A Response to the ANC's Discussion Document

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*While focus in the ANC's discussion document, **Communication Policy Discussion Document – Building an Inclusive Society Through Information and Communication Technology**, may have been on whether the ANC has varied its position on the statutory Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT), the document as a whole merits serious consideration, as it is likely to have an important impact on the nature of South Africa's communications environment.*

What is particularly noteworthy about the document is that, for the first time, ANC policymaking on communications focuses on the state of the ICT sector, and not just on the legacy media.

Any forward looking policy must also include an assessment of past transformation efforts. The document provides a very useful assessment of the gains and losses since the transition to democracy, and is, at times, highly critical of the lack of transformation. Many of the sector's key institutions are in a mess, and South Africa is underperforming in terms of key ICT indicators. The authors blame these problems on fragmented and uncoordinated policy and institutional arrangements.

While there is an element of truth in this assessment, it is not the whole picture. In the mid 1990's the ANC championed a largely neo-liberal approach to ICT restructuring that had disastrous outcomes for the sector.

Partial Privatisation

The decision to partially privatise the fixed line telecommunications parastatal, Telkom, led to an untold amount of profit being extracted from the country by Telkom's investors. The commercial orientation of the parastatal, which began under apartheid, led to customers being charged unaffordable tariffs, and resulted in the disconnection of the majority of lines it rolled out to attain universality.

This problem is coming back to bite the ANC, as the shrunken nature of the network limits the country's ability to build a high speed broadband network using the fixed line backbone.

Parastatal Meltdown

All key communications parastatals that were commercialised in the 1990's, namely Telkom, the South African Broadcasting Corporation and Sentech, have experienced meltdowns to varying degrees, which strongly suggests that the neoliberal model of running public sector institutions using private sector principles and practices simply does not work. This model, that underpinned earlier ANC government policy, turned these institutions into protected monopolies that were both bad at business and bad at offering public services.

Furthermore, the largely shambolic Universal Service and Access Agency (USAASA) has failed to make any substantial contribution to universality. The telecentres it rolled out in this earlier period failed because they were made to operate on a cost-recovery basis, which many could not afford, and many offered ICT services that were simply not in demand.

Its mandate to support needy people to access communications has never really been implemented, because of the huge numbers of people who would inevitably have to be defined as needy.

Would the policy solution have been to privatise and liberalise at the same time, subject to a strong, independent regulator, as has been proposed by key South African telecommunications policy critics? Had this happened, then undoubtedly the parastatals would have been forced to up their business games under threat of competition.

The most obvious solution was the one that was the most unthinkable for the ANC at the time, namely to remove the parastatals from the market entirely, de-commodify them, and run them as pure public services.

But it is doubtful that more competition would have increased universality in underserviced areas that by their very nature do not attract competition. Not even the most robust regulator would have been able to square this circle.

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Policy Mistakes Redux

If the discussion document is anything to go by, there is a real risk of policy mistakes made in the analogue environment being reproduced in the digital environment.

According to the discussion document, ANC policy should aim to establish an inclusive information society. The document notes that the ICT 'revolution' of the last three decades (as they describe it) has fundamentally transformed the way people live and relate to one another, and that access to information and knowledge has become '…the key determinant of the extent to which individuals, communities, societies and whole regions can shape their own lives and compete for jobs and services'.

The document also warns that globalisation has sharpened inequalities and led to a digital divide between the digital haves and the digital have-nots. In order to address these problems, South Africa must invest heavily in ICT infrastructure and train more young people in the sort of e-skills needed by the mainstream economy.

These propositions are not new; in fact they are quite old, tired, and highly contested. For the past two decades, information society proponents have argued that if countries are to remain globally relevant, then they must shift from an industrial social order, reliant on manufacturing and agriculture, to a society and economy where information and knowledge drives productive activity. Otherwise they risk being marginalised from the global economy.

Information society theory served neo-liberalism well, as it could be used to convince governments into believing that they must refashion their communications environments to open up national economies to foreign investment.

From the mid-1990's onwards, information society-speak permeated the corridors of development institutions like the World Bank, which touted the diffusion

of ICTs as a panacea for the developing world's problems. Countries reliant on agriculture and mining, which were especially susceptible to marginalisation during globalisation, were told that they could use ICTs to 'leapfrog' over the industrial phase of development, straight into the information society and knowledge economy.

This development fad led to a series of multilateral initiatives, and many ICT for development projects (ICT4D) were bankrolled during this period.

Many of these projects failed, mainly because they were supply driven, not demand-led. Expensive multipurpose ICT centres in rural areas fell into disuse as residents were unable to adapt them to everyday use, turning these projects into techno-versions of toilets in the veld. Policymakers assumed – incorrectly - that mere diffusion of ICTs was enough to ensure development, failing to focus on the human capabilities needed to integrate ICT usage into everyday life. Lack of much more basic services such as electricity and transportation further hampered ICT take-up.

If the information society is such a flawed concept theoretically and practically, then why do governments and parties like the ANC continue to embrace it?

These failed ICT4D projects exposed the dicey nature of many assumptions underpinning information society-speak, which proposed techno-fixes to development problems. Information society proponents usually fall into the trap of technological determinism, assuming that technological change drives social change and, further, that the ICT revolution is ushering in, unavoidably, an entirely new social and economic order. So political choices are not guiding how society is organised; technological advancements are. Furthermore, society's ills, such as poverty and unemployment, can be addressed by embracing ICTs.

But society's key problems cannot really be solved by an 'add ICTs and stir' approach. They continue to bedevil many societies because the social relations of capitalism that brought them about remain untransformed. In fact, shifting from an agricultural or industrial to an ICT-driven economy often deepens existing structural weaknesses in developing countries, exacerbating unemployment. Development priorities can become even more distorted than they were, leading to perverse growth.

Northern-based electronic companies benefit inordinately from the supposedly inexorable march towards the information society as they tie developing countries into technological dependency. Countries are brainwashed into believing that if they don't invest in the latest technologies, then they will condemn themselves to underdevelopment.

Technologically determinist approaches are disempowering, as they discourage the evolution of societies where technology finds its proper place in the cycle of human development. If one accepts that the shift to an information society, with all its dangers for developing countries, is not inevitable but guided by political choices, then one must also accept that different political choices can be made.

If the information society is such a flawed concept theoretically and practically, then why do governments and parties like the ANC continue to embrace it? Is an attractive concept for those who do not want to confront the complex, systemic nature of development problems, but still want to appear as though they are committed to revolutionary social transformation?

In South Africa's case, the creation of labour absorbing jobs on a mass scale must be driven by industrial policy. Relying on ICTs to drive job creation is a lousy strategy as the labour absorption capacity of the sector is insignificant. For every one job that can be created in services, four can be created in manufacturing.

Furthermore, according to the government's Economics Sectors and Employment Cluster, since 1991, employment in the communications sector has declined more drastically than in any other major sector, in spite of the expansion in the sector, which calls into question the wisdom of pursuing e-skills as a panacea for job creation.

The ANC does not seem to have drawn the really important lesson from the earlier period of transformation, namely, that neo-liberalism cannot deliver universality of communications, and that any developmental ICT policy must break fundamentally from neo-liberal precepts.

The ANC document merely reproduces information society-speak uncritically, while failing to interrogate its most problematic assumptions about the relationship of technology to society. It is trying to take South Africa down a well-worn path, incorrectly assuming that ICTs are a magic bullet for the country's myriad development problems.

Principles for Policy Review

The government's decision to review all existing communications policy and replace them with a converged ICT policy is long overdue, and the fact that the ANC recognises this need is welcome. This policy review provides an opportunity to learn these lessons and use them to redefine first principles for the sector.

First principles must include the fact that communications must be universal, which includes the right to communications that are available, affordable and accessible. Communication must be ubiquitous: that is, users should be able to access information anytime, anywhere, anyhow, depending on the choice of the user. Communications must also be dialogic: that is, users should have the ability both to receive and impart information. They should not simply reproduce old methods of communication where a few talk and the majority listen.

The ANC does not seem to have drawn the really important lesson from the earlier period of transformation, namely, that neo-liberalism cannot deliver universality of communications, and that any developmental ICT policy must break fundamentally from neo-liberal precepts. Otherwise, first principles will become as unattainable in the digital environment as they were in the analogue environment, in spite of the interactive potential of digital media.

With the rise of anti-capitalist struggle globally, and the crisis of legitimacy of the neoliberal project, there is no better time than now to embark on a different course. But the ANC will have to produce a much more honest, reflective assessment of the state of communications and its flawed transformation, if it is to live up to this task.

This article first appeared on The South African Civil Society Information Service (www.sacsis.org.za) website in April 2012.