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The Information Society 4 vols

Critical Concepts in Sociology

Preface (to appear at start of each of 4 volumes)

In this Major Work on the information society, I use the label ‘The Information Society’ to designate a particular vision of developments arising from the growing use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the acquisition, storage and processing of information. In the early post-World War II period, scientists, engineers and mathematicians were interested in information and communication control systems and new technologies that might help them to realize their hopes for the contributions of artificial intelligence and robotics. Innovations in ICT provided technologists with new toys. If bigger and better versions could be built, they could be sold to the military-industrial-complex, the richest client for their wares. Economists were searching for a productivity strategy to stimulate growth, and information - although a problematic commodity - was expected to improve productivity in the manufacturing sector and to contribute to the growth of new information-related industries.

Some hoped that the productivity gains reaped by mechanization could be replicated by automation as the dependency of the United States economy on services increased. Policy makers were trying to maintain full employment and growth, and information workers (such as librarians and software engineers) were attempting to increase access to knowledge by crafting better tools for accessing information. Many workers were finding themselves in front of keyboards instead of working with pens and paper. It was widely assumed that enormous benefits would be reaped by those best

positioned to enter the information age. Social scientists were trying to understand how all of these changes were transforming societies. They continue to do so and to assess our prospects for the future. In The Information Society, will we become cogs in the machine or system, or empowered savants?

This collection of papers is intended to provide some answers to questions about how social scientists have responded to popular mantras about The Information Society. Should we accept the idea that movement towards The Information Society is creating, or has the potential to create, social exclusion and disadvantage? What have we learned about how this movement influences the way that we live and work?

In the mid-1990s, with the spread of the Internet, research on The Information Society experienced a huge expansion. This collection includes contributions from the late 1940s and extends to the present. Like the prevalence of the vision, it reflects a Western bias. Harold A. Innis (1951: 90), a Canadian economic historian, argued that the study of the implications of media and communication, 'may enable us to see more clearly the bias of our own' civilization. It was in this spirit of critical inquiry that I made the choices about the papers to include.

Innis warned against the 'ideology of information technology' indicating that the economic, social, cultural and political outcomes associated with a dependence on electronic information should not be straightforwardly associated with enhanced human well-being. I have included papers focusing on the benefits of The Information Society and those offering critiques of the concept and its implications. Frank Webster (2002) suggests that if The Information Society label has any analytical

purpose, this must be judged through empirical investigation. For the most part, I have included papers based on empirical studies.

Scientific research in the 1950s focused predominantly on the effects of information and communication to the neglect of the analysis of symbolic meaning. Human beings were conceived of mainly as agents, with little effort made to examine the cultural contexts in which they experienced their lives or acted upon the world. As the scholarly community began to examine the concept of The Information Society from critical perspectives, issues of power and the situated nature of human experience as it is mediated by ICT, claimed greater attention. Research relevant to these issues uses many labels including information economy, post-industrial society, post-modern society, network society, informational capitalism and network capitalism. These terms are used in different ways by the authors of the papers that are included in these volumes, but all are germane to debates about the history and future prospects of this vision.

My selection of papers began with a systematic survey of the literature informed by my knowledge of the field and the boundaries that I had decided upon. This resulted in an initial set of 800 papers, 86 of which figure in these four volumes. Selecting only some ten per cent of what were often excellent contributions was difficult. I ask for forbearance from those authors that have been excluded. The final selection of papers was reviewed by colleagues and my Routledge editor, but responsibility for the choices made remains with me. I elected to include both papers that have been cited extremely widely as well as papers by scholars whose work has influenced me, but who are not as widely known.

A stage theory of the advance towards a singular Information Society vision in my view is not helpful. A more instructive approach is one that seeks to understand information societies in relation to cultural, social, economic and political life. With the exception of some of the papers chosen to exemplify the early period, most of the papers illustrate the latter perspective, and as seen through the lens of disciplinary approaches in the social sciences. Innovations in ICT during the period from the 1950s to the present are important, but they should not be seen as determining. They provide the stage and some of the sets for the enactment of the cultural, social, economic and political aspects of information societies.

The arrangement of the papers within each volume is chronological. It does not represent the earliest treatment of an issue by an author, but rather is representative of my effort to include foundational scholarship as well as illustrations of cutting-edge research in reasonably concise papers. Readers may wish to refer to Mansell et al. (2007) for a set of original papers which bear on the themes addressed in this Major Work set.

Volume 1 - Information Societies: History and Perspectives

This volume introduces readers to early contributions, by mainly American authors as it was primarily in the United States that early views of The Information Society originated. Focusing on the period 1980 to the present, the second part of this volume introduces diverse reflections and perspectives, highlighting the need to recognize the plurality of information societies and moving beyond wealth creating, technology-driven perspectives present in the mainstream of Western scholarship. My plural

designation of information societies in the titles for these volumes is intended to signal the importance of differences and distinctions within and between societies.

Volume 2 - Information Societies: Knowledge, Economics and Organization

This volume emphasizes the role of information and communication in the economy and includes papers concerned with the economics, and the political economy of information, the latter of which explicitly acknowledge power as a facet of information societies. These papers address inequality and the digital divide, highlighting concerns about what it means to be excluded from acquiring the capabilities for participating in the predominantly Western conception of The Information Society. Papers illustrating research on organizational changes associated with the introduction of digital ICT are also included, acknowledging that organizational style and power relations are crucial for developments in information societies.

Volume 3 - Information Societies: Democracy, Governance and Regulation

The actions of state institutions and organizations representing social movements, citizens, consumers and those who are stateless or migratory, contribute to shaping information societies. The papers in this volume focus on issues of democratization and the distribution of power at global and local levels. The spread of digital networks is beginning to offer the potential for empowerment to those whose voices have been absent in the past, but as the papers selected for this volume indicate, empirical evidence on the consequences of these developments is ambiguous. These papers also provide illustrations of research on the institutions that are emerging at a global level for Internet governance, research on modes of regulation of the infrastructure of

information societies, and perspectives on the role of intellectual property in the digital realm.

Volume 4 - Information Societies: Everyday Life

This volume includes papers representing research on the way information societies enable new forms of mediated experience, whether as a result of interaction with traditional media or with newer media including the Internet, mobile phones and online social networking applications. The papers selected focus on how everyday life is influenced by perceptions of belonging, ethnicity, identity and gender, and by capacities for achieving literacy, maintaining privacy, and managing surveillance in information societies. This research touches upon issues of social (in)justice and inequality and people's abilities to shape their everyday lives as well as the ways that the forces of globalization mediate identity and allegiances shaped by experience of the local.

Works in the knowledge management tradition and research on intellectual property that are important for understanding information societies is represented only marginally in these volumes as they are the subjects of other Routledge Major Works. Also, for reasons of space, there are only a few references to the debates on the New World Information and Communication Order, many of which resurface in controversies over promotion of The Information Society vision.

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