Conceptualising "The Information Society"

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Abstract: The concept of "the information society" as an important new phenomenon has recently received much attention at a European and national level. Exhortations on the need for advance preparation for this society by all the social partners are commonplace. This paper problematises the notion of "the information society", the position of technological determinism with which it is often associated, and the concomitant privileging of certain forms of technical discourse concerning the shape of our future society.

I INTRODUCTION

T he publication of the report of the Irish Information Society Steering Committee "Information Society Ireland: Strategy for Action" has provided a useful focus for debate about the future direction of our society among a variety of actors — Government, industry, labour, voluntary organisations, and academics. My own perspective on these issues reflects my interdisciplinary academic background in both the computing and social sciences, and subsequent research in the areas of human-computer inter-action and social informatics. Additionally, I was involved in the EU FAST Programme on "The Information Society" in the early 1980s (Bannon, Barry, and Holst, 1982), and it is interesting to see how the current debate in part mirrors these earlier debates, and in part opens up new arenas for discussion — an example of the latter being the importance of market forces stressed in the EU *Bangemann Report* (1994). In this short critique, I raise some concerns about the nature of the so-called "information society". I also question the perspective of many recent reports on "the information society", including the Irish report, as they appear to accept a view of societal change that is almost solely determined by technological forces.

II THE PROBLEMATIC NOTION OF AN "INFORMATION SOCIETY"

While there is universal acceptance that there is an increasing penetration of information and communication technologies into our daily life, it is not at all clear that this fact is sufficient to herald the emergence of a new form of society — an "information society". If one wishes to claim that the core of such a society is based on use of new technologies, there are difficulties in determining precisely what kinds of technologies must be involved, and how widespread they must be, before one can deduce that we have an "information society". The notion of the "information society" as a relatively new, reified and uncontentious concept is not tenable. One could argue that there have been many information societies in the history of the world, indeed Western civilisation in the early 20th century would appear to fit this category quite well. How then can it be argued that new technological developments will fundamentally change our society?

Concepts of an "information society" can be linked to a variety of frames of reference: technological, economic, occupational, spatial and cultural, as Webster (1995) so cogently notes. Each of these perspectives can, and should, be analysed and scrutinised for their utility and explanatory adequacy in attempting to understand the nature of our evolving society. Perhaps the most well-known of these frames, besides the technological — which has appeared in a number of guises over the last 50 years, e.g., automation (1950s), the microelectronic society (1980s) — is that of the *information economy*, referring to the work of Machlup (1962) and Porat (1977), and the *post-industrial society*, linked to the work of Daniel Bell (1976). It is impossible to provide an exegesis or critique of these approaches here, but the reason for even mentioning them is to emphasise that the notion of an "information society" is not one that can be used without considerable clarification as to its meaning in particular contexts of use. Indeed, the very notion of information itself that is utilised in the different approaches becomes increasingly problematic as one delves deeper into the different conceptualisations.

III THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN SOCIETAL CHANGE

The technological perspective mentioned above, which is dominant in many recent reports on the "information society", assumes an overly deterministic stance, which views technology as an autonomous force that *impacts on* society. We should not assume a position of technological determinism, but realise that we can actively shape technology to our needs. By this I am not implying that we in Ireland have the power to directly change large scale economic and technical forces that are currently involved in transforming

aspects of Western industrialised society, but we should be aware that technology is not some neutral, autonomous agent over which we have no control. Instead we should pay attention to how technology is developed and how we accommodate the resulting technologies into our everyday work lives. There is no single model of how this co-adaptation of technology and society can and will take place. However, if we start out from the assumption that all we can do is "prepare for" or "react to" some posited "information society" as if it were some form of immutable blueprint, then we will have missed a myriad of opportunities for developing alternative requirements for future technologies and for adapting aspects of the technologies to our local needs. These concerns are ones that do not imply any rejection of technology *per se*, but address questions concerning how we view the relation between technology and society. Indeed, the very idea of talking about "society" and "technology" as quite distinct domains can itself be questioned, given that they may be best viewed as mutually constitutive. Technology is perhaps more appropriately understood as inherently a social relation, not an autonomous force.

In accepting that the convergence of telecommunications and computers, the merger of media conglomerates, the rapid rise in electronic networking, the phenomenal growth of the Internet and its accessibility via the WWW, all create the potential for substantial changes in how we do business and how we live our lives, it is very important that we do not hide the fact that the kind of society we will live in, in the future, is still substantially determined by the choices that we as citizens and as a society make now. There is no single line of development that impels us to a particular road to the future. One can argue that the future is a direction, not a place. While, certainly, more of our work and activities will be *mediated* by the new technologies, so that we can say that more of our activities are *informatised* or *informated* (Zuboff, 1988), the exact form of the society that will evolve is something that will be determined by many factors, personal; social; economic; technical; political. Hence talk of "the information society" as some coherent, mutually agreed upon, new concept that has an autonomous force of its own to which we must "adapt" or "prepare for" is problematic. Changes in demographics; cultural values; conceptions of work, and non-work; political shifts, all have significant effects on the kind of future(s) that we are evolving.

IV THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

An unfortunate side-effect of the technological perspective on the "information society" is that it tends to privilege certain kinds of groups and professions in any debate about this much vaunted new society which is

emerging — namely, those with technical skills. Since this perspective focuses so much on the new technologies, the argument is that surely those who can best comment on and evaluate the issues are those people who actually create this technology? However, if we are mindful of the variety of other perspectives on our evolving society, most of which focus on issues of history; geography; philosophy; religion; culture; society; law; government, etc., we come up with a quite different mix of disciplines and practices that would be privileged to discuss issues concerning the new information societies that we are supposedly evolving. I have no wish to create barriers for open exchange and debate about the information society among all sectors of our society, but I do believe that currently this debate is far too often dominated by people who may have technical knowledge concerning the development of information technology infrastructures, but this does not imply that their views on priorities in Government funding, on urban and rural planning, on directions for education, etc., should be given greater weight. Indeed, it would seem that a more coherent argument could be made for the involvement of those in the social sciences, together with all interested citizens as involved actors, determining, rather than simply reporting from the sidelines, on societal policy in this area.

V CONCLUDING REMARKS

While this is not the place to engage in a detailed critique of the original brief given to Ireland's Information Society Steering Committee[1] or the specifics of their subsequent report, it is worth noting that it explicitly follows from the earlier EU *Bangemann Report* (1994), and tends to adopt an overly technological and commercial perspective on the "information society". What is surprising is the lack of discussion or mention of the earlier reports of other countries concerning the "information society". For example, in this volume, Friis provides some useful critique of the Danish report on the information society, which has been viewed as one of the more balanced reports on the topic, and which has been available for some time, yet which is overlooked in this report. Another surprising omission is the lack of reference to earlier debates about the information society, which have surfaced several times over the past 25 years.

Taking a more positive stance, the publication of this report can serve as an occasion for a much more broadly-based and inclusive debate in Ireland about the kind of society we envision, and the values we wish to maintain. In such discussions, arguments concerning global competitive pressures and

1. For those interested, a copy of my critical remarks submitted to the Committee is available on the Web at http://www.ul.ie/~idc/library/papersreports/LiamBannon/8/InfoSoc.html.

technological advancements should not be allowed to silence those voices which argue for broader and deeper perspectives on the very concept of the "information society".

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