"Diversity, Plurality & Meaning in the Digital Universe"

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- We are in a digital economy and society - the operating system of society has changed. At its core is the Internet - an emporium of devices and content (Richard Hooper).

- Irrespective of the point of origin, everything is morphing into the single internet platform. It is not hyperbole, therefore, to describe the Internet as a fourth domain, just like land, sea and air. The impact will be quadrupled by the integration of augmented reality, artificial intelligence, robotics, as well as the Internet of All Things.

- Many 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. [CLICK].

- But, information in abundance does not equate to plurality or diversity of content. [CLICK].

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.

- So, the digital ecosystem is one that is rich in content, but poor in diversity. 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 (in local languages) 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 that content was produced by contributors from North America and Europe rather than Africa itself.

- Ethnic and linguistic divides are therefore significant. [CLICK].

  - 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. [CLICK].

- 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. [CLICK].

- The platforms are also highly concentrated in ownership, which is as startling as the consequences of their influence and control over the social, cultural, economic and political interaction of half the global population.

- The case of small and/or developing nations, is particularly concerning. They tend to have a higher proportion of vulnerable persons, with low levels of digital literacy. They are also most susceptible to automation as there is an inverse relation between low levels of GDP per capita and vulnerability to 4th industrial revolution disruption. Yet, information about this imminent disruption is not available to the most vulnerable, in their language.

- Through the developing country lens, the digital world is binary and far from diverse.

- This was the view expressed by delegates at the 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 is global attention to a linguistically more diverse internet and open access to communication online.

- But, 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.

- I want to share with you, the approach that is being taken by the Broadcasting Commission of Jamaica. First, we are developing award winning digital literacy content for television and online, in the language of the people. (This ad is about fake news. A woman hears that someone is hospitalised in critical condition. She sends a broadcast on her phone and starts to pray for the victim. She then learns there is no truth in the story. [CLICK].

- The great thing about this ad is not that it won a gold medal in the MUSE Global Awards. The great value is the

impact of the use of local language on children. They have created their own versions of the ad online [CLICK].

- To Sustain and preserve linguistic diversity I suggest two of things we must do. [CLICK].

- Firstly, we must accept that culture underpins everything else – so, notions of development must be rooted in our people: their language, food, fashion, dance, politics, theatre, communities, aspirations, behaviours, skills, competencies and philosophies.

- Secondly, we must structure our discourse so that generations Y and Z, the next custodians of culture, see vividly that their language has purpose and design, and should not just be treated only as nostalgia and legacy. [CLICK]

- I leave you with a talisman. The task of our generation is to refocus the measure of the value of language from "learning about" to the more enlightened idea of "learning to be".