



BRAHMA KUMARIS WORLD SPIRITUAL UNIVERSITY

An Inclusive Information Society: Wisdom, Vision and Values

Statement for the

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It is surely a sign of the times that the defining attribute now so often connected with society is information, raw facts, statistics or data, reducible to a digital soup of binary code, rather than a nurturing family of persons. And yet such a society represents the latest stage in a development process that has progressed from agricultural and industrial foundations to one in which tremendous efficiencies, life-saving know-how and answers to many of the riddles of the world around us are now at our fingertips – or rather, primarily at the fingertips of the small percentage of the world that presently has access to the internet. While successful agriculture and industry of any kind are themselves based on access to information – and there is a tremendous hidden wealth of knowledge of the natural world within indigenous communities – never before in human history has there been such an upsurge in the quantity of information, the means to communicate it and its ubiquity. If economic value is based less and less on physical characteristics such as size and weight, so also knowledge has an ever-greater role to play in personal and social life. Access to information has long been a powerful driving force for progress and so there is much to be welcomed in humanity's increased capacity to create, disseminate and make use of information. Proof of this can be seen in the fields of medicine, education, commerce and the environment, to name but a few. Yet there is much to be concerned about as well – not just the divide between haves and have-nots, the waste of resources, the abuse of information, and the application of technology for unconstructive purposes – but their underlying root cause: a world in which, notwithstanding the abundance of information, and much rhetoric, there is a poverty of concerned action, practical wisdom, human values and sometimes plain common sense. Quantity of information is important but so is its quality, relevance, accessibility and distribution, and the ability to make use of it. Knowledge is power and the challenge we face is to make the most of the new capabilities at humanity's disposal in ways that truly bring benefit and improvement to the lives of all people.

The potential is clear to see, but what do we want to achieve with it?

The potential afforded to us by the convergence of the ability, capacity and skills to generate and capture new information, and the means to access, absorb, use and transmit it cheaply and widely, is indeed tremendous. But like all capabilities it can be used in a variety of ways, and a concerted effort, based on clear guiding principles, is required to ensure that it is appropriately applied. Perhaps above all, we need to be clear about the vision that we hold for tomorrow. What kind of world do we wish to see? What future do

we want to help shape for humankind? And how do we see ourselves? Such questions are not an invitation to indulge in a fantasy world divorced from reality so much as a wake-up call so that knowledge and technology are harnessed in a coherent, synergistic and effective manner for the sustainable human development of all people.

Fortunately much has already been accomplished in charting a course that we wish to head for. Documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Millennium Declaration are clear signs of an emerging global ethic and commonly agreed minimum standards for humanity to live by. But we need to keep reminding ourselves of the value systems from which these aims are forged and use them as yardsticks with which to guide and by which to assess our actions. Development and use of information and technology that are intrinsically global in nature and potential should involve private sector acumen and government leadership but not be dictated solely by market forces or political power structures; there must be coordination with multi-lateral and national organizations and the involvement of civil society in the context of an agreed global framework. This requires that, as a global family, we look deeply within ourselves and decide what we want to become and what ethical convictions we want to guide our decisions and choices and inspire our actions.

Technology may be the answer, but what was the question?

Clarity of vision also serves the important task of distinguishing aims from the means to achieve them. This distinction is of particular relevance when any new technology becomes available, as the new potential it offers tends to bring with it the tendency to see it as a panacea for all problems or an end in itself. Technology by itself does not change our lives so much as the motivation, passion and resolve with which we make use of it. We need to keep developing better technology and to make use of it, but must see it as a common public good that can, and must, be used responsibly in ways that respect and benefit all humanity. Likewise, the issue in relation to the resources of information and knowledge is not their scarcity so much as the use that is made of them; indeed for many, the flow of information has become a burden rather than the privilege that it generally tended to be. Drawing on existing notions of stewardship, technology, and the information used to develop and use it, can be seen as a part of the world's intellectual heritage held on trust to be shared for the benefit of present and future generations.

We must also remember that while the latest technology, open source software and public domain information are part of the solution, they are not going to end the scourges of poverty, disease and exclusion overnight. Further, they will typically not be the starting point, as there are often many more fundamental needs to address first. A computer is not of much use to the thousands of villages without electricity or the millions of illiterate individuals whose time is consumed by daily subsistence tasks such as collecting water or firewood. Similarly, technology is used in a social context by individuals with varying preferences, systems and ways of living that must be taken account of, including those who prefer a simple life closer to nature. We also need to remember that while part of the answer we are struggling for may be more things, a larger part of the answer revolves around the use that we make of things, the value that we give to them, and the way that we relate to ourselves and other people.

One of the tremendous benefits of technology, or the application of knowledge to practical tasks, is its potential for cost-effectiveness and ease of scale. In the case of information and communication technology, when appropriately development-oriented, this means the

ability to transmit knowledge to unreached millions, to help eliminate gender disparities, support job creation and facilitate the meeting of basic needs such as food and water. This potential must be used in ways that humanize globalization rather than imposing a uni-cultural one-size-fits-all perspective that does not support the cultural and linguistic diversity of the human story. Thus, for example, technology can be localised and used in a community-driven networked world to educate, to teach life and livelihood skills, to strengthen individual and cultural identity by preserving and increasing access to and the practice of cultural traditions and indigenous know-how.

The standardisation or commonality that we should aim for is of a culture of human values, of interdependent rights and responsibilities, that respects and appreciates cultural, linguistic and social specificities; let us globalize a civilisation of peace and wisdom, an ethic of inclusion, solidarity, dignity and compassion, founded on the understanding that there is but one race, the human race, expressing itself in many diverse co-existing traditions and cultures. A society that includes all people will have to be pluralistic, while, if it is to be one society, also drawing itself together around broadly shared moral principles. But for diversity to coexist peacefully and harmoniously in the global village that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can make a practical reality, will require all of us to pay greater attention than before to living by qualities such as understanding, respect, tolerance, humility and non-violence.

*Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*
T. S. Eliot

If technology must not be the sole focus of our attention or the centre of our world, similarly we must not stay only at the level of information. Somehow, in the vast volume of fast-forward information flows that deluges the lives of many, a space must be staked out in which to hit the pause button so that we may question, reflect and evaluate rather than merely passively receive, accept and absorb. Questioning is a first step in critical thinking, while reflection cements learning and supports the creation of meaning and the unfolding of understanding that gives value, relevance and applicability to facts or information. It is meaning, understanding and wisdom, eternal notions of truth and timeless values, rather than just superficiality, short-term perspectives and selfish impulses, that must guide us.

Thus while the idea of a world of informed individuals, or a society based on knowledge, is a powerful and appealing one, so much depends on the kind of information and knowledge and what we do with it. Our collective and conscious knowledge-base must extend beyond the functional and notions of a technology-driven marketplace of consumers to embrace spiritual principles in relation to the self and the one-ness of the human family. Knowledge gives birth to the potential for change, and it was indeed new knowledge that heralded the beginning of the industrial revolution and dawn of the information society. But if from our world of extremes and exclusion there is to emerge an inclusive home for all and a culture of human values, it is the transformative potential of spiritual knowledge that must now be tapped. The divide between the haves and have-nots, the missing link between principle and practice or intention and action, will not be bridged without the awareness of the spiritual dimension of the individual, the consequent one-ness of the human family and the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood that arises from this.

“If you can reach them, you can teach them.”

Communication, freedom of expression and creativity are the foundation of society and culture. Our very world is shaped by the words we express and images we create, while our attitudes and thinking are coloured by those we hear and see. So as individuals we need to reflect on the worlds that our words reflect and create and to be aware of the generative capacity of our own thoughts and inner awareness. We frequently transmit to others a pre-established message, missing out on the richness that comes from listening, reaching out, empathising and dialoguing with those around us. To fulfil our vision of a people-centred information society, we need a spiritual language; we must mainstream a values perspective, thinking and speaking from the heart and in the language of the soul – a language of trust, faith and love, of appreciation, wholeness and responsibility. Sometimes the means that we use to communicate obscures the fact that no matter what the scale it still involves people at both ends of the process. The fact that we have mastered how to transmit in quantity only highlights the importance of the quality of what is communicated, the need to consider its impact on the listener or receiver, to use it responsibly and the special potential of the mass media to bring to others not just information but also know-how, truth and the means for prosperity and well-being.

If the convergence of information and technology is to bring about the revolutionary changes to people's lives that it can do, it will first require a quantum evolution in the way we go about things. Business as usual will not bring about an inclusive society in which all its members benefit from development and all have equal opportunities to participate in building their future with the ability, and right, to make a difference in society. To achieve this, education must be at the front line of our efforts as it is a fundamental strategic instrument for personal and social change and development, the attainment of peace, freedom and justice. Human capacities must be developed so that the information society is an educated society comprised of individuals with those values, attitudes and skills needed to handle the challenges, and make the most of the opportunities, of contemporary possibilities and a globalizing world. This must start with the realisation of the outstanding promise of universal primary education, which remains an elusive goal but is surely a good foundation for all other types of education, the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals and making a difference to the lives of the oppressed, marginalized, deprived and excluded.

An educated society is in turn comprised of educated individuals and education must have as its object not just greater economic productivity – although it must meet individuals' basic learning needs and equip them with appropriate vocational skills – but the all-round development of the human personality, the formation of the pillar of the family, the citizen of the community and the world. The quality of education is directly linked to the quality of our lives and we must build a culture of life-long learning based on the corner stones of spirituality and wisdom if our vision of the society of tomorrow is to be met. Of critical importance in making the most of the information society is learning to create meaning from streams of data, to discriminate reality from bias, illusion or perception, to see significance, discern quality, evaluate, assess consequences and develop the ability to decide and respond. Faced with a sometimes monolithic flow of media communication, we need above all to remember that one of our most fundamental freedoms is that of thought and the power of choice.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University therefore believes that achieving our vision of an inclusive development-oriented, people-centred information society requires that we place a high priority on learning and education that is not only functional, practical and relevant in content but which also has spiritual and moral principles and values at its heart and the overall development of the whole person and society as its aim. For the past 65 years the Brahma Kumaris have been offering to people of all walks of life around the world a very simple, accessible and yet effective education in self-awareness, spiritual principles and values and would welcome working with others in this continuing and crucial endeavour. Information must now be refracted through the prism of spirituality so as to give the light of wisdom by which we may lead our lives as one human family, for it is only when we change our inner world that the outer world changes.

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University

The BKWSU is a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and in consultative status with UNICEF.
The University was founded in India in 1937 and has branches in over 100 countries worldwide.
It has been affiliated to the United Nations Department of Public Information since 1980.

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