

Popular buzzwords, supernarratives and metanarratives for development: What does the term “information society” mean?

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Popular buzzwords

The **information society** is a rather complex, variegated and diverse research field. It comprises many topics, where thorough discussion is not feasible in a textbook of only 13 chapters. Hence, many interesting areas and exciting phenomena had to be left out of our textbook. Our main reason for this was that by detailed discussion of numerous exceptionally specialized themes in a textbook of a general character we would have exceeded the limits of our interpretation, our framework and our space.

At the same time, it is possible to show in a tabular form what we have reviewed and what has been left out of the book. In our table below we also indicate the topics and popular buzzwords that characterize the field after the turn of the millennium, and which may stimulate you, the interested reader, to make further investigations.

Of course, the list of buzzwords cannot be complete, and it has further shortcomings too: in certain respects it is inaccurate because it mixes up lesser and greater parts of sub-topics, and the keywords may reflect confusion regarding some socio-economic, scientific and political concepts. This disorder and the lack of clarity are not the result of a careless compilation of the list: the items are important and, for the time being, ineluctable attributes of the field, signifying that the whole area of investigation is not yet quite mature. However, even with its mixed character it demonstrates that the information society represents an extraordinarily diverse field which requires a multidisciplinary approach in order to begin to understand it.

Popular buzzwords and sub-fields of the information society (in alphabetical order, for the sake of simplicity):

- broadband Internet;
- content industry;
- diffusion, penetration, application and use of information and communication technologies (ICT);
- digital culture, cultural heritage, digitalisation;
- digital divide, e-inclusion, accessibility, ICT and socially disadvantaged groups (for example, senior citizens, Roma and other minorities, etc.);
- e-commerce, e-economy, network economy;
- e-democracy, cyber-democracy, participation, e-voting, political parties' presence on the Internet;
- e-governance, e-administration;
- e-health;
- electronic signature;
- e-readiness, ranking lists, statistics;
- freedom of information;
- grid structures, networks and computer technology;
- hacker ethics, hacker activities and cracking;
- identity, virtual identity, identity theft;
- informatics in education, e-learning, distance learning, online learning, e-universities;
- information literacy, digital literacy;

- information overload, data smog;
- information warfare, cyber-terrorism;
- intellectual property rights and their violation, “creative commons”, online piracy, software patents;
- intelligent settlements, intelligent towns, regional information society;
- Internet addiction;
- minorities, hate propaganda on the Internet;
- mobile telephony;
- new media (e.g., digital television, Internet radio, podcasting, etc.);
- online games, massive(ly) multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG);
- open source software;
- peer-to-peer networks, sharing of music and film files, torrents;
- productivity of information and communication industries, software industry, hardware industry;
- protection of personal data, surveillance, control;
- public Internet access points;
- regulation and administration of the Internet;
- research and development, innovation systems, innovation politics;
- sex and pornography on the Internet;
- strategies of the information society;
- telework;
- the future of the Internet (e.g., semantic Web, quantum Internet, interplanetary Internet);
- ubiquitous computer technology;
- various activities performed on the Internet (e.g., e-mail, chat, banking, telephoning, etc.);
- virtual communities, community pages;
- virtual reality, cyberspace;
- viruses, unwanted electronic mail (SPAM), data fishing (data dredging, mining, snooping), security, etc.;
- Web 2.0 and its characteristic phenomena (blog, wiki, tag, feed, RSS, podcast, etc.).

From the above list it is clear that ICTs have penetrated all aspects of our lives. The list also shows that every sub-system of society (politics, economy, education, public health services, etc.) is attempting to use the technology and to meet the challenges posed by an information society. As we mentioned in the first chapter, numerous buzzwords in the list referring to information and communications technologies are mistakenly identified by many individuals with the information society itself.

By studying the list, it may be easier to understand why so many people make this mistake. These buzzwords also show the conceptual laxity which characterizes research in the area and often intermingles facts or phenomena from real life with political jargon and commercial slogans. The fervour for innovation represented by the popularity of these buzzwords may influence scientific research, too, strongly attracting scientists or, on the contrary, repulsing scientists, sometimes endangering the objectivity of surveys and investigations.

The topics covered in our textbook, in contrast to the technological examples mentioned above, concentrate on the introduction of theoretical fundamentals, on the impact of changes affecting various subsystems of society and on political efforts in the field. In this way, they have dealt with the following major issues:¹

- the concept and historicity of the **information society**;
- the role of technology in society, **technological determinism**, **technorealism**;
- the phenomena of networking, including the **network society**, **network economics** and the **network state**;
- changes in the perception and utilization of space and in spatial connectivity, **globalisation**;
- the enhanced role of **innovation** in both the economy and society;
- issues of legal regulation, **law in the information society**;
- **information policy and strategy** of the European Union;
- **electronic government** and administration;
- **the digital divide** and equal opportunities in the information society;
- digital culture, **digitalisation** of the cultural heritage, **information literacy**;
- electronic education, **life-long learning**.

We claim that these subfields are the most important areas forming the backbone of the information society, and that they reflect the many faces of our sociological, political, and economic perspectives. One of the main objectives of this chapter is to justify, from a theoretical perspective, the selection of the items chosen in our first list to reflect basic questions of social and political development. This selection is also required for in-depth analysis, in order to avoid conceptual vagueness. It is also made inevitable by limits on our space. We have justified why we have chosen those issues that are included in this volume: this discussion is leading us back again to the meaning of the concept of an information society.

¹ While introducing these topics, we also often mentioned, in a concise way, the phenomena included in the first list (for example, in connection with the utilization of space, we talked about *MMORPG* taking place in virtual reality, etc.). In other words, we deal with topics that do not necessarily appear in the above list, while parts of them are often contained in one or more items of the list. The reason for this is that the individual chapters of the textbook focus on the most important subfields, while the buzzwords might refer either to some particular phenomena or to the same larger subfields as those covered in the textbook (for example, e-economy).

The tension between grand theory and daily practice

Dessewffy suggests that in the social sciences where we are dealing with the emergence of an information society, primarily in sociology, the following three major research areas have been proposed (Dessewffy, 2004):

1. Meta-level: since the publication of the three-volume opus of Manuel Castells on “The Information Age” (1996, 1997, 1998), earlier aversion towards postmodernism and the theories of post-industrial society has significantly diminished in and beyond sociology. Current social phenomena demand that we reflect on Castells’ ideas, even if we do not regard his books as the ultimate source. Other authors like Beck or Giddens also discuss a new kind of modernity – one cannot ignore evidence that a new modern era is clearly discernable, and in order to understand this, it is necessary to make thoughtful well-organized, careful investigations.
2. Internet: the Internet transforms the world and initiates new processes. It makes its appearance in traditional sociological fields, which were in the forefront of interest in the 20th century, such as **social capital**, political participation, connection networks and social inequalities. The problem is that we are now at the initial stages of major changes in society, and consequently the majority of research activities have only just begun: we have only now started to formulate our questions and hypotheses. More problematic, the cycles of research in the social sciences (typically 10-12 years) are too long to fully comprehend the rapidly developing effects of the Internet. Therefore, if we want to understand the new phenomena appearing in our lives, we have to make sure that our research efforts keep up with the pace of the processes taking place around us.
3. New themes: finally, entirely new social phenomena appear which hitherto did not exist in that form even if their very shadowy beginnings could be discerned.² We can expect that more and more such research fields of revolutionary significance will emerge and will need to be explored in the future.

Thus, it seems evident that a basic textbook dealing with the information society has to select its approach and conceptual framework from these three levels. This book, even though it focuses on rather general phenomena emerging in the information society instead of concentrating on the Internet or on the new phenomena referred to above, does not approach the subject exclusively at the first (meta) level, as might seem suitable for purposes of theoretical discussion. However, there is a good practical reason for this. Meta-level research done by theoreticians engaged in the social sciences, that is, *grand theory*, in many cases does not at all reflect certain significant aspects of our subject matter chosen for discussion here, namely, the information society “as it is”.

As we saw in the chapters dealing with the policies of the European Union, e-governance or the digital divide, in everyday life the players in the political arena and the economy as well as many other practitioners refer to the “information society” as symbolic of the spread of information technology and the Internet: succinctly for the ubiquitous practical utilization of computers. Grand theory, on the other hand, interprets an information society in the widest possible sense, as the totality of today’s (post) modern and post-industrial world emerging from the sixties or seventies of the 20th century onward, and focuses primarily on social processes that may be initiated or enhanced by technological developments. From this perspective, everything that has

² Lawrence Lessig’s book on “code” is an example of this (Lessig, 1999).

happened in the world during the last three or four decades can be regarded as part of the emergence of an “information society”, since we have been using this particular term for as long as that.

Thus, when writing this textbook we had to discuss important questions and represent phenomena of the information society without having a firm, well-established theoretical foundation, because grand theory, save for one or two conceptual developments, does not pay enough attention to numerous problems of practical significance.

Castells and other theoreticians do not write about electronic governance, about e-Europe, about the digital divide or about e-learning, even though these and other themes are frequently referred to among the popular buzzwords, which the students and other interested readers of this textbook meet on a daily basis. They must therefore feel that the problems signified by them are much closer to reality than the more remote and theoretical concepts of social science, which may be too abstract to take in. The theory does not raise questions about those efforts that politicians and other key players in socio-economic life make in generating policy for developing the information society. It does not comprehend information strategies, or monitoring progress in building up the information society, or the special dilemmas of the “new economy”, the widespread myths regarding the new technologies and about the practical problems of becoming a user of them. In other words, the theory does not include predictions to help us understand several basic issues that members of society identify with the main characteristics of an information society.

Theoreticians do not use the popular buzzwords that practitioners use nowadays arising in the world of work, leisure and the media. These range from ‘telework’ to ‘electronic signature’ and ‘intelligent settlements’. Actually, there are several “information societies”: first, a comprehensive one, which theoreticians examine and analyse, second, a narrower perspective, which is being built by those interested in progress and development, and third, one which includes society’s members who are less interested and uninitiated. The latter could not care less about some crucial questions of the information society, which in fact are of vital importance for them too.

It was our objective to attempt to connect and merge these more or less separate worlds, so that the textbook would not be of a too remote and abstract theoretical character. However, we did not want to become superficial either by dealing only with generalities, or slavishly reflecting the short-lived slogans of politics and commerce. We hope that the chapters of this book actually allow some insight not only into theoretical dilemmas but also into practical everyday problems. We hope that at the same time, they shed light on the contrast between different worlds or “layers” of the information societies referred to which exist in parallel: the comprehensive view of grand theory, the narrower view of politics and public life, and the practical view of everyday reality.

The world of theory may appear to be quixotic, unrelated to practical problems. The political approach is often full of jargon and slogans, and sometimes expresses a blind revolutionary faith that widespread use of information and communication technologies will, of itself, be capable of resolving vital political and economic problems. Finally, the common sense perspective often reduces the complex issues at hand to particular questions of our use of various devices offered by ICT. An integrated discussion of these different alternatives may be capable of reducing the misunderstanding we described above because we may achieve a theoretical clarity combined with practical understanding.

Often this complexity of interpretation creates some sort of “schizophrenia” for researchers into the information society and for many of those cogitating over the subject. While we are discussing an information society, we may not really grasp the deep complexity of the concept, which may be extremely difficult to comprehend, and certainly cannot be interpreted solely by the social sciences. Sometimes it is necessary to accept

the narrower focus of political and economic considerations or the everyday perspectives of mass culture, even if these may be more superficial.³

Problematically, a contradictory situation arises. Scientific theories exist but they can only be used to a limited extent: with regard to the subject as it presents to us in the real world. For example in public efforts to further develop the information society, we have plenty of direct experience but very few measured results of empirical investigations. In the final analysis, it is our assertion that familiarity with the grand theories elaborated by Castells and others further discussed and classified into five clusters by Webster (1995), is at best a *necessary* but certainly not a *sufficient* condition for understanding the current processes and the trends of further development of information society.

Firstly, these theories discourse exclusively on “mainstream” development (predominantly from the perspective of the developed western societies) and the rest of the world remains outside the scope of their inquiry. Secondly, the information society is interpreted only in general technological terms, neglecting the interests of the players involved in the processes of development. Thirdly, only certain phenomena and not the general trends of ongoing development of the information society are discussed and analysed. Fourthly (with perhaps the sole exception of Castells) the grand theories which are used to interpret the process of “informatising” our societies, had their golden hour at the end of the eighties and in the early nineties of the 20th century, and now they are behind the times by decades. The incredibly fast, dynamic progress made since the middle of the nineties seems to have escaped the attention of those early researchers completely; they have not followed up the sequels to study them.

The consequence of all this is that, save for one or two exceptions, “grand theory” has virtually ceased to be able to offer a clear and comprehensive picture of the information society, and it is no longer even the subject of contemporary discourses. Not only is it useless for politicians and the active interpreters of real socio-economic life, but it also does not provide a firm conceptual platform for researchers. For example, let us just think of those who are trying to measure Internet penetration or to explore societal questions of certain information technologies?

A further consequence of this regrettable situation is that in when we take up the available academic conceptual framework, it is virtually impossible to gain an insight into several important aspects of the information society and its relevant subject matter, or to examine current developments and to investigate related changes in the fields of politics and the economy. Therefore, when writing our textbook, we decided that in addition to introducing the theoretical fundamentals, we would have to discuss in detail some facets of the actual political practice in this field. We were determined to resist the temptation to use certain fashionable slogans, but to approach the subject from the direction of comprehensive themes likely to be more enduring in the long run than many of yesterday’s and today’s popular topics.⁴

³ These three (scientific-theoretical, political, and mass cultural) approaches will be discussed in detail later on.

⁴ Who would use today, for example, the term “information superhighway”, even though it was extremely popular in the second half of the last decade?

A supernarrative for development and competing metanarratives

I. The information society as a supernarrative for development

If we are to discuss practical politics, in addition to pointing out the limitation of investigations by the social sciences, we have to consider the socio-political context within which the statements in our textbook were formulated: the community of the European Union. The development of information society has been identified by its advocates with the spreading of ICT and the use of the new tools offered by the new technologies, in the context of the Union, since the publication of the Bangemann Report in the ninth decade of the 20th century (Bangemann, 1994). This demonstrates that the concept of the information society has been interpreted as a **supernarrative for development**.

The *eEurope* programme package (eEurope, 2000; eEurope+2003, 2001; eEurope 2005, 2002) can essentially be regarded as a development programme the aim of which is to improve access to the Internet throughout Europe. Maintaining the enhancement of services to be made available over the Internet, the EU documents entitled *i2010* (i2010, 2005) placed the media and renewal of innovation policies at their centre. Since the year 2000, all public efforts in this field have been made subservient to the so-called *Lisbon objectives* (The Lisbon European Council [...], 2000), whose overall aim is to make Europe “the most competitive knowledge-based society” (the expression “knowledge-based society” to be interpreted here and now as “information society”) in the world by 2010. In other words, this goal stands above all other aims and objectives so we are dealing with a supernarrative that, in principle, is meant to be the guide for all development projects.⁵

Thus, in the European context, the information society is a supernarrative for development, and, at the same time, it is also an interpretative framework for European societies’ technological development. It will provide a focus for political discourse, specific worldview, which should guide the Union’s decision-makers in setting comprehensive directions for the development of our society for the future. If the information society is conceived as a supernarrative for development, then every problem in society can be viewed through this perspective, and every project to facilitate development can be oriented to the goal of building a competitive information society that will increase people’s well being and overall quality of life through the spread of ICT. All this, if successfully executed,⁶ can render political decisions legitimate and can establish an all-round system of goals, while creating cutting edge identity for society that can be relied upon in the transition period leading further into the 21st century.

Before and after the decade which finished at the turn of the millennium, such programmes for rapidly developing our information society were adopted by many nations within and without the European Union notably Singapore, Malaysia and the countries of the former Soviet block. However, most of those countries did not take the challenge seriously enough and did not exert the required Herculean effort. We admit that this happened here in the Union too, where the Lisbon objectives eventually met with failure, though a number of the member nations achieved notable successes.

⁵ Only in principle because, as we saw in the chapter written by Lilla Juhász, the „Lisbon objectives” could not be adhered to, and the Union has not been successful in executing its ambitious programs.

⁶ See the example of Finland (Castells and Himanen, 2002).

2. The information society as a competing metanarrative

Naturally, this is not the only narrative, there are several competing metanarratives. These metanarratives attempt to give sufficiently comprehensive explanations of what may be going to happen with humankind in the new millennium. Such alternatives are proposed for example, in the theories of a “postmodern society” (Lyotard, 1979), of “post-industrial society” (Bell, 1976), of “post-capitalist society” (Drucker, 1993), or of a “risk society” (Beck, 1992). We might also mention here theories of “globalisation” and the conceptualisations of “sustainable progress” (United Nations, 1987). Finally, we should mention the durable earlier ideas of the “welfare state” and the “consumer society”: even though these ideas are not as universal in character as those above, they have played an important part in western thought and politics during the second half of the twentieth century and continue to do so.

Without going deeper into an explanation of these concepts or taking sides in the controversies, we must point out that the information society in such interpretations is no longer the supernarrative but only one of the competing metanarratives that project one or another “*readings*” of *reality*, and they do not represent *reality itself*.

In plain language, we are not building an information society, but it is society’s current progressive processes that can be interpreted as leading to the emergence of an information society, just as society’s inevitable progress can be explained by the emergence of a consumer society or as the next stage of capitalism, or as a crisis in the welfare state. The present stage of modernity can be interpreted as an “unsteerable juggernaut travelling through space” (Giddens, 1990), as the risk society, as the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1997 [1996]), or as “perverse integration” (Castells, 1996). All of which refer to the same period of time. Presumably, we are correct in concluding that none of the above represents the absolute truth. Does this mean that in our conceptualisation of an “information society” no more than one of the possible perspectives or, in other words, just another metanarrative is reflected?

The meaning(s) of the term “information society”: a final analysis

Having taken all these divergent lines of thought into consideration, we may have quite confused about whether the theory or the actual practice of building an “information” society would be of any use for us, and whether it is possible to define the information society at all. At this point, we can summarize *very briefly* what we have learnt from the textbook about this conceptual framework. Doing so, we hope, it will restore our self-confidence to what it was. After all, it is worthwhile to review the chapters of the book, and we shall see that now that we are furnished with useful knowledge, there are ample reasons to use this term “information society”.

I. Information society as first encountered: Utopia vs. Reality?

Whoever wants to investigate and understand the information society has to discriminate at least two interrelated but opposing spheres of phenomena, which can be separated from each other only in theory:

- At the first encounter, we find that the *information society is a conceptual framework, replete with values and norms*. It is used to denote a positive *UTOPIA* and a negative *DYSTOPIA* at one and the same time. As we have already seen in the first chapter, both technophile and technophobic ideas abound in information society either intertwined or separated.
- By the same token, the term *information society is a name given to an existing socio-technical REALITY*. It signifies the epoch that is presently succeeding so-called modern society, that which took shape after the industrial revolution. This shift is taking place before our eyes in the form of technological, economic, and cultural changes and can be observed, as we illustrated our first chapter, in modifications of the employment and production control structure as well as in other important structural aspects of social life (Webster, 1995).

As an inevitable consequence of this fundamental duality, significant misunderstandings can arise among the participants of any investigation, development project or controversy relating to the information society. It is easy to comprehend that their preconceptions, prior knowledge, expectations, and fears are different. We find that even those doing research talk different languages. While for some the term “information society” signifies reality, and a tool for understanding the world and effecting changes in it, for others it means an unapproachable, unknown, and not particularly attractive realm of ideas, remote from real life. It may even seem downright threatening!

2. Information society revisited: theoretical, political and everyday approaches

In addition to our conception of a reality intertwined with utopia, we can also discern another closely interrelated, threefold system of approaches to the information society. These differ from each other either in who proposes the definition, or the timeframe within which it is set: in what period of time do we consider we saw the onset of the shift to it or when indicators of it appear, or, again, in the change in quality of the content and the maturity of the definition.

1. Table: Three approaches to the information society

| Definition | Onset | Advocates | Content |
|---|--|---|--|
| <i>Theoretical (descriptive, ex-act)</i> | After World War II, from the sixties or the seventies of the 20th century on | Theoreticians, social scientists, researchers | Technology Employment structure Economy Spatio-temporal structure Cultural values, norms ⁷ |
| <i>Political (promotional, program-like)</i> | From the nineties of the 20th century forward ⁸ | Politicians, technocrats, entrepreneurs and expert advisors to business and Govt. | Political program “Revolution from above” Modernization as the main objective Those lagging behind shall drop out |
| <i>Everyday, prosaic (amorphous, utopian)</i> | Not before 2010 or 2020 forward | Mainstream media, participants of utopian controversies, sci-fi movies | Ubiquitous and total information and communication technologies |

Source: Pinter, 2004: 31

As we proceed downwards in the table, the definitions become progressively more and more difficult to grasp, and the onset of the information society shifts to later and later dates, finally into the future. It can be seen clearly from the table that all kinds of discourses, investigations, and political initiatives relating to the information society, as well as the achievements and aspirations in the economy, manifest themselves in an extremely complex manner.

Thus, in order to present a comprehensive outline of an objective knowledge base for the ever-changing, dynamic profile of the information society, we need to understand the interrelations of all the three approaches described above. We have to integrate the theoretical-paradigmatic, the political-promotional, and the prosaic-utopian perspectives. All three kinds of definition have to be considered simultaneously in order not to repeat the mistakes of our parents and grandparents in our investigations concerning the information society.

3. Information society encountered for the third time: technology, society, narrative and science in focus

As we saw in the first two chapters of our textbook, the information society is a new mode of social synthesis, determined by the utilization of ICT, the emergence of a network society producing a network economy and paradigmatic cultural changes at the same time.

In definitions of the basic concept different features of the information society might be emphasized, depending on who formulates the definition. The key phenomena might be the visible diffusion of *information and communication technologies*, the continuing fundamental *socio-economic transformations*, the *political programs for development*, or, finally, the results of *scientific research* being carried out in this field. Thus, we have four different but equally rational viewpoints; a technological, a societal, a political and a physical science perspective with which to study the information society each presenting a different picture.

⁷ See Webster's typology (1995), outlined in the introductory chapter.

⁸ From the appearance of the first modern information strategies on (e.g., Singapore, 1992).

Based on our preceding discussions we can define the information society in four different ways:

1. In terms of *technology*, ICT and various operations for processing knowledge and information play the central role in information society.
2. From the perspective of the whole *society*, the emergence of a network society and a network economy, of new types of community, of continuous adaptation to an ever-changing environment, of new kinds of inequality, and globalisation are the main characteristics of an information society.
3. According to the *political narrative*, the term “information society” refers to a new paradigm, which is transforming the late industrial epoch. It refers to a new way of conceptualising the world, and might be described as a supernarrative for development, as we saw above.
4. Finally, from a scientific perspective, there is a wide field of research called *information society studies*: this is exactly what we are presenting to you in our textbook – to characterize this landscape, let us refer here again to Webster’s typology (Webster, 1995).

4. Missing an exactly defined concept

In all the examples we have discussed, it is apparent that we do not have a definitive conception of the information society. We can regard it as a theoretical construction or as reality, as a technological revolution or as a political programme, as a meta-narrative or supernarrative, as a new paradigm or as a research field for scientific investigations by social scientists, or, in plain terms, as the context of our working days in the 21st century. The list could continue, however, the gist of the matter must be clear by now: we ourselves have to decide how we understand the information society and whether we wish to engage with it or not? This textbook is intended to help those interested in coming to a conclusion of their own: this was, after all, our fundamental objective in explaining the complex nature of information society.

Summary

By reviewing our whole book in this concluding chapter we have tried to show the way to an answer to the question how the content of our textbook was selected and compiled as it was. By so doing we have come to understand how we may, possibly think about the information society at this, the beginning of the 21st century.

In the first part of the chapter, we surveyed a number of popular buzzwords. After seeing the list the reader may justifiably ask why they have not been discussed in this, an introductory textbook. The first reason for this are the controls limiting our space (a textbook consisting of only 13 chapters cannot deal with every detail of its subject matter) moreover, the topics indicated by the buzzwords cannot be discussed on a uniform level because scientific concepts, political catchwords, and business-oriented slogans intermingle in the list.

However, there are other reasons why the book is limited to certain social science theories and to some central political topics. We had to consider the present state of professional engagement with the grand theories of social science which is a prerequisite for taking part in the discourse on the relevant questions, while remembering, on the other hand, that those theories were, bogged down at the end of the eighties or in the early nineties of the 20th century. With the exception, that is, of the work of Manuel Castells. The social phenomena most frequently at the centre of discussions (see buzzwords) have little connection with grand theories, thus, it is impossible to explore them relying on a firm theoretical basis. For this reason, paying attention to real political intentions and programs for development is especially important for understanding and interpreting the current situation. Consequently, in our textbook we had to concentrate simultaneously on social theory and political practice.

In the context of Europe's political efforts, we have suggested that in the European Union the information society is regarded as a supernarrative for development, the priorities for which were laid down in the Lisbon objectives (2000). In reality, the failure of the Lisbon strategy and the emergence of other metanarratives might offer a future challenge to the privileged status of the "information society", both in regard to the public projects which are intended to facilitate information society development, whatever that might prove to be and possibly to the working out of social processes associated with it as well.

Finally, when we summarized the approaches to and the definitions of the information society in previous chapters, we urged our readers to decide for themselves what these explanations meant for them: is it a utopian theoretical construction, a technological revolution, their own everyday environment, the field of their scientific inquiry or something entirely different. This textbook should serve as a guide for orientation in the densely interwoven, multi-dimensional network of all these intriguing questions concerning the information society.

Revision questions

1. Could you mention any popular buzzwords that are missing from our list?
2. What do you think we mean by suggesting that 'building up an information society in the European Union can be regarded as a supernarrative for development'?
3. What competing metanarratives, in addition to that of the information society, could help us understand the world since World War II?
4. On what basis have we stated that the information society is both a utopia and a concise description of reality at the same time?
5. What characterizes the theoretical, political, and everyday approaches to the information society?
6. What is at the heart of the technological aspect of an information society? Similarly, what defines the social aspect of information society?

Key terms

Digital divide: In general terms, it refers to the gap between those with access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and those without. Initially the term was used to indicate those who had access to hardware (i.e. a Personal Computer) in comparison with those who had not. As technologies evolved and their use also changed qualitatively, the divide has been seen as separating users from non-users, and latterly, distinguishing different types of users. It is clear that there is not just one digital divide but multiple divides which relate to a variety of factors, such as: gender; age; 'ethnic clustering'; uncertainty of living/financial conditions; work insecurity, and social insecurity.

Digitalisation: The process during which works (texts, images, and sounds) originally published non-digitally are converted into an encoded form readable by computers. When texts are digitalised each character (letter, punctuation mark, etc.) is given a separate code; this is often complemented by commands about how the text is to be displayed.

Electronic government: Using the combination of information technology, structural changes and new skills in public administration in order to improve the standard of public services, and make the operation of public administration more simple, more efficient and more economical, and to further strengthen the democratic processes.

Globalisation: refers to the increased interdependence and mutually exerted influence between countries and between human communities on a global level, which shapes economic, cultural and political subsystems.

Information literacy: The ability to access information and use it to create value. Someone can be regarded as information literate if he recognises when he needs information, and if he has learnt how to learn.

Information society: A new form of social existence in which the storage, production, flow, etc. of networked information plays the central role. (There are several other definitions of the concept.)

Information society law: A group of laws that includes the protection of personal information and the freedom of information. The sum of regulation governing social relations built on communication networks. We can differentiate between two kinds of regulations of the information society: either the legislator attempts to regulate the anticipated developments of interactions in advance, which is called *ex ante* regulation, or alternatively waits to see how these processes will develop and retrospectively regulates them, this latter approach is called *ex post* regulation.

Information strategy: A new stage of high level political planning that emerged in the early 1990s, uniting areas such as the development of information infrastructure, the informatisation of the key subsystems of society and the development policy for the information industries. Functioning as a framework for social planning that determines the programme of building the information society, it includes visions about the future, outlines a comprehensive view of society, has long-term aspirations, and presupposes a consensus between the players of the political elite regarding the future attainment of a desired social quality. It prescribes the controlled concentration of resources. It regards education as the main sector where competitive advantage can be achieved and therefore considers it as a priority of national prosperity.

Innovation: The implementation of a new or significantly improved product (goods or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations.

Lifelong learning: The concept of lifelong learning focuses on the development of a new culture of learning and the dissemination of competency-based education. It encompasses the whole life cycle of the individual, from early socialisation and pre-school education to the post-active age (from the point of view of employment). Its objective is to guarantee access to learning for everyone, and includes forms of learning that are outside the school. Apart from learning within the formal framework of school systems, it regards personality-building experiences taking place in any other area of everyday life (for example through the media), at the workplace or in the family, as learning.

Network economy: The economic system of information society. The attribute “network” signals that the creation of products and services - the actual creation of values, takes place in networks.

Network society: A social form based on the production, processing and transmission of information. The basis of its operation is ensured by the network of modern information and communication technologies.

Network state: A complex institutional system in which different local, regional, national and supranational decision-making levels are combined.

Social capital: Several definitions of social capital are known, but a common characteristic of all of them is that the concept is connected to social networks in which interactions, preferences and friendly attachments related to the everyday life of people develop. By social capital, we mean non-material resources resulting from relationships between players who constitute the networks, and influence the social and economic processes taking place on the different (e.g. family, neighbourly, settlement, national) community levels of social cooperation.

Supernarrative for development: An interpretative framework for the development of society, a focus for political discourse and a specific worldview which guides decision-makers in setting the direction for the development of society.

Technological determinism: argues that technology is the principal driving force in society determining its mode of operation, development, course of history, structure and values in a decisive manner. The effects of any opposing direction are taken into account to a limited extent, fully disregarded or disclaimed. Technological development is thought to be propelled by the logic of science alone.

Technorealism: makes efforts to assess the social impacts of technology objectively taking into consideration positive and negative effects.

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