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Information Divide, Information Flow and Global Justice

Abstract:

There is a significant information divide between the countries in the North and those in the South. This is detrimental to economic growth as information feeds into knowledge production. The divide is exacerbated by a series of uneven and unjust flows of information between the North and the South. Two related patterns of the unjust flow are explored, namely the flow of biological resources and information and the flow of rare manuscripts and published materials. I argue that the concept of global justice is an appropriate tool to comprehend the situation; this is an addition to those offered in Britz and Lor (2003). Furthermore I discuss the need for increasing intra-South information flow. This will strengthen the Southern countries as a whole, since the flow will link the countries together so they have a stronger voice and chances to learn from one another directly.

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Information has become a precious resource. It is commonly known that today's economy is being driven by knowledge and information, and that today's advanced technologies in many fields are deeply infused with information. However, it is also well known that this type of information lies mostly in the hands of those in the highly developed western countries, who generate the information to serve the needs of their industries and enterprises through basic and applied research. These industries in turn feed the economies of these countries, which come back to provide more funding for further research. Thus a cycle has developed whereby the industrialized economies are able to sustain their pace of economic progress.

On the other hand, the countries and economies in the developing world do not seem to fare as well. What is happening is that the same kind of virtuous cycle that has already taken place in the developed world has largely not found its way to get started yet. And the key to this non-starting is the apparent lack of information. Without effective research and development facilities and infrastructure, the countries in the developing world seems to lack a mean of generating information and knowledge that is necessary to fuel their own industries. Without these industries there is little that these countries can rely on in order to provide their own funding for research and development.

I would like to call this situation an 'information divide.' It is broader than what is commonly known as the digital divide in that the latter is focused more on the actual access to information technology and the global computer network, whereas the information divide here is more a matter of a society's capability of generating their own information that could be harnessed in their economic development. The digital divide as commonly known is then only a part of the wider information divide, and many scholars have agreed that a way to solve the digital divide problem is to increase the flow of information. Nonetheless, there are some serious problems about this, most notably involving certain types of injustice that are involved in the flow of information, especially between the North and South.

What I aim to do in the paper, then, is to lay out a conceptual map for the whole issue, firstly by outlining the ethical issues involved, then providing some conceptual clarifications—it is clear that the very concept of information needs to be clarified. I contend that the concept of global justice is necessary as a tool to understand the situation where there is a disparity and injustice in the flow of information. Then I conclude by suggesting some concrete means by which this information gap can be reduced.

As for the first part on the ethical conception, I argue that the disparity in information between the developed and developing world is not simply a matter of one side having more information than the other. On the contrary it is actually a matter of the capability of 'harvesting' or 'mining' the information that is already there everywhere. This capability has in fact spilled over from the territorial confines of the developed world when, for example, biologists and pharmacologists from the West come to countries like Brazil or Thailand searching for biological samples that could be developed for new drugs. The information is already there, but some expertise is needed to extract it. This issue, known as 'biopiracy' or 'bioprospecting,' has created controversies and protests from those in the developing world (as well as their allies in the developed world), who see this to be an injustice, since the drugs that will be developed will often be catered to the interests of the rich consumers in the West. Hence, sharing of information has become a crucial issue in the relations between the developing South and the developed North. The issue that needs to be ironed out is how this sharing of information should be spelled out in detail in practice, not only about sharing of information gleaned from biological resources, but other kinds of information also.

Apart from biopiracy or bioprospecting, Johannes Britz and Peter Lor (Britz and Lor 2003) have also examine the case of information flow from Africa to North in the form of library materials through their purchase by rich Western libraries. Not only is this happening in Africa, but it also occurs on a significant scale in Thailand, as libraries in the West and Japan are buying up precious books and rare manuscripts from the country, leaving the country with fewer products of their own intellectual tradition of their own than in the Western countries.

The key ethical issue here is that of international or global justice: Is it just for Western libraries to buy up intellectual resources in the South? It might, however, be argued that the buying up could be necessary in case these resources are in danger of disappearing altogether. In Thailand, for example, rare manuscripts found in rural temples may not be appreciated by the local people, who either do not understand them or do not regard them as important. In any case the manuscripts might not be well taken care of. Hence it is likely that the precious

information found in these manuscripts might be lost forever if not for the effort of Western libraries to care for them.

The same line of argument can also be made regarding mining of biological resources. If the value of these resources were not recognized and developed into medicines through sophisticated techniques found yet only in the North, then what is the use of keeping them there in the jungle? However, the question is to which group of people the benefits will go to. In the case of rare manuscripts and published materials, the benefits usually go to those who have access to those libraries themselves, and these usually are scholars in the North. As for the biological resources, in many cases they are developed into medicines that are geared toward the needs of those in the West who are better prepared to pay for the medicine than those in the South (Schüklenk and Kleinsmidt 2006). In both cases those in the South are left out, even though they could be said to be the custodians of the very resources that are developed to benefit those in the North themselves.

Thus, it is imperative that a just and equitable scheme of benefit sharing be devised and fully implemented. For the library resources and information flow, this could mean that those in the South should be compensated in some way for the information that is taken from them. But it is important to note here that such compensation scheme should be the last resort. It should be enacted only in the circumstance where the Southern locale in question is unable to take care of their resources, or where the information resources are in danger of being lost otherwise. Such circumstances are very few, and it would be more beneficial to everyone involved for the rich libraries in the North to enter a form of information sharing through building up networks of libraries between the North and the South. Hence the compensation needs not be in monetary form only, but it could come as programs for building up the capacity of the Southern communities so that they are better equipped to cope with the increasingly complex world. One specific way this could be done is perhaps funding of educational effort to national governments in the South, or directly to the local governments themselves. One should not forget that information resources such as rare manuscripts or books published in the South are integral parts of the people's lives and traditions, so the books and manuscripts should if possible remain within the communities of readers to which these books and manuscripts are intended. As information flows from the South in an apparently unjust form,

information should then flow back to benefit the South to redress the situation. Thus, I agree broadly with the proposal by Britz and Lor that the conception of justice should be one that governs the South-North flow of information (Britz and Lor 2003, p. 162).

In their paper, Britz and Lor argue that three concepts of justice, namely those of commutative justice, distributive justice and contributive justice, should be put forward as a scheme to ensure fair and just flow of information from South to North (Britz and Lor 2003, p. 162). Basically the first is the kind of justice that obtains when there is fairness in exchanging; the second concerns fair distribution of resources, while the last is about giving and taking between individuals and their community. However, these three concepts do not directly address the issue of disparities and unfairness *among nations.* Commutative, distributive and contributive justices are relevant in all instances of dealings between people or groups of people, but none of them addresses the issue of the global disparity in resources or capacity that is addressed by global justice. So I would like to propose that the concept of global justice be added. This will point toward the fact that the ethical issue in question is an international one and consequently requires international effort to provide a solution.

When global justice is added to the picture, what emerges is that the distinction between North and South as groups of countries is highlighted. In commutative or distributive justices, an instance of injustice can be solved within the boundary of a nation state. When one party fails to follow up their commitment, such as when they fail to honor a contract, the offended party can take this matter to the national authority to help redress it. The authority in question has jurisdiction over both parties. However, in the case of global injustice, it is unclear who should be turned to in order to help redress the situation. The United Nation, to take the supreme example of an international organization, does not have authority over the sovereign states.

In this situation, global justice is markedly different from the other types of justice. In fact the international and cosmopolitan dimension of global justice is a subject of a lengthy debate among theorists as to whether global justice deserves a totally different set of conceptual tools to address it, or whether the same tools used in the more familiar types are adequate (See, e.g., Mandle 2006; O'Neill 2000; Pogge 2001.) An adequate discussion of this difficult topic would obviously be out of the scope of the

present paper. What I propose here is only that global justice be considered as one of the conceptions that are relevant to the discussion on information flow. Depriving the local communities of their precious intellectual resources such as books and manuscripts without due compensation clearly constitutes injustice, and in order to redress this concerted international effort is needed. The putative fact that the local people may not be taking adequate care of their own intellectual resources might not be tenable as a support for an argument for taking local resources out of the area, unless it can be demonstrated that these resources stand to be in grave danger if left with the local people. But this in fact attests to the fact that the local people need to be empowered so that they have the means to take care of their own intellectual resources. So rather than for taking these resources out from their communities arguing that the resources will be safer somewhere else, the local people should be provided with capacity building schemes which enable them to take care of the resources properly. Moreover, the national governments should be the ones who protect these documents (in case the local communities are actually unable to do so) rather than the Western libraries in any case, as they stand as intermediaries between the local population and the wider international circles, and as they should play the role of protecting the intellectual resources within their countries.

Talking about sharing of information and justice also implies that one also talks about flow of information from one region to another. To think that the problem of information divide could be solved by simply letting information flow from North to South does not work, because that would mean the information that is already there in the South is not put to use, a point also agreed to by Britz and Lor (Britz and Lor 2005; Lor and Britz 2003), as we have seen.

Hence, I propose a system of flow of information that better also reflects global justice. Instead of the one-directional flow, and in addition to the scheme of just information flow from South to North discussed above, information needs to flow in and out in both directions, including among the Southern countries themselves. In order for the South to be actually strengthened, information needs also to be able to travel from one part to another all within the South itself. This, unfortunately, is not happening on a significant scale, as developing nations still look toward the Western countries for models and for knowledge and expertise.

For that to be feasible, there has to be a network of Southern, developing countries with one another. This is not as easy as it might look, because there are a number of obstacles that need to be overcome, such as differing language, cultures and perhaps more significantly the idea that there is nothing to be learned from one's counterpart in another developing country. Another important point is that there has to be an effective way of 'mining' or 'extracting' information so that valuable information in the South is not lost to the whole world. This also involves looking toward the traditions of the cultures of the South (and indeed at those of the North) in order to find insights and even expertise in dealing with contemporary problems.

Let us look at how all this is done in a little more details. Firstly, strengthening South-South information flow is facilitated by the people in the South themselves getting more connected to one another. A vestige of colonialism that is still visible today is that former colonial countries usually interact with their former masters. Thus Indonesia interacts quite a lot with the Netherlands; South Africa and Australia with Britain, for example. These are historical ties and there is in principle nothing wrong with them. However, when these ties, also those between the South and the North, are exclusive, South-South interaction and communication suffer. A clear disadvantage of this is that the Southern countries then are forever dependent upon their former colonial masters. There is then no chance for these countries to get together to form a united front to strengthen themselves. The picture is like that of a planet and a number of satellites orbiting it, where the satellites are in no way of breaking away. The alternative picture that I am proposing is that of a number of former satellites to band together to form a larger unit, thereby strengthening each part. This is one way to redress the global injustice problem because strengthening the Southern countries through increasing channels of communication and information flow among them is a prerequisite for the Southern countries to help one another. Without this help and connection, there is little chance of breaking away from the pattern of dependency that afflicts most Southern countries today.

Secondly, the people in the South themselves need to free themselves from the mindset that tells them that there is little to be learned from their peer across the borders or in other Southern continents. This is a strong misconception because most in the South have learned that the path to development lies through following the North's lead. In fact another advantage of focusing on intra-southern

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information sharing is that it dissolves the global/local dichotomy that seems to be prevalent in today's discourse about information flow, where the global is represented by the North and the local by the South. The North is global in the sense that it acts like the planet around which the 'locals' orbit like satellites. This picture clearly illustrates that the West (or the North) is the hegemonic force that is capable of dominating the world, becoming the global in the process and thereby forcing non-western cultures to be the local ones. This is clearly an instance of global injustice.

On the contrary, developing South-South flow would mean that everywhere is a global and a local at the same time, or nowhere is exclusively a global or a local. However, Lor and Britz point out that the prospect for robust South-South information flow is currently poor and will not take place in a large scale any time soon (Lor and Britz 2005, p. 73), though they also admit some bright spots. It is indeed true that South-South flow has a lot of obstacles to be overcome, but we should not forget that we are not talking about the satellites becoming a big planet. Instead we are talking about satellites linking with one another. So the flow takes place between two Southern countries, for example, on a much smaller but more intimate scale. The Internet can be of tremendous help (Lor and Britz 2005, p. 73), but so are personal dialogs and communication in other forms. Strengthening intra-South flow of information is possible because the South does have its store of information that is ready to be shared for the benefit of the world. The challenge is only how to bring that out in such a way that does not require being dependent on the North.[1]

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