‘The relationship between the information rich and the information poor is the central political dilemma of the information society’ (John Feather, 2004: 136). Discuss.

Feather defines the information rich as ‘a country, an organization or an individual with the information which is needed to carry out the task in hand’ (Feather, 2004, p121). It therefore follows that the opposite is true of the ‘information poor’. Feather argues that this relationship plays a central role in the so-called ‘information society’ (Feather, 2004, p136). These terms are often used to suggest that contemporary society relies on information as never before and the fundamental cause of this is the growth of the Internet. However, in many respects, this apparent ‘information society’ is no different to other societies throughout history. During the Middle Ages there was a clear information divide between highly educated priests and largely illiterate congregations (Hubregtse, 2005). These congregations relied on the priests as their sole source of information. In many ways, there are still sections of society that could be defined as ‘information rich’ or ‘information poor’. As Feather suggests, information is a necessary requirement before carrying out a task. Whether this be a farmer wanting to increase his yield (Feather, 2004, p121), or an individual wanting to raise themselves out of poverty, society relies on the flow of information to develop and progress. It therefore follows that a society that allows pockets of information poverty to develop, will never fully progress until it addresses this relationship. In order to examine how this relationship manifest itself, it is necessary to analyse the relationship within a society (ie the divide within a nation) and between nations (between the developing world and the industrialised world).

As one of the leading industrialised nations, the United Kingdom has one of the highest broadband subscriber rates in the world. According to the latest figures from the first quarter of 2007, there are approximately 14 million broadband subscribers in the UK (World Broadband Statistics, 2007). Furthermore, during the first quarter, the UK recorded 840,000 new broadband subscribers, putting the UK fifth for total worldwide additions (World Broadband Statistics, 2007). Despite the apparent growth in subscriptions within the UK, there are still very serious divides within society. Broadband adopters tend to be well-educated (at least to degree level) and reside in the higher income groups (Dwivedi & Lal, 2007). In contrast, the numbers of those that haven’t taken up broadband subscriptions are higher in the lower income

groups. Consequently, lower income groups are unable to access the same information as those in the higher income groups as they are less likely to be able to afford the necessary technology. There is also a geographical divide between those that can access broadband and those that cannot. In 2003, 95 per cent of urban households in the United Kingdom were online, compared to only 7 per cent of rural villages (Hirsch, as cited in Hubregtse, 2007, p.167). Although the government has attempted to address this issue in the UK through schemes such as the People's Network (The People's Network: Evaluation summary, 2004), there is clearly a divide along socio-economic and geographic lines. Indeed, Ofcom has called for more to be done to address the current discrepancies with information provision. In their recent survey concerning the narrowing of the digital divide, Ofcom's Chief Executive declared that:

> "The geographic gap between the digital haves and have-nots in the UK has been gradually narrowing, but we need to do more to ensure that everyone is able to benefit from the economic and social benefits modern communications offer." (Ofcom, 2007)

Although the gap is narrowing, there is still a concern that a section of society will be left behind. It is mainly the wealthy in society with the opportunities to access information and use it to their advantage. There is, in effect, a two tier system operating where the wealthy have a high level of access to available information, whereas the lower income groups have more limited access. Clearly this will lead to increased tensions as one section of society benefits from the economic benefits that modern communications offer, while the other does not.

This relationship between the information rich and the information poor in the UK also manifests itself in the relationship between the state and the individual. The UK has long had a reputation as 'one of the most secretive governments operating in a democracy' (Trevor Haywood, 1995, p.148) although there have been some tentative steps to address this. For example, the current government introduced the Freedom of Information Act in 2000, perhaps a predictable move given the growth of the Internet as a source of information. Freedom of information is a vital component of any modern democracy. Guaranteeing its existence is necessary to ensure an effective and

democratic society which ensures government is transparent and accountable to its citizens (Mutula, 2006). The establishment of the FOI was inevitable as the British government were aware that the days of controlling the flow of information would be seriously compromised by the growth of the Internet. This has not, however, stopped government ministers from suggesting that there should be restrictions to the access of information. In early 2007, the then Trade Secretary, Alastair Darling, wrote to the Lord Chancellor claiming that the act was "placing good government at risk" (Branigan, 2007). In addition, Members of Parliament have attempted to exempt themselves from the requirements of the Act (Henckek, 2007). By attempting to undermine the FOI, the government is seeking to restrict the flow of information and preserve their status as 'information rich'. Without the provisions of such an act, government has no obligation to ensure it is transparent and accountable. Consequently, the lack of will to support such legislation deepens citizens' distrust of political institutions, leading to an inevitable tension between the 'information rich' and 'information poor' (Mutula, 2006).

The belief that the provision of information is seen as a threat to democracy is exemplified in the ways in which the political establishment communicates with the general public. The advent of the Internet has provided a unique opportunity for political parties to communicate with the electorate, an opportunity that they have failed to grasp. The 2005 general election provided a golden opportunity for parties to engage with voters in an entirely new way. However, instead of providing voters with information on public meetings and other opportunities to engage, the sites were used as part of a carefully controlled public relations exercise. In effect, they focused on funding rather than informing (Jackson, 2007). An exciting way of allowing voters to make informed decisions was overlooked in favour of financial gain. Thus, large sections of the population were relatively ill-informed about the choices they could make. This is, perhaps, a contributing factor in the continued low turn-out during an era of information technology (UK Election Statistics: 1918-2004). Although the vote increased slightly in 2005, it was still one of the lowest record turn-outs since 1918 (General Election 2005, 2006). A society that is information poor cannot be expected to make informed decisions about who governs the country. This in turn could lead to serious tensions in the relationship between the information rich and the information poor. Without adequate information the vote will most likely

continue to decline, putting serious pressure on the democratic system. After all, a democratic system cannot operate if informed choices cannot be made.

This divide also manifests itself in the ways in which the state responds to whistle-blowers. The United Kingdom, alongside former colonies such as South Africa and Australia, offers very little protection for those that wish to blow the whistle. Article 32 2 a of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption requires signatories to 'establish procedures for the physical protection [of whistleblowers]' (De Maria, 2006), yet the UK applies many clauses to the rights of the whistle-blower before they receive such 'protection'. These clauses include making protection contingent on the disclosures being 'substantially true' (De Maria, 2006), clearly an unrealistic caveat. As De Maria states, 'it is as if the whistleblowers are "outside" the State and deserve not to be treated as concerned citizens but threats to good order' (De Maria, 2006). As with Darling's reservations about the Freedom of Information Act, the flow of information is considered a threat to 'good order'. These restrictions provide an effective barrier between the state and the public, ensuring that information that is in the public interest remains firmly in the hands of the state. These restrictions have also been extended to serviceman commenting on websites and in newspapers about the state of life in the armed services. Given the controversy over recent activities involving the armed forces, the Ministry of Defence is clearly concerned about the impact of the flow of information. As a result of these restrictions, soldiers will be required to inform their commanding officer before they are able to make any public comment about their activities in service (Gillan, 2007).

Although there is a degree of provision in the UK, there are certain restrictions in place that ensure that the age old information divide remains in place. The government introduced the Freedom of Information Act not so much to improve the flow of information in the information age, but to pre-empt the difficulties the government would likely face with the improvements in communications. Attempts to undermine the Act will only lead to a deepening sense of mistrust amongst the electorate. Furthermore, there appears to be an interesting contradiction between the state and the individual. Despite the attempts of the state to restrict the flow of information, there are increasing efforts to gather more information about the individual. The possible introduction of an identity card, alongside the use of CCTV

cameras and the proposals to collect DNA (Travis, 2007), would herald a new age in accumulating information about the individual. If this proposal was to make it to the statute book, the tensions between the information rich and the information poor are likely to be exacerbated, particularly if the government succeeds in watering down freedom of information laws. This tension could seriously undermine democracy in the United Kingdom, as it is hard to see how people will make informed decisions during an election, when their access to information is severely restricted. However, this informational divide is not only visible within an industrialised society, it is also apparent in the relationship between the developing world and the industrialised world.

Africa is undoubtedly the poor relation in the global information society. Due to the ongoing poor economic climate, due to various conflicts and famines, libraries have suffered with inferior financial resources. Consequently, library services in the region are inefficient and largely ill-managed to service the needs of the local population (Kavulya, 2007). Furthermore, university libraries have declined to almost complete collapse, leading to increased marginalisation in the university (Kavulya, 2007). Their status has not been helped by the perception in the region that they are not significant players in the process of national development (Enakrire, 2007). This deficiency in information provision naturally extends to Internet access. A recent report reveals that in Africa's most affluent nation, South Africa, broadband penetration runs at 1.79% (World Broadband Statistics, 2007). This compares with over 50% in the United States. Furthermore, only four sub-Saharan nations made it onto the report at all; South Africa, Sudan, Senegal and Gabon (Wray, 2007). This lack of access has serious implications for Africa in the global economy. Contrary to the perception in Africa that information provision is insignificant, it can play a vital role in development. As Castells argues (1999):

> 'Information technology, and the ability to use it and adapt it, is the critical factor in generating and accessing wealth, power and knowledge in our time.' (p92)

If Africa really is to rise out of poverty, it is the fundamental issue of access to information that will enable the continent to do so. However, for Africa to be considered 'information rich', many barriers must be overcome.

Perhaps the primary barrier that must be confronted is the issue of literacy. African countries have some of the lowest literacy rates in the world. The latest figures show that the literacy rate in Africa is a mere 61.1% (Beyond 20/20, 2007). In comparison, literacy rates in Europe and North America are 99% and 95.7% respectively, clearly a huge divide. The problems are exacerbated by the lack of provision for native speakers in Africa. Compared to the United Kingdom, the publishing industry in Africa is particularly weak. Of the 90,000 books published every year, only around 1.5% are published in Africa (Enakrire, 2007). The lack of information available in the native languages of Africa is also exemplified by the Internet. At present, some 80% of computer-based communications are in English, whereas the proportion of English speakers across the globe stands at around 10-20% (Mutula, 2005). This clearly presents a massive barrier for people in non-English speaking nations like Africa. Although English is taught in schools in Africa, it is estimated that some 40 million children of school age in sub-Saharan Africa do not attend school (Mutula, 2005). The combination of a lack of literacy and an inability to communicate in English leaves many Africans unable to utilise the Internet in order to access 'wealth, power and knowledge'. However, it is possible to address this situation to the benefit of the people of Africa. It was only after the development of Chinese characters on the Internet that the majority of the Chinese population showed any interest in connecting to the Internet (Cullen, 2003). Furthermore, there was a similar expansion in Russia after the introduction of Cyrillic letters (Cullen, 2003). Consequently, it is possible to navigate the issues surrounding language to enable the people of Africa to gain access to access to information and thus close the divide with the industrialised world.

As well as the issue of literacy, the failure to provide a reliable electricity supply is a crucial factor in the divide. Whereas in the industrialised world electricity is taken for granted, in the developing world electricity can rarely be relied upon. Without a reliable source of power, it is virtually impossible to broaden Internet usage as any

outages could result in damage to the hardware. In Nigeria, for example, there are frequent outages due to an unstable supply of electricity. This requires ISPs and cybercafé owners to provide stand-by generators to ensure a constant supply of power (Adomi, 2005). Fortunately, some African nations have begun to address this issue of unstable electricity supplies. For example, in Kenya, there have been moves to establish a system to supply the eastern and south-eastern parts of the country using solar technology as its power supply (Enakrire, 2007). With such basic infrastructural problems within individual nations, it is hard to see how the gap between the information rich in the industrialised world and those in the developing world can ever be narrowed. Certainly, before embarking on a programme of establishing networks within Africa, it is vital to address the crucial question of energy supply.

As well as the multitude of issues regarding the infrastructures in place to facilitate access to information, there is a lack of government will to create an environment of information sharing. Many African nations have been keen to keep matters of public concern entirely private. In fact, except South Africa and Zimbabwe, many countries within the sub-Saharan region of Africa have failed to enact basic freedom of information laws (Mutula, 2006). In the case of South Africa and Zimbabwe, even these laws fail to ensure that freedom of information is secured. Both countries have adapted the legislation to suit political aims, the former in attempting to muzzle freedom of expression and the latter to promote the state owned press over the more critical elements within the media (Mutula, 2006). Furthermore, it has been claimed that the Zimbabwean government have indicated a willingness to monitor e-mail communications by regulating the operations of ISPs (Gajjar, as cited in Mutula, 2006, p.442). As Mutula (2006) points out:

> 'Both South Africa and Zimbabwe would seem to lack the political will to implement the FOI to the full.' (p. 443)

With such restrictions in place, it is little wonder that there is no real appetite for developing a knowledge based economy. If governments continue to place restrictions on the flow of information, there is no incentive to push for information technology. It would seem that governments in Africa are afraid of what the information revolution could lead to. With the increase in access to information,

particularly with the growth of the Internet, inevitably comes a loss in control. The barriers between society and information will be difficult for governments to maintain. Subsequently, the state will no longer be able to control the flow of information and, therefore, the gap between the information rich and the information poor will begin to close. The more this barrier is maintained, the more the tensions will rise between those in power (the information rich) and those in society. Even within developing countries, there is a divide between those who have access to information and those who cannot.

Despite the many barriers to accessing the Internet, there are encouraging signs across the continent. In many countries in Africa, there has been a huge growth in cyber cafés as they are the only source of reliable access to the world wide web. There are currently around 2,316 cybercafés in Nigeria (Adomi, 2005) and around 150 in Ghana (Mutula, 2003). Cybercafés provide an invaluable service, particularly given the prohibitive costs of Internet access. In Nigeria, for example, the average dial-up cost is around US$67 per month and yet the average capital income is around US$409 (Adomi, 2005). By offering a cheap alternative, cyber cafés are playing a crucial role in closing the gap between the information rich and information poor. However, even this creates its own problems. The vast majority of the cyber cafés in Africa are based in their respective capital cities. Most of the cyber cafés in Nigeria are based in Lagos (Adomi, 2005) and around 90% of those in Ghana are based in the capital city Accra (Mutula, 2003). This creates a further divide within society between those who live in large urban areas and those that live in the country. In Nigeria, around 70% of the population live in villages and consequently do not have access to the kind of information based infrastructure that is available in the capital city (Adomi, 2005). Even within the developing world, there is a growing divide between those that have access to information, and those that do not. With a growing divide in the developing world, it is difficult to imagine that the gap with the information rich industrialised nations will ever close.

In conclusion, I would argue that the relationship between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor' is certainly the central political dilemma of the information society. As has been the case throughout history, there are serious divides between those who have access to information and those that do not. Despite the legislative

changes in the United Kingdom, the government still seeks to control the flow of information as well as to undermine the very Act that it introduced. The contrast between a political establishment that seeks to control the flow of information and yet seeks more information from the individual, will obviously lead to greater tensions between the 'information rich' and 'information poor'. If this situation is not addressed, there could be very serious implications for the state of democracy in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the divide between developing nations, such as Africa, and the industrialised world needs urgent attention if there is ever any hope of Africa closing the divide. Without addressing the low level of literacy and the poor provision of material, the vast majority of its people will be excluded from the wealth of information that is available and the benefits that this brings. Consequently, the economic divide between the industrialised world and the developing world will continue to grow, leading to heightening tension between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor'.

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