

Chapter 1

The Knowledge Society

INTRODUCTION

Gone are the days of the divine rights of kings—or of anyone else, whether owner, manager, labor leader, politician, bureaucrat, technologist or scholar. Absolute and groundless authority is being contested all over the world: ours is an iconoclastic age --Bunge, 1977, p. 96.

Generally speaking, all societies in history were knowledge societies. However, the modern, conceptualization of the “knowledge society” can be traced to John Stuart Mill’s (1831) *The Spirit of the Age* where social progress was explained through the diffusion of knowledge (intellectual wisdom) and increased opportunities for

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2 *The Knowledge Society*

individual choice arising from industrialization. This was an early indicator foreshadowing the transformation of modern society into a knowledge society. Beginning in the early 20th century, industrialized nations became increasingly reliant on economic investment in the production and distribution of knowledge in training, education, work, research and development (Abramovitz & David, 2000). Also, the importance of knowledge in society became even more pronounced through the advent of specialized areas of science and technology in society. As stated by Stehr (2002), “Contemporary society may be described as a knowledge society based on the extensive penetration of all its spheres of life and institutions by scientific and technological knowledge.”

New scientific and technological developments are transforming society into a knowledge society as they become deeply embedded in popular culture, private and public affairs, work and educational settings, social practices, and public institutions. Knowledge derived from scientific and technological developments is redefining key aspects of social life including: How scientific discoveries are treated, how health care is distributed, how children learn, how adults interact and work with one another, how governments conduct affairs, how ethnic groups preserve their culture, how medical research is controlled, how business transactions are conducted, and how nations interact within a global marketplace. Moreover, the growing body of knowledge derived from scientific and technological developments has the potential to provide important social benefits such as reversing environmental damage caused in the past, reducing pollution in the present, and preserving natural resources for the future. Due to the propagation of powerful new scientific and technical advances within this knowledge society, there is a need for a study of social and ethical aspects of such advances to leverage benefits and guard against the misuse of new tools and knowledge. This is not an easy task and requires a clear understanding of key terms and concepts.

The notion of “knowledge society” is both powerful and complex. It is powerful because it has received widespread attention as both a chief development and challenge for public and private institutions, leaders in industry, and governments with vast amounts of resources and control in decisions leading to large-scale innovations directing societal growth. This is particularly salient in the domain of economics where terms like “knowledge-based economy” and “knowledge management” represent core areas of theory and research. The notion of ‘knowledge society’ is complex because it has many facets and supporting constructs connected to a multidisciplinary base of scholarship. It is the focus of scholarly attention in multiple disciplines and fields of study from economics to sociology to information sciences to business. Other terms such as “information society”, “postindustrial society” and “posthuman society” are related terms that help draw attention to the

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