

Global Agenda Council on Informed Societies

Towards a Blueprint for Informed Societies

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Introduction

This is a time of profound change in the way we inform ourselves as societies. The digital revolution is challenging the old media – print, radio and television – creating a situation of peril and vast new opportunity.

Many traditional media organizations are struggling. Across many countries, dozens of newspapers have gone out of business during the past decade. Even where the print media is thriving, it faces disruption from digital technology. In the United States, those newspapers that are still succeeding are the ones that are using the Internet as a distribution channel – they have embraced interactive and social media, mobile devices and other new platforms. Magazines, radio, non-fiction book publishing and even television are all in various stages of upheaval. The media of the industrial age – one-to-many, one-size-fits-all, centralized and controllable – is beginning to unravel.

How do we inform ourselves in a world where our traditional media and tools for doing so are declining or even collapsing?

The new media landscape provides new promise for societies to be better informed. Thanks to the Internet, mobility and the inexorable digital revolution, people in many parts of the world have unprecedented access to data, information and knowledge. They can inform themselves through collaboration like never before. They can have access to tools and communities for learning anywhere in the world; a student in a ghetto of Mumbai can study artificial intelligence from Stanford University.

People by the millions can contribute useful knowledge for everyone to share, as in the case of Wikipedia. Hundreds of thousands of amateur astronomers can help map the heavens through Galaxy Zoo and inform the world of their findings. Observers of street violence can document it and inform the world as citizens did during the 2007 post-election riots in Kenya.

The upshot is that there are tremendous new opportunities for societies to be better informed, more open and more successful than their industrial age counterparts. This creates many profound challenges. How do we handle information overload? How do we sort through all the misinformation spewed when a billion people essentially have printing presses at their fingertips? How do we ensure quality news, investigative reporting and good journalism? How do we avoid a Balkanization of news where we each simply follow our own point of view, placing each of us in a self-reinforcing echo chamber where the purpose of information is not to inform us but to give us comfort? What will happen to the media industries? How can school and universities take advantage of the new tools and media to transform pedagogy and themselves?

The change is no less profound than the transition precipitated by the printing press from agrarian economies to the industrial age. It raises profound and far-reaching issues for every government and for each one of us.

The Importance of Informed Societies

It is critical for every community, city, state, country and the world to be well informed. Evidence is strong that in a knowledge economy and an age of networked intelligence, those societies that are best informed are more successful. Increasingly, economies create value through “brain rather than brawn”; the societies with the best-informed brains win out every time.¹

Information is the key to innovation and entrepreneurship – critically important as the vast majority of new jobs in most parts of the world come from companies that are five years old or less.² Being informed as a society is linked to better health and other measures of wellness. A [Financial Times special report](#) on health explains that the key to many illnesses, such as diabetes, is information and education. Many have noted that – even with improved diagnostic technology – gains are slow because misconceptions are the big problem.

In fact, there is emerging evidence that informed societies not only have better prosperity and quality of life, but also social justice, empowerment and even freedom. If this were to be proven true, it would have significant implications for how government and business leaders (and just about everyone else in a society) approach the question of information, knowledge and collaboration.

The traditional media of the industrial age (print, broadcasting) were inherently centralized: one-to-many, one-size-fits-all and controllable. For governments that were so inclined, the old media had discernible control points. New media, by contrast, is distributed one-to-one or many-to-many, and is customizable.³ As a consequence, the mass media is becoming less significant. The new news sources provide outlets for many voices and are harder to control.

The Challenge to Government Leaders

These developments raise many challenging issues for government leaders. Some, by attempting to control and censor the Internet, have put their country’s development in jeopardy, for the free flow of information is a cornerstone of any civil society, and that includes information that flows over the Internet.

Governments can either use the new digital resources to promote open government and business, or use the same technologies to attempt to limit their citizens’ access to pertinent information, and in doing so closing minds and inhibiting development and freedom.

Instead of trying to control today’s Internet conversations, governments can embrace the opportunity provided to establish a dialogue with their citizens. The result would be more transparency in governance, a government agenda that is better informed by direct citizen input, and a more informed, globally aware populace.

Some governments understand and accept that an informed society is part of a larger shift in power away from traditional sources of authority towards citizens and their organizations. Digitally

¹ Dunning, John H. *Regions, globalization, and the knowledge-based economy*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

² Haltiwanger, J., Jarmin, R.S., Miranda, J. *Who Creates Jobs? Small vs. Large vs. Young*. US National Bureau of Economic Research, 2011.

³ Kalyanaraman, S., & Sundar, S. S. Portrait of the portal as a metaphor: Explicating Web portals for communication research. In *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 85 (2), 239-256, 2008.

driven networks of shared interests are gaining the power to advocate, put pressure for accountability and even catalyse new forms of collective, self-organized action. Perhaps ironically, societies that embrace this notion or pluralism in the new sense are those that are more stable in the long term, and that have enduring legitimacy for their governments and other institutions.

There are many positive steps governments can take in terms of policy, investment, laws and actions to help their citizens' progress on the path towards an informed society. The World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Informed Societies has identified five dimensions of informed societies in which government conduct is particularly critical: access; education; media literacy; transparency; and privacy. It has also plans to create an Index of Informed Societies, which will serve as a measure of progress of "informedness", by which the nations of the world can be compared.

The Council hopes that this document will serve as a helpful instrument for educating and enhancing informed societies everywhere, while the Index is intended as a tool for tracking improvements in individual societies. The Council invites citizens, educators, business leaders and government officials to join it in debating the critical need for fostering informed societies worldwide, and in developing both the blueprint and the index. By promoting this model, the Council hopes to encourage governments and other institutions to take the steps to create and sustain informed societies.

The Five Dimensions of Informed Societies

An informed society is one where citizens have the resources, education and skills to access and participate in the free flow of reliable and pertinent information through a diverse range of platforms and media organizations that empower them to make considered decisions about their economic, social and political lives.

There are five requirements for an informed society:

1. Access

A precondition for being informed is access to the media and tools of information. Citizens need access to "old" media: print and broadcast. But, increasingly, access to the Internet is critical. Although 2 billion people have access, this is still a minority of the world's population. The digital divide – the gap between different socioeconomic groups' access to and use of ICT – is still a problem. We are creating a world of digital haves and have-nots who become knowers and know-nots, doers and do-nots; people who have access to the world of information and those who do not. The danger is that we will create a structural underclass in the world.

Access is more than simple connections. Citizens need access to tools and services to enable them to become informed and effective users. And as broadband is increasingly required to deliver multi-media information and the new services, we recommend that every country takes steps to develop a high-bandwidth infrastructure that is suitable for the 21st century.

Information is power and government leaders need to be motivated to truly empower citizens with access and these tools. The Internet distributes knowledge and can enable a greater number of citizens to participate more fully in the economy, society and political life. A democratization of information is occurring, and power often follows. Smart governments understand that when their citizens are engaged, active and empowered, economic activity flourishes and societies become

more informed. Smart corporations understand that. Rather than having power over people, they can now have power *through* people – from informed customers to empowered employees.⁴

However, some governments have viewed these opportunities as threats. Their leaders are uneasy with an empowered citizenry and their digital tools, and have moved to control the widespread participation of their citizens on the Web. Even in G8 countries, including the United Kingdom and the United States, government leaders have mused about creating an Internet “off switch”. We remind governments that such behaviour is self-defeating. With no way to communicate, citizens have no choice but to gather in the streets. We have seen examples of this across North Africa and the Middle East, where citizens have started to fight against long-standing political and military regimes. As the Internet becomes the foundation of economies, cutting access essentially creates a self-inflicted general strike in a country.

2. Education

A second precondition for a society to be informed is education. Literacy is the foundation of education. Notwithstanding the rise of multi-media, TED talks and YouTube, reading and writing will still be the foundation of knowledge for the foreseeable future.

Educational offerings are growing throughout the world. Pre-school, primary, secondary, post-secondary and post-graduate enrolment continues to grow and at every level are at all-time highs. Around the world more students are graduating from colleges and universities than ever before, boding well for informed societies.

That said, further education is changing. New media has changed the way people access educational materials, opening up vast new educational resources. The [Kahn Academy](#) currently has 3,800 educational videos that have been accessed by over 100 million people. An [online course on artificial intelligence](#) offered by two professors at Stanford University attracted 160,000 students in 190 countries. The [MIT Open Courseware Consortium](#) is now supported by over 350 universities and is opening up courseware to the world. In the United States, [close to a million students](#) are now registered in full-time educational programmes online and tens of millions of people worldwide are enrolled on online courses through services like [Coursera](#) or [Edx](#).

Educated societies are most likely to be informed societies. But education, while necessary, is insufficient.

3. Media Literacy

It is not only important to be literate and educated. Citizens need to understand the media themselves and have literacy with regard to the meaning of information delivered. Citizens need to know how to judge the information around them and place it into its proper context, whether it comes from the traditional media or in digital form.

The traditional news media in free societies is critical for creating informed citizens. The editorial function provided by the traditional media is valuable in gathering critical information, fact checking, putting news into context and challenging readers’ assumptions with important information they may not otherwise have discovered.

The Internet is full of inaccurate and misleading information and so citizens need to become good scrutinizers of content. Citizens are also in danger of drowning in data. There is a risk of societal

⁴ See Bernoff, Josh. “Empowered”. In *Harvard Business Review*, 2010. He discusses employee empowerment through the HERO (highly empowered and resourceful operatives) Compact. See also Empowered Consumers and Growth: Literature Review. Final report for the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. 17 March 2012.

Balkanization as each of us can restrict our information diet to only those sources that we agree with.

Despite these limitations, the Web is enabling an explosion of journalism – much of it good and accurate – as people everywhere can become publishers. From sub-Saharan Africa to London, Tokyo and New York, citizens are becoming better informed than ever through information on the Internet. For example, using the Ushahidi network, citizens have revealed critical information on everything from post-election violence in Kenya to the location of people buried in the rubble after the Haitian earthquake.

These developments should be encouraged. But rather than promoting new models of journalism and citizen awareness, some governments are thwarting the development of free and independent media.

4. Transparency

Transparency is critical to achieving informed societies. Citizens cannot be informed unless they have open government. They cannot be informed unless corporations are obligated to provide full disclosure of their financial, social and environmental performance. They cannot be informed unless there is legislation requiring full disclosure of the ingredients and impact of products – from food to toys.

The good news is that we live in an age of unprecedented access to information about governments and corporations. However, many governments, rather than embracing transparency as a force for good, have tried to hunker down and become more secretive. Many have focused on the dangers of Wikileaks and other forced transparency initiatives, and have taken steps to prevent such public access.

At the same time, the force of technology means that governments and corporations are becoming more transparent everywhere. Rather than trying to block such developments, governments and corporations should learn to cope with the new reality. Research indicates that greater transparency is good for a country's economy and society. Transparency helps companies, governments and institutions to build trust, social cohesion and stability. Transparency cuts transaction and collaboration costs for businesses. It helps to eliminate corruption, patronage and cronyism.⁵

5. Privacy

Perhaps paradoxically, an informed society can only be achieved by restricting and safeguarding some data from public disclosure – that is, personal information. Transparency, disclosure and freedom of information flow are an opportunity for institutions not for individuals. On the contrary, the digital revolution has brought new threats to privacy that could undermine human rights and free societies and prevent people from informing themselves. Governments and corporations now have unprecedented power to collect information about individual citizens. Rather than understanding that there is danger in destroying privacy, many governments are doing the opposite. In the name of security, or in order to preserve power, they are intruding deeper into the private lives of citizens.

Corporations, too, are undermining the right to privacy. Companies want to know more and more about what makes us tick – our motivations, behaviour, attitudes and buying habits. While they can use this once private knowledge to give us highly customized services, and to help sell advertising that supports the largely free content and services on the Internet, they may also collect information in ways that are deceptive or contrary to consumers' wishes.

⁵ *Transparency International Annual Report 2011.*

In testimony before a US congressional committee, Justin Brookman from the [Center for Democracy & Technology](#), outlined the dilemma that citizens confront when they want to access information fully yet not live under constant surveillance: “There is an incredible amount that we as a society have to gain from innovative new technologies, but there is also an incredible amount that we have to lose. Without a framework in place to assure everyday consumers of the ability to limit the collection and retention of the minutiae of their lives by unknown third parties, any sense of a realm of personal privacy may completely evaporate.”

Brookman cites many examples, such as the ability to track the stories that have been read on a newspaper’s website, compared to the anonymity of buying and reading a paper from a newsstand. Or, going out for a drive, talking to friends, writing letters, watching TV – “all of these rights are eroding as these activities move into the networked world and surveillance technologies become more sophisticated”. Brookman likens the decision to opt out of being party to the data collection as analogous to opting out of electricity 30 years ago. “To disconnect from the services that collect such personal, sensitive data would be to disconnect from society.”

Privacy is a foundation of a free and informed society. Individuals need to know that what they read, what sources of information they access, what tools they use can be done privately. Citizens will not use digital tools for full information access if they believe they are being spied on or their personal data will be used for inappropriate reasons, including against them.

Steps for Success

We urge government leaders to adopt the following recommendations to encourage the development of informed societies, both in their own countries and globally:

1. Access

Governments should take all steps possible to ensure that their citizens have access to a rich and diverse variety of media. In many countries, this will involve launching a campaign to close the digital divide. Every child needs access to the Internet in schools and in their lives.

To achieve access and a vibrant and accessible Internet, governments should enact policies that protect media freedom and the openness of the Internet.

Governments should adopt policies that foster connectivity and competitive media markets.

Governments should create an enabling environment for independent media, everywhere.

Governments should be vigilant against anti-competitive or anti-free-speech steps by private and public actors that might undermine the neutrality of the Internet.

2. Education

Education is a right and requirement for every citizen, regardless of gender, class or other variables. In a world of growing resources and tools, the quality of education should not be declining in any part of the world. Even in wealthy countries like the United States, class sizes are growing and education outcomes are not commensurate with the expectations of students, parents and employers.

Governments need to exploit digital media to rethink the model of pedagogy in their schools and other educational institutions. Every classroom needs a wireless network and every student needs an access device at school and at home if we are to transform pedagogy towards a

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student-focused, collaborative and customized model of learning. Different nations are naturally at different stages in this transformation, and this will not be possible everyone at once. What is required is for governments to take steps towards meeting these objectives in the long term.

3. Media Literacy

Government leaders and institutions should promote media literacy among the populace, to ensure that citizens have access to complete, reliable and pertinent information, and know how to use such information to their own benefit.

First and foremost, governments should not censor. Rather, governments should permit environments in which ideas can be exchanged freely, on and off the Internet. In some cases, governments may need to assist in the creation of these environments; in others, less intervention will be required.

Governments should help build media literacy into educational curricula. As much as resources permit, governments should be encouraged to adopt policies that encourage better communication infrastructure, including mobile and fixed Internet access.

Governments should encourage the development of new media industries in their countries and support independent media everywhere.

4. Transparency

Governments should embrace transparency, not fight it. They have an obligation to create transparency and to communicate pertinent information to their citizens.

Governments should ensure freedom of information. This may include legislation, regulation, education, and partnering with public and private sector organizations to encourage openness.

Governments should foster an environment for media organizations to embrace self-regulation. Media organizations hold a powerful position in society through the impact of their content, and it is therefore essential that they act in a manner that is responsible, transparent and accountable.

5. Privacy

It is inevitable that the data available about each of us will continue to grow. Governments and business should understand that the need for security and profit must be tempered by the need for freedom, rooted in individual privacy.

Governments should help educate citizens about the right to privacy.

Governments should implement policies to prevent the inappropriate use of personal information, and should be at the forefront of setting high standards for all institutions.

The Global Agenda Council on Informed Societies

Over the next months the Council intends to create a composite index, which will rank countries according to the extent to which they are able to foster informed societies. To find out more about this initiative, please contact Alexandra May by e-mail at alexandra.may@weforum.org or Stefan Hall by e-mail at stefan.hall@weforum.org.

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