Public Authorities and the Local Information Society

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INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the role of public authorities in the creation of local information societies (LIS). The analysis is conducted with reference to strategies, policies, and actions of public authorities with the aim of promoting information and communication technologies (ICTs) at the local level. Although the article relates to broad issues relevant today throughout the western world, we narrow the empirical examples to Finland.

To begin, we provide a brief account of documents that guide LIS policies. Our focus is on the *discursive* formation and *strategic* guidance of LIS. For example, several European Commission documents highlight the positive relationship between economic growth, competitiveness, and knowledge-intensity as a means for success in global competition. On the national level, we discuss the current Finnish government strategy for the promotion of the information society (Government of Finland, 2003).

Second, we offer insights into how discursive strategies for the LIS are implemented through *practical* activities. Two examples discuss the relationship between public authorities and citizen, business and governance-oriented LIS. In particular, it is essential to consider the connections and disparities between written policy strategies and everyday practices. The first topic focuses on the Tampere Region, recounting a case of LIS promotion through enhancing interaction between citizens and public authorities. In the second case, we discuss the Multipolis technology network. It is an example of LIS policy targeted to support private-led technology development in the more remote localities of northern Finland.

BACKGROUND

Information, technology and knowledge and their production, transformation, and distribution have become part of our daily lives. Consequently, everyday language has incorporated new concepts such as information society (IS) and knowledge (based) society (KS). The former adopts the progress of technology as the core question, whereas the latter focuses on promoting the capabilities of citizens through learning, knowledge creation, and creativity (e.g., Florida, 2002).

The IS and KS, in their particularities, have been addressed by several scholars (e.g., Castells, 1996; Kellerman, 2003; Mansell & Wehn, 1998; Mitchell, 2000; Schienstock, 2004; Simmie, 2001; Webster, 2004). The roots of the IS are connected to market economy and growth. The majority of theories[1] on the IS highlight global competition, circulation of capital and flexibility in locating economic activities. Where IS researchers tend to observe societal issues from a macro perspective with a strong technical emphasis, their KS-oriented colleagues prefer to concentrate on the intertwined relations between innovation processes, technological development in organisations, and the significance of information as a fundamental element in knowledge creation. Colloquial use of the term information society has deflated the concept through the attribution of a wide variety of meanings and responsibilities. In this article, we use the term (L)IS to refer to the contents suggested by both IS and KS. Conceptually, IS and KS are analysed profoundly in other articles in this volume.

Our key interest lies in the local conditions and actions promoting both economic and social dimensions of the IS. In LIS practices, the significance of "local" is commonly narrowed to the level of municipalities. However, exclusive focusing on municipality as the spatial category for local disregards the position of LIS as a process with an active presence beyond the local. Therefore, we highlight the processes of LIS formation and how the IS, present at different spatial scales, transforms and transfigures local realities (see LIS definition at the end of the article).

We argue that public authorities discursively create a flexible definition of the information society in which ICTs play a fundamental role. Public authorities are mostly responsible for the continuous presence of IS in the

media, at least in Finland. In fact, Finland is a case of particular interest due to the "Nokia syndrome" plaguing the national IS discourse. As a result of the production and rapid proliferation of wireless technology, Finland was taken off guard by its new position at the top of the global information society (World Economic Forum, 2003). Public authorities were happy to accept credit for this fluent conversion from a traditional industrial society to an information society. Retrospectively, they claimed a causal relationship between the emergence of the IS and public investment in education, research and development in particular technological fields (Miettinen, 2002).

In the 1990s public authorities began to actively promote the IS as the key economic strategy for Finland. Castells and Himanen (2002) represented Finland as an example of a socially coherent and welfare-oriented IS with high level of social security. However, during the early 2000s, the growth of the ICT production and development sector has slowed down in Finland and the attraction of the "Finnish model for the information society" has waned somewhat. In everyday life, the penetration of ICTs and especially their active use has not increased as expected (ITU, 2005).[2] Nevertheless—or perhaps consequently—public authorities stress the significance of the technologies themselves in the promotion of LIS.

STRATEGIES AS DIRECTIVES FOR IS DEVELOPMENT

On the global scale, the IS became a top priority in public policy in the early 1990s, when the US government published its *National Information Infrastructure* report (NII, 1993). Almost simultaneously, the "Bangemann" report was published highlighting the essential role of technology for the competitiveness of the European Union (European Commission, 1993). The strategy guideline reports of these two economic superpowers were followed by various national IS or "technology-driven" growth strategies. In Finland, the lead up to the current IS strategy began in 1994 with the publication of the TIKAS report by the Ministry of Finance. Soon after regional authorities started to produce their own IS strategies.

There are several possible ways to approach IS strategies. The first challenge is to define the appropriate spatial scale. There exists a vast amount of data concerning ICT-related indicators on the national and regional level of the European Union. However, such data on the spatial diffusion of ICTs and related infrastructure is rough and only describes certain technical prerequisites of IS. The rapid diffusion of continuously changing devices has the consequence that such data rapidly becomes outdated. A comprehensive comparative analysis of the presence of ICTs in the localities of EU-25 would require enormous effort. Furthermore, such extensive description would not be sufficient, as ICTs and their usage cannot be observed exclusively as technological phenomena: they are strongly influenced by the social context. For this reason, in the present study we choose to concentrate on Finland and describe findings in the practical promotion of LIS.

The Information Society Programme[3] is one of the four major policy programmes adopted by present Finnish government. In this way, concerns relating to IS development concerns are addressed on the same level as issues regarding employment, entrepreneurship, and public participation policy, which constitute the other three programme dimensions. In certain innovation policies and programmes, contacts between the public and the private sector are frequent (Lemola, 2003). Yet, the significance and substance of a general IS policy programme in Finland has been questioned. For example, in autumn 2004 a director of a major ICT-company gave a statement that co-operation between public IS policies and private enterprises in Finland is currently "more or less non-existent" and that the national IS Programme is but a collection of fancy ideas and words with no concrete substance that might induce co-operative action.

The regionalisation of IS in Finland occurs in a number of different ways. One significant regional policy tool is the Centre of Expertise Programme initiated in 1994. The mission of the current 22 centres around Finland is to make use of international high-level knowledge and competence for entrepreneurial activities, to improve the regions' development resources, and to create new employment opportunities. The local centres aim to improve the basic conditions for new innovations, product development, and commercial activities (Centre of Expertise Programme, 2004). Several centres focus on technology improving the competitiveness of technology firms in private technology parks.

As described, the fundamental goals of IS strategies are very similar on the EU, national and regional levels: the main components generally consist of economic competitiveness, regional equality and improved social life of citizens enhanced by the usage and implementation of ICTs. In Finland, local and regional authorities state similar goals in their regional and local IS strategies. The aims of regional authorities can be observed through a three-way categorisation based on their primary object of interest: the *citizen*, *business,* and *governance*-oriented IS (Table 1).

We use the above categorisation in our analysis of two LIS cases. The first case concerns the Tampere Region (Pirkanmaa), which is the second largest functional area in Finland, the largest being the capital area (Helsinki region, Uusimaa). The second case observes localities in the area covering the northern half of Finland