Information Society Discourse

Lech W. Zacher
Leon Kozminski Academy of Entrepreneurship and Management, Poland

INTRODUCTION

Information society (IS) has a short history as a form of human organization and social context. However, information (signals, communications, various data, etc.) and use thereof have always been fundamental to people's existence, survival, and development. Some important milestones included the Gutenberg printing press, telephone, radio, TV, computer, and all electronic devices and systems related to ICTs. In fact, the progress of technology, especially of electronics and telecommunications, marked out the directions and potentialities of social change.

Coined as a term in the 1960s, information society is just emerging nowadays mostly in developed countries. As a result of the effect of present technological, economic, and political globalization processes, the whole world is being impacted and transformed by ICTs. IS can be *per se* perceived as the intellectual (scientific) model or ideal type having a set of specific characteristics and assigned interpretations.

Needless to say, in the real world there are only *concrete individual different* information societies. Their difference concerns mostly: geographic, historical, educational, technological, cultural, political, and economic aspects and advancements already achieved in IS development (i.e., its stage, directions, pace, and so on) and their multifaceted impacts on societies, organizations, and individuals. In the social sciences—especially in sociology and political science—there are some indicators enabling measurement of these advancements and their consequences.

The aforementioned societal advancements, initially always pre-informational or not yet informational, are constantly emerging from some "embryos"—often scientific and technological—and are progressing via multidimensional processes of organizational, social, economic, political, cultural innovations, and by their diffusion. In fact, all segments and features of society are heavily affected by them. These impacts are rather difficult to measure and evaluate. Quite often, they are treated generally as ICTs' impact on a society. Certain analytical methods and procedures connected with *technology assessment* or—more comprehensive—*impact assessment* can be applied to this end. Since IS is still emerging, or in other words *in* the *statu nascendi* stage, it is reasonable and necessary to apply a prospective approach to its investigations and evaluations.

Therefore, the future of ISs should be of interest not only to researchers, but also governments, business, and the public—referred to as *civil society* in democratic countries. Increasing use of the word "future" in its plural form, "futures," has been accepted for a long time. In English this form has already functioned for decades, while in other languages "future" is used only in singular. The other reason is that people (and scientists) often perceived the future as non-optional (a rather fatalistic approach). By using the plural form, we emphasize the conviction and hopes that the future will be multi-optional, thus very differentiated for regions, states, societies, communities, and individuals. Therefore, differentiated ISs will not have the same futures. As such, the future of the whole world will be extremely complex. It does not seem probable that there will be one future for all.

Historically, various societies have had divergent take-off points, possibilities, development opportunities, trajectories, as well as performance, behavior, policies, cultural heritage, social capital, and so forth. In spite of some universalistic tendencies in production and consumption patterns, many diverse *gaps* currently exist in political systems, media performance, and so forth. Some time ago, it was fashionable to refer to them as technological, organizational, or managerial, information. There are other forms and names, for example, presently we talk about the digital divide and knowledge gap. Technological developments, their diffusion and transfer all over the world do not make the world equal regarding the stage and impacts of IS progress (understood in the abstract).

The irregular development of economies and societies throughout the world seems to be a historical regularity. The same applies to the present stage of development connected with ICTs. A historical perspective of IS development in particular countries requires grouping such into classes:

- *pioneering countries*—in ICTs production, use and wide diffusion in all sectors of economy and social life;
- *imitators*—taking advantage of technology transfer, FDIs, and global networking, however the diffusion of ICTs may be limited to selected sectors; and
- *lagging behind*—for a variety of reasons, for example, educational, technological, economic, political, cultural, and so forth, such countries may have trouble introducing and effectively utilizing ICTs.

A similar division is possible made within particular countries. The developmental dualism seems to be common in many parts of the world, especially in the less advanced

states. However, some regrouping is occurring. Until recently the only pioneers were the United States, Japan, and Western Europe. Due to the global reach of transnational corporations, FDIs, international trade, and global networking, as well as national strategies and efforts, some countries have become increasingly competitive (e.g., China, India). Moreover, the internationalization of ICT production is rapidly growing. In addition, some countries (including the entire European Union) declare they are building an information society.

Nevertheless, particular ISs will not have the same faces throughout the world despite some strong similarities, universalistic trends, similar strategies and policies of governments and business, and certain parallel human activities. The chaos of developing a diversified and turbulently changing environment may outweigh some, mostly technological, deterministic tendencies. Technological determinism that assumes "one way for all" seems to be merely an intellectual idea or simplistic concept rarely functioning in reality (if so, with some time and space limits).

Summing up: various emerging information societies are highly differentiated and will probably also have differentiated info-futures. Apart from certain similarities and some evident universalization, the growing info-diversity may occur and greatly shape the world's societies. Therefore, even a general abstractive model or pattern of an information society may need reinterpretation based on actual experience. So far, the known prophecies and visions of IS development, elaborated in Japan, the United States, and Western Europe, will probably not match the real course of events, the real potentials, needs, and aspirations of billions of people. All the aforementioned differences were reflected in the IS discourse.

BACKGROUND: INFORMATION SOCIETY - DEFINITIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

ICTs, their multifaceted impacts, the change of sociocultural context, and the global dimensions of all emerging transformations need permanent investigation, analysis, interpretation, and forecasting, required not only for research, theorizing, or education.

All theorists, futurists, and analysts dealing with the IS problem express a conviction that there is some possibility and social ability to steer and control occurring changes and transformations.

For all these reasons, there have been numerous efforts to define problems, recognize and evaluate processes, and predict the possible future course of IS around the world since the 1960s.

Providing one commonly accepted definition of IS seems to be very difficult. There are many terms or qualifications directly or indirectly connected with broadly understood IS. To name several examples: *information society, information rich society, cyber-society, computer society, telematic society, network society, virtual society, e-society,* and the like. These terms underline the role of various characteristics and symbols like, for example, access to information, cyberspace as a new social space, use of computers, telecommunications networking, virtualization, and electronization. All are relevant and in fact complementary. However, various authors tend to support their own interpretation concerning the most important features. The long list includes examples such as Masuda (1981a, 1981b), Negroponte (1996), Dertouzos (1998), Castells (2000, 2004), Wellman (1999), and Virilio (1998). Many authors add such qualifications as *digitalization,* referring to the advances of info-technology (e.g., Tapscott, 1998), and *mediatization,* referring to the overwhelming role of mass media (e.g., Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2002; Downing, 2000).

It is quite difficult to find truly precise definitions in the very extensive literature on this subject. Quite often, there are descriptions, characteristics, and qualifications that are rather general and vague (i.e., not comprehensive). In many cases, though the term "information society" appears in the title and in the text of a book, article, or document, it is not explicitly defined, but used as a kind of label, taking for granted that the content would sufficiently explain all terms.

However, there have been many efforts in the past to describe, analyze, and evaluate ongoing technological, socioeconomic, and cultural changes connected with new ICTs. For example, Bezold and Olson (1986) reviewed first the specific *societal impacts*—past, present, and probable—of the information revolution. Subsequently, they discussed different *whole-system* images of how an information society may evolve. They contrasted images of the civilizational and societal transformations of leading future-oriented thinkers, such as Bell (1973), Toffler (1980, 1990; Toffler & Toffler, 1995), Naisbitt (1982), Harman and Markley (1985), and Masuda (1981a, 1981b), who believed that a new stage of civilization is emerging, with information and ICT playing a pivotal role in the social transformation. However, they differ on such matters as the *key driving forces* for societal change, the *main features,* and the *overall pattern* of change. Bell (1973) announced the emergence of post-industrial society in which the critical driving force for change is the codification of theoretical knowledge generating the exponential growth of science, systematic R&D, and new intellectual technologies. Toffler (1980, 1990; Toffler & Toffler, 1995) developed the theory of a third wave driven by growing socio-economic complexity, diversity, heterogeneity, and connected with demassification of production, media, lifestyles, and so forth. The newly emerging social order demanded higher levels of information flow.

Naisbitt (1982) believed social development rather than technological change leads to information society, although