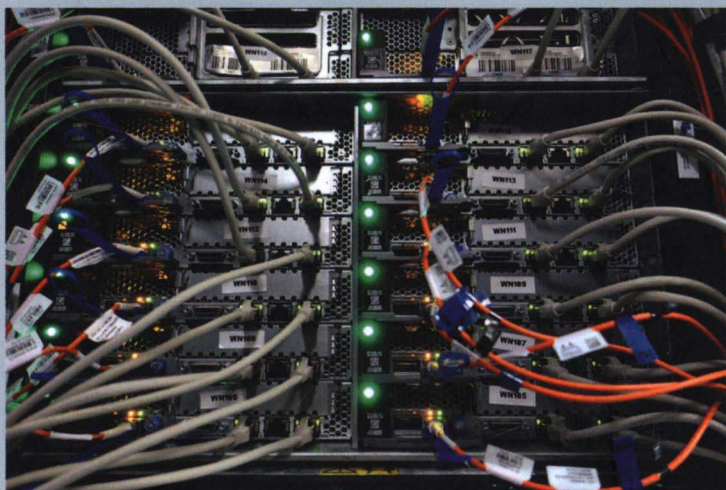


Borut Rončević / Matevž Tomšič (eds.)

Information Society and its Manifestations: Economy, Politics, Culture



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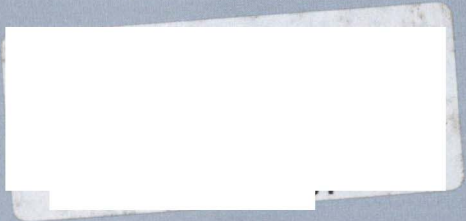
Information Society and its Manifestations: Economy, Politics, Culture

The book provides a compilation of idiosyncratic manifestations of information society in techno-economic, political and cultural spheres. The contributors focus on the increasing complexity within information societies. To manage this complexity, societies develop constantly evolving context-specific modes of meta-governance. The contributions allow a better understanding of well-known conceptualizations and definitions of information society and related concepts such as post-industrial society, post-modernity, as well as network society, and knowledge society.

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Table of Contents

Preface.....	7
<i>Borut Rončević and Matevž Tomšič</i>	
Perspectives of Information Society: Bricolage of Manifestations.....	9
<i>Nikolai Genov</i>	
Information Resources in Upgrading Organizational Rationality.....	23
Embeddedness in the Information Economy: Opportunities and Constraints	
<i>Borut Rončević and Urška Fric</i>	
Path-creation in the Information Society.....	41
<i>Dolores Modic</i>	
Intellectual Property Rights in the Information Sector: Sociological Perspective.....	55
<i>Erika Džajić Uršič and Borut Rončević</i>	
Industrial Symbiotic Networks in the Information Society: Research Challenges and Perspectives.....	71
<i>Lea Prijon</i>	
Networking of Business Elite in the Information Society: The Case of Interlocking Directorates.....	83
<i>Jana Suklan and Vesna Žabkar</i>	
How to Benefit from Cross-Media Synergies in the Information Society	101
Politics: Old Challenges, New Perspectives	
<i>Matevž Tomšič and Petra Kleindienst</i>	
E-Participation, E-democracy and Political Engagement of the Citizenry in Central and Eastern Europe.....	117
<i>Victor Cepoi</i>	
Trust and Participation in the Information Society: New and Traditional Information Sources	135

Matej Makarovič and Mateja Rek

Experts and the Macro Level Decision-making in the Information Society..... 153

Janja Mikulan Kildi

Crisis Mapping for More Inclusive Humanitarian

Information Management in the ICT Era..... 173

Changing Culture Dynamics: Identities, Knowledge
and the Power of Networks

Tea Golob

Instrumental Identities and Information Society –

Deploying the Issue of Social Fields..... 197

Jana Krivec

Cognitive Processes and Information Technology in Education..... 217

Jernej Agrež and Nadja Damij

Knowledge Dynamics in a State of Emergency: A Case Study..... 243

Dejan Valentinčič

Facebook as an Indicator of Vitality of Slovenian Minority and

Diaspora Communities (with Emphasis on Young Population)..... 265

Preface

Information societies are characterised by a high level of structural complexity. This causes significant challenges in societal steering and demands development of contextualised meta-governance mechanisms. In this volume we do not provide a detailed overview of a variety of conceptualizations of information society and related or partially overlapping concepts such as post-industrial society, post-Fordism, network society, post-modernity, knowledge society, etc. Instead, we provide insight into the bricolage of specific manifestations of information society in techno-economic, political and cultural spheres, unveiling the wealth of context-specific elements that have to be taken into account in analytical and practical work.

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Perspectives of Information Society: Bricolage of Manifestations

Abstract: *Information societies are characterised by a high level of structural complexity. The processes of comprehensive societal change known as modernisation led to unprecedented dynamics and heterogeneity of institutional forms and practices. Increase in speed of symbolic communication, in which information technologies played the key role, further contributed to this process. In this introductory chapter we are dealing with the question of whether strategic steering of an information society is even possible and what are the consequences of differentiation, networkisation and informatization for steering and governance. We then present the overview of contributions to this volume, which offer insight into the manifestations of an information society in spheres of economy, politics and culture.*

Keywords: *information society, networkization, strategic steering, governance*

1. Introduction: Information in Complex Post-industrial Societies

Information societies are characterised by a high level of structural complexity. The processes of comprehensive societal change known as modernisation lead to unprecedented dynamics and heterogeneity of institutional forms and practices. Unprecedented speed and efficiency of symbolic communication, in which information technologies played the key role, further contributed to functional differentiation where particular systemic functions are performed by different subsystems with their specialised institutions and specific logics of functioning. Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory states that in contemporary society there is no central subsystem that would represent society as a whole (Luhmann 1995). According to Luhmann, different subsystems are completely autonomous and function on the basis of their special and particular interests and rationalities and each of them has its own medium of communication. Other authors have softened this claim by emphasising the reflection and systems discourse (e.g. Willke 1993), but there is a consensus about the de-centred nature of contemporary societies. In a similar way, for example, one of the key theorists of information society Daniel

Bell (1996) claims that in (postmodern) societies there is no unified referential system, no unified internal dynamic of structural change and no unified or dominant regulatory mechanism. They are composed of three different spheres, with each of them binding to its own 'axis-principle' that has an intrinsic status. These are: the techno-economic sphere that works on the principle of functional rationality; the political sphere that is based on the principle of legitimacy; and the cultural sphere whose axis-principle is self-fulfilment of the individual, i.e. his/her existential realisation as a creative human being (ibid. 29).

Furthermore, Bell acknowledges three key aspects of the post-industrial society. The first is the data, information describing the empirical world. The second is the organisation of this data into meaningful systems. The third is knowledge, i.e. the use of information to make judgments and make appropriate decisions (Bell 1973). Although Bell was writing about the coming of the post-industrial society, by conceptualising information as a key organising principle of this society he effectively introduced the notion of the information society; a society in which collection, creation, assembling, reproducing and massive commodification of information becomes the key activity, a part of all aspects of social organisation, and thus plays a crucial role in steering societal development.

In this volume we do not provide a detailed overview of a variety of conceptualisations of the information society and related or partially overlapping concepts such as a post-industrial society, post-Fordism, network society, high modernity, post-modernity, knowledge society, etc. It is also not our goal to review crucial contributions such as those of Daniel Bell, Manuel Castells, Niklas Luhmann, Ulrich Beck or Alvin Toffler. We already have very good literature providing these, such as Webster (2014) or Mackay et al. (2002). Instead we provide analytical insight to specific manifestations of information society in three aforementioned spheres as defined by Bell, namely techno-economic, political and cultural, trying to unveil some of the aspects of information societies that make it possible to steer them purposefully.

The dilemma of the development of societies should be subjected to planned steering or left to self-regulation, i.e. social evolution, is not limited to information societies. It is without doubt one of the most important and the most prominent dilemmas in the history of social, political and economic thought. From the reflexion of this issue arises the famous remark of Adam Smith (*Wealth of Nations* 1776): "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices". We could add that the 'conspirators against the

public' would have to meet to exchange the information required to coordinate their actions.

But the universality of specific developmental issues or questions does not presuppose the universal validity of solutions or answers. Conclusions based on a specific situation can be completely irrelevant to another. Therefore, while solving this dilemma in the context of information society, we have to approach it by considering the specific empirical level, focusing on structural characteristics of a defined social environment and on analysis of conditions that could enable or prevent specific ways of steering or self-steering social development. There is no universal answer to the above-mentioned dilemma and specific solutions work in specific societal constellations. This is the reason why attempts of transplantation of institutional arrangements that are successful in a specific environment, e.g. the highly successful information economy of the Silicon Valley, completely fail to meet the high promises and expectations in another, e.g. the planned 'Russian Silicon Valley' in Skolkovo near Moscow.

Is strategic steering of an information society even possible? Successful strategies have to take into account complex relationships and co-dependencies between various partial systems if they wish to achieve long-term success. This requires substantial hard and soft infrastructure, and significant effort at a structured exchange of information. It is therefore not surprising that the importance of regional innovation systems and other mechanisms for intermediation between relevant actors came to the fore with the advent of the information society.

2. From Differentiation to 'Networkization' and Coordination

Functional differentiation implies upgrading the effectiveness of a system since it enables the simultaneous steering of several processes that cannot be comprehended with a single context of conduct. Individual subsystems are very complex themselves since the processes of internal specialisation lead to the diversification of issues, principles and practices, highlighting a need for the reintegration of their diversified unity. Likewise, there is a need for reintegration of the system as a whole, to achieve systemic rationality. Furthermore, relations are determined by the diverging interests of key actors deriving from the very principles of functioning (for example, in a market economy whose profit-oriented logic triggers conflicts of interest between owners and employees) which, again, points out the need for co-ordination and mediation between stakeholders.

The development of modern information society is thus directed towards the independence of its different partial systems that are becoming "operatively closed", i.e. steered internally, on the basis of their own specific norms and

principles. However, functional differentiation in terms of increasing specialisations in particular fields is coupled with the interdependence of these functions since every functional field can constitute a functioning society only when it is connected to the others (Willke 1993, p. 44). Since we are dealing with an increasing number of nodes at the macro (subsystems), meso (intermediary structures) and micro levels (individual organisations or actors) that communicate with each other with increasing speed and efficiency, we are also dealing with an increasing number of increasingly complex networks.

“Networkisation” of contemporary societies can thus be explained as inevitable consequence of modernisation, which, more than in the case of segmentary and stratification differentiation, put modern societies before the challenge of societal integration. These processes also led to the lessening of the probability of successful hierarchical coordination and successfulness of spontaneous evolution. Networks can offer part of the solution to the problems of social coordination that originate from developmental dynamics of modern societies. Transformational processes that accompany social modernisation led to the strategic process of formation of network forms. Messner (1997) offered a concise description of networkization – he did not use this expression to describe the trends – already twenty years ago.

One major trend is *movement in the direction of the organising society*. This implies that although numbers of collective actors and acceleration of developmental dynamics are growing, there is a reflection and awareness of the need to influence and steer societal development. Domination of nature and particularly of society, *Weltbeherrschung*, remains the major goal (Genov 1997, p. 412), also in the information society, although the instruments have to change. Genov terms this trend the ‘spread of instrumental activism’ and describes it one of the four main trends (1997, 2010). Advantages, derived from linking are also pooling (limited) resources and combining various competences and forming new, emergent ones that exceed the sum of resources of individual actors. Information technology only increased the relevance of this trend with the more and more efficient multi-level communication and the newly emerging ad hoc and virtual organisations, societies and communities.

Another major trend is the *increasing sectorization of economy and society* (Messner 1997, p. 150–153). This describes the process that we named functional differentiation. This process is complemented with the process of specialisation. This leads to the establishment of conditions for the increasing importance of individual partial systems or individual actors in society. Different sectors and

actors are included into the process of decision-making, which is leading to the *supersaturation of the policy process*.

Differentiation of partial systems also leads to *the growth of policy*. It means that because of the risks, emanating from the prospect of decline of systemic rationality on account of target rationality, it comes to the increasing volume of state interventions (there are more and more domains and possible situations that have to be regulated) or the interventions and regulations by the supranational entities (European Union (EU), World Trade Organisation (WTO), etc.). Even public information exchange services, once almost synonymous with openness and unregulated accessibility, are now increasingly subject to regulation by national or supranational organisations, see for example the Great Firewall of China or debates on Internet neutrality in the EU.

These trends have immense importance for the state. In the long run this process led to the *decentralization and fragmentation of the state*. It means that various forms of intervention and steering started to emerge in the framework of the state. It also started shifting the responsibility on lower levels (regional, local). Furthermore, with decentralization came various forms of cooperation between the state and other actors. The *border between policy-makers and recipients of policies became blurred* (Ibid.). Jessop expanded the definition of the state beyond the usual conception of a political and administrative apparatus in control of a monopoly of power within clearly defined geographical boundaries and on the basis of work by Gramsci and Poulantzas develop the strategic-relational approach, the concept of the state as a social relation (Jessop 2007). This would explain why in some domains development led to the state – understood in the traditional sense – almost completely lost its abilities for autonomous policy-making. Input from non-state actors cannot be neglected without consequences. It came to *the inward loss of the autonomy of the state* (Messner 1997) in the relation to other partial systems. Globalization, the regionalization of economy and integration of national states into supra-national organisations contribute to *the loss of the autonomy of the state outwards*.

From this arose the need for a *cooperative or negotiating state* that has to learn to impart responsibility to other levels and other actors and of course to support the capacities of these actors for successful cooperation in policy processes (Ibid.). Conditions for the emergence of an *active society* (Etzioni 1968), in which strategic processes unroll in interaction between relevant actors and partial systems, are established on the basis of previous trends. This is at the same time the only successful solution to growing mutual dependency. These interactions establish

relations of inter-systemic coordination which differ from market or hierarchical relations.

Different explanations of formation of new forms of social coordination also exist. The most famous of them is the approach of technological determinism, which Manuel Castells explained at the beginning of his most well-known work *The Rise of the Network Society*: “A technological revolution, centered around information technologies, began to reshape, at accelerated pace, the material basis of society. Economies throughout the world have become globally interdependent, introducing a new form of relationship between economy, state and society, in a system of variable geometry” (Castells 1996, p. 1). In this sense, for example, Castells also explained the downfall of socialistic systems as a consequence of their inability to adapt to demands that the revolution of information technology put before them (Castells 1997).

3. The State in the Network Society: *Primus Inter Pares*

In the beginning of the 1990s David Held famously stated that today we deal with a hybrid system, in which on the one hand despite different trends the system of sovereign national states still persists, but on the other hand systems of plural structures are also developing (Held 1991). The implication is that the national state represents only one of the existing centres of power in a broader network, where it often confronts other centres that limit its autonomy (Castells 1998, p. 304). However, this doesn't mean the inevitable decline of national state, but it indicates the changed role of the state in strategic processes: ... while global capitalism flourishes and national ideologies throughout the world explode, it seems that national state, created in modern era, loses its power, but, and this is essential, *not also its influence*” (Castells 1997, p. 243).

As we have already stressed, in a network society the state doesn't lose its autonomy only outwards, but also inwards. Castells states that subordinate social groups gain access to policy processes, especially in the lower levels. “Thus, a complex geometry emerges in the relationship between the state, social classes, social groups, and identities present in civil society” (Castells 1996, p. 271). In this way, lower levels, the so called “local state”, become important strategic instances (Warner 1999). In this way, local and regional governments become a manifestation of decentralized political power, a point of contact between the state and other social subsystems. In this way, networks, within which it comes to policy-making, become much more complicated. Examples of this are the policies of European Union with the principle of subsidiarity, which complicates the analysis of networks with the introduction of an analysis of multi-level governance.