THE STRONG CASE FOR DEREGULATION AND PROLIFERATION OF ICT

In terms of **I**nformation and **C**ommunication **T**echnology (ICT), there are more Internet users in New York City than on the entire African Continent; Greater Tokyo has more telephone connections than the entire African Continent; high-income countries (Annual Per Capita Income of more than $US4,650) account for 15 percent of the world's population, but possess more than 60 percent of all the global telephone lines and about 70 percent of all the mobile telephones; low-income countries (Annual Per Capital Income of less than $US470) account for about 60 percent of the world's population, but only about 5 percent of all Internet users; and, about 30 percent of all the inhabitants of high-income countries use the Internet, compared with about 1.50 percent in low-income countries.

The above statistics may be considered shocking to some people in the West, but they have all been known for some time by statisticians in universities in the Western world, and by politicians, the world over – and especially by politicians of the many authoritarian governments of Asia.

Knowledge is power, as the trite expression goes, but the jealous withholding of knowledge gives power to he, who has the power to constrain and restrain its use.

The global proliferation of ICT threatens authoritarian governments' grip, which, like the buggy whip manufacturers of the 18th Century, are scheduled to be usurped by the march of civilization.

Try as they might, those who would attempt to hoard knowledge for any length of time will come a-cropper in due course.

The Catholic Church, for many centuries, tried to control the peasant by the jealous hoarding of information, making it a crime for the laity to possess, even a Bible.

The authoritarian rule of the Catholic Church could not, however, stop Galileo Gallei (1564 – 1642) from publishing, in 1610, that the earth revolves round the sun, as opposed to the accepted assumption of the day (and that pronounced by the Catholic Church) that the planets circle the fixed earth, the Aristotelian/Ptolemiac assumption.

After being placed on house arrest for life by the Inquisition in Rome, in 1633, Galileo continued to maintain that he was correct in that which he had discovered.

It was not until 1992, 382 years later, that a Papal Commission acknowledged the Church's error in Galileo's case.

The Galileo case could not have happened in the 20th Century, and cannot happen in the 21st Century, due to the march of science and the rapid international explosion of information, which makes it quite impossible to produce a universal genius, as was the claim, made by Aristotle, who was said to have stored all of the known knowledge of the day in his brain.

Thus far, the repercussions of the digital revolution of this period in the evolution of the world has been confined to a comparatively small group of countries: In the main, to the industrialised West.

The global information society is, already, being considered and studied in respect of its scope and shape.

The highly unequal distribution of the possibilities of making use of ICT and participating in the efficiency gains upon which it confers on users is a product of the social and economic imbalances that exist between developing

countries and industrialised countries.

Inadequate infrastructure, high connectivity costs, a lack of locally relevant content, language barriers, a dearth of venture capital, and the inability of workers to derive economic and social benefits from information-intensive activities is characteristic of what has come to be known as the digital divide – the unequal distribution of the possibilities of making use of ICT.

The digital divide, without question, is hampering the march of development, in all spheres of activity, from industrialisation, to philosophy, to husbandry, to population controls.

It is a known fact that about 96 percent of 100 million Internet hosts, throughout the world, as at the end of December, last year, were located in countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

As at December 31, 2000, 0.25 percent of all Internet hosts were domiciled on the African Continent, with South Africa, being the dominant player.

Due to the lack of proliferation of ICT, advantage cannot be taken of the opportunities for combating poverty and disease, for improving education, for the transference of knowledge, round the world, and for the spread of ideas, political, philosophical and theosophical.

The potential for growth by greater use of ICT has yet to be realised in many parts of the East, in countries, such as the Cambodia, Viet Nam, the People's Republic of China, Indonesia, the Middle East and India, to mention but a few countries, due to sparse networks, incapable to carrying *'the word'*.

Whereas the city states of Singapore and the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the PRC are well endowed with information networks, carrying data, speedily along the Internet highways to the aggregate 10 million human inhabitants of these territories in their combined 676 square miles that they occupy, in the rest of Asia, there is a huge divide.

Estimates suggest that, by the year 2004, about 160 million people will have access to the WorldWideWeb in Asia.

Today, it is estimated that not more than 65 million people in Asia are connected to the Internet.

In the PRC, about 30 million people are thought connected to the Internet.

That statistic does not match up well against a human population of the country, estimated to be about 1.30 billion, but, in absolute terms, it is still a great number of users, in terms of emerging markets in the most populous area of the world.

However, 30 million people still represents about 2.30 percent of the total population of the PRC, a statistic, which is on a par with many other Asia countries:

Estimates of Territories in Asia, Connected to the Internet

South Korea	41 percent	The HKSAR	34 percent
Singapore	32 percent	Taiwan	29 percent
Malaysia	16 percent	The Philippines	3 percent
	Thailand	2 percent	

In city states – Singapore and the HKSAR, especially – the high level of connectivity is likely to be partly to blame for their trailblazer roles due, in part, at least, to the population densities and the relative ease of providing physical access to the Internet.

The incidence of low usage of the personal computer, in certain parts of Southeast Asia, is due to inadequate communication infrastructure.

In Thailand and the Philippines, it is estimated that there are about 20 personal computers for every 1,000 human inhabitants.

That statistic compares with Singapore where there is thought to be 510 personal computers to every 1,000 human inhabitants.

In the PRC, it is thought that the incidence of personal computers is about 20 million units, or about 1.54 percent of the entire population owns, or uses, regularly, a personal computer.

Due to economic necessity, being what it is in the PRC, there cannot be too many personal computers because the cost of one unit is equal, at present, to more than double the average monthly income of the average Internet user.

How many of the population of the PRC are on the bread line, nobody knows for certain, so that any statistic about this country must be weighed carefully, taking into account that one is held in glorious ignorance – which is fostered by the constitutional government where the results of government committee elections are known, prior to votes, being counted.

For the time being, stagnation in the growth of ICT in Asia, as well as penetration of the Internet, is a cross that the area will have to bear, and it is unlikely that there will be a swift turnabout situation.

The very severe slowdown of the economies of the West is impacting, dramatically, on the East, the *'breadbasket'* of cheaper-made consumables for the West.

Deregulation of essential services, as far as the Internet and ICT are concerned, is the only way that countries, such as Thailand, may go forward.

At this time, the Thai Government's Communications Authority is exploiting its State-controlled monopoly by imposing high Internet user fees.

The Thai Government, obviously, does not appreciate that lower Internet user fees will have a greater impact on the overall economy than the paltry income, now being derived from its draconian imposition of relatively expensive user fees.

Lowering the users fees for Internet users in the country will allow Thai companies to take advantage of the positive network effects that their competitors in the HKSAR, Singapore and South Korea have enjoyed for a great many years.

This would permit greater industrialisation, bring in further investment into the country, cause the coffers of the country to be swollen with more corporate taxes, in addition to foreign funds, which would gravitate to the country in order to take advantage of its low-cost structure, relative to other regions of the world.

The greater the competition, the greater are the prospects for efficiency and lower access charges to the Internet.

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