

Editor's preface

This volume explores the patterns and dynamics of the network society in its cultural and institutional diversity. By network society, we refer to the social structure that results from the interaction between social organization, social change, and a technological paradigm constituted around digital information and communication technologies. We start from a rejection of technological determinism, as technology cannot be considered independently of its social context. But we also emphasize the importance of technology as material culture by focusing on the specific social processes related to the emergence of this new technological paradigm. Thus, while several chapters focus on the social uses of the Internet, this is not a study of the Internet. Instead, observation of the practices of the Internet is our entry point to understand the diffusion of networking as an organizational form and to examine the complex interaction between technology and society in our world. Using an historical parallel, the equivalent would be to study the diffusion and uses of the electrical engine and the electric grid to understand the development of industrial society.

What defines the collective research effort presented in this book is the conviction that the network society, while presenting some fundamental, common features in all contexts, takes very different forms depending on the cultural and institutional environments in which it evolves. We would like, as our contribution to the understanding of a world in the making, to break with the ethnocentrism of many visions of the network society (or information and knowledge society in another terminology), which often assimilate the rise of this society to the cultural and organizational unification of a globalized world, usually reproducing the social forms and values of the United States or Western Europe.

Furthermore, there is an implicit assumption that this convergence in the ways of producing, living, and thinking is a necessary condition to access the promise of the new technological power. The more a new society emerges, the more the analytical effort to understand it reproduces the historical error made in the study of industrialism and postindustrialism: societies that did not look like the United States, England, France, or Germany were considered to be exceptions to or variations of the basic model of industrial or postindustrial society. We would like to introduce, in the early stages of the development of the network society, the notion of its diversity, as a result of the differential

interaction between new socio-technical processes and the culture and history of each society. Thus, our comparative study of Silicon Valley and Finland (chapter 2) provides support for the proposition that similarly technologically advanced and economically competitive societies can be rooted in very different institutions and guided by sharply divergent public policies. We go on to show how, in various contexts around the world, the diffusion of the Internet, the adoption of digital technology in the production process, or the relationship between cultural identity and electronic media is treated in different ways.

But we also contend that there are some common features to the network society, and that they are related to the socio-technical specificity of the informational paradigm. This volume analyzes, along the main dimensions of economy, society, and culture, the interaction between structural commonality and cultural singularity in the deployment of a new social structure on a planetary scale.

The perspective of this volume is cross-cultural. To be sure, there are many cultures, and societies, that are not studied here. Our purpose was not to create an encyclopedia of the network society by accumulating information and analysis on a large number of countries. Our objective is analytical; it is to suggest a method of inquiry on a variety of key themes in a diversity of cultural and institutional contexts. We hope that this effort will stimulate specific studies in countries around the world, so that we can learn from each other, and build, cumulatively, the human cross-cultural map of the emerging network society.

The volume starts with an attempt to present, in tentative terms, the theory of the network society. I want to emphasize that this is not the common theoretical framework of this volume. Neither do the chapters in this volume represent an application of the conceptual framework presented in the first chapter. Each author has built the results of his or her research on his or her own conceptual system. However, there is a common approach in trying to comprehend the autonomous interaction between technology and social structure, emphasizing the importance of networking as an organizational form. So, to some extent, the theoretical blueprint presented here (elaborated and written after the analytical chapters were completed) tries to relate to the issues and findings permeating the whole volume. However, I do not feel that it is necessary, or possible, to systematically integrate the empirical record in the categories of the theoretical scheme presented here. The empirical evidence for this theoretical chapter must be looked for in my own analytical work, as referred to in the notes to the chapter. Nonetheless, it is my hope that by placing up front the theoretical discussion of the network society, we can clarify terms, define issues, and enhance the understanding of the meaning of findings presented in the rest of the volume.

The organization of the book is straightforward. After presenting a tentative

theoretical discussion of the network society, we analyze, in part II, processes of technological transformation, in interaction with social structure, in five different cultural and institutional contexts: Silicon Valley, Finland, Russia, China, and the UK. Part of the approach is directly comparative (between Silicon Valley and Finland). Most analyses document the specific development of networking technology and organization in each society, leaving the interested reader with the task of considering the contrasting experiences of socio-technical transformation.

Part III of the volume analyzes the transformation of the economic dimension of the network society by focusing on the three major components of the economy: capital, labor, and the production process. We try to analyze the specificity of productivity growth in the new economy; the transformation of the process of valuation of capital, in terms of time and space, in the global financial networks; and the emergence of flexible labor as the form of labor characteristic of the network economy on the basis of observation of the original site of the transformation, Silicon Valley.

The fourth part of the book looks at patterns of social structuration and social relationships, comparing the findings of research conducted in North America and in Catalonia, with a particular emphasis on the new patterns of socio-spatial segregation as observed in the Detroit Metropolitan Area.

We then undertake, in part V, the study of the transformation of the public sector, and its related public policies, by organizational networking and communication technologies. We summarize and discuss some of the knowledge available in the key areas of e-learning, e-health, and community development, trying to assess the social and institutional limits that exist on the use of Internet in the public interest.

Next, part VI analyzes the sociopolitical implications of networking and the Internet by studying, on the one hand, the reconfiguration of social movements, and particularly the so-called "anti-globalization movement," and, on the other hand, shortcomings in the use of the Internet in formal politics, which is, by and large, still organized in hierarchical terms, while providing a hint on the potential of grassroots networking on the condition of the enhancement of political autonomy in civil society.

Part VII explores the crucial question of culture in the network society, with particular emphasis on the interaction between the construction of identity and the dynamics of television, contrasting the experiences of Catalonia and India. There is also the presentation of a novel hypothesis which tries to find the cultural matrix of the new society in the materials provided by the "hacker ethic," in an historical transposition of Weber's attempt to propose the Protestant ethic as the spirit of capitalism.

Finally, a distinguished historian of technology and culture provides an historical perspective to relativize even further our relativism on the process

of socio-technical transformation that we have identified as the multicultural formation of the network society in this early twenty-first century.

In ending these introductory remarks, I would like to emphasize the practical consequences of our analytical perspective. If, indeed, the new technological modernity comes in a variety of sociocultural formats, societies – and their representatives – would be ill advised to copy successful models which will likely operate as implants and be rejected by the people at large. Instead, it is by opening up the ability of societies to experiment for themselves with the new socio-technical paradigm that home-grown network societies will emerge, rooted in their identities and open to the social forms of other cultures. The networking process will then allow the cross-fertilization of human experience, so that a global network society may be the result of identity-based, specific forms of network society communicating with each other. Communication, rather than replication, seems to be the historical horizon for societies in the information age.