

So Many Countries, So Many Customs

Utsumi Yoshio, former secretary-general of the International Telecommunication Union, offers a personal insight into the development and use of information and telecommunications technology in the world today.

Unless viewed from space, the earth doesn't appear round to its inhabitants. They have little choice but to observe the world they see from their own vantage points.

My own vantage point has undergone a dramatic shift over the past few months. Having completed eight years as secretary-general of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Geneva, I returned home to Japan and became advisor to the automaker Toyota Motor. With this change, my perspective on the world of information and telecommunications was also transformed.

On arriving home, I noted the progress which has taken place in Japanese telecommunications. I saw a plethora of sophisticated services I'd never seen in Europe, whether related to the Internet, mobile phones, or digital TV. Some young people were paying tens of thousands of yen each month for their mobile phones, and "one-segment" television broadcasting for the mobile phones, something unheard of in Geneva, was all the rage. Television broadcasting itself is to be completely digitalized in 2011, and present analog television sets will apparently become obsolete. On returning to Japan, I bought a flat-panel hi-definition TV, but I couldn't understand the product catalogue without looking up the definitions of standard technical words such as "HDMI" [high-definition multimedia interface] or "DLNA" [digital living network alliance], which I'd never heard of.

In any event, what is to become of all the analog television sets once broadcasting is digitalized? Japan seems totally out of touch with the fact that, around the world, there are innumerable people who have never dialed a phone or only dream of buying a television set.

I've worked on issues such as developing worldwide telecommunications and closing the global digital divide. These past few years I organized both phases of

the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) as secretary-general of the ITU. The summit pledged to build an information society which will make the Internet accessible to everyone around the world by 2015. A great deal of effort was expended at the summit, and few Japanese are aware that heads of state of the developing nations expressed fervent hope that information technologies would give developing nations an opportunity to enter the ranks of advanced information nations. Few people are even aware of the

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global digital divide. This is also true regarding the achievement of the ITU for the Internet protocol phone, for which I myself created a dissemination platform. Users enter a contract with a provider at most, with no consciousness of the involvement of the ITU, which is tackling the digital divide.

Having now taken up my post at Toyota, I've been astonished at how the automobile world has benefited from the information world. As a specialist in telecommunications policy, I've advocated the exploitation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in areas such as e-medicine or e-government. But I never imagined that ICTs would be seen as a basic necessity for cars so early on.

Already electronic components account for 20-30% of the price of automobiles and for up to half the price of low fuel-consumption hybrids. Cars now fully

exploit information and communication technologies not just in control features for driving safety and accident prevention but also in navigation to one's destination. Whether in lowering fuel consumption to cut CO₂ emissions, in technology to avoid traffic congestion, or in electronic toll collection systems, ICTs plays a central role.

In the past, those in the field of telecommunications didn't pay much attention to such applications, but those in the auto industry now regard these technologies as a means to enhance the attractiveness of automobiles and to resolve a great number of problems associated with them, such as global warming.

ICT is nothing more than a tool for achieving an end. But as the saying goes, "so many countries, so many customs." What is to developing nations an indispensable tool for development of the economy is to advanced nations a means for new forms of recreation and to the automobile industry a rich source of new product development.

Though ICTs are used for different ends in different fields, the technologies



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are the same and should initially be prepared for a variety of functions. Otherwise, inefficiency and chaos will be the result.

Having worked in several different worlds over such a short time, I sense that each world applies a different language and set of standards and engages in little mutual conversation when it comes to information and telecommunications technologies. One can easily imagine the difficulties they will face in accomplishing their goals effectively so long as they remain isolated from each other.

Thus, building links among these different spheres is a critical issue. ■

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