

Privacy vs. Free Flow of ideas

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My last article on the later of this subject involved the appeal for why major forums such as the Inter-Africa Group did not include Information Technology for development in their agenda for action. Well, having just been part of, and a participant at a UNESCO/UNECA sponsored workshop on a regional Info-ethics for Africa; it brought me closer to what I have been working for so many years in my career. I thought it was a brilliant opportunity not only to entertain the views and share with interested readers why this topic under the above title will present a great deal of debate and a serious attention by all users of information, particularly the internet.

Having worked abroad and in Ethiopia, I could not but help to have a global view of the issues at hand. In the perspective of free flow of information and ideas, what will be the impact on the developing world and our continent, Africa if the west will have to be concerned about protecting, securing, preventing all falling under the privacy act. If what will leap frog Africa to the 21st century is not to reinvent the wheel but to use what is already in place and add on Africa's perspective, how will we survive if information is to be blocked with the reasoning of privacy act or copyright laws etc, particularly on the information we get via the internet. Does Africa have the resources to reinvent the wheel, or the greater ingenuity and creativity along the means of production to even protect its own and effectively compete in the global market. How does the global market treat Africa's intellectual properties and how far can the continent use it to make breaking advancement that will have an impact on its own economies, people etc...

The presenter in the Info-ethic Forum discussed in detail the role of the Public Authorities in accessing information, the 'fair use' concept in the information society, within the context of Ethics, Equitable Information Society, Intellectual Property, the rise of the 4th World, the digital divide, the content of text vs. multimedia.

The other major topic of discussion was protecting human dignity in the digital age, privacy, Consumer Protection, and Freedom of speech. Property, the rise of the 4th World, the digital divide, the content of text vs. multimedia was also discussed.

I will rewrite from my 1993 article from Ethiopian Review Magazine, and that which I find current until today, the issues of privacy as a concern to individuals 'One of the most pressing issues facing all of societies is that modern computer systems have made it technically and economically feasible to store large volumes of data about citizens in such a way that this data can be readily accessed and analyzed. Conversely, consideration has not been given to the great potential for loss of privacy, and that misuse of this data threatens many of the basic freedom found in society.

With the help of computers, data about citizens is being gathered and stored in files at an astounding rate. If these files (names, addresses, telephone numbers, marital status, income,

medical history, driver license, education, credit rating and other types of information) were inter-connected by a means of nationwide data communication network, the impact on privacy is undoubtedly high. It should also be obvious that the accumulation of masses of personal information, where the individual has no means of checking its accuracy, is highly relevant to the question of civil liberties".

Having written that back then, I will tend to still argue that at this point the privacy issue with interconnectivity will not have a high impact on the Continent with the exception of South Africa perhaps, since the information or digital age is just at its infancy. As a matter of fact, due to monopolies of our telecommunication systems, a digital divide is being created and only the few elite less than 1% of our populations are subject to these privacy issue, even so, the impact at an individual level is very low.

On the subject of Industrial Espionage/Software Piracy, well, the two are among the biggest concerns that the high-tech industry is faced with today. In most developing countries, including Africa, there does not seem to be some form of Data Protection Act or Computer Misuse Act, there is no hope for prosecuting such charges or even minimizing such acts. Included in this category are also virus infections, fraud and sabotage, software copyright violations etc. It must be noted that this and other similar scenarios are among the factors discouraging foreign investments by corporations or individual entrepreneurs, which has a bearing on the continent's economy.

Ultimately, the countries in the continent of Africa cannot avoid technology and they have to admit it is here to stay. However, what should be a priority at the national and continental level is that as the population are acquiring technology and making it part of their everyday lives, specific programs and policies, including laws should be in place to ensure its use is appropriate, in light of entering the information age has as much damage to cause as the benefit it provides. These pros and cons should also be seen from both the perspective of both national and individual level.

Finally, yes, free flow of ideas are key to democratic rights and economic and societal progress, but how will it marginalize the African continent if the public does not have their voices heard about how issues and acts of privacy can have a negative impact on their opportunities for leapfrogging to the millennium.

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