problem.

Finally I read some optimistic reactions: “cultures will survive because they have strong human values, no matter how wide is the penetration of the US-loaded Internet”. Well, maybe not.

The truth is that many cultures have already disappeared or are right now disappearing under our own eyes. Not that Internet is to blame; actually it is not that powerful yet and has not expanded that much among traditional cultures. But cultures are suffering from other uneven interactions in the cultural arena. Radio, television, music and above all consumer products and the advertising that comes with it are shaping societies and cultures as fertile ground for the

commercial expansion. Anyone that has worked in developing countries has seen things changing in recent years and the trend can't be more powerful now that globalisation is the flavour of the day. The more optimistic prospect for many cultures is to become enclaves for tourists, protected cultural areas preserved in a glass box, with no oxygen, as it happened in the US with many of the original nations or "tribes". Of course, it worries that in countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, we are not talking only about tribes but cultures that involve the majority of the population.

History has taught us that it is healthy for cultures to mix and evolve through interaction. No great culture has remained a "pure" culture. The most important societies have borrowed and have shared; cultural interactions are responsible for some of the highlights of the advancement of humanity. But the electronic age has made the terms of "cultural exchange" far too imbalanced, so uneven as those that characterise today the commercial exchanges. The rules of the game are dictated unilaterally. Cultures already weakened and divided (nowadays too often by ubiquitous religious denominations and sects) are easily wiped out by the tidal waves of open market. The vision of a world where everyone will have "access" to the same hamburgers or the same bottled black water is actually very frightening, but that is certainly the trend. The paradox is that capitalism doesn't need to behave imperialist, every body else is contributing to do the dirty work, including academics, scientists, media people and myself by

doing the effort to write this piece in English. I'm also playing the game.

The current progress in Internet technology and usage does not really represent any effort to provide room for other cultural expressions. It is not just the problem of language; when we say "language" we are referring to the whole culture behind. Software that mechanically translates from English to Chinese or the other way around cannot deal with that. To be honest, we better not talk yet about Internet "building democracy" or "expanding the borders of knowledge" until the expansion happens not only in terms of technology, but also in terms of relevant contents and balanced cultural representation. The technological revolution has blinded many, both in the industrialized nations and in developing countries. The fascination of easy access to the rest of the world has obscured the question of who has access and which are the benefits and risks.

One of the illusions of Internet is that it has no central management. Actually it has; just look at the contents. Money rules. What is actually happening today with Internet, already happened before with cable and satellite television. Years ago some thought that satellite and cable TV would bring a better choice of programmes and more diversity of information to the world. Today we know it only helped to impose one point of view, one way of life, one way of looking at society and reality... 24 hours a day! The same corporations that regulate the lives of people in industrialized countries have captured Internet. We all have to

navigate through the most incredible labyrinths to find an oasis that is really worth.

I am aware of the potential of Internet, as I am one of those privileged people in the world that: 1. Have electricity, 2. Have a phone line, 3. Have a computer, 4. Have enough to pay Internet, and 5. Reads and writes English (painfully sometimes). But I don't want any kind of Internet, and that is precisely what we have now, any kind with no quality. The same as for television, quantity reigns largely over quality.

The ideal of a worldwide democratic society where all voices and all cultural differences are equally respected and cherished is obviously not shared by those who are too comfortably installed in a world dominated by a few. Democracy in real life or in cyberspace is not something that comes automatically just because the technology has improved or the right time has come. For a better world or a better Internet many will have to struggle. Maybe communities in the Third World and consumer associations in the industrialized countries will eventually and hopefully organize themselves to stop the development of Internet as an instrument of commerce and advertising. It seems so normal right now to have a screen full of adds and business offers that nobody seems to realize how horrible would be to see, for example, all those banners and links surrounding an exhibit of Boticelli in Florence or saturating the image of a film by Buñuel. Why are we so compliant to take so much electronic garbage at once? Where is the limit?

The word “free” in English has been unfortunately corrupted and Internet is projecting it to worldwide dimensions: “fat free” food, “free gift if you click here”, “free access”... As if the word had been created by merchants. How much better would be to use the word free for freedom. Freedom to take advantage of Internet, the real liberty to choose the contents and the usage, instead of just following the millions of clones (Internet “Dollys”), that are clicking the same icons, directed to the same search engines, the same sites, the same pages, as if genetically pre-programmed.

How beautiful would be to have the “Eight Art” emerging from Internet, something so new and innovative and culturally adaptable that can repeat the extraordinary feat of the other seven arts and help humanity to leap forward.

Nobody will deny that Internet is a great advancement and that has an enormous potential. But this is the time to make it work for the whole world and not just as the point-of-lance of globalisation. The question of the electronic apartheid has to be taken into consideration with open minds and less arrogant attitudes. The issue here is not only how to be successful in selling technology -business as usual, to the Third World. The challenge is to shape Internet as a tool for democracy and development, for participation and cultural identity.





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