

CARLOS CORRÊA GAGO, President of the Portuguese National Statistical Office and host of the **2000 DGINS Conference**, shares in the following article his thoughts on the theme 'Information and Knowledge' which was discussed during the conference in Porto last June. He underlines that his ideas are not the Conference's conclusions, but rather a personal reflection.

Bridging the gap between information and knowledge

“Information and knowledge” is of major topical interest in our information society.

Our aim was to place our specific theme of interest, statistical information and knowledge, into a context. Therefore, in the presentations given by other statisticians and representatives of other institutions we focussed on areas where converting the vastly growing amount of accessible information into better knowledge also poses problems – ranging from the exercise of conscious citizenship to what was termed 'progress in civilisation'. The papers presented can all be condensed to formulate the question: "Much more information is available to us, but do we really know much more?".

Since the conference did not, and was not intended to, lead to a formal summary and since time did not allow detailed discussion, it seems pertinent to continue the debate and give a subjective summary of the areas where there was a notable consensus of opinion.



Carlos Corrêa Gago

Unprecedented progress

It is practically impossible to measure the stock of knowledge accumulated by humanity in the course of its history – as well as that knowledge not yet known which increases in parallel

with that stock. But it is possible to recognise the periods in which knowledge has gone through qualitative and quantitative leaps: classical antiquity, the Renaissance, the modern and contemporary era. We live in one of these periods, benefiting from unprecedented progress in

science, technology and communications.

The extension and deepening of knowledge has effects on all citizens in terms of the progress in civilisation of human societies; these effects have multiplied thanks to almost instant access to important elements of this expanding knowledge. So far, these effects have been much less than proportional to the expansion of the knowledge in itself. These modest repercussions vary enormously depending on the areas of knowledge and their respective effects on the behaviour of people and their social activity.

This means that the impressive rate of acceleration of information available by electronic means, especially via the Internet, is only marginally reflected by the rise in the general level of knowledge – processed and correctly assimilated information – of people and societies. The democratisation of access to information is not being accompanied by the democratisation of knowledge.

Among the areas in which positive repercussions of the democratisation of access to information are more visible are:

- The exercise of political power – those governing and those governed, the electors and the elected, in democratic systems, have or are in a position to have, practically the same knowledge, and this deprives politicians of the comparative advantage of possessing information and the argument of authority. This



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then changes their behaviour in a game of persuasion with the same information.

- ▶ The exercise of conscious citizenship – persons, individually or organised, have new conditions on which to base or direct their civic activities and participation.
- ▶ The exercise of their pedagogical and opinion-forming functions via the 'reference' means of social communication – forming a qualified interface between information, for example statistical data, and the knowledge which can be assimilated by those who consult it regularly.

On the other hand, scientific and technological research, cultural activities and statistical knowledge, themselves, are areas where information has a relatively low general impact on knowledge beyond the professional circles which deal with it. Here, the simple dissemination of invalidated information, frequently incorrect or biased and always fragmentary, largely outweighs the analyt-

ical and interpretive treatment necessary for information to be converted into assimilated and enriching knowledge.

The instrumental value of easy electronic access to certain stocks of information is recognised. The same goes for the current possibilities of instant long-distance communications in the current and potential activities of our education and vocational training systems throughout our lives. Yet, so far, there is no means of entirely replacing direct contact between teachers and training staff, on the one hand, and pupils and trainees, on the other.

In the field of official statistical information, which benefits from the skills of producers and main users, political decision-makers, economic agents and social partners recognise the major progress already achieved in the accessibility of this information.

But there are still areas that are ignored, to varying degrees, such as poverty and exclusion, distribution and redistribution of income, holding of assets and accumula-

tion of fortunes, and ecology as the indispensable means of maintaining life on earth in the long term.

Knowledge as a privilege

It can be seen, then, that access to information, thanks to the Internet, is rapidly becoming universalised. However, access to knowledge remains the privilege of a few.

Why? Can this situation be improved by better use of the enormous quantities of information generally accessible for making progress in those aspects of civilisation where no improvement has been recorded? Some reasons were given and a few solutions were identified.

- ▶ 'Distribution' of information, mainly in the hands of market mechanisms, is governed by the aims of immediate profitability, which ignore concerns for progress in quality.
- ▶ Indicators measuring the development of the communication and information society are also, above all, quantitative: access traffic, number of access terminals and mobile phones sold, number of 'hits' registered, number of consultations, transactions by electronic media, etc.
- ▶ What users are told as standard behaviour is the mere acquisition of the access facility. What is being accessed, why and the quality of that informa-

tion are entirely secondary questions.

- ▶ Nation states have generally abandoned any duty to regulate the quality of the content, and especially any direct, supplementary professional mediation in sensitive areas: scientific and cultural propagation and statistical dissemination are examples.
- ▶ This national abdication of responsibility makes it even more difficult to take any action or measures at international level which could clearly cope with 'globalisation', of which the Internet is the main propagator.
- ▶ Thus the road has opened up for access to information and information itself not just becoming 'democratised', but also trivialised. This does not provide any stimulation to selective intellectual curiosity and requirements inherent in the process of acquiring knowledge.

Thus what in my view has gained increasing emphasis has been the absence or lack of mechanisms for professional and regulatory mediation for dealing with, validating and increasing the value of this diverse mass of information.

Progress in this direction, in the field of statistical information – which necessarily, for pedagogical purposes includes metadata – will certainly require more active intervention and availability of organs producing official statistics, including Eurostat. ■