

Information Society, or is IT just another tech?

Kaido Kikkas
SPEAIT, Autumn 2023

An old lecture – with some newer twists

- Originally, one of the oldest parts of the course (some sources date back to the 20th century) – but is still state of the art and obtained new points of view
- Old theoretical foundation + recent developments (note: some personal opinions included)
- Most things will probably stay valid for foreseeable future (some accents will change, perhaps in cyclical manner)

Some sources (and recommended reading)

- Robert Theobald („The Rapids of Change“)
- Charles Handy („The Future of Work“ etc)
- Pekka Himanen („Hacker Ethic“)
- Yochai Benkler („The Wealth of Networks“)
- Evgeny Morozov („The Net Delusion“ etc)
- Shoshana Zuboff („The Age of Surveillance Capitalism“)
- Manuel Castells, Paul Redmond, Vinton (Vint) Cerf...

Stages of society (as commonly known)

- Primitive society
- Agricultural society
- Industrial society
- ??? Information society? Light... or dark?

Interesting times

- An old Chinese curse: *May you live in interesting times!*
- A bit similar to going from hunting and gathering to agriculture, or from there to industry
- The game is bigger!
 - Approaching the planetary limits (a.k.a. drowning in poo...)
 - Immense growth of powers – either for creation or destruction
- Recently it has been interesting enough
- On the positive side, some really novel ways of doing things

Immigrants to the new times

- The proverb *Let the young study, the old ones know* will lose the meaning
- Mindquake (or mind-quake) – a concept by Robert Theobald, an American futurist of the late 20th century
 - *Everything You Know Is Wrong* (Weird Al Yankovic)
 - Old models do not work anymore (the latest fad: ChatGPT)
 - The ability to 'build a ladder' or to divide the jump into smaller parts is vital
- Three recent, quite telling examples: a) COVID-19 pandemic, b) War in Ukra

Handy's nine paradoxes

- Charles Handy, a British analyst/writer
- Nine paradoxes formulated during the 1970s/1980s – yet still surprisingly to the point today (some of them more so)

- 1. **Intelligence** – is supposed to be the new form of property, yet it's impossible to manage like one
- 2. **Work** – no one agrees to work for free or little pay, yet many people have got no work and much work is left undone
- 3. **Productivity** – organizations do the same work with less people, the rest of the people do nothing. The organization is effective, the society is not. The experts can also be too expensive for organizations!
- 4. **Time** – effective work takes less time (also due the technology used), yet people have in fact less free time than before. An explanation is the competition for jobs, so people agree to work for longer shifts

- 5. **Riches** – traditionally, economy is spurred by people buying and selling actively. Yet, the number of those people who have enough resources is decreasing. Also, there is a lot of important things that cannot be bought or sold
- 6. **Organizations** – they face a number of conflicting demands (e.g. have to be both global and local at the same time)
- 7. **Age** – the rapidly moving society is led by the elder generation with little transfer of knowledge. Also, the active working age as well as gender roles are changing
- 8. **Individual** - the conflict between individual initiative and 'team play'
- 9. **Justice** – capitalism seems to foster injustice; society rewards those who gain the most for themselves (especially evident in the US)

Castells' network society

- Note: these are also quite old, but nevertheless valid – in fact, all these points have gained new aspects since
 - Information economy
 - Global economy vs the '4th world'
 - Network enterprise
 - Flexi- and telework
 - Social exclusion, polarization
 - The culture of true virtuality
 - Harsh and dirty politics
 - Timeless time
 - Space of flows

Education

- Among the trends, we can see
 - greater variance of approaches and methods – from traditional to alternative; most of it forms a ‘market’ where feedback is the main currency
 - focus on person, various methods regarding time and place (note: some of those kept the societies going during the pandemic)
 - lifelong learning
 - onslaught of ideology (from both ends of political spectrum) becoming a threat to academic freedom

Now and then: Paul Redmond back in 1995

- Traditional

- Clarity
- Employer
- Job
- Career
- Promotion
- Degree

- Future

- Variety
- Customer
- Adding value
- Portfolio
- Personal development
- Lifelong learning

We live in his future now: Redmond hit the mark quite well. Still, the old ways persist as well

Work

- The key is flexibility
- Less time spent at one job?
- Advantage: good educational base + ability to adapt
- A serious threat: McJob
 - A tedious, unappreciated, low-paying job, esp. in the service sector, with little to no prospect (Amitai Etzioni / Douglas Coupland)
- I hear someone saying: “We don’t flip burgers, so we don’t have those in IT.” WRONG!!

Change

- At first there were labour-based jobs
- Then came skill-based jobs
- And then knowledge-based jobs

- And instead of going to work, we DO it

Online communities

- A body of humans determined not by common physical location but rather common attitudes, interests and thinkingl
- Vint Cerf has outlined some reasons:
 - Bidirectional in nature (ct newspapers or radio)
 - A wide and dynamic/adaptable spectrum of communication models
- Widely used in software development, e-learning etc
- Used to be voluntary, COVID-19 forced some on people

Himanen's work ethic for the information age

- The metaphor of monastery and academy
- The work ethic of the industrial age comes from the monastery:
 - Work has intrinsic value, there are strict schedule and harsh punishments.
And there is the One Correct Way to do the work
- The work ethic of the information age should come from the academy:
 - Interaction, discussion, freedom of thought, word and organization. No One Correct Way
 - Work can still have intrinsic value – as one's way of self-expression and finding meaning (yet, the motivation is internal rather than external)

A word of caution

- The greater freedom implies much greater responsibility
- The shorter duration implies more intensity and stress
- A great danger is to lose the border between work and rest!

- The result is a lot of burnt-out people
- Note: COVID-19 added significantly to the load (Zoom etc, especially when used across time zones)

A new kind of resource?

- Yochai Benkler insists that information is radically different from the key resources of previous ages (land, gold, minerals)
 - You have two apples. You give one to a friend. You now have one left
 - You know two jokes. You tell one to a friend. Both of you laugh and you still know two
- A big question to think about – is the post-scarcity economy finally possible with information as the main resource?
 - If yes: an “inverted T” type of society
 - If no: yet another failed utopia
- There would also be new risks (TMI, echo chambers etc)

King Koko and the mailboxes of Fantippo

- Hugh Lofting's Dr Dolittle stories tell us how King Koko of Fantippo heard from a white stranger about letters going to the right place when put into the mailboxes: "I understand: a new kind of magic!"
- The project ended in a major fuss (and Dr Dolittle had to do it all over)
- Internet is not a new kind of magic - as important as the information infrastructure is the skill to make something constructive with it
- The society needs to be coherent enough to adapt it

When information goes sour (dark information society)

- Mushroom management (e.g. Urban Dictionary, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=mushroom%20management>):
 - Keep them in the dark
 - Feed them shit
- Note: in this case, the feeding matter is also information
- Usually, there is some kind of ‘-ism’ or repressive ideology involved!
- (in a twisted way, the old-time USSR was also an information society – KGB knew a lot about everyone!)

The Hacker Ethic (Himanen)

- Work as one's favourite pastime, hobby
 - some lucky dudes actually get paid well for doing it!
- Playful cleverness
 - Do serious things as if having fun. Have fun seriously
- Hoarding is not good
 - “The white man only has two feet. Why does he have five pairs of boots?”
- Friday or Sunday?
 - Both in the Christian and ordinary sense
- Passionate life
 - “Do. Or do not. There is no try.”

Summing up

- Mindquakes have happened before – and will happen in the future
- Flexibility + good education
- Full information society would become possible if
 - the gaps in the society are not too large
 - there are no oppressive ideologies and mushroom management
- Two necessary things:
 - reason
 - conscience

Thanks!