

Chapter 7.4

Knowledge Management and Democracy: A Critical Review of Some Moral Issues and Social Dilemmas

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ABSTRACT

The main problem discussed in this chapter is the question of compatibility between knowledge management in the knowledge economy and democracy in the ICT-driven global society. The assumption is made that democracy is the dominant form of organizing the global society on a variety of levels; and that it is regarded as desirable and morally superior in comparison with other such forms.

INTRODUCTION

When seen from a certain perspective, the problem of knowledge management and democracy- which is the chief subject of this essay- has a long history.

However, I will discuss it mainly as it occurs in its most recent form, i.e., as it occurs in today's ICT-driven *global* society. Unfortunately, I will explore this problem almost exclusively from the "western" point of view due to both my inadequate familiarity with "non-western" societies as well as the restrictions to the length of this text. Nevertheless, I would like the Reader to be aware of the fact that a truly global context brings to this matter a richness of issues not mentioned in this essay, both important and interesting, which certainly need a thorough inquiry and which could shed new light on many aspects of the subject of knowledge management and democracy in the ICT-driven global society.

There are certain concepts that are perceived as quite obvious and self-explanatory today, although they would be highly doubtful or controversial a few years ago. Twenty, or even just ten years back, some of them might not have even been

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in existence. For instance, the term *knowledge economy* gained popularity only as recently as the second half of the 1990s, apparently first in New Zealand, according to the World Bank website (The World Bank, 2009). Today, knowledge economy is almost a household name. Likewise, it seems that there isn't much doubt anymore that human-kind entered the phase of *global society*. Yet, the global society is still not even well established; rather, it is in the process of becoming. It moves through its own formative period; its final shape is presently hard to predict.

The same applies to one of the foundations of the global society, namely *Information and Communication Technology* (or Technologies, as some prefer), hereafter referred to as ICT. It too is a relatively new phenomenon in its present form, although information and communication belong to the most ancient forms of human activity (Górniak-Kocikowska, 2008; 2007; 2005). Computers and other forms of digital technology which became the main components of ICT changed it so profoundly that the change can be safely declared as revolutionary, and ICT of today is justifiably seen as a very powerful *new* technology.

Knowledge management and several other concepts and processes which will be the subject of this essay have an even more recent presence in our "collective consciousness". Some of them are still "fuzzy"- their exact meaning has not been fully agreed upon yet. It is possible that the meaning ascribed to them today will not last; either because they will change to the point that the present understanding will cease to be correct, or because a better way of describing them will be found.

The definition of *democracy* used in this paper covers notions like "government by the people" as well as "a state of society characterized by formal equality of rights and privileges", and also "political and social equality, democratic spirit" (Webster's Dictionary, 1996). A democratic global society would be, therefore, truly of the people,

by the people, and for the people; whereas "the people" would include all humans.

The idea of democracy, unlike knowledge management and knowledge economy, has been a "staple" of western civilization for a very long time, although its definition evolved over the ages to take its present-day form as quoted above. There is a general agreement that it originated in Ancient Greece; and it had its devoted supporters and fierce opponents ever since. Although there have always been groups which were functioning on the principles of democracy they usually did not play a dominant role in society at large (one of the exceptions has been the *nobles' democracy* in Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which lasted several centuries and had a profound, not always positive, impact on the history of these nations). Most of the time, communities organized on the principle of democracy were treated as utopian social experiments. This situation started to change rapidly by the end of the 18th century, especially after the founding of the United States of America. Since then, democracy both as a theoretical concept and in its practical function progressed in the field of politics and in many other areas of public life worldwide. This progress accelerated in recent years due largely to the wide-spread use and rapid advance of ICT, which serve as news, information, knowledge, and opinion-sharing devices. Today, democracy can be rightfully regarded as a dominant form of social organization in the global society, especially with regard to political structures and organizations. In the area of political and social theory, too, democracy is favored as the best form of social organization, especially from the ethical standpoint. It is widely believed that democracy serves best the flourishing of human beings who treasure individual freedom, dignity, and actively practice self-perfection while believing that all their fellow humans should have the same rights as they do.

One of the questions emerging from what I have written above is the question of *compatibility* between knowledge management and democracy.

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