



Notes

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The Information Society and the New Drivers?

Summary

CECUA was set up over 30 years ago with the encouragement of the European Commission to be a federation of national Computer User Associations from all member states of the European Union and the Council of Europe www.cecu.org

With widespread introduction of personal computers and the Internet, CECUA realised that all citizens were becoming "computer users" and also members of the Information Society. This process has mainly been driven by the IT&T industries with their own agenda. CECUA as the only independent European user organisation has provided counter balance by promoting and advocating user issues from the user perspective at various levels, e.g. Commission, Committee of the Regions and European Parliament. The message has been well received and CECUA is an active member of the European Internet Foundation with an international high-level expert support group.

Now new Information Society drivers have entered the stage, i.e. businesses to reduce costs and stay competitive in global business environment, e.g. Banking, Tourism, Hotels, Airlines, Retail, etc. To reach people they have to communicate in their own language and the way people are used to, i.e. respect cultural and linguistic diversities. But they will do it on their own terms. Will small countries sit at the same table as larger ones? Is their culture and language in danger of extinction? Counter balance will be needed and CECUA will continue to provide it on its own and in co-operation with others.

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Information Society for all – from vision to reality with new drivers

In a recent article in Baltic IT&T Review #33, p 52-56 I examined what Information Society for all means. And I came to the conclusion that every second citizen of the EU before the enlargement is a member. In the new EU member states every fourth citizen is a member of the Information Society. But there is a change in the wind. New drivers are working hard at promoting the use of the Internet. Here I am going to look at the drivers involved and try to evaluate their efforts in terms of cultural and language diversity.

First we will look at the **Old Drivers**:

- **Governments**
 - Telecom deregulation
 - Service Directive
 - Broad band vision

Government Agenda: To ensure competitive advantage (Lisbon Strategy)

- **IT&T Industries**
 - Telecom operators
 - ISP providers
 - Hw and Sw producers

IT&T Industries Agenda: Sell Hardware, Software and Services

Then the **New Drivers**

- **Businesses**
 - Banking
 - Tourism
 - Hotels
 - Airlines
 - Retail

Business Agenda: Transfer service to customers to reduce costs

The businesses know that to reach customers they need massive advertising. And they are ready with billions in advertising money. They also know that to sell a new medium few people use you need to advertise in old media most people use, e.g. print and TV. And they are ready for a long stay with billions of advertising Euros. To promote the new medium, i.e. the Internet they offer e.g.:

- Airlines offer better deals on the Internet if you book yourself.
- Airlines are also pushing passengers to check themselves in at airports.
- Hotels offer lower rates if you book yourself on the Internet
- Retailers are offering goods for sale on Internet at better price.

And why are they doing this? Why are they in the driver seat of the Internet promotion now?

Business desperately wants to reduce costs to stay competitive in a global business environment. IT&T has proven very useful cost reduction tool in the past. Before year 2000 business invested a lot in new IT&T to be sure of no year 2000 problems and also to improve business processes. Now they have gotten all they can out of that investment. Further cost reductions are only possible with further investment in IT&T. People are a major cost item. They can cut down on people by letting customers do the work employees did before. With more IT&T they can do it. This is of course not what their advertising says. Advertising emphasizes better service whenever you want it and wherever you are.

They know how to put this to their customers with their long experience in marketing and promotion. This means that the customer has to adjust to this new business environment. Some people will say it is good, some will say it is OK but some will not be happy about it at all and for various reasons. One reason will certainly be good old conservatism. Why should we change it if it worked well in the past it?

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Others will have more profound reason. They feel they are not up to it. Age and unfamiliarity will have a lot to do with it. Most older people have learned to use phone, the mobile and maybe the fax. But the Internet is still a foreign territory to many of them. They need a terminal and a hook up at home and they ask what for? It costs money and what do they get out of it? Well for parents to be able to book a cheap flight to visit their children and grand children they have to do it. And to avoid long waiting lines at the airport check-ins they have to check themselves in.

Will this work or are we witnessing another upcoming digital divide? And this time not from north to south or east to west. No, this time a real across EU digital divide.

Nobody knows. It depends a lot on the businesses themselves. How patient are they going to be? What sort of assistance are they providing for people? Businesses like to do everything fast. Maybe faster that it takes to turn people around? Also reactions from governments and user organizations and consumers will have their influence. But the new drivers will be pushing ahead fast and certainly they need to be reminded of that **in the end what is good for the people is going to be good for them.** How is this going to effect cultural and language diversity?

The new drivers know how to get to people. They have many years of experience and deep pockets with advertising money. They know that to sell a new medium you have to use old media like print and TV. They also know that to get to the heart of people they have to speak their language and the advertisements have to reflect the cultural background of the people they are targeting. Therefore, they can be expected to use local languages and local culture. But there is a downside. It is the bottom line. If the target market is too small it will be tempting to use non local language and culture materials.

We also have to keep in mind that the drivers are global. Not only EU companies will be going after EU market. The Americans are pioneers in Internet marketing. USA companies will be going after the EU market. And Americans still believe that the world speaks American or at least should.

So the drivers will be international going after an EU market with strong cultural and language diversity. Much of the promotion will be in local language and culture and therefore support the cultural and linguistic diversity. There will be exceptions. But we can be sure that smaller nations are more likely to face foreign language promotion than larger ones where the economy of size will justify localization costs. Therefore, special measures are needed to protect the smaller language regions from adverse effects or extinction. There are many ways of doing this. And no single one will do it alone.

- One way is some sort of language and culture regulation. But we know from experience that this way is difficult both technically and also legally.
- Another way is technical. Providing language translation solutions would be another way. The drivers would support this if only because this will help them to address a bigger target group.
- Third way is conferences like this one. Raising awareness and promoting discussion is a key issue. No mass media campaign can replace it. Therefore, I am very pleased to be here today and speak about this from CECUA's user point of view. The drivers will need to be made feel that they have a duty and obligation to support the European cultural and language diversity. CECUA will continue to present and argue this issue both on its own and in co-operation with others.

Very early, or in 1998, CECUA published the first Citizen Bill of Rights in the Internet world. The word citizen here is used in its broadest sense, i.e. individuals, parents, children, teacher, researcher, and also organisations, companies, enterprises, etc. The CECUA Bill of Rights is based on our European cultural heritage put into context of the Internet development. This subject has been discussed at many conferences, e.g. the very important Paris Conference "Identity, Confidence and security in the digital world" last year.

The Bill of Right has to remain dynamic and needs constant discussion and updating. The preparation for WSIS meeting in Tunis presents an opportunity to revisit the Bill of Rights and update it. Your participation and support would be very much welcomed.