

New technologies

A cause, a fight... a label



ON 20 JANUARY, THE INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL SOLIDARITY LABEL WAS LAUNCHED IN GENEVA. ITS OBJECTIVE: TO ESTABLISH THE PRESENCE OF THIS INITIATIVE IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE. THE ORIGIN OF THIS COMMUNICATION DRIVE.



“Why equip Africa with computers when they haven’t got anything to eat...?”: In a few to-the-point words, Denis Inkei, communication consultant, sums up the challenge facing all those with an interest in the information society who have engaged in the fight to reduce the digital divide and defend the place of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). To help tackle this challenge, Inkei, a specialist in social and humanitarian communication commissioned by the global Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF), resolved “not to portray the cause of the

problem, but to convey an image of one of its solutions...” and proposed the creation of a digital solidarity label. Launched on 20 March in Geneva and already awarded to some ten companies, it is envisaged that this label will become a global reference. What’s it all about?

The context

Although it may be disembodied and conceptual, the information society is nonetheless an inescapable economic reality. According to a French study, between 3% and 8% of growth in international gross revenue is attributable to the information society. It even contributes to 40% of annual growth in the European Union. The information society is also a scientific and cultural reality, with encyclopaedias, medical protocols, exchanges of knowledge and distance teaching now available online. Finally, it is an historic opportunity for many countries to develop their economies and improve the living conditions of their people by sidestepping the obstacle of first having to undergo an industrial revolution. Indeed, at present, more than 80% of the world population does not have access to ICTs.

The diagnosis

First discussed in 2003 at the international summit in Geneva, validated in 2005 in Tunis and present at numerous regional forums, the concepts of the information society and the digital divide have been at the heart of the international agenda for a few years. However, they have yet to make it into the public sphere. “Unlike wars, AIDS, poverty or famine, the digital divide is intangible”, explains Denis Inkei. It’s faceless, has no history, no concrete examples of suffering to talk about or show. It’s hard to create a popular, public media existence for it.” The concept of the digital divide also goes against our collective culture. “We all have a fixed image of Africa”, continues Inkei, citing, as proof, a drawing recently in the press which showed an African child with a distended stomach, dressed in rags, standing in front of an Internet café, where the word “café” is crossed out. “This is a stereotypical representation of

part – but only part – of the African reality. Of course, Africa also has cities, urbanity, knowledge, energy, active young people, academics, initiatives, employment...”

To those who are surprised about this wish to give concrete form to the digital divide, Denis Inkei replies that it is the only way of “obtaining a lever of political and economic power and influence. It’s a strategic and operational necessity, as with ecology or fair trade.” Finally, he adds that “this media existence of the digital divide is the very essence of the information society concept”.

“The cure”

Press campaign, adverts, mobilisation of IT giants, events, international conferences, a label... To establish their cause in the public sphere, the promoters of the DSF had a number of scenarios and methods to choose from. They opted for the label because it responds to the demands and constraints of the means available, the circumstances and requirements at the grassroots level. “This is the age of the image and logos,” Inkei reminds us. “What’s more, the label has a democratic dimension that suits the specific nature of the DSF and its tripartite composition, with representatives of public authorities, businesses and civil society.”

The treatment

Creating and launching a label is equivalent to “starting to tell a story”, but it is only the first chapter. It is only over time that its promoters will find out whether they made the right choice, whether their label will gain widespread recognition, credibility and legitimacy. To achieve that, they must finalise and apply the label eligibility requirements and develop suitable checking criteria and instruments.

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