

# People first in the information society

## 1. What's this all about?

We are engaged in the early stages of a fundamental change in the way in which economies, and societies, operate.

The change is being made possible by the development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Increasingly, data of all kinds can be held in digital form (the '1's and '0's of the binary system on which computing is based) and can be communicated effortlessly across great distances by telecommunications links. Digitised 'information' of this kind may consist of written texts, but may also be images, sounds, films and TV, as well as other kinds of emerging multi-media.

These technological changes are important for the way they will transform how we work and live. We can already begin to sense how our lives will be affected in what is being called variously the 'network society', the 'digital society' or the 'information society'. Many commentators have suggested that the current process of transformation is as historically significant as the change which brought about the industrial revolution: that we need to prepare to move from the industrial to the information age.

Will such an age be a better or a worse time in which to live? This depends on how it is introduced. The technology is neither inherently good or bad, and it would be wrong to adopt an approach of technological determinism. It is important to argue for social, cultural and moral considerations to be given proper weight as we set the foundations for the global information society of the future. It is vital that trade union organisations make their voices heard in the debates to come.

FIET has been fully engaged in the information society revolution through a series of measures ranging from adapting its own IT abilities to examining how today's technology will have an impact on tomorrow's world of work.

The individual FIET Trade Sections are engaged in looking at the implications on their immediate sector and workplaces.

FIET has also developed activities for the IT sector itself. The Industry Trade Section has expanded its sphere of influence to include business services and the IT sector. For the best part of a decade FIET's structure has included a European IT forum, which brings together computer professionals and representatives of unions organising in the IT sector. The aim is to build union organising in the IT sector and to ensure that IT professionals have conditions of work covered by collective bargaining arrangements. The IT forum has also co-ordinated attempts to obtain European works councils in the IT giants. During the 1997 forum, the participants agreed to establish an on-line community for IT professionals. The European IT forum is now consolidated and the aim is to give it a global vision and structure.

This paper attempts to address the implications, both for FIET and for FIET's affiliates, of the information society.

- It will begin by looking at the technological and regulatory background to the current debate on the issue.
- It will then explore in detail the changes which are under way in work organisation.
- Finally, it will look at the wider social issues which are raised.

In the process, it will identify **thirty challenges** for discussion.

## 2. The Information Society: questions to answer

Change brings opportunities, but it also brings dangers. Across the world, people have questions and concerns about their working lives:

- *Will the changes affect the way I currently work?*
- *Will the changes mean that there will be more or less unemployment? Will I lose my job?*
- *With technology changing so fast, how will I be able to keep up with the changes?*
- *Will the changes offer me an escape from poverty?*
- *Will I find myself separated from my work colleagues, for example stuck at home with a computer?*
- *What sort of working lives will my children have?*

- *Can a trade union really have anything to offer me in a new working environment?*

Some questions concern other aspects of their lives:

- *Will I have the opportunity to access the technology I need?*
- *Will I find my personal privacy under attack? Will personal data about me be held without my control?*
- *Will my region be marginalised?*
- *Will my language and culture be threatened?*
- *Will a future information society provide greater or fewer opportunities for women?*
- *Will it be easier or more difficult to have power over my own life, and to take part in the democratic life of my community and country?*

Challenge 1: Do we have the information and understanding we need to be able to assist our members when they ask these questions?

Challenge 2: We need to look ahead. What are the questions and issues which our members will be raising in ten years, in the year 2009?

### **3. What's going on?: convergence**

The information technology and telecommunications industries are increasingly coalescing, into a hybrid referred to as ICTs (information and communication technologies). This process is widely described as 'convergence'.

Until very recently, it was easy to draw clear boundaries between the two sectors: IT companies were concerned with data processing and storage, whilst telecoms companies supplied communications channels, primarily for voice telephony. But convergence is blurring such clear distinctions.

For example:

Telecommunications networks are being used more and more for data transmission between computers.

Dial-up access to files is increasingly integrated into computer operating systems (such as Microsoft's Windows 98)

Mobile phones and small portable computers are becoming a single technology.

The Internet, the international network which now links many millions of computers, is perhaps the most dramatic example of the sort of potential which ICTs offer. (We will return to the Internet shortly).

The process of convergence is increasingly bringing in a third sector, the world of broadcasting, film, publishing, entertainment and the media. Major companies in these industries understand that they have the opportunity to play their part in the information age, as the providers of digitised information content. It is early days yet, but already there are pointers to the future: for example, the blurring of previously clear boundaries between technologies (e.g. the television set and the PC) and means of communication (broadcasting, satellite transmission, public telephone network). The development of digital television in many developed countries during the next few years will reinforce this process of convergence. Microsoft's purchase of WebTV (providing Internet access through home TV sets) is a sign of trends.

Convergence has not led, and is probably unlikely to lead, to a complete merger between previously separate industries. For example, IBM, Digital and Microsoft remain primarily IT companies, whilst AT&T, NTT and Deutsche Telekom remain primarily telecoms firms. International companies such as News Corporation, Bertelsmann, Time Warner and Pearson are positioning themselves to be the worldwide content providers of the information age. But nevertheless the trend towards a converged market place will clearly accelerate.

Challenge 3: What implications does convergence have for trade union structures within countries? For example, are mergers between unions now more appropriate?

Challenge 4: For how much longer are individual trade unions going to be able to be based in single nation states, rather than representing workers across international borders?

Challenge 5: FIET has already announced its plans to combine with the Communications International

(formerly PTTI), International Graphical Federation (IGF) and Media and Entertainment International (MEI). In the light of convergence, how should FIET's relationships with other ITSs develop?

#### **4. What's going on?: the information society - governmental and international responses**

Until recently, discussion of the Information Society has been very much on the basis of free market principles.

In the USA, the first Clinton administration was responsible for the launch of the 'National Information Infrastructure' (NII) project, including the *NII Agenda for Action*. The NII idea was extended in 1994 at an international conference to that of a Global Information Infrastructure (GII). US Vice-President Gore argued that the GII's guiding principles should be based on the requirements of the private sector, including:

- encouraging private sector investment;
- promoting competition;
- providing open access to the network.

In the European Union, early key reports (such as the 1994 Bangemann Report, *Europe and the Global Information Society*) similarly reflected the interests of large commercial operators.

At the same time worldwide moves towards greater competition in telecoms provision have been taking place, away from the old concept of publicly-owned monopoly providers. The European Union set the date of January 1998 for 'liberalisation' of telecom provision in most member states (following the path already taken, for example, in the United Kingdom and Sweden). In February 1997, the World Trade Organisation agreement between 68 countries extended telecoms liberalisation, so that among others the Japanese and US markets are now committed to full liberalisation. Greater competition in telecoms is being marked by lower prices but also by major mass redundancies.

The development of the information society cannot simply be left to market forces, however. Many governments, including Australia, Japan, Canada and South Korea, have drawn up their own public policies and strategies. In the European Union, recent initiatives (such as the High Level Expert Group's two reports, *Building the European Information Society for Us All* and the EU's Green Paper *Living and Working in the Information Society - People First*) have tended to stress the importance of social issues, or as the HLEG put it 'the importance of social embeddedness' in an information society in which all may participate.

The relationship between the information society and the developing countries has also been the focus of attention, primarily in the Information Society and Development conference held in South Africa in 1996.

Challenge 6: How successful have trade union organisations been in ensuring that national and international policy documents on the information society adequately reflect social issues and concerns? How can we improve international liaison in this area?

Challenge 7: What sort of work would we like international organisations such as the ILO to be carrying out in this area?

#### **5. What's going on?: the Internet**

Information highways (or, in popular speak, 'superhighways') are set to take on much of the economic importance previously held by transport networks.

Broadband technologies, capable of transmitting tremendous quantities of data almost instantaneously, are expected to provide the main thoroughfares of the information highway network. These technologies are already being developed. In the interim, we have a precursor of how the future may look, in the form of the Internet.

The Internet is an extraordinary phenomenon of the last few years which has grown at a tremendous speed. It is best seen as a networking of separate computer networks, bringing together (1996 figures) about 16 million host computers and sixty million users. Communication via the Internet works through a commonly agreed technical protocol (TCP/IP), but the network is not owned or controlled by any central body. The Internet evolved from an American military computer network (dating back to 1969), initially into an academic and educational network. More recently, the development of the World Wide Web and of browsers such as Netscape and Microsoft Explorer transformed the opportunities for use of

the Internet, and the last few years have seen its increasing commercial exploitation.

The decentralised, almost anarchic, nature of the Internet offers great opportunities for direct international communication (it has already proved valuable to trade union organisations), but poses challenges for vested interests.

Among current issues are:

Encryption. To what extent should governments and others have the power to monitor Internet communication?

Commercialisation. Potentially electronic commerce via the Internet could sidestep revenue raising powers of individual governments.

Regulation of pornographic, racist material.

Copyright and legal issues.

Added to this, we might include:

Anglocentric nature of the Internet.

Inequalities of access, especially from the developing world.

Challenge 8: Should trade unions attempt to engage in the international debates about the future direction of the Internet? In which forums should we make our voices heard?

## **6. Work and work organisation: more jobs or less?**

The developing information society will clearly have an effect on employment. The problem for us is that there is little consensus among economists and observers about what this effect will be.

On the one hand, there is potential for completely new types of employment, in jobs created by the new technology. New industries are emerging. Already considerable numbers of people make their living in ways which were not even thought of ten years ago: web design and html editing, for example.

However, it also seems likely that the new technologies will threaten existing employment. Arguably, this has been a feature of economic life since the first days of the industrial revolution. However, as the pace of change accelerates, so can the speed at which jobs disappear.

The experience in the major telecoms companies as a result of liberalisation is salutary. Here large numbers of people (often previously in safe, public sector jobs) have seen massive redundancy drives. The British operator BT, for example, shed half its workforce (over 120,000 people) in the period after it was privatised; over 19,000 people left the company's employment in a single day alone.

In one of FIET's own sectors, banking, a major process of restructuring is also taking place, also accompanied by major redundancy programmes in many countries. New forms of banking (such as the use of automated teller machines, the development of telephone and (shortly) Internet banking, and electronic means of payment such as credit cards and electronic cashcards) are all threatening what was once a secure and stable career for life. There is no guarantee that, as banking becomes increasingly a question of the efficient and safe electronic transmission of financial data, the banks themselves will not find their role under direct attack from others: in the words of Microsoft's Bill Gates, "The world needs banking, not bankers".

The commerce sector is also being changed by ICTs. Retailers in the USA and elsewhere are experimenting with the removal of check-out staff, with customers themselves responsible for scanning the goods they buy. Internet shopping, and electronic commerce generally, is expected to increase rapidly in the years ahead, at least in developed countries.

Even the IT sector, which it might be expected would be the place to look for good employment prospects in the information age, is undergoing considerable transformation. Older experienced IT professionals are facing redundancy to let in younger graduates, who comprise a cheaper human resource. Downsizing and outsourcing trends continue in several of the major players. The fact that many US based IT companies have no tradition of unionisation within the USA produces problems for employees and their unions in other countries.

In a time of rapid change, continuing training and education becomes even more important. Many commentators have made the observation that the information society needs to become a lifelong learning society.

Challenge 9: How can trade unions defend their members' interests in a time of transformation and restructuring?

Challenge 10: How can trade unions reach out to recruit and organise workers in new types of work or in new sectors?

Challenge 11: What practical steps can FIET and its affiliates take to offer education and training opportunities to our members?

## **7. Work and work organisation: globalisation**

ICTs challenge the confines of geography. Work can be transferred effortlessly from one part of a country to another (for example, from a high cost, high wage urban centre to a lower-waged peripheral region). This is (and has been for some time) a feature, for example, in the relocation of back office white-collar work by banks in many developed countries.

ICTs do not recognise national boundaries, either. Data can be transmitted electronically around the world as easily, and probably almost as cheaply, as within a country. The phenomenon of 'offshore' information processing has existed for over twenty years, and has given rise to concerns about social dumping - in other words, the idea that jobs can be exported away from countries where workers enjoy high levels of social protection to countries where wages, controls and benefits are lower.

'Offshore' information processing includes low-status work such as keyboarding, text entry and voucher processing and more skilled work such as insurance claims processing and editing. The Philippines has been for some time a major centre for offshore data processing of various kinds, as have some Caribbean countries especially Jamaica and Barbados. More recently, China has developed a large data entry sector, at very low cost and wage levels. Interestingly, in at least one case, basic text entry work formerly undertaken in the Caribbean has been shifted by the US parent company to a lower cost plant in China.

At the top of the value chain for 'offshore' work is software development. India has been very successful in developing a burgeoning software industry, centred particularly in Bangalore and Bombay.

Offshore information processing poses considerable challenges to trade unions, in countries at both ends of the process of international migration of work. In some countries, information processing centres are in free trade zones, where the right to trade union organisation is precluded. In other countries the opportunity for free trade unions to organise is simply not possible. Even in countries where union recognition rights are enshrined in law, it can be difficult for trade unions to negotiate with stubborn and anti-union US parent companies, an experience with which the Barbados Workers Union, for example, is familiar.

All this means that internationalism, long a keenly-held matter of principle and belief for trade union and labour organisations, is rapidly also becoming a practical necessity in the struggle to defend members' rights.

Challenge 12: What practical methods of support and solidarity (twinning? bilateral links?) can stronger trade union organisations offer to unions which are less well resourced? What role should FIET play in this?

Challenge 13: Can the social labelling and fair trade initiatives (being developed for example for the textile industry) be replicated in sectors such as publishing, banking and insurance, and marketing, where offshore information processing may be used?

Challenge 14: How can the idea of global works councils be developed?

## **8. Work and work organisation: new work, new ways of working**

New technologies make possible the idea of teleworking, which can be simply defined as 'distance working facilitated by information and communication technologies'. Teleworking has been the subject of a recent FIET report, *Teleworking and Trade Union Strategy*.

Much focus to date has been on the model of home-based teleworking, where workers replace the need to commute to work by 'telecommuting', in other words by utilising computers and telecoms links instead. Trade unions, especially in Europe, now have considerable experience in negotiating home teleworking agreements with employers, and have identified a number of issues of importance for defending teleworkers' rights. These include the preservation of employment status, the voluntary nature of home-working and the right to return to the workplace, the continuation to some degree of workplace working, remuneration of home expenses incurred, the right to privacy, measures to combat isolation and to promote career development, safe working conditions and appropriate equipment, adequate alternative childcare facilities, and the right of access to the trade union.

Home-based working can be sub-divided between higher-status professionals (for example, working at their own speed on creative work) and lower-status staff (for example, handling telephone enquiries) who are more likely to be tied to the demands of technology. Self-employed home teleworkers make up a further category. Moves by some companies to 'downsize' and outsource work previously undertaken in-house are leading to a growth in self-employed working by former employees. Trade unions may need to consider ways of attracting these workers into retaining or taking out union membership.

Home-based working blurs the traditional line between work-life and home-life. It may also be accompanied by a blurring of the usual distinction between work-time and personal time, especially for example if people are encouraged to structure their days to meet external peaks in work demand (e.g. peaks caused by incoming telephone calls from customers). These issues offer challenges to trade unions but they also offer the opportunity to broaden the trade union agenda away from traditional workplace concerns, to include issues such as childcare, the juggling of home and work commitments, housework and family life.

Working from home is however only one aspect of teleworking. Collective teleworking in remote back offices, especially in the new purpose-built 'call centres' dedicated to the computer-controlled handling of incoming and outgoing telephone calls, is likely to affect many more people. Call centres are already a feature of banking and insurance, retailing, the travel industry, market research and several other sectors.

Collective teleworking, whilst in some sense a continuation of the traditional idea of the centralised workplace, nevertheless raises new concerns for trade unions. One is the threat to established employment conditions from the relocation of work. Flexible working and shiftworking is a feature of this type of teleworking. Technology, especially the integration of telephony with IT, is imposing restrictive working conditions on some white collar staff, while flat organisational structures inhibit career development. (The export of work to collective telework centres in other countries has been considered above).

Challenge 15: How well are trade unions meeting the needs of workers who have flexible forms of working which challenge the paradigm of a 'normal' working week in a 'normal' workplace?

Challenge 16: How far should the traditional trade union agenda be widened, to include issues such as childcare and family life? To what extent does this link with equal opportunities and gender issues?

Challenge 17: How can unions meet the needs of self-employed workers? Or should unions be content simply with organising employees?

Challenge 18: Certainly in north America and Europe, the majority of the 'call centres' appear to be non-unionised. What experience do FIET affiliates have in organising in this very new type of workplace?

## **9. Work and work organisation: health and safety**

The introduction of ICTs has an impact on occupational health and safety. These include keyboard-induced upper limb disorders (such as carpal tunnel syndrome, repetitive strain injury) which have been described as almost a white-collar epidemic in recent years. More generally, the use of ICTs is being associated with increased levels of psychological stress and information overload. The blurring of work and home time, already referred to, is likely to contribute to this trend.

Concerns have also been raised about the long-term effect on human relationships of the increase of 'virtuality' into people's lives, through ICTs at work, but also through screen-based leisure activities such as TV and computer games. Could some people lose a sense of what is real, when so many activities are based only on the virtual representations of reality?

Challenge 19: Are psychological issues (such as stress) harder to campaign around than physical health and safety issues? Do we take them less seriously?

Challenge 20: How can FIET better disseminate good practice by affiliates in this area - e.g. TCO (Sweden)'s computer labelling campaign?

## **10. Work and work organisation: union organisation**

Trade unions are primarily a product of the industrial age. How easy will it be for unions to adjust to potentially very different work relationships in an information age?

Much traditional trade union practice is built around the fact that members work together in a centralised workplace. If ICTs diminish the importance of this way of working, there will be considerable implications for trade union organisation. These include:

- Recruitment

- Communicating with members

- Union democracy

Fortunately, ICT applications themselves offer ways of ensuring that members, and potential members, can be reached wherever they may be working. E-mail, for example, is an obvious resource which can be exploited. The demand for trade union bodies to have the right of access to corporate e-mail systems, already raised in a number of negotiations over telework programmes, is an important one.

Unions may need to review ways in which services are delivered to members. Direct contact with members (as opposed to contact mediated through shop stewards, branch or regional structures) may need to be developed. The emphasis may need to switch in time from collective bargaining towards the delivery by telephone of individual help and support (e.g. on legal or health & safety matters), and unions may need to learn from other consumer-focused service providers (such as bancassurance and motor breakdown operators) how these services can be delivered. Conceivably, some unions may find it appropriate to set up their own call centres, or even to outsource particular member services to other operators. Where unions will differ from commercial service providers or co-operatively owned members' organisations, who may equally be able to offer work-related advisory services, is in the core union principles of solidarity, collective organising and democracy.

Trade unions already possess considerable information resources, often in the form of publications with only limited circulation and use. Web publishing offers a way of widening the dissemination of this information. However, it may be difficult to restrict access only to authorised users or paid-up members. This is a trade-off which may nevertheless be worth making.

Some trade union hierarchies may find it threatening to find that their members have a more direct point of access into union life. Arguably, the same pressures which are encouraging a flattening of work hierarchies in companies making use of ICTs will apply also in relation to trade union structures. Forms of union democracy and member participation may need reconsidering, as the information age develops.

The alternative, however, is for unions to be associated only with traditional industries and with traditional ways of working (typically full-time, centralised, and often predominantly male work) - or in other words, to be seen as a creature of a rapidly disappearing industrial revolution. Under this scenario, unions would have little to offer casual workers, younger workers, and people engaged in flexible working forms such as teleworking.

Challenge 21: If trade unions were being created afresh today, how would they be structured? What services would we provide members? How would we ensure that our organisations were democratic?

Challenge 22: How can trade unions better utilise applications such as e-mail, on-line bulletin boards and web sites to communicate with paid officers, lay officials and members? How can trade unions develop cyber campaigns?

Challenge 23: Are trade unions adequately exploiting the Internet's potential? How aware are we of the resources available elsewhere on the Web? If unions have their own web sites, are they regularly updated? Are web sites used for recruitment?

Many of these issues also apply to discussions about FIET's future role in servicing its affiliates' needs. It

has already been argued that international trade union co-operation is needed now more than ever, as ICTs transcend national boundaries and work flows worldwide over the data networks.

The challenge for FIET is to take advantage of the new technologies to better meet the needs which affiliates, and indeed their individual members too, have for an international organisation. It is possible to imagine how FIET could recreate itself as primarily an on-line organisation, making maximum use of the instantaneous means of communication worldwide now available. However, it is also important to remember that, at present, access to IT technology and Internet facilities is limited in many parts of the world.

Challenge 24: How can FIET use e-mail and fax transmission to communicate better with affiliates?

Challenge 25: How should FIET develop its own web site? What information should FIET make universally and publicly available on its web site? If certain information is to be restricted to affiliates, how would this work in practice? Should FIET offer services for affiliates' own members?

## ***11. The broader picture: information-rich and information-poor***

It is important that trade unions play their full role in debates about more general issues raised by the transition to the information age. As has been pointed out by others, there may be several possible models of information societies, just as there have been several models of industrial societies. There is certainly no preordained way in which our societies will evolve.

From President Clinton's NII initiative and the European Union's Bangemann Report downwards, many have talked of the dangers of a divide growing between the information-rich and information-poor. This divide is already with us, to a large extent reflecting existing inequalities within societies. For example, in the developed countries, some social groups (including the unemployed, the elderly and those on low incomes) have much less opportunity to access information sources such as the Internet or applications such as e-mail. Women's organisations have commented that technology is for the most part designed by men, and that the Internet's orientation is masculine.

Some who raise these issues tend to disregard the fact that, unless steps are taken to the contrary, commercial pressures will mean that profit rather than social need dictates developments.

The risks of the 'information-gap' widening are greater if the development of the information society is left solely to market forces. The need for controls is clearly acknowledged in the telecoms field, where governments are working to ensure that liberalisation of telecoms provision is also accompanied by new regulatory measures, including making sure that basic telecoms services are available to all through universal service provision (USP).

The importance of public libraries, as central access points to digital information sources, is also being acknowledged, an extension into the 21st century of a public resource which had much to do with developing popular education and access to knowledge in the last century.

The issue of information-wealth and information-poverty must also be confronted on a global level. There are vast differences in access, even to a basic item of technology such as the telephone, in different regions of the world. For example, currently there are on average about 48 telephones for each 100 people in the developed OECD countries. This ratio falls to around 10% in middle-income countries and to 1.5% in the least advanced countries. As South Africa's Deputy President Thabo Mbeki pointed out to the 1995 G7 conference on the information society, "Half of humanity has never made a telephone call".

The PC ratio per 100 inhabitants ranges from 18% in high-income countries to 0.01% in the poorest countries. Even where Internet access is available, the speed and cost of its use may vary enormously. A US academic may be able to download a journal article in a few seconds at no measurable cost; a researcher in Africa connecting over an unstable telephone line might find that the same article took ten minutes to retrieve, at high cost.

Challenge 26: What practical steps can FIET and its affiliates take to promote efforts to redress current inequalities in access to information and to ICTs?

## ***12. The broader picture: sustainable development***

The principle of sustainable development, as defined more than a decade ago by the Brundtland



Commission, is the requirement that current generations meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The implications for sustainable development of the information society have been the subject of a number of studies (such as the 1996 report of Working Group 6 of the European Union's Information Society Forum, *Sustainable Development, Technology and Infrastructure*), but firm conclusions are hard to find. This issue needs more detailed analysis.

Challenge 27: How can FIET and its affiliates encourage greater interest in the issue of sustainable development? How we can contribute to this debate?

### **13. The broader picture: privacy**

The information society poses considerable risks to individual privacy. As one study put it, "Travellers on the Information Superhighway may be monitored and followed every step of the way. Their movements could be entered into continuously expanding databases."

Information on individuals, their actions and their behaviour, has already proved of great value for commercial marketing purposes. It also gives tremendous power to state bureaucracies and undemocratic regimes. Digitisation makes the storage and analysis of information vastly cheaper and easier. Furthermore, the collection of data on individuals is not limited to written sources since voice, video recordings and other records of everyday life may also be stored effortlessly in digital form.

In the work context there are new dangers of company intrusion into employees' privacy, for example through electronic monitoring of work performance. This is made more acute if work is being carried out through teleworking in individuals' own homes. An ILO Conditions of Work Digest examined these issues in 1993 and concluded that 'workers' rights to privacy should be treated as a fundamental human rights issue'.

In general, digitisation makes it essential that adequate measures to ensure data protection and individual privacy are in place.

Challenge 28: How can FIET and its affiliates raise these issues with members, and influence discussions at national and international level?

### **14. The broader picture: promoting cultural diversity**

The challenge is to build an information society where human cultural and linguistic diversity is celebrated and given opportunity to develop.

At present, by contrast, we are seeing the domination of one language, English, in much electronic communication. We are also seeing the growth of large multinational media conglomerates (such as News International), which already have tremendous power to control TV and newspaper content in individual companies.

A firm commitment needs to be made to the principle of putting cultural diversity at the heart of the information society. This will include, among other things, taking appropriate measures to protect existing public service broadcasting and defending diversity in media ownership. It is likely to mean reinforcing support for the world's languages, including the lesser-spoken minority languages. (It is possible that ICTs may be of help here, if applications - e.g. translation software - can be developed to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages.)

### **15. The broader picture: democracy and community**

Finally, we need to work to ensure that the information society is one in which public participation and democracy are enhanced. Potentially, ICTs create opportunities for a better informed public, and for improvements in the democratic decision-making processes.

There are also opportunities for ordinary people in different parts of the world to communicate with each other directly, something which has never been possible before. As has been pointed out, the e-mail medium renders invisible and irrelevant the race, colour, gender, age, sexual orientation or degree of physical disability of the people communicating with each other.

Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that the information age will necessarily be a more democratic time. An increase in the potential information available will not necessarily lead to more active citizens - it

could have the opposite effect. Media concentration may challenge the existence of unbiased or pluralistic news and information sources. Governments could draw power not from popular mandate but from the sophisticated use of new technologies, especially from the analysis and interrogation of massive databases of information about their citizens.

These are vital issues, in which it is essential that trade union organisations play a full part in the debate. The final challenge, perhaps, is to make sure our voices are heard by young people, who will inherit the information society of the future. Our organisations have not necessarily always been particularly successful in reaching out to the young, who in some cases consider trade unionism to be a part of history. We have to demonstrate that, whilst we celebrate our roots and our history, we are also actively engaged in the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Challenge 29: What practical opportunities are now available through ICTs to develop international solidarity between trade union organisations at the grassroots level? What are the implications, if traditional channels of contact can be bypassed in this way?

Challenge 30: In what ways can FIET and its affiliates engage young people in our work? What changes will this mean to our ways of working and operating? What are young people's views on the information society and the future of work?