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SESSION 4: Digital content in a highly competitive, OTT world:
creating a virtuous cycle of network access, content consumption,
media pluralism and rich, local, content/application creation

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"Diversity, Plurality & Meaning in the Digital Universe"

SPEAKING NOTES

Introduction

● The Internet as emporium of devices and content (Richard Hooper).

● People are accessing news, information, entertainment, education, geo-location/directions, home management and shopping, translations and many other services on and across multiple screens, devices and platforms.

● It's an age of ubiquitous information.

● But, information in abundance does not equate to plurality or diversity of content.

The Global Picture

● We are in the age of Internet Empires. It is said that North America belongs to Google and the Middle East belongs to Facebook.

- USA, China, EU constitute a data Troika, presiding over three distinct data realms, opening a new digital divide between themselves and all others who are rule takers.

- The digital ecosystem is one that is rich in content, but poor in diversity. For example, 48% of the world's population is excluded and the entire continent of Africa accounts for only 11% of all internet users. This is partly due to a lack of infrastructure.

- But, research has shown that low cultural acceptance and unavailability of local content are actually greater barriers to internet penetration and use than lack of infrastructure.

- There is also a problem with so-called "local" content that is being produced and moderated by non-local producers. This is illustrated by the fact that while there was a dramatic increase in content about Africa on Wikipedia between 2012 and 2017, much of this content was produced by contributors from North America and Europe rather than Africa itself.

- Ethnic and linguistic divides are also significant.

  - According to the World Bank, 80% of online content is presented in one of 10 languages; but 50% of the World's population do not speak or understand any of these languages.
  - Moreover, in excess of 50% of all online content is in English, a language that is understood by only about 21% of the world's population.
  - The situation is much more stark when you include local/indigenous languages.

- Another challenge to pluralism in the online space is that the technology companies (Google and YouTube, Facebook, Netflix, Amazon, Apple etc.) control the "places" on the Internet where we gather and connect. The result of this disproportionate power is the risk of "automated content

discrimination" at the level of the individual citizen and people operating in closed loops.

- The platforms are also highly concentrated:
  - It has been estimated that the world's four largest public cloud companies Amazon Web Services - AWS, Microsoft/Azure, IBM Cloud and Google control over 61% of the public cloud.
  - The largest social media platforms are also concentrated, with common ownership –
    - Facebook, he tech company with the most users, 2 billion+, owns WhatsApp which has the 3rd largest number of users (1.5 billion). Facebook also owns Instagram which has 1 billion users.
    - 77% of all internet searches are conducted on Google, which owns YouTube, the second largest social media platform with 1.9 billion users.

In conclusion, I want to point out, that I do not have a problem with the topic for this session but I see its premise as an ideal and aspirational. For the moment, the digital world is binary and not sufficiently diverse. This was the view expressed by delegates at a June 2018 UNESCO Conference on Tangible and Intangible Impact of Information and Communication in the Digital Age. They signalled a concern about the language of the Internet as a barrier to access. A declaration drafted at the close of the conference warned of the danger of the de-humanising nature of technology which effectively excludes people from "generating meanings and values and turn[s] [them] into functional supplements to communication flows". A part of the solution therefore is global attention to a linguistically more diverse internet and open access to communication online.

As Amy O'Donnell, ICT Programme Lead at Oxfam observed "… *focus needs to shift from accessibility to the meaningful use of the internet".* In my words, there should be enlightened access, meaning content to build digital literacy, serve local needs and preserve socio-cultural diversity.

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