

# By way of introduction

The globalization of social, cultural and economic relations is facilitated, and at the same time conditioned by developments in the information and communications technologies (ICT) and infrastructure. Human knowledge brought mankind from an oral to a literate culture, thanks to the invention of the print media. The development of the electronic media in the last century paved the path for the information age, in which spatial and temporal constraints are lifted. "In every society, the production, distribution, and use of information play vital roles in the management of events... The development of these Information Societies has been characterized by the innovation and adoption of technologies, changes in mass media systems, and changing patterns and procedures for individual and group decision-making. Attention has shifted in these societies from the development and utilization of technologies to a concern for their impact upon each society" (Edelstein, Bowes & Harsel, 1978: vii). The consequences of this revolution in human communications are multidimensional in character, affecting economical, political and social life on national, international and local levels.

The focus of this book will be on *Europe*. However, as argued by John Pinder (1995) or Cees Hamelink in his contribution to this book, it is rather difficult to qualify what is meant by the notion of the 'European Information Society (EIS)'. Therefore, we cannot but take other geographical dimensions into consideration as well.

Though many authors (see, e.g., Dordick & Wang, 1993; Martin, 1995; Webster, 1995) express serious doubts about the validity of the notion of an *information society*, a variety of criteria could be used to analytically distinguish definitions of an information society (IS). Frank Webster (1995: 6), for instance, identifies the following five types of definitions: technological, economic, occupational, spatial, and cultural. The most common definition of an IS is probably technological. It sees the information society as the leading growth sector in advanced industrial economies. Its three strands – computing, telecommunications and broadcasting – have evolved historically as three separate sectors, and by means of digitization these sectors are now converging.

Throughout the past decade however a gradual shift can be observed in favor of more socio-economic and cultural definitions of the IS. The following definition, drafted by a High Level Group of EU-experts, incorporates this change: "The information society is the society currently being put into place, where low-cost

information and data storage and transmission technologies are in general use. This generalization of information and data use is being accompanied by organizational, commercial, social and legal innovations that will profoundly change life both in the world of work and in society generally” (Soete, 1997: 11).

Others prefer to use the term *knowledge society* to clarify the shift in emphasis from ICTs as ‘drivers’ of change to a perspective where these technologies are regarded as tools which may provide a new potential for combining the information embedded in ICT systems with the creative potential and knowledge embodied in people. “These technologies do not create the transformations in society by themselves; they are designed and implemented by people in their social, economic, and technological contexts” (Mansell & When, 1998: 12).

Also in other ways, this book intends to move away from the technological hurrah to a more historical and contextual assessment of the opportunities and dangers on the information highway ahead of us. One of the fundamental questions is whether the information society in Europe will also be a *welfare society*? The welfare society which is one of those great captivating ideas Europe wants to cherish (Calabrese & Burgelman, 1999). Undoubtedly the evolution towards an information society puts pressure on the classical ways in which the welfare society has been constructed. And this at the level of political philosophy – for instance: what means citizenship in a digital environment? (see Castells, 1997; or the contribution by Andrea Ricci) – as well as at the level of social and economic policy.

These discussions imply choices in such areas as universal availability, investment in education, regulation, the role of public authorities, and the balance between individual privacy and community security, and between information freedoms and communication rights (see Venturelli, 1997, or the contributions by Cees Hamelink and Peter Johnston). One of the hottest issues in debates on the information society is the digital divide between the ‘information haves’ and ‘have-nots’ (the so-called ‘information underclass’). According to Hacker and van Dijk (2001), there are four main hurdles of access to the information society producing these inequalities: (a) lack of basic skills and ‘computer fear’; (b) no access to computers and networks; (c) insufficient user-friendliness; and (d) insufficient and unevenly distributed usage opportunities. Especially the contributions by Jan Servaes, Francois Heinderyckx, and Nico Carpentier address these issues in some detail.

The European communications environment is undergoing a number of major structural changes. The *Single European Act (SEA)*, adopted by all national parliaments in the European Union, which entered into force on 1 July 1987, has

introduced a new strategic vision – the 1992 objective for completion of the internal market. It created the framework for *Europe 1992*, and therefore it can be said to be the most important reform of the Treaty of Rome since its inception on 25 March 1957.

As the Single European Market-idea is based on the philosophies of mutual recognition and subsidiarity – *mutual recognition* by member states of the differences in national laws so long as these do not distort inter-community trade, and *subsidiarity* whereby international bodies should not assume powers over national issues and that national governments should not take control of matters better dealt with on a regional level – it is increasingly becoming governed by international and supranational regulations.

Therefore, the SEA has introduced new dynamic elements to generate the convergence of the member states of the European Union. International regulation, as laid down in the Council of Europe's Convention on Transfrontier Television Broadcasting (1989), and supranational regulation, as expressed in the EU Council of Minister's Broadcasting Directive (1989), has contributed to a more competitive communications environment, both at national and supranational levels.

Nowhere, perhaps, as argued by Caroline Pauwels and Jean-Claude Burgelman, are these changes more profound than in the field of broadcasting, which is ceasing to be an activity almost entirely regulated by national legislation. Furthermore, one could argue that different logics are guiding the EC policies in different hardware and software sectors. Therefore, the telecommunications policy with an emphasis on *liberalization and deregulation* differs from the policy recommendations in the broadcasting field where some measures (e.g., the quota-system) could be interpreted to be *protectionist*. For instance, with regard to *anti-cartel legislation*, there is at present no cohesive legislative provision in the European Union.

The EU industrial policies have changed during the eighties from a defensive towards a more offensive policy. Two sectors where this policy change has become very obvious are telecommunications and informatics. This has led to a technological convergence of communications and computer technology into Information Communication Technologies (ICT). This convergence will have considerable implications for policy formulations at distinct levels. However, it is feared that the EU is not really anticipating an overall policy on the problems of convergence within the EU. Only at operational levels some concern is expressed and isolated initiatives are initiated. A more comprehensive and centralized structure is urgently needed to tackle this convergence issue.

As the two historically, separately evolved sectors of telecommunications and broadcasting converge, the different policy consequences of the economic versus the cultural, and local versus international interests have to be taken into account. It is no longer sufficient to concentrate on a distinct sector from only a technological or an economic perspective. Therefore, a multi-dimensional analysis of the different policy options and their respective consequences is necessary.

This discussion can also be observed at the more theoretical level. Jan Van Cuilenburg and Denis McQuail (1998) distinguish between three different historical phases of media policy in the US and Western Europe. During the first phase (until World War II) media policy was largely dominated by the tensions between state and corporate interests at a national level. Afterwards (from the fifties into the eighties) a shift took place from economic and national concerns to more socio-political considerations. This phase is often summarized with a reference to public-service broadcasting as the political ideal for media policy, notably in Western Europe. There was a strong policy commitment to universal service, diversity of content, democratic accountability, public financing and non-profit making. Caroline Pauwels and Jean-Claude Burgelman argue that these concepts are largely insufficient in view of the problems and challenges that new information and communication technologies pose for the information society.

Such a broad perspective coincides with the third phase, as identified by Van Cuilenburg and McQuail. They describe how from 1980 onwards several technological, economic and socio-cultural trends have fundamentally changed the context of media policy.

In general one could say that both national governments and the European Union as a governing body are faced with a dilemma when it comes to developing a communications policy. If they would give preference to economic and technical considerations, they would stimulate the media policies in the direction of uniformization and large-scale developments. Quantitative criteria, which are mainly based on 'technical' (or hardware) considerations, do play a more important role than qualitative criteria that build upon the 'content' (or software) of media products. The latter approach would be more in line with a cultural policy, which emphasizes pluriformity and small-scale autonomy (see also Becker, 1995).

The contributions in this book take shape at three levels:

At one level, the policy of an EIS will be analysed in terms of its underlying assumptions and discourses. Although most of the articles deal with this point, especially the ones by Jan Servaes, Paschal Preston, Caroline Pauwels and Jean-

Claude Burgelman, Francois Heinderyckx, Nico Carpentier, and Cees Hamelink discuss EIS policies in some detail.

Starting from the assumption that information and communication technologies undoubtedly possess the potential to contribute to social change, these authors question whether this potential will be converted into advantages for everyone under the given scenario's the EU has planned. As large-scale application of information and communication technology increases, new problems will arise which 'the market' as such will not be able to resolve. More and better regulatory mechanisms, this book argues, will have to be developed to deal with these. If it should appear that the means proposed by the EU representatives are inadequate to arrive at the intended result, then the current ICT strategy will have to be amended, or, if necessary, an alternative strategy will have to be proposed.

A second level of critical issues deals with the tension between the national and the supranational (the EU) and how this might affect EIS policy and planning in the distinct nation-states. As in every dossier, different national authorities in Europe react differently to the plans of Brussels (and this mainly due to national specificities).

At a third level, specific issues or cases are being scrutinized: business issues facing new media (by Robert Picard), the impact of the EIS on employment and work (by Peter Johnston), the prospects for on-line voting and e-democracy (by Andrea Ricci), and the new roles for users in on-line news media (by Brian Trench).

The book concludes with a number of recommendations for both policymakers and researchers.

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