

## Thoughts After Geneva: Universal Design and Communication Rights

Sylvia Caras

Universal Design is an architectural concept<sup>1</sup> shaping the design of products and environments to be usable by all people without the need for adaptation or specialized design. If that approach were applied to the delivery of information, ideas about universal information should be part of the information and communication technology (ICT) and Information Society discussion and considered as part of communication rights.

### **Universal Design and Communication Rights**

Universal Design is an architectural concept about designing products and environments to be usable by all people without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Use must:

- be equitable, flexible, simple, intuitive;
- require low physical effort;
- related information must be perceptible;
- be designed with a tolerance for error; and
- size and space for approach and use must be built in to the plan (Center for Universal Design, 1997).

Universal service and universal access are analogous concepts related to telephone service, and extended to discussions of connectivity and the digital divide. Conflating design and access while considering a people-centered design standard may lead to wider applications.

“Design should create the social environments that respect and support the dignity of humans, which we propose to call Universal Design. . . . It is vital for the users to be part of the process, and the society to earnestly respond to them. . . . toward building a society that will respect the natural variations among individuals, and the changes that we experience as we grow older, and give the highest priority to inclusion, participation, and independence for all” (International Universal Design Declaration, 2002).

These ideas are being applied to education curricula to mean a variety of methods to convey content. “Universal Design for the Internet is making

sure that the presentation of content on the Internet and the design of Internet technology [are] flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the broadest range of users possible, regardless of age, language, or disability” (Internet Society, 2001).

Universal Design is part of much of the information and communication technology orientation. Universal technology underpins the Internet; for instance, the protocols and URLs. Universal communication is reflected in accessible Web site design, varieties of formats for one source of printed material including large print and Braille and more than one language. I think universal information might be better addressed, especially from the content perspective. There is some move toward this, providing legal documents written in plain speak, government regulations that consider literacy levels for information provided.

Universal information seems to me to mean writing about a subject in the simplest way. Universal provision of information would consider literacy levels and use nontechnical language. Concepts of universal information might enhance learning and enhance the integration of existing material into new ideas, so that each new encounter adds value to both the underlying universality and the individual uniqueness.

### **Communication Rights**

One of the themes addressed at the Geneva Information Society meetings was communication rights and positioning the right to communicate as a human right. As I wandered through some 800 exhibits and attended sessions in an open-architecture environment competing for my auditory attention not only with each other, but with drumming exhibitions and airport jet arrivals and departures, I wondered whether this onslaught was communication. The word *communicate* comes from a root that means impart or share—I have something I give/tell/share with you. But what if you didn’t want to receive? Where are your choices? Connect comes from a root that means bind or fasten, and I realized that what I wanted from information was to connect with the giver of information, have the contents made meaningful for my interests and life. I began to wonder in a more global, philosophical,

1. For some visual examples of universal design, visit <http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/ubdweb/page2.htm>

and political way what the Information Society is about.

There's a distinction between data and information and knowledge. I think we surely are producing and disseminating volumes and volumes of data. Berners-Lee is developing standards for coding a "semantic web" to enable broad cross-site analysis. And we have 24/7 information onslaught—news and ads and electronic alerts and cell phones always on. But I would like to see more knowledge being imparted. McGovern in his weekly e-letter writes persuasively about editing content so that it serves the recipient: "Knowledge management may have to maximize input so as to minimize output. It's harder to write 500 well-crafted words than 5,000 words of waffle. . . . To achieve more today, we need to produce less—but produce it better" (McGovern).

Then I wonder who would be the editors, massaging my information, omitting what I might not want to see, shaping what Nico Stehr suggests is the emerging field of knowledge policy.

I also wonder at the expectation I sensed in Geneva that closing the digital divide would also close all the divides—the poverty divide, the pure water divide, the health divide, the education divide—and create a just and equitable society. It seems to me short-sighted to expect so much of this technology, that rather it is time for the Internet to take its place with other technologies like phones, radio, and printing as a tool, not an end in itself, which a discussion of the digital divide is apt to suggest. ■

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## Comment on the Financing Aspect of the Information Society for Developing Countries

*Martin Hilbert*

The issue of financing has been the most difficult subject of the WSIS negotiations. Only hours before the Summit opening session, delegations agreed on consensus language. Finally the Declaration of Principles recognizes "the will expressed by some to create an international voluntary 'Digital Solidarity Fund,' and by others to undertake studies concerning existing mechanisms and the efficiency and feasibility of such a Fund." The Plan of Action proposes to create a Task Force to review the adequacy of existing financing mechanisms and to ensure their full exploitation. The urgent questions now are: Are existing mechanisms enough to ensure the creation of a universal Information Society? How much money will be needed to close the digital divide?

Statistical data available for such calculations is scarce. However, in order to put the dimensions into perspective, we can do some rough estimates to provide a first insight to the magnitude of the financing challenge facing the digital divide. The estimates in our studies show that while in high-income countries the average per capita ICT expenditure is around US\$2,500 per year, half of the population in Latin America has less than US\$100 per capita per year, or US\$2 per week, to spend on the technology. "ICT access prices" in Latin America (calculated as an average mobile telephony expenditure, hardware equipment, 1 hour of Internet access daily, and 10 minutes of fixed-line telephony daily) are around US\$1000 per year in 2001. To finance the closure of the digital divide, the poor would either need financial aid to subsidize connectivity to the Information Society or ICT prices would have to be cut by a factor of 10 just to connect the richest 50% of society. Supposing that it would be possible to reduce ICT access prices to such a level (especially through an active public policy agenda, including shared access models and the provision of alternative access equipment), the poorest half of society would still require financial aid. According to our calculations, to subsidize complete and high-quality ICT access for the remaining poorest half of Latin American societies, around 19% of the region's GDP