Chapter 7.10

Information and Communication Technologies for the Good Society

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ABSTRACT

The appearance of notions of a "good society" does not come as a surprise, given the recent crises in the fields of economy, the financial markets, or the climate change. These notions play a decisive role in the context of implementing ICTs. This chapter contends that ICTs – like any technology – make sense in the context of normative visions only that make technology a means to an end. The vision of a good society must nowadays refer to the global challenges confronting the further development of societies. In doing so it identifies ICTs as facilitators of the advent of a Global Sustainable Information Society which makes ICTs meaningful or it classifies them as meaningless gadgets or

even as detrimental for designing the future. It is Gunilla Bradley who can take credit for devoting her lifework to raising awareness of the impacts of ICTs on humans and the ethical implications of research in that field.

Gunilla Bradley's lifework has been intrinsically motivated by safeguarding human well-being and the search for societal conditions that enable individual self-fulfillment, given the rapid development and deployment of converging computer, tele- and media technologies. Her scientific perspective is normative. Her vision is "the good ICT society" (2006, 197), "the good society for all (GSA)" (2006, 229). In that she is a pioneer and has been serving as lightfire for the emerging field of ICTs and society (a term by which I intend to comprise all scientific endeavours to design and assess ICTs in their societal context, whether

they originate in Science and Technology Studies, New Media Studies, Computer Science or else).

It's an opportune moment to discuss the "good society". The current financial crisis that brought about the current economic crisis does question the current neoliberal system and its belief in the free market. In doing so, it makes the quest for a "good society" topical. And indeed, the attention that is given to the issue of a "good society" has recently been rising. Suffice to mention that, in the political field, ten years after Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder produced their declaration of the European "third way" in June 1999, British and German Social Democrats invite to a debate on "Building the Good Society" in Europe (Cruddas and Nahles 2009), or that, in the academic field, there is a trend to base good life research issues being investigated in connection with technologies more and more upon considerations of what is the good society – in that vein, e.g., the director of the European division of the International Association of Computing and Philosophy, Philip Brey, had his talk at the Seventh European Conference on Computing and Philosophy 2009 on "The Proper Role of Information Technology in a Good Society".

My own considerations regarding the good society gained tremendous momentum when I became acquainted with a remarkable publication on behalf of the European Union. In April 1997, an EC High-Level Expert Group on Social and Societal Aspects of Information Society, chaired by Luc Soete, and under the participation of well-known scholars like Manuel Castells who ranks today under the most cited authors on information society matters, finalised a report under the title "Building the European information society for us all".

The basic tenet they departed from is the insight that "the information society signals more than a major change in the technological paradigm that underpins our society." The policy challenges ICTs raise "transcend the simplistic notions of rapid adjustment to an externally, technologically

determined future in which people have little or no say" and "the sooner these are addressed the better" (63).

The notions "wisdom" and "wise society" were introduced in this context and appeared for the first time and, unfortunately, so far, for the last time in an official document of the European Commission (16): "One of the main effects of the new ICTs has been to speed up and cut the cost of storing and transmitting information a billion-fold, thereby "energising", in the words of the Bangemann report, "every economic sector" ("Europe and the Global Information Society", Brussels, 1994). However, these new technologies have had no such effect on the generation or acquisition of knowledge, still less on wisdom [Which we identify as "distilled" knowledge derived from experience of life, as well as from the natural and social sciences and from ethics and philosophy.] . One would hope, of course, that society would be shifting more and more towards a "wise society", where scientifically supported data, information and knowledge would increasingly be used to make informed decisions to improve the quality of all aspects of life. Such wisdom would help to form a society that is environmentally sustainable, that takes the well-being of all its members into consideration and that values the social and cultural aspects of life as much as the material and economic. Our hope is that the emerging information society will develop in such a way as to advance this vision of wisdom."

The adoption of the competitive Lisbon strategy rendered the vision of this report obsolete. The positive aspect one might be inclined to ascribe to this report is that it anticipated or, at least, accompanied the shift in European Union policy thinking from technological issues exclusively to the inclusion of economic issues testified by the subsequently accorded framework programmes for European research and development. New buzzwords – the "knowledge-based economy" and the "knowledge society" – began to partly complement and partly replace the precedent talk

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