

Triad: Knowledge, Technology and Autonomy

by Fatima Lasay

Towards a cultural definition of technology

For a people to define technology in their own terms is to express and understand technology in their own historical and cultural contexts. If technology is to be acknowledged as viable medium for creative work, then its value must be defined from within the artist's expression of a fundamental freedom.

(Final declaration of the World Congress on the Status of the Artist - 2. We emphatically recall that the creative faculty is a special capacity whose strength and originality emanate from within the artist, and that it is therefore important to encourage the discovery and fulfillment of each person's talent as the expression of a fundamental freedom. - 3. We also recognize, within the context of the changes that occur as contemporary societies evolve, that artistic creativity constitutes a decisive factor for the preservation of the identity of peoples and the promotion of a universal dialogue.)

A culture becomes consumerist and dependent on corporate producers of technology when the people that shape culture are not allowed to be active cultural producers and innovators. Here, corporate ICT interests could disempower and marginalize people. In reality, many in the ICT industry just see the developing world as a market, and most ICT ventures into social and cultural development only become ways to sell technology products. Further, the diversity of artistic production is minimized as foreign content continue to be consumed or adapted by developing countries and countries in transition.

(Final declaration of the World Congress on the Status of the Artist - 10. We are aware that the trend towards uniformity in patterns of thought and cultural productions, which are often based on maximum and immediate profitability, constitutes a threat to creative diversity. While we appreciate the growing interest of the private sector in the encouragement of artistic creation, particularly when such contributions help to avert the loss of creative talent owing to a lack of means, we wish to reaffirm the importance of maintaining public funding of the arts.)

In the spirit of diversity, a culture must be allowed, encouraged and supported to define its own meaning and practice of technology, but the call for diversity is illusory without autonomy.

Technology is contextual, and our application and use of it become counter-productive when they are used (within context) to perpetuate existing (knowledge based) imbalances. Here, we need sensitive development structures in order to see the relationships between technology in context and unique knowledge bases. The problems arising from the subtle conceptual relationships between knowledge and technology may be seen in the examples of language diversity, e-learning and the pursuit of efficiency through communications technology:

Technology can exclude and marginalize language diversity in the pursuit of the

efficiency of communication that relies mostly in English. If language is understood not just as a means of communication but as integral part of culture, then language diversity must be respected. Along a similar perspective in the field of education, e-learning adapted merely for efficiency of access to education abridges the process of both learning and teaching innovation. Moreover, it is not only the context in which e-learning is implemented nor the level of technology that is invested that is important, but the autonomy to create and define the unique knowledge bases which e-learning deploys and inspires.

Unique knowledge bases need to be developed in a culture's own language and historical specificities. But this is incomplete - we must push for autonomy in the building of our unique knowledge bases, and here we need a structure that can make this possible, one that can place the locus of intellectual and cultural content production within the developing countries themselves and by the people of these countries themselves, not outside - but also not in isolation.

Towards a Strategic Transregional Cooperation in the Arts and Technologies

In the current age of globalization, strategic transregional cooperation must be established. In Asia and the Pacific, the nature of a strategic regional network means moving the locus of intellectual and cultural content production to the developing countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar and Vietnam. Strategic transregional networking may afterwards be established in view of the colonial histories of these developing countries with those outside the region. This means, for example, establishing Peru as connecting hub between Southeast Asia and South America, or in view of trade routes, establishing a trans-Eurasian network with Iran and Lebanon as hubs. In an iterative systems approach (which will be discussed later) hubs may be allowed to move across regions. In principle, it is the developing countries and countries in transition that must be allowed to define the content and direction of their creative productions with the new technologies by recognizing them as hubs in their respective regions. For example, Indonesia or the Philippines could be established as starting hub of Southeast Asia, and subsequently, those countries with colonial education systems or where artistic expression runs the further risk of state repression.

A system of relationships that could address an undercurrent imbalance with regards to funding and resource-sharing also involve a strategic transregional cooperation and a support fundraising system from international and public organizations. All those involved must also share the financial responsibility. But funding will not be sufficient without policy. And the recognition to draw one's own cultural policy is an exercise of autonomy.

Strong technology and arts policy need to be made in consideration of economic, social and cultural development trajectories. Policy should be defined within local interests and with respect to the uniqueness of local knowledge bases, and not simply in line with the "modernization" perspective of development where it is argued that developing countries and countries in transition can only move on to national development through the need to adopt "better quality of life" in the "information society" as these have been defined by developed countries. And because technology, arts and cultural policies are made in view of local concerns, problems resulting from

globalization and modernization such as the erosion of traditions and cultural heritage would also be addressed in this approach - thus, the natural ecology of technology and heritage / tradition is established and maintained via a strong self-defined technology and arts policy.

(Final declaration of the World Congress on the Status of the Artist - 34 (c) it is recommended that the new technologies be used for the safeguarding of the cultural heritage and oral traditions.)

Strategic Transregional Cooperation as an Iterative System of Development

A strategic transregional cooperation may also be viewed and implemented as an iterative system of development that puts emphasis on inter-relationships of social, cultural, economic phenomena which accepts the limitations of a normative development framework. Here, consensus and policy building is allowed to operate within the triad of ownership, sovereignty and autonomy, and with constant feedback and circular relationships among those in the transregional network (as there should be between theory and empirical realities), the process (or movement) of inter-relationships and the consequent intellectual and cultural content production forms the development framework.

Eventually, if intellectual and cultural content production is established within the countries concerned then consumerism is lessened and the production becomes self-sustaining. In the inter-disciplinary field of art, science, technology and culture, a market-focused approach will not answer the deeply rooted problems of cultural work in a globalized economy. We need to be art and technology innovators and creators, not simply technology adapters; we need strategic partnerships that empower the artist and that can ensure our fundamental rights to create knowledge, define technology and exercise autonomy.

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