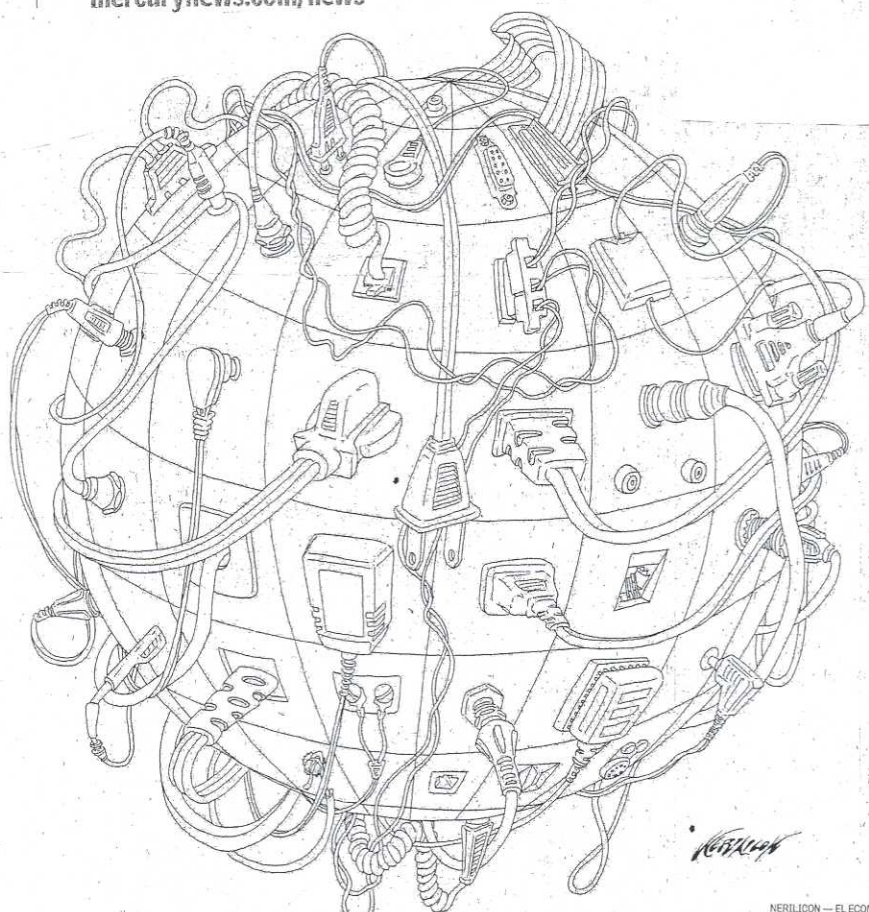


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NERILLOON — EL ECONOMISTA

On the Web, everything except sharing

CREATING A DIGITAL COMMONS FOR DATA WOULD HELP US TACKLE GLOBAL PROBLEMS

By Geoffrey C. Bowker

It's all out there on the Web, isn't it? Just go to Google and you can find the poem "On the Road to Mandalay" by Rudyard Kipling, innumerable blogs describing the experience of the walk, and the offer of a cruise along the Irrawaddy River. Or again more than 27.6 million hits for the "Bay Area" — from live Webcams to creative cremations (Creative Cremains).

Whatever you need to know, whenever you need to know it.

In the heady days of the early to mid-1990s, when the dot-com bubble was so iridescent and the future so inviting, a wave of enthusiasm spread about the beneficial powers of the Internet. If we could just bridge the "digital divide" — getting the poor access to the Internet through community kiosks, computer donations, supporting libraries — then many of the world's woes would go away.

Give a poor person a computer and an Internet hook-up, and they would become self-sustaining, politically active and community-

centered. This was a strange logic, when there was already evidence that when people in the developed world got computers and Internet access, we logged on to buy more, be entertained and get sex in new and interesting ways.

A lot more needs to happen if bridging the digital divide isn't going to be an empty call.

It's really not all out there on the Web. We have gone from 500 channels with nothing on to a billion sites recycling much of the same content.

Take a problem like climate change: a problem hitting close to home this year, with floods as far south as San Diego and a sunny California winter in Seattle. It would be great if we could all just share our data and work out whether this global issue called for global management. However, the global community has a conflicting and confusing array of policies around data sharing.

The European Directive on Databases recognizes producers of databases as adding creative content, which means that even if the underlying data is freely available, use of the database can be restricted to those who are willing and able to pay the access fee. So if an organization in the Bay Area wants to answer that climate change question, they had best be prepared to ante up.

We need to be able to share our knowledge, wisdom and insights. We need a digital

commons, which can bring together accessible data, technology to use it and an institutional framework for deploying it to best advantage. There is no simple market fix here: Markets don't think very well in 20- to 200-year time frames — just the frames we need to be thinking in to address our urgent global problems. A digital commons, properly designed, can be a key tool for the protection of our great common heritage: the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat.

Even with the data and the technology in place, it's not all clear sailing. Increasingly, the developing world is calling for "data repatriation." The argument is that the first wave of imperial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries took out national treasures. The second wave is taking out information. Developing countries want it back.

There are possibly huge financial windfalls in data about a country's flora and fauna — there could be a new strain of corn that ripens twice in a season or a cure for the common cold. Having seen the enormous profits taken by companies like Monsanto, many in the developing world want to erect walls around their data. Only if the right institutional and governmental agreements are in place will it be possible to create the community of trust upon which data sharing thrives.

GEOFFREY C. BOWKER is executive director of the Center for Science, Technology and Society at Santa Clara University. The center today is hosting an international conference, "Digital Divide or Digital Commons: Toward Global Knowledge Sharing."