

New Information Technologies: An illusion of equity

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1 THE IMPORTANCE OF INFORMATION

The access to social, cultural, sportive, educational and sanitary information is primordial.

Since the eighteenth century, information is based on anthropocentric conception.

On behalf of equality and freedom, information has to be accessible to each citizen as a mean to know and to act.

Thus, in France since 1748, information is acknowledged as a guarantor of the republic.

The citizen is not forced to obey without understanding and without judging.

Otherwise, since the Human Rights Declaration (1948), information is considered as a guarantor of individual rights.

The citizen has the right to choose his opinion and above all, the right to seek and receive all the informations without caring about frontiers or financial means.

Information is essential to the opening up of man.

It is important to the entire society as well.

Kant and Rawls consider that information is common to the citizen all together and allow them to gather around common values, which are necessary to the stability of the society.

Information was although a determining factor in the urban organisation.

This one was based on conglomeration principle, for optimisation of the exchanges.

J.Audoin says « The antic city articulated in the agora, the market and the exchanges of informations in a territory accessible to all speakers ».

As we can see, information has a very important role for man, society and space.

It was diffused in a formative goal : everyone could access to it.

2 INFORMATION RARETY : MANY SPATIAL DISPARITIES IN FRANCE

The liberalisation of information cast doubt over that principle and that of public utilities (facilitates the access of everyone to information).

France is from now on marquée by deep social disparities in informatical facilities (schools, hospitals, librairies...).

In France, Paris have still the first place concerning information. Information offer and its quality are better in Paris than in the rest of the country.

We can find these disparities in different levels of urban framework.

At « regional » level, the doctors density per 100 000 inhabitants variates to 197 in Picardie to 348 in Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur, symbole of a neat cut in France, to the detriment of the north.

But nevertheless, north is historically marquée by serious pathologies.

At the « departement » level, distances between home and the first high school can be more than 53 kilometers.

And, at the local level, the distances to access to the elementary facilities can reach 100 kilometers in the mountainous areas.

Faced with these disparities, it was the following debate : how to restore a good access to information for everyone ?

French government was inclined to favor the establishment of an egalitary access to information for everybody. The last Pasqua's law is a good illustration. It says that each point in the country should be at less than 50 kilometers from a high way or train station.

But faced with the difficult applicability of that principle (birth of liberalism, law of the strongest, inadequacy between the offer and the needs...), we take more interest in the principle of equity.

The new maps of publics utilities (schémas de services collectifs) of D. Voynet prove that. They aim to organize the public utilities development to the real needs. In fact, their purpose is to facilitate the effective access to information instead of its technical access.

3 THE N.I.T.: A NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR TERRITORIES?

But since the advent of New Information Technologies, the debate has been called into question.

3.1 An important technical potential

Dematerializing information, New Information Technologies free it from all spacial constraints and make it accessible from everywhere.

Thus, they allow spacial equality and give hope of social equity.

N.I.T allow urban development to prove that each area has its own interest and that those areas have to give to those who want to leave and work there a good environment.

Theoretically, N.I.T. put an end to all spacial disparities.

That is in this aim that french government has launched different national programs to equip territory with informatic facilities.

Thus, 73 % of french high schools are equipped with net-computer, 62 % of public libraries are computerized and link themselves progressively to the net. 200 000 doctors have taken a subscription for the « Réseau de Santé Sociale », which is a network that links different sanitary professionals.

Several successful local experiences (setting up of multiservices shops bringing together elementary utilities (food) and new utilities (postal relay, netcomputer)) take over from the governmental initiatives.

3.2 An insufficient and unequal social appropriation

But the access to the information is not only its technical access.

There are other criterions which condition the effective access to information. Though physical obstacles have been removed, social obstacles persist.

Those can be sum up in three points :

3.2.1 The access to the immaterial information depends on the same factors than those which concern the access to material information and which create social and economical inequalities

The computer equipment is linked to social category (in 1998, more than half of managerial staff were equipped with computers against 6 % of farmers), to standard of living (in may 1999, 40 % of the 20 % richest households were equipped with computers against 11 % of the 20 % poorest ones), and to cultural resources (the equipment rate is 36 % when the housholder has been to university and less than 5 % when he stopped in middle school).

That means that information is theoretically accessible to everyone from everywhere but that the means of access remain unequal.

Otherwise, immaterial information allowed by the N.I.T. could be the source of new social inequalities.

There are many obstacles to the realisation of social equity.

- Firsts are linked to language. In France, in 1995, we counted 11 % of illiterates. How this consequent part of population could access to immaterial information ?
- Otherwise, the multiplication of metalanguages (own languages of specific populations) constitutes another real worry to real access to information. The details of linguistic changes are social and geographic. They affect remote rural area (« patois ») and the interstitial areas in the city (metalanguages).

In these ones, since the emphasizing of social and spatial disparities, the wish of social differentiation has produce a linguistic differentiation.

Thus, these metalanguages are the source of serious problems of social integration.

Labov, who studies the school failure causes of Harlem young blacks, says « the main cause is that culture, environment and school values have no influence on attitudes which are deep rooted in street culture. The school failure of those youngs is explainable by a linguistic difference which is not taken into account at school ».

Considering this conclusion, how internet, which uses the official language, can make the information accessible for metalanguages speaking people ?

3.2.2 The second kind of obstacle is created by man

The internet imposes a unique diagramme of mental structuring which a lot of people cannot use.

In this case, internet is a new factor of social inequity.

3.2.3 The last obstacles are a matter for competence

In may 1998, only 46 % of french people know how to use a computer. 75 % of them learned at school. It is called « illectronism ».

Otherwise, thanks to the N.I.T and to the data banks, information is no more rare but plentiful. It is wanted like the immediate mean to know everything about anything.

Too many informations can be the source of disinformation and new social differences.

Beyond the access code, the « how to choose ? » and the « how to sort out ? » are two of the most advanced intellectual fonction.

Due to the fact it is family and not school origin, inequity is significantly strengthened.

But especially, the consequences of the immaterial information development could sooner or later call into question social link and social opening out.

We thought N.I.T could substitute datas transfer for physical moving. But that is not the case due to the fact that individual needs civility and to move.

On the contrary, virtual moves create more real movings than they have put an end to them.

Moreover, individuals reclaim contact and human presence.

A regained proximity could probably be a solution for the struggle against exclusion and loneliness provoked by the N.I.T development.

Nowadays, the no-consideration of need for proximity, due to the N.I.T existence, fix a large part of population to territory.

We can also fear the lack of links and meetings areas between those who can access to N.I.T and who consider territory as a second home and those who are fixed to territory and who are moved back into poorness areas.

So, the lack of proximity is source of exclusion.

By the way, we can underline the impact of N.I.T on city.

Traditionnal city was concieved on the conglomeration principle. Since the birth of N.I.T, they have theoretically no more reason for being.

They would be replaced by a new urbanity form, a new kind of urban society which would be of huge scale and more and more independent of the city.

We can no more ignore the risk of an emergence of a social gap.

In France, the social duality is strengthened by a demand politic, impulsed by the information distributors.

The « one to one » (D. Wolton) lead to messages segmentation public to public. That leads to an increase of the information cost and a strengthening of social and spacial inequalities.

What will be the social cement of the twenty first century without the sharing of common values ?

The problem is that those differences are rooted in territory and threaten society to implose.

Each social category took over specific area. This appropriation is voluntary for the richest and under constraint for the poorest.

The twenty first century challenge is not information at all costs but number management and society and communities cohesion which will take place in a democratic and opened framework.

That follows the reflexion about territorial and social cohesion started during the european summit in Lisbon (23/03/2000) and written in the Amsterdam treaty (article 7 D).