

Information Society as a Late Modern Society

Media and Information Environment for Individuals?

HELENA TAPPER

Information society is seen primarily as a strategy for economic growth in post-industrial societies. Crisis in industrial society or economy, has resulted in strategies for economic growth based on information technology, and the view of information as a key resource. Information together with capital and labor, has not only become a key input in production processes, but increasingly it has become an output, i.e. either a service or product in a market-place. Thus, industrial economy has led into information economy.

Progress in information technology has facilitated another change; that of the structural change to network economy. Another major change is the increasing role of market economy and a lessening role of economic regulation. One result of this development is the formation of economic blocks like the EU or NAFTA. These blocks form or they attempt to form larger economic entities with common internal regulatory markets and joint protectionistic policies towards external markets. Thus we have a few large economic entities in the global economy. This trend emphasizes on one hand global competition and global economy and on the other local or regional economy.

National economic policies are directed to operate according to common economic policies of these economic blocks. The enterprises benefit from the larger internal markets of the blocks, but on the other hand they operate globally.

It is necessary to understand that national economic policies are based on the growth of information technology and information service or product markets. However, the structural change in economies towards information and service economies causes mass unemployment and a need for training.

Information society or global information superhighway are the key strategies for post-industrial societies to maintain or increase their economic growth. These strategies propose that information services and products and building information infrastructure, are the key for economic growth. Until now, the strategies in national policy have centered around, how to create information infrastructure both in economy, in education

and training. The emphasis has been on the economy but gradually other domains in society have been discussed as well.

In rhetoric terms at least, the emphasis is in the building of global information superhighway (the USA). Since the national strategies tend to emphasize the national economic and information policy, there is an increasing attempt to harmonize and coordinate these policies at the international level, with the prime example the EU information society policy. The global information superhighway is an attempt to reach to global information markets, and gain control over them.

What are then the main issues in this discourse or policy? Primarily, the emphasis has been in THE CAPACITY OF INFORMATION NETWORKS to transmit information. The ISDN, the ATM and other integrated information networks provide a growing capacity for fast information transfer nationally and internationally. Several questions arise: who are the network operators, who builds the network, who has access to the network, at what price, and how are the national networks linked into international networks?

The main developments are the integration and digitalization of information networks which increases transfer capacity. The second issue is, THE TYPE OF INFORMATION TRANSFERRED IN THE NETWORK. Is Internet the description of network information: a new, at the moment mainly free of charge global information marketplace for all with access to a computer and a network.

The global information superhighway as a policy indicates statement, that the network is global, it is efficient (super) and it transfers information.

What about the Media?

Information society policy programs have been primarily built on the technological-economic development policy. The important issue is, the role of the media in creation of this society. Cultural and social issues together with the role of the media have been discussed very little in these documents.

How does the media create an image of a society, what does it represent, for example in the news. In Europe, national media contents and national media institutions, i.e. the public broadcasting companies, have traditionally had an important

role in the creation of national identity. Media has traditionally been viewed as a part of national culture domain, representing the culture and society, and therefore important for creation of national identity.

Today, we have different media landscape in front of us. We, as individuals or as receivers of media contents, are living in a different media environment. We live in the world of constantly changing flows of mediatexts, like the news, music, entertainment, documentaries, the commercial MTV, movies etc. They are all trying to grasp, at least at that moment, a piece of reality or giving us an escape, a time-out, of the reality or everyday life.

These mediatexts increasingly have no one homeland, they are global in the sense (see Appaduraj 1990) that they are produced in one country but they increasingly combine multicultural, multi-origin elements, though they often are synthesized in Hollywood studios. These mediaproducts are distributed globally by the massive conglomerates of the US and European mediacompanies.

We learn easily to read these mediatexts, since they are available everywhere. In Sydney or New York or in Helsinki, we may see the same Jane Austin-movie or the same CNN news at the same time. This poses, at least theoretically a question: is there a growing global audience who reads the mediatexts increasingly the same way or do the cultural differences change the reading (see Ang, Lull, Morley).

The national media policy and regulations often aims to strengthen the national media contents. National television and radio channels or local radio stations have a strong emphasis on representation of national issues and national forms of mediatexts. To what extent do they represent a world of national identity and what is their role in the formation of identity, as we live increasingly in the future in the world of global issues and global mediatexts?

It is important to look at the mediatexts, how they represent the society, what are the values, the role of an individual in society, and finally for whom are these texts produced.

In looking at the information society policy, I see the national media policy having two roles: one as a provider of a functional media-environment rather than as a regulator; and the other to increase the opportunities for national production of mediatexts, like independent producers and other domestic production. These roles together have an effect in strengthening the national culture and identity, and more importantly, in reflecting and producing components for understanding the reality of everyday life. This means, that the mediatexts not only represent the culture but they also produce the culture, in the sense of strengthening some aspects of the reality of everyday life of individuals.

The intertextuality of mediatexts refers to other mediatexts. Thus to be able to understand a certain text one needs to know the referred texts as well. This means that certain issues in the media are less discussed than others, or texts are less open to a large audience. If issues such as the development of information technology and its importance both for a country (a Nokia success story, Finland has a developed telecommunications network), and for an individual capacity and knowledge to be able to operate in a high-technological environment, whether at

work or at home, are repeatedly represented in the media. This creates a generally perceived idea of a country such as Finland, as an information (technology) society.

Is Information Society a Late-Modern Society?

Graham Murdoc and Anthony Giddens have introduced the terms late modernity or high modernity, as a stage of society after the modern society (Murdoc 1993, Giddens 1990). They propose in their texts that today's society is a developed modernity: characterized by rationality, high level of specialization and individualization. Murdoc emphasizes the role of the media in the change of society.

Ulrich Beck introduced in the 1980's the idea of a risk society, as a late-modern industrial society (Beck 1990). In the 1990's Beck has criticized the post-industrial society calling it a reflexive modernization. These concepts are useful instruments in analyzing the information society as a strategy for today's information/knowledge or digital information super highway.

Both Giddens and Murdoc emphasize that today's modern society is still characterized by rationality and individualization. Beck develops these ideas further in his analysis of reflexive modernization.

According to Beck, a post-industrial society or society after the industrial stage, has reached a level where the risks of development, such as the control of technological systems (f.ex. the nuclear power-stations) become uncontrollable. Another example might be environmental risks: highly developed industrial processes or traffic produce environmental risks which cannot be controlled. As the risks become greater the expert systems to control these risks become more important. As the systems become more complex and less controllable, are we then today living in an insurance society?

Individualization of life is another issue of Beck's analysis. This means that individual choices become an essential part of individual life: the responsibility for one's choices is increasingly one's own, not the society's. The individual becomes a decision-maker of her/his life.

Beck's reflexive modernization means that these issues are discussed first in the media, and later they become issues in policymaking. What does reflexive modernization mean? At a level of society, it presumes new politics where the issues of individuals become discussed in political decision-making process. At the level of an individual, it presumes individual responsibility but also togetherness or solidarity by bringing the issues of everyday life in the media and politics.

Both the individualization and the increasing risks of economic and other development may also be analysed in the information society. The risks of information society may not be environmental or problems of solidarity discussed in politics.

The problems in information society at a level of society are: 1. a lack of economic predictability (see also Beck, and Bell), due to quick changes in international financial systems and access to that information through information networks. 2. the lack of possibility to foresee the future of an individual, as due to lifelong education and training for work. 3. High de-

pendency on technological expertise and development, in addition to standardization measures in information technology. 4. Access to information networks and information may be limited in information societies. 5. The free information services and products are competing with the priced information.

As the society has become more complex, also more people need to find information and skills to be able to use information networks, to find one's individual place in the changing media environment and to be able to orient oneself in that environment become essential skills for individuals in these societies. Daniel Bell predicted almost thirty years ago in his "Coming of PostIndustrial Society" (Bell 1976), the increase of unpredictability, the professionalization, the need of information systems in decision-making and the increasing need of theoretical (specialized) knowledge in society.

It appears that, many of the information society programs follow these ideas. However, there is a need to focus more on the individual, the *savoir*, the *voloir* and the *desir* of an individual in her/his life. Therefore, the producers of the media-texts, the information service providers and policy-makers, need to focus on issues of everyday life, human needs in life, not only on rationality and on logic as a driving force of individual behaviour in society. This may result in new kinds of information services and use of media.

Media Policy for Information Society?

In the global information (technology) environment, national media policy or information policy faces new challenges. As a small country Finland has a highly developed information technology infrastructure in telecommunications, a high-level of cable-penetration and cellular phones. The market in tele-

communications is liberated and there is an increased competition in that market. Another characteristic for the Finnish medialandscape, is the effort to maintain the production of Finnish products media contents even in new tv channels.

The media policy in last ten years has favoured deregulation of the media. This has brought new national and international operators to the market. The operating licenses have been granted by the Cabinet but the current policy, is to create an open media environment for different operators. This poses another question: how to maintain the public service principle in society. In other words, what is the role of the public broadcasting company in the current medialandscape? Another issue in the public domain is that of the role of libraries. They are the main free information service in society today, and they provide open access to new media such as the Internet.

The media policy issues need to be discussed in the context of the overall information society policy. This brings into focus several issues: what is the level of regulation needed in society: to provide a deregulated media environment or to provide basic information services for all. The choice of the latter would mean, the choice of the welfare-state policy.

If the society provides basic infrastructure for information services and media, the access to the information networks is a key issue. Another issue is the information society for all, this means pricing of information services. Which services are free and which are priced?

Additionally, there is a need for education, i.e. teaching people how to function in the new media environment, where to search information and how? The philosophy of a rich media environment for individuals needs to be discussed further in the technologically oriented world of economic growth.

References

- Ang, Ien (1991) *Desparately Seeking the Audience*. London, Routledge.
- Appadurai, A. (1990): Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy. *Public Culture* Vol.2, no 2 Spring 1990, pp. 1-24.
- Beck, U. (1992): *Risk Society. Towards New Modernization*. London, Sage.
- Beck, U. (1994): The Reinvention of Politics: Towards a Theory of Reflexive Modernization in Beck, U. & Giddens, A. & Lash, S. (1994) *Reflexive Modernization*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Bell, D. (1976): *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*. Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
- Giddens, A. (1990): *The Consequenses of Modernity*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1995): Living in a Post-Traditional Society in Beck, U. & Giddens A. & Lash S. (1994) *Reflexive Modernization*. Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Finland as an Information Society. A National Strategy* (1995). Vantaa, Painatuskeskus.
- Lull, J. (1988): *World Families Watch Television*. London, Sage
- Lash, S. & Urry J. (1994): *Economies of Signs and Space*. London, Sage.
- Morley, D. (1992): *Television, Audiences and Cultural Power*. London, Routledge.
- Morley, D. & Robins K. (1995): *Spaces of Identity. Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*. London, Routledge.
- Murdock, G. (1993): Communications and Constitution of Modernity. *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol-15 pp. 521-539.
- Webster, F. (1995): *The Theories of the Information Society*. London, Routledge.