

«People – Data – Internet»

Synthesis for a Transferkolleg – ICT Year in 2011 (first draft)

In 2010, one human being in one thousand lives in Switzerland.

Take a 1'000 soul community. One will identify some unique characters: the doctor, the teacher, the priest, the midwife, the policeman, as well as some groups with specific characteristics: the administration, business people, blue-collar workers, farmers, children, elders, etc.

What make unique characters unique are their specific knowledge and skills, and the fact that these assets are necessary for the survival, development and comfort of the rest of the community. The doctor doesn't have to be teacher and priest and farmer and businessman: just plain good doctor, and he or she will thrive in the community.

Multiply this community by 7.5 million and you will find sufficient complexity so that a tiny nation like Switzerland can develop some very unique assets that make it necessary to the rest of the world with respect to the knowledge and skills considered, and that allow it to thrive in the emerging global knowledge society.

In the past, Switzerland has achieved such a position in domains like micro-mechanics or banking with respect to very specific tasks: making watches, which are very complex mechanics indeed; or offering stability and security of banks, which are only two characteristics of that industry, but two in which Switzerland so excelled that it drained the savings of many people of the world. Among Swiss skills in banking one would not find profitability; and when Swiss bankers tried to look as profitable as the rest of the big world banking players, ... they went broke. Some lesson.

Looking at the internet, Switzerland is in the same position as it has been in the past, in a world where a tiny nation has only the place it makes for itself: what are the unique assets we can develop with such a degree of excellence that they will not only become a reference as goods or services (that can be copied at once world-wide, like a watch or a bank), but that Switzerland will become the reference when people think of them as reliable assets for their own well being?

Discovering or inventing a couple of these global assets in ICT's and the internet, developing them in Switzerland and cultivating them into a national treasure, should be the main mission of our national efforts towards the development of a knowledge society in Switzerland.

Just as Swiss navigation clocks drove the exploration of terra incognita without any of their craftsmen ever having set foot on a high-sea vessel, just the same will the right Swiss "technology" be in a position to drive some of the developments of the internet, if we develop the right strategies and make the right efforts.

What is quite surely not right is to retreat behind old borders with concepts of Swiss e-something (Swiss-id, Swiss health-record, Swiss e-learning program, or the like). Immaterial goods cross borders without a thought for obsolete legislation. In these fields, we are consumers, like the 999 other villagers of the internet and even the development of a new product, if it ever had a chance to become a standard, would not constitute a unique asset upon which to build a unique position.

Transferkolleg, while bringing together researchers and practitioners, should emphasize the need to think about the assets necessary to an open world that we are the only ones today in a position to deliver. And don't wait, for fear it might be too late: Switzerland already buys twice as much worth of ICT services and products than it sells... rather distressing for a country with no other natural resource than grey matter.

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