The Digital Divide and the Social Divide in New Media Access and Their Implications for the Development of Civil Society in Nepal

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Abstract
Civil society associations in Asia have been keen to exploit new media in their activities. There is, however, a parallel recognition that there are great inequalities in rates of access to new media, both between and within countries. Researchers argue that the term 'digital divide' popularly used to describe such inequalities should be reserved for inter-country differences, whilst inequalities in access within countries are best understood as reflecting underlying social divisions. This paper examines the relevance of this distinction in media access inequalities to debate about the relationship of new media and civil society, with particular reference to the situation in Nepal in the past two decades.

Introduction

The development of new media, such as the Internet and other digital information and communication technologies (ICTs), has often been seen as potentially beneficial to civil society, but such optimism has in recent times been tempered by more pessimistic evaluations (Heeks 2002). An important contributing factor in these re-evaluations has been concern about inequalities in access to new media, which are frequently referred to as a 'digital divide' (van Dijk 2006). However, researchers have pointed out that we should not conflate the problems associated with inequalities that exist *between* different countries in their rates of access to new media with access inequalities that exist *within* those countries themselves (Couldry 2004, Norris 2001). Pippa Norris refers to the former as the digital divide proper, whilst referring to the latter, intra-country inequalities as a social divide because media access inequalities are very closely related to the context of more widespread socio-economic inequalities, particularly the income distribution and educational opportunities that exist in any given country (Norris 2001).

This paper discusses how such distinctions identified in media access research affect the relationship between new media and civil society. The particular example of the development and use of media in Nepal is used to illustrate some of the implications that such distinctions may have for an understanding of this relationship. It concludes that civil society associations may face quite distinct problems in their use of new media depending on the *social divide* in media access that they face in a particular country. However, attempts by governments and international non-governmental organizations to alleviate the *digital divide* that the same country suffers relative to other countries may actually exacerbate the problem of the social divide by further concentrating media resources in the hands of those who already have access to economic and political power. This presents particular difficulties for civil society associations that find themselves as mediators between states, INGOs, and local communities, not the least when they are reliant upon these agencies to support their work. These difficulties are dramatically described thus by the noted Nepali media researcher, Pratyoush Onta, writing shortly before the return of party political system in April 2006 (Onta 2005: 167):

> The major players in the conflict in Nepal – the monarch, the Royal Nepali Army, Maoists and political parties – all conduct their politics by actively manufacturing information (or disinformation) and analysis that serve their own objectives and ends. They also try and control, as far as possible, access to means and avenues that would generate and disseminate accurate and impartial accounts of the conflict, ideas, information and analysis that would challenge their 'mono-truths'. It is no surprise that these players have embedded communicators in almost all types of media institutions in Nepal to filter out detrimental coverage and promote self-serving content. Hence, while championing true respect for human rights including freedom of expression is a theoretically sound idea, advocacy by a relatively weak Nepali civil society is a difficult project to accomplish.

Habermas's (1992) influential theorisation of the role of media in the formation of the public sphere drew criticism for neglecting those members of society who seemed to have no access to its communicative space (Ehrenberg 1999, McKee 2005, Webster 1995). The same criticism can be extended to digital divide research for emphasising some media and forms of access to information at the expense of many other forms of communicative action and actors. To redress this oversight, I argue that understanding the relationship of new media to civil society will be enhanced by ensuring that older media and other forms of communication are included in our studies. This ensures that we better understand how civil society organizations' uses of new media are embedded in the wider context of media and communication ecologies (Tacchi, Slater, and Hearn 2003). As Nick Couldry notes, debate about access to new media is important because it 'links the vast, murky currents of global policy discourse to practical, local issues about who is getting something valuable out of the Internet, where, and how?' (Couldry 2004: 185).

Media in Civil Society Discourse

Media and civil society have always been strongly linked in both theory and practice. Freedoms of information and of a press that articulates public opinion are invariably seen as cornerstones of any properly functioning democratic polity. Civil society discourse therefore frequently includes discussion of what institutional arrangements can best support such democratic communicative functions and how civil society associations can make most effective use of media to sustain their work. The development in recent decades of new media has added further impetus to this debate with

many claiming that they hold the promise of further invigorating and strengthening civil society (Burke 1999, Harvey 2007, USAID 1999). Nevertheless, just as there is often ferocious argument about what civil society actually is and its relationship to the state and market in different contexts, there is little agreement on how new media are to be conceptualised or understood. Although many remain optimistic in their assessments of the potential of new media and information communication technologies (ICTs), analysts are increasingly sceptical or even pessimistic about their influence on civil society (Heeks 2002, Holderness 1998). It is important that we assess the relationship between new media and civil society against the background of this argument about the conditions in which people do or do not gain access to information and communication technologies.

Civil society analysts have often been keen to point out the potential benefits of new media technologies. Howell and Pearce (2001: 82), for example, state that 'the rapid development of the Internet provides a new medium through which awareness of…issues can be raised and campaigns speedily mounted'. Likewise, Kadir (2004: 349) notes in an examination of civil society associations in Singapore that 'some analysts think that it is here, in this arena of cyberspace and the Internet, that the push for greater public space and public accountability can be most effective'. These types of generally optimistic analyses of the potential of media and ICTs to contribute to progressive social and political change often stand in marked contrast to the commentators' critical interpretation of the theory and practice of civil society activities. Although Howell and Pearce (2001: 86) point out that there are

"barriers to entry" into civil society, and that civil society is as much a captured field as the state and economy such insights have not pursued with equal rigour in analyses of relationships between new media and civil society. Media can contribute to the effectiveness of civil society organizations and their activities, but differences in access to media and ICTs may severely limit this, especially as organizations come to rely increasingly on such technologies in their work.

The growing appreciation of media's importance to social justice may be seen from the fact that access to information is now acknowledged as a basic human right enshrined in the United Nations' Millennium Goals. Under the rubric of Goal 8 ('develop a global partnership for development') the declaration states that member states will, 'in cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies— especially information and communications technologies' (UN 2005). The inclusion of this clause within the declaration reflects prevailing anxieties about inequalities in people's access to media and information communication technologies (ICTs) both within and between nations. The most recent UN Millennium Development Goals Report notes the persistence of this so-called *digital divide* despite the fact that 'access to information and communication technologies continues to outpace global economic growth' (UN 2006: 25). This should come as little surprise given that many of the world's people live in conditions of extreme poverty that have not been directly improved even by technologies invented during previous eras of industrial development.

Inequalities in New Media Access and the Digital Divide

Analyses of differences in new media access vary between those that focus on national or regional comparisons and those that look at the situation within nations (Norris 2001). National comparisons understandably dominate analyses conducted under the auspices of organizations such as the UN (UN 2005) or OECD (OECD 2001), concerned as they are with understanding and ultimately influencing the distribution of resources between their member states. At the national level of analysis, however, the concern is with inequalities of resource distribution between different segments of the population, whether these are configured according to gender, ethnicity, education level, class, or other sociocultural criteria (Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury 2003), or by regional distinctions, such as rural or urban residence (Holloway 2002, Venkatesan, Eversole, and Robinson 2004, Wilhelm 2004). The support of the state or commercial organizations for such *intra*-national analyses are invariably motivated less by a concern for social justice issues than by anxiety regarding the possible loss of the sorts of competitive economic advantages that innovations in information technology and media may provide (Funabashi 2002, OECD 2001, Quibria et al. 2002). The launch by the government of Nepal of a High Level Commission for Information Technology (HLCIT) alongside a National IT Policy and Strategy in 2000 is typical of the kinds of initiative that governments worldwide have embarked upon in order to ensure, in the words of the Commission, 'proper harnessing of recent advances in the technological domain notably, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)' (HLCIT 2006). Nepal's HLCIT freely

acknowledges the ineffectiveness of technology alone either to enhance macro-economic performance or improve governance unless it is introduced with corresponding reforms to the institutional arrangements through which the media are regulated and these resources utilised. However, it remains to be seen whether governance remains a priority of equal standing compared to economic development within the Government of Nepal's ICT planning.

It appears that inter- and intra-national analyses of new media and ICT access carried out by both international non-governmental organizations and governments in industrializing states often follow a similar economic rationality. But such rationalizations in analysis are flawed, however, because although economic factors may be the major determining cause of inequalities in new media access, these factors are not then specific to new media, either in comparison to the distribution of access to other media or to other important resources (Norris 2001). Similarly, despite the optimism of some analysts (for example, Compaine 2001b) it is unlikely that market-based solutions can be relied upon to solve new media inequalities, as they have largely ineffective in or even exacerbated other resource inequalities (Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury 2003). The growing critique of the economistic terms through which media access debates are frequently conducted provides a strong entry point for discussion of the relationship between media and civil society. As Howell and Pearce (2001: 86-87) note, 'contemporary civil society debate has focused on the anti-state dimension of civil society with the result that the relationship of the economy to civil society, and also, especially, to the market, has still to be problematized. Yet as long as the assumptions that

donors uncritically make about the compatibility of civil society with capitalism are left unexplored, it is unlikely that civil society strengthening programs can yield the results that donors might wish'. There is clearly much common ground here upon which to build in terms of concerns shared between theorists and activists in the fields of media access studies and civil society.

Apart from economic factors, educational attainment appears to be the only other decisive factor affecting media access (Norris 2001), but it is at this point that the key question of what actually constitutes access comes to the fore. The consideration of economic factors influencing ICT access tends to imply that this is a one-off event that is primarily a decision made by individuals or at least households acting as unified economic agents. However, as van Dijk (2006: 224) argues, access must be seen 'as a process with many social, mental and technological causes and not as a single event of obtaining a particular technology'. Education, whilst measured in terms of formal qualifications or levels of attainment, also encompasses each of the other areas that van Dijk identifies as crucial constituents of the digital divide. Using ICTs with any degree of success requires skills that are not innate but learned from formal educational institutions, informal social relations, and through trial and error. Familiarity with other technologically-based media is often an important factor in people's ability to acquire skills in the use of ICTs and other digital media. These factors also feed into the acquisition of the desire to use ICTs. One must know what one can do with these technologies and also weigh this against other potential uses of resources before making the decision to use them or not. Even when the economic costs of access are

reduced, either through market operations or through collective provision via

public institutions, such as schools, libraries or other 'telecentres', significant

access barriers remain. As Price and Krug (2007: 100) observe of the press,

'media independence may depend on the capacity of the audience to treat

information wisely and critically and draw inferences from it. There is a special

kind of literacy that might be demanded, not just literacy in the conventional

sense, but literacy that encompasses a desire to acquire, interpret, and apply

information as part of a civil society'. Price and Krug's emphasis on literacy as

a core component of people's use of media in the context of civil society also

serves a useful purpose in uniting more traditional concerns with education

and communication with the seemingly more contemporary problem of access

to new media and information.

Despite this extension of the analysis of media and ICT inequalities beyond

simplistic notions of access to technology into areas of literacy, there remains

a continuing tendency to ignore the uses that people make of these

resources; what people do with ICTs and the differing uses to which they put

the technology once access is achieved is often ignored (Couldry 2004).

> The use you or I make of the Internet [for example] depends not only
> on the speed and reliability of our modems and our individual
> predilections, but on our particular needs and capabilities to *do
> something with* the resources we believe are available online…Being
> an active online producer is related to more than modem speed; it is a
> question of education and, ultimately, of what type of person you feel
> yourself to be. "Low-income people think they're not *legitimate*
> information producers," said one community advisor interviewed by the
> Children's Partnership. (Couldry 2004: 191; emphasis in original)

Likewise, van Dijk (2006: 230) notes that in the USA 'active and creative use

[of the Internet]…is a minority phenomenon. Active contributions are

publishing a personal website, creating a weblog, posting a contribution on an online bulletin board, newsgroup or community and perhaps, in a broad definition, exchanging music and video files. In USA, 20% of online Americans produced such content in 2002 in a narrow definition and 44% in 2003 in a broad definition'.

Access to the Internet or other new media may be converted into more active use, which is the often stated ambition of many advocates of the emancipatory potential of these technologies. In the words of Vinaya Kasajoo, one of Nepal's greatest champions of the use of new media in the service of civil society, it is important to become 'an uploading as well as a downloading society' (pers comm.). For this to become a reality it is important both to ensure the required skills are available to new media users and the motivation to use them is present (Janelle and Hodge 2000, Stanley 2003, Zarcadoolas 2002).

Remembering that there is no guarantee that new media use will be either progressive or altruistic, how such active use is to be encouraged is a question that must be very carefully addressed in civil society analyses. Just as '*any* civil society can be created, supported, manipulated, or repressed by *any* state' (Ehrenberg 1999: 238; emphases in original), so to can any medium be put to diverse and conflicting uses. As previously noted the effects of political power on the development and uses of new media at the macro-level of states and at the micro-level of particular civil society associations often remain to be investigated in depth by civil society researchers.

Media Development in Nepal

How these problems of media access and the relationship of new media to civil society are manifested 'on the ground' can best be appreciated through the examination of a particular case study of media development. Nepal's civil society has been severely challenged by continuing political unrest since the end of the Panchayat system in 1990 and by more than a decade of civil war initiated by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)'s declaration of the so-called 'People's War' against the state in 1996 (Dixit 2006, Hutt 2004). Caught in the midst of a three-way struggle between the Maoist forces, the democratic political parties, and the monarchy (Riaz and Basu 2007), civil society groups and their members have been attacked, often literally, but have also undergone unprecedented growth during this period. Nepal's citizens, particularly those from social groups that have been traditionally marginalised in the country's complex and diverse, hierarchical social system, such as Dalits (untouchables), members of minority ethnic and religious groups, and women, have increasingly seen civil society associations as the most effective means through which they can find a place within the highly contested political spaces of the nation-state (Brown 1996). One measure of this can be seen in the growth of NGOs in Nepal from 220 in 1990 to estimated numbers ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 a decade later (Montgomery 2002). Onta (2005: 121) argues that,

> The proliferation of NGOs in post-1990 Nepal must be seen as the manifestation of Nepali citizens exercising their fundamental rights to form associations in accordance with the Constitution of Nepal, 1990. While questions regarding issues of transparency, dependency on donor contributions and public monitoring (of services and products for quality) of NGO activities need to be further debated and discussed, it

is definitely the case that NGOs have expanded the realm of freedom of expression in Nepal.

The growth in Nepal's civil society associations has been matched by an equally unprecedented and dramatic increase in media activities. Prior to 1990 almost all media in Nepal, either printed or electronic, were state controlled. But growth in local radio stations, for example, either private or community owned has been impressive since Nepal's democratic revolution in 1990 (Noronha 2001, Page and Crawley 2001). By the first half of 2007 there were more than 60 active, independent radio stations with more than 100 additional licenses granted. Onta observes, 'while there are inadequacies in the independent radio sector [that has arisen since then]..., its achievements constitute a slap in the face to those who make it their business to repeat the cliché that "nothing happened during the era of multiparty democracy"' (2006: 119). Likewise, there has been huge growth in the print media sector with many papers and magazines published to satisfy the seemingly insatiable appetite for news (Hutt 2006). Privately-owned cable and satellite television stations have also broken the monopoly of Nepal Television, the state broadcaster.

These developments in 'old' media have been mirrored by the appearance of new media, such as the Internet and mobile telephony. As in other places these new media have become the focus of great interest and hope on the part of state, commercial, and civil society actors who see them as offering innovative means to further their specific political, economic, and social goals. 'The growth in all forms of media has enlarged the space of what can be

called civil society in Nepal and facilitated the search for democratic

foundations for the state and the entire society at large' (Onta 2005: 121)

But after more than a decade of development, Nepal's rate of Internet use as

measured by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) was only 0.83

per 100 inhabitants in 2005. Although this is a more than five-fold increase

from the 1999 figure of 0.16 per 100 inhabitants, this figure for use and rate of

increase compares very unfavourably with other nations in the Asian region

(see Figure 1). The pattern of access to *all* media within Nepal, but most

especially new, digital media technologies within Nepal is geographically

unbalanced with use overwhelmingly concentrated in the main towns and

cities, the Terai region bordering India, and the central hill region roughly

adjacent to the major highways.

Although successive Nepali governments have seen communication and

media infrastructure as key components of development, it is clear that the

obviously unequal distribution of these and other resources has proven to be

a major catalyst for the political unrest and violence of the past 20 years

(Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004, Pigg 1992). At the same time the decade-long Maoist

conflict has caused extreme disruption to media development and often the

destruction of already existing infrastructure in some places. This conflict has

significantly slowed growth in new media access in many parts of the country.

However, political unrest has also provided impetus and opportunity for some

media organizations and their activities. Despite intimidation from both

Maoists and the state, especially during the period of emergency rule and

renewed monarchical dictatorship between 2001 and 2006, media producers

have seized the opportunity to increase their activities. These activities

whether largely commercial in ambition or inspired by civil society goals, have

grown to meet the demand of audience members and readers who wish to

know more about the events that are daily affecting their lives (Onta 2005,

Onta 2006, Page and Crawley 2001, Wilmore 2001).

Figure 1: Internet Use per 100 People: Selected Countries in Asia

(Source: ITU)
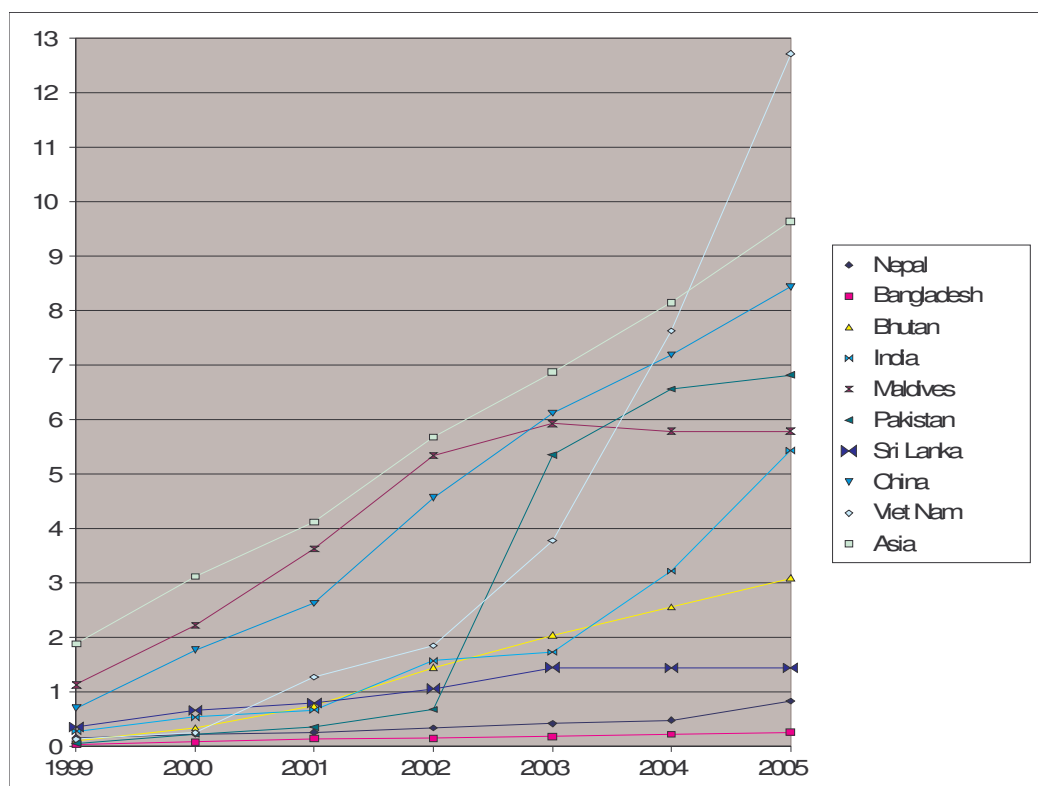
From Division to Unity: New Media Users and New Users of Media in

Nepal

Terms such as 'media have and have nots' or 'the digital divide' have certainly succeeded in making questions of media access more familiar to the public, policy makers, and media activists. But the extent to which media access is a dependent or independent variable compared to other socio-economic factors remains fiercely contested (Mueller 2001, van Dijk and Hacker 2003).

My own research in Nepal could be used to illustrate such distinctions between media haves and have nots, focussing as it does in one case on the creators of Nepali personal websites and in another on the work of NGOs that seek to provide access to media, especially radio and local television, in communities where there has previously been little or no availability. If the former *users of new media* could be described, following Compaine (2001a) as winners of the access war, the latter *new users of media* are certainly often viewed as having narrowly avoided becoming its potential casualties. However, rather than neatly dividing the entire population into two groups, the distinction between users of new media (the website creators) and the new users of media (the consumers of NGO produced media) appears to describe different points within a complex spectrum of media use. A significant proportion of Nepal's population, perhaps even a majority, may lie somewhere between or beyond these points.

Therefore, we need to think about the relationship between media (including new media) and society (including civil society) less in terms of the either/or logic of much digital divide research and more in terms of an ecological paradigm within which communicative resources and strategies are skilfully

used by people to achieve their own desired goals within the context of the
wider environment of the local community, polity, and economy (Tacchi,
Slater, and Hearn 2003). The concept of a communicative ecology described
by Tacchi, Slater and Hearn provides a grounded research methodology
through which the empirical details of the more abstract, macro-analytical
concept of the mediascape and its relationship to the other –scapes of the
'global cultural economy' (Appadurai 2000), such as financial, ideological,
ethnic, and technological, can be discussed.

Typically the questions asked in relation to the types of social divide in media
access are quantitative ones designed to measure the proportion of the
population that can be assigned to different types of media use and access. A
vast array of statistical evidence is available to answer such questions. In the
case of Nepal these reveal the gulf between media users to be very wide
(HLCIT 2005). Whereas we might see the spectrum of use in Western,
industrialised countries to consist mainly of an active, productive minority and
a relatively large majority of more (but not entirely) passive consumers (van
Dijk 2006), the spectrum in Nepal, as in other developing countries, includes a
very large proportion of the population for whom mass media are largely
unavailable in any form. It is for this reason that great emphasis is often
placed by governments and non-governmental organizations upon the
development of media and communication infrastructure, and this effort tends
to overwhelm all other considerations. After all, it does seem perverse to ask
how people use media when large proportions of a country's population do
not even have any media to use!

But perverse questions, that is, ones that seem intractable, are often those most worth asking. How and to what ends people use media or might wish to use media if it was available to them are exactly the type of question that should be at the heart of the discussion of the relationship between new media and civil society. Media, especially new media like the Internet, appear to hold exciting potential for civil society whatever the goals of any given association or organization might be. In this sense, new media for civil society debates centre on how best to get the message across. Such an analysis of effectiveness has to take the audience and its diverse characteristics into account (Burke 1999).

In relation to the two groups of Nepali users described above we might discern quite different problems when analysing the effectiveness of civil society communication. Whilst it may be hard to communicate with the *new users of media* because they do not have easy access to the means to hear or see a message, the *users of new media*, connected to a vast array of media technologies and content may not even notice such messages in the midst of such profusion. The former appear to have little or no choice in media, whereas the latter appear to have too much choice. Both scenarios present problems for civil society in getting its message across or expanding the network of people who identify with its goals.

These are real problems. It is not surprising that a great deal of the precious resources devoted to media by civil society associations are committed to

overcoming them, either by providing expensive infrastructure (satellite radio or Internet connectivity, for example) or high quality content rivalling the production standards of commercial media to attract audience members. In the case of Nepal, for example, NGOs such as *Equal Access*, who specialise in communication for development have recognised the need to produce programming for new users of media that are every bit as (if not more) sophisticated in their understanding of the audience's diverse needs and responses to content, as are those produced within the commercial sphere (EAI n.d.). Likewise, the extensive work of US anthropologist Mark Liechty demonstrates how urban media consumers differ in their response to the challenges presented by the Nepali and global mediascape and, even by their own estimation, face such challenges with varying degrees of success (Liechty 2002, Liechty 2003, Liechty 2006).

Studies of the digital divide and media access in Nepal provide ample evidence for the reality of these of inequalities, but they should also be seen in the context of the development of social and cultural distinctions that go beyond purely material difference. Authors such as Pigg (Pigg 1992), Liechty (Liechty 1995) and Heaton-Shrestha (Heaton-Shrestha 2004) have argued that there is growing alienation between those in Nepal who are perceived, not the least by themselves, as situated on opposing sides of the sorts of material divide that are described in media access research. The terrible effects of such alienation have already been noted above in regard to the past 10 years of civil war in Nepal.

The material inequalities that contribute to media access problems, not the least for civil society associations in countries like Nepal, cannot be downplayed. But, following Van Dijk (van Dijk and Hacker 2003, van Dijk 2006) it is important to recognise that such divides are also constituted through other social, cultural and motivational factors. Media access inequalities must be seen as arising from 'a process with many social, mental and technological causes and not as a single event of obtaining a particular technology' (van Dijk 2006: 224). This makes it clear that any attempts to better understand and alleviate such problems must be equally multi-faceted in their approach.

At their crudest, discussions of media access division may come close to blaming the victims of such inequality for their predicament, if ignorance of media or the skills needed to successfully access media, such as literacy, are regarded as its determining cause. Even at their most benign, theories of the digital divide tend to create a situation where the mediascape is envisaged as inhabited by different types of media users with distinct needs and abilities, and who face problems requiring quite different solutions. This may appear to present a primarily practical problem for civil society associations who seek to use media in their work, due to the fact that multiple acts of translation, both literal and metaphorical, may be required to mediate between different groups. Such mediation can be doubly difficult when civil society associations and their members are positioned as users of new media by contrast to those who are new users of media within their own community of representation.

However, the central point that I wish to make is that one of the most obvious omissions in media access analyses has actually arisen from their overwhelming emphasis on division and difference. It causes us to overlook the extent to which people actually share similar communicative needs despite the fact that the resources available to them for the fulfilment of these might differ. On a basic level this is to restate Peterson's (2003) point that media encompass a range of 'technologies' that runs the gamut from instinctively learned complex language systems, which differentiate humans from other animals, to the things that we learn to use and may think of as new media, such as the Internet. Baring the most extreme disability everyone communicates using some medium and the distinction between media on the basis of lesser or greater estimations of sophistication is largely socially constructed (Michaels 1994).

No matter how they are mediated acts of communication share the characteristic ability to create or sustain (and alternatively change or sever) social relations. The need to sustain sociality is fundamental to the human condition and is not diminished by the presence or absence of any particular technology or medium. The introduction of new media to a community may, as Benedict Anderson (1991) argued, alter the spatial and temporal scale on which it is possible to imagine the extent of social relations. Equally, it may introduce qualitatively new dimensions to the experience of sociality, for example a 'network society' characterised by forms of 'hypersociality' (Castells 1996, Castells 2006). If such hypersociality is becoming the norm for those who are intensive users of new media and if this is, as Castells argues,

the basis upon which much contemporary economic activity in the

industrialised world is based, then 'the position inside and outside networks

becomes vital' (van Dijk and Hacker 2003: 324).

To return briefly to the example of new users of media and users of new

media in Nepal, whilst the distinctions between types and quantity of media,

especially new media, used in different places and by different socio-cultural

groups are very real there is also evidence of unity in some people's use of

media as a component in personal social relations. Many listeners to Equal

Access' popular program *Sathisanga Manka Kura* (SSMK) [Chatting With My

Best Friend] (EAN n.d.), which is primarily targeted at a rural, youth audience,

write to the program makers to request advice about personal problems,

including issues of friendship, courtship, and family relationships. In addition

to this, SSMK has become the focus for local listener groups that regularly

meet to discuss the program content. Although the radio program has a mass

audience - estimated by Equal Access to be in the region of 6 million listeners

(from a total national population in 2007 of approximately 24 million) based on

research conducted by the ACNielsen organisation, it is also clear from the

content of letters and other responses that it is integrated into listeners' lives

in more intimate ways both individually and through local social networks.

Such uses of media are paralleled by many users of new media, especially

the creators of websites, who use the Internet to create often highly personal

records of their daily lives and social relations. The websites created by

Nepali Internet users living in Nepal and abroad provide a good example of

the types of 'strategic self-presentation' (Cheung 2004: 56) that have been noted in other personal websites, albeit with a distinctive emphasis on Nepali national identity, music, and other popular culture, as one might expect. There is much that could distinguish a young villager listening to SSMK from the creator of a personal website living in Kathmandu, and these differences must be appreciated, but they also share a great deal that must not be lost in the rush to emphasise difference. In particular, sociality and social connectivity appears to be the content that is most valued in people's experience of much media use, just as it is most important in face-to-face communication.

Conclusions

The relationship between new media and civil society in Nepal is, as even this brief discussion shows, complex and often contradictory. In particular it demonstrates how important it is for those who seek to use new media and information and communication technologies on behalf of civil society to take the wider characteristics of the local and global mediascape into account when estimating the desired or actual effects of their work. This paper has argued for an increased theoretical and empirical subtlety in analysis of such social and digital divides. Work in the field of media for development has echoed one of the key concerns of civil society debate, which is the attempt to appreciate more clearly the complex interrelationship of civil society, state and market (see the papers in Harvey 2007 for example). The recognition that these are concerns shared by those who would variously identify themselves as either media or civil society researchers and/or activists will in its own right strengthen discussion of how civil society makes use of new media.

However, Wilson (2004: 391) ruefully acknowledges that, 'thus far ICTs have [had] very limited effects on developing countries as a whole but are centrally important for the small national elites'. He continues,

> The impacts on the many are low, while the impacts on the few are much higher…The Internet is having substantial impacts on the organizational and political capacities of the privileged groups in these countries - on their professional and personal ties overseas and on some elements of national economic performance. The result is a huge domestic disjuncture between the high access enjoyed by a very few privileged and the low access permitted to the population at large' (Wilson III 2004: 395).

It is the sheer scale of the disjuncture in media access in many developing countries compared to either fully or newly industrialised countries that creates potential problems in conceptualising and analysing the relationship between new media access and civil society.

In situations where access to media approaches very high levels, even nearing seeming universality it may be that media access inequalities are almost invisible and only discerned following extremely careful collection and analysis of statistical evidence (van Dijk and Hacker 2003). It is precisely because industrialised societies are so highly reliant on mediated forms of technology (Castells 1996) that the minority without a presence in communication networks are virtually invisible and *social divide* research is required to bring the plight of those without access to our attention. The statistical minority without access are still most likely to be from groups that are themselves often identified as socially and politically marginalised. Thus, the important questions for civil society associations and activists in such a situation will be: How to communicate effectively via new media given that

those people and groups who may be most in need of their support may also
be those with least access to new media? How then to assess the contribution
that media access inequality makes within the context of the broader range of
inequalities that they face (Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury 2003)?

By contrast the high visibility of the social divide in media access in
developing countries gives rise to a potentially significant problem due to the
subsequent emphasis placed on the related issue of the international digital
divide, which, as the example of the UN's Millennium Goals shows, looms
large in geopolitical discourse. Although it is the overwhelming poverty of
extremely large proportions of developing countries' populations that is the
root cause of the aggregate inequalities in media access this may not always
be reflected in the allocation of resources for media development provided by
governmental and non-governmental organizations. To, again, quote Wilson
(2004: 18), 'the aggregate, macro-level cannot tell us who advocates for these
new technologies, who opposes them, what purposes they're used for, and
under what circumstances they're developed'. Attempts to reduce media
access inequality may in this respect be little different from the wider
processes of development that frequently serve to support elites and the
growth of the middle class without having any significant impact on those
people and communities whose poverty actually causes the appearance of a
digital divide in the first place (see, for example, the comments on '"cronyism"
in donor support' for Nepali media organisations in Onta 2005: 120).
Mossberger, Talbot and Stansbury (2003) point out that even in the context of
the politically open and _relatively_ economically equal, industrialised countries,

market-based processes of diffusion of resources cannot be relied upon to eliminate the social divide in media access; any faith in such processes of diffusion is utterly naïve in the context of developing countries given the current conditions of political and economic inequality that exist.

I have argued above that one part of the solution to this problem, which both general support for civil society in developing countries and support for particular civil society associations and initiatives can contribute, is to consider again the question of the visibility of different media users. In this case it is not simply the problem of making visible inequalities and differences in media access, which is most relevant to industrialised countries. Rather, it is the opposite problem of attempting to make visible the things that are actually shared by individuals and communities who might appear at first glance to be greatly divided in their access to and uses of resources, such as new media. As Stacey Pigg (1992) has observed of the distinction between developed (bikasi) and undeveloped (abikasi) people and places in Nepal, the persistent observation of such distinctions, whilst reflecting the distribution of wealth and resources, also reinforces a profoundly hierarchical vision of social organization and historical change. The challenge is to envisage and value different people's communicative actions equally, not privileging some as of greater worth simply because they make use of certain types of mediatory technology. Although civil society may find that new media contribute a great deal to furthering the goals of increasing equality and freedom for all members of society, perhaps these contributions are best assured by giving equal regard to all voices by whatever means they are articulated. New media can

be used for civil society, but only if civil society continues to be for everyone

and not only those who have access to new media.

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