

to close many technology gaps at record speed.”<sup>3</sup> Not a word about potential dangers, whereas now “the downsides of technology’s inexorable march are becoming clear” to the point that a “neo-Luddism” is seen by some analysts as emerging.<sup>4</sup>

### Box 3.1

## Half of humanity is NOT online

If the spread of ICTs only brings good things there is no need to regulate it and the only question is how to accelerate its expansion so that everybody in the world can benefit from it. Thus, under SDG 9 on industrialization and innovation, target 9.c commits to „significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access

to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020.“

This formulation is a bit awkward. It seems to imply that there would be complete world coverage by 2020, if even the poorest countries have universal access by then. But since a majority of the people living in poverty are citizens of G20 countries, the forecast by Cisco is that by 2020

only half of the world population will be online (4.1 billion Internet users, of a total population of 8 billion). By that date, the number of connected devices will have surpassed 26 billion, thanks to the fast expansion of the “Internet of Things”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cisco (2017).

### Hands-off...

The Internet started in the 1970s as a research project funded mainly by the US Department of Defense and the National Science Foundation. In 1995, the US government announced it was ending its subsidies to the operation of the Internet backbone and, simultaneously allowed commercial use of the network, previously restricted to educational and research purposes.

Governments were supposed to better serve the global public interest by keeping their hands off cyberspace. The network expanded at fast speed and quite soon came to be described as a “global public good”.<sup>5</sup> Yet, keeping with the hands-off spirit, the only

decision that governments collectively made over the new realm was the 1998 declaration of the World Trade Organization (WTO) stating that members “will continue their current practice of not imposing customs duties on electronic transmissions”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a disk carrying videos, music or software can be subjected to a customs tariff when crossing borders, but that same content being transmitted to a paying consumer by Netflix or iTunes continues to remain untaxed.

The technical difficulties in controlling the cross-border flow of data (short of a total communications shut down) added an element of necessity to that decision, as in “if you can’t beat them, join them”.

The value of cross-border data flows, which was insignificant when the decision not to tax them was

<sup>3</sup> Earth Institute/Ericsson (2015), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Bartlett (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Kaul et al. (1999).

<sup>6</sup> WTO (1998).