

Digital citizenship and information inequalities: Challenges for the future

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1. Every major innovation in communication related technology, from the printing press on, has always given rise to a mixture of hopes and fears. As an example, the development of radio in the 1930s, then of television in the 1950s, in a context of international tension and of escalating propaganda, made observers fear that large populations would become vulnerable to potential manipulators of opinion, attitudes and behaviors. Others, however, saw an unprecedented opportunity for mass marketing and the advent of mass consumption. It took functionalist theories to turn things around and shift from a vision of vulnerable audiences potentially manipulated by all powerful media to critical and organized audiences faced with weak media having no choice but to seduce the audience or disappear. *As often, it now appears that truth lies somewhere in between.*

The potential effects of the divided evolution we are witnessing could be of particular magnitude for at least two reasons.

Firstly, the trend towards convergence implies that many, if not most or all cultural activities may, at some point, be deeply affected by innovation. Secondly, while television, for example, was developed and then gradually entered households with only continuous innovations (today's television set is functionally that of the 50s), the so-called new technologies are being used by an increasing number of people, at the same time as these technologies are still evolving rapidly and indeed barely taking shape.

Any research or indeed thinking in the matter is like predicting the pattern of the flue epidemic: given the constant mutation of the virus, public health authorities can only make educated guesses as to its viral profile and how it will propagate and with what effect.

2. Surveys, like those Measuring the Information Society, show that large segments of European societies are not 'inside' the so called 'knowledge society' but 'next to it' or simply 'outside' it. This is at the same time a scientific finding and a political issue.

The evolution of the Measuring Information Society survey results show:

- (a) that a *multi-faceted media and communications system* is in place in Europe – this new system is the sum of the traditional and innovative media all coexisting and all conflicting with one another to acquire a larger share of the financial/time budget of Europeans; and
- (b) that *different kinds of 'user groups'* coexist today in Europe that use in different proportions different clusters of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs).

However, for policymakers in the Information Society, the important issue is how to mitigate information inequalities and possibly to prevent them. This becomes a very crucial task when there is some evidence that the prevailing tendency in the European Information Society is *exclusive*. Therefore, it is very important to understand the role of ICTs in relation to people's ability to participate in society. The observed phenomena of social exclusion in the Information Society are pretty close to the conjecture that technologically richer media might imply poorer democracy, in the sense that the corporate media explosion could result in a corresponding *implosion of public life*.

Furthermore, socio-political differentiation might be generated by either intended or non-intended processes of integration. The latter (unintended consequence) is known as 'informational Balkanization'. The former is related to the two contradictory trends of globalization simultaneously producing both *fragmentation and integration*: In another paradoxical operation of cyberspace, it enlarges the public sphere and political action through the virtual world and reduces them in the real one.

The impact of new ICTs on civil society, participatory democracy and citizenship is of immense contemporary concern. This impact is usually associated with the demand of universal access. But universal access/service alone does not suffice. The way Stephen Coleman puts it, "if citizenship requires universal access, democracy needs trustworthy channels of information and deliberation if it is to prosper" (2001: 124). In other words, modern European citizenship needs the demand for and provision of information in order to develop the proper rights and responsibilities in the conditions and complexities of the Knowledge Society of eEurope.

3. In spite of the recurrent claims of evermore user-friendliness, information and communication technologies use remains strongly subordinated to a set of specific *skills*. These evolve along with innovation, but tend to grow in importance as the complexity of the technologies as well as the scope of their applications extends.

These set of skills go well beyond managing the interfaces needed to operate them. Broadly speaking, new media are increasingly associated with new writing, hence of new reading, not to mention new ways to organize, treat, retrieve and control information in its broadest sense.

This so-called *new literacy* will soon lead developed societies into difficulties comparable to that of illiteracy in the 19th century. Like the illiterate of those times, the new illiterate will be, as we can clearly see from the diffusion patterns of new technologies, of lower social status, with the associated lower income and level of education. Medium term developments may lead to a dichotomized social body made of, on the one hand, wealthier, better educated and *new literates* having the skills and the means to access and use ICTs and, on the other hand, poorer, less educated and *new illiterates* kept out of the new tech scene and deprived of most technologies and hence denied access to an increasing amount of information and culture. Therefore, Francis Bacon's famous saying – Knowledge is Power – could be replaced by '*the capacity and speed to access, select and reproduce knowledge will determine power in the 21st century*'.

4. The question of whether new media will grow at the expense of traditional media is of particular importance to the industry. Unsurprisingly, the first tangible signs of decreased television viewing among Internet heavy users are now showing in the United States. Also the MIS 2000 survey shows the impact of Internet browsing on people's time-budget: a 73% reduction in time spent on TV viewing, 46% reduction in book reading, 34% in newspaper reading, 29% in radio listening, 28% less family activities, 27% in sports, and 24% less time spent with friends (INRA, 2000: 68). However, at the same time one also notices a rise in television viewing behaviour among certain socio-demographic groups as well.

One core characteristic of many new technologies makes any kind of prediction even more audacious: *integration*. The Internet in its most popular form (the World Wide Web) seems to hold characteristics, which might grow into true media integration. All forms of media (broadcast) and interpersonal communication are likely, sooner or later, to be transposed or accessible via a unique interface organized around the Internet. In theory, a device that would be small enough to be portable, yet large enough to ensure perceptive comfort, could well replace everything from personal computer to Walkman, telephone to television and video recorder, fax and answering machine, newspaper and radio, movie theater and advertising posters, bookshop and libraries, shopping malls and city halls. Integration of all existing vectors of communication (and much more) would also give rise to an endless number of *hybrid combinations* prompting changes in

behavior of such a magnitude that it would, if accessible to a large population, deeply reorganize social structures, as we know them.

In this sense, the Internet can be considered as emblematic of the new technologies. Given that it takes skills (education) and money (equipment and running cost), using the Internet is to be viewed as a major landmark in new technologies penetration. Internet users have indeed gone over the hurdle that is most likely to keep people away from technology, and having done that are likely adopters of downstream technologies, as long as these remain within continuous innovations.

Surprisingly, however, there is *no linear relationship* between proportions of non-users saying they are interested and of those saying they are planning to purchase an Internet connection within six months. Finland shows the highest proportion of interested non-users and near highest proportion of purchasers within six months. This is to say that the diffusion pattern of Internet can be seen, at this stage, as animated by a snowball effect or marketing hype. However, at the content side, it remains to be seen whether the Internet will not become another divide comparable to the 'old' media. As is usually the case with new technologies, the question is how much ICTs will be used on top of existing devices and/or will gradually replace them.

5. By way of conclusion we would like to present a number of recommendations for consideration to policymakers and researchers:

New directions for the policy maker

To liberate it and to materialize further growth in Europe policymakers and corporations should envisage the introduction of a series of new priorities capable of adapting strategically the public choices to the cohesion issues which have become clear in the course of the last few years:

First priority should be to increase the *social dimension of the policy*. Patterns of behaviour found in the MIS and in other surveys indicate that usage of electronic media is correlated to structural levels of economic development. There is a huge economic deficit that de facto impedes many to take the opportunities offered by the new technologies. Usage of ICTs can become a constituting element for a new categorization of social classes. Unless specific policies are put in place to reduce the gender gap, women risk to occupy the lower classes of the new ICT-based social segmentation.

The second priority should be to develop *new forms of awareness raising* activities. Europeans perceive applications as relatively important for their life because their pertinence cannot be immediately perceived through generic promises. Waving the icon of the Internet does not per se mobilize customers. It is its pertinence to their professional and personal priorities that matters.

The third priority concerns the support to *cross country research*. Measuring how many use a computer is not enough, surveys have to go deeper and must understand whether the 'neutral' information society has any chance to evolve in a 'knowledge society' or whether is going to become foremost an 'entertainment society'. High PC/Internet penetration means little if PCs are mostly used as entertainment machines (and not as knowledge management or learning tools).

The fourth priority should be *the re-formulation of the economic drivers of the digital growth*. Trans-nationality should be the shaping factors of the new policies for the development of e-commerce. The digital economy exists, the MIS shows it, but it is located beyond our borders and we need a market offer which is capable of turning the trans-national potential into revenues for local entrepreneurs. The European integration could find in the 'digital internal market' the milestone of the globalization era.

New directions for research

Conducting research on a fast evolving subject is quite challenging. Yet, decision makers at all levels can only make adequate choices based on reliable research material, so that there is an urgent need for new and on-going research in at least six areas.

Firstly, a *multi-media approach* to the new technologies should understand how the mutations of the media landscape affects each media, its audience, its content, its interaction with others. Are new media a threat to the established ones, or are they a unique opportunity for them to (re)gain audiences? Will convergence and digitalization lead to a new, distinct media, or will it gradually absorb all other forms into a unique interface?

Secondly, ICTs are to be studied in a *time-budget perspective*. The time that people have available for communication activities and media consumption is limited. Traces of lower television viewing in heavy Internet-using households are beginning to be found, leading to essential questioning as to which activities are reduced to free up the necessary time to use the spreading new technologies. How does it affect reading books, magazines or newspapers, watching television,

listening to radio, participation in cultural activities, community involvement, etc. How does the current evolution affect the work/leisure balance in people's time-budget?

Thirdly, questions are raised about the *content* conveyed by these new technologies. How much do the new media represent new forms of information and communication, and how do these new forms affect the public's perception of the world? Beyond forms, people using these new technologies tend to have access to content that before was either out of reach, or simply did not exist. How will that affect their personality, their interests, their level of information and education, their behaviour, etc.? How different are the new forms of writing? How can they be improved? What skills need to be developed among audiences so as to make the best of these new forms?

Fourthly, there is an urgent need for *large-scale research about the social and cultural implications of the current evolution*. While the communication companies tend to merge into worldwide giants, the technology tends to allow forever-smaller communities to emerge and consolidate. Specialized media, thematic channels, web sites and chat rooms allow individuals with narrow fields of interest to develop a particular passion, share it with people sharing that interest, and provide the means to gather individuals into groups that could not otherwise have existed. All personal investment into these groups (be it time or money) is made at the expense of other fields of interest, including that of the traditional communities. This might lead to a complete restructuring of social groups as we know them.

Fifthly, the theories of globalization/localization have been challenged, criticized and modified, but few would deny that they do offer a fertile ground for research. We advocate a convergent and integrated approach in studying the complex and intricate relations between *globalization/localization, consumption and identity*. Culture is an important factor, either facilitating the transnationalization of national or local cultural industries, or impeding further growth of global media. Global media may be largest in terms of coverage, however their size shrinks significantly if measured in terms of viewing rate.

While some national programs are successful because of their distinct cultural characteristics, others may achieve similar success by promoting foreign values. During a dynamic process of change, it is the interaction of factors that brings about endless possibilities.

Finally, and this in fact applies to all above mentioned research areas, there is a need for *more qualitative research* on these matters. Karvalics & Molnar (2000), for instance, question: What do we know about the 'average' Internet-user, the Netizen? What about his personality, his universe of values, his social contacts and future? There are plenty

of fears, reserves and aversions that describe the informatization process as a de-humanizing, Orwellian scenario.

The complexity of the phenomena at hand cannot be fully appreciated by sheer quantitative research. There comes a point when the observations need to be explained and refined, and that can only be achieved by qualitative methods which, although more difficult to implement, although less operational in appearance, provide the indispensable level of detail necessary to appreciate behavioural phenomena of this magnitude.

Let's start!

References

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