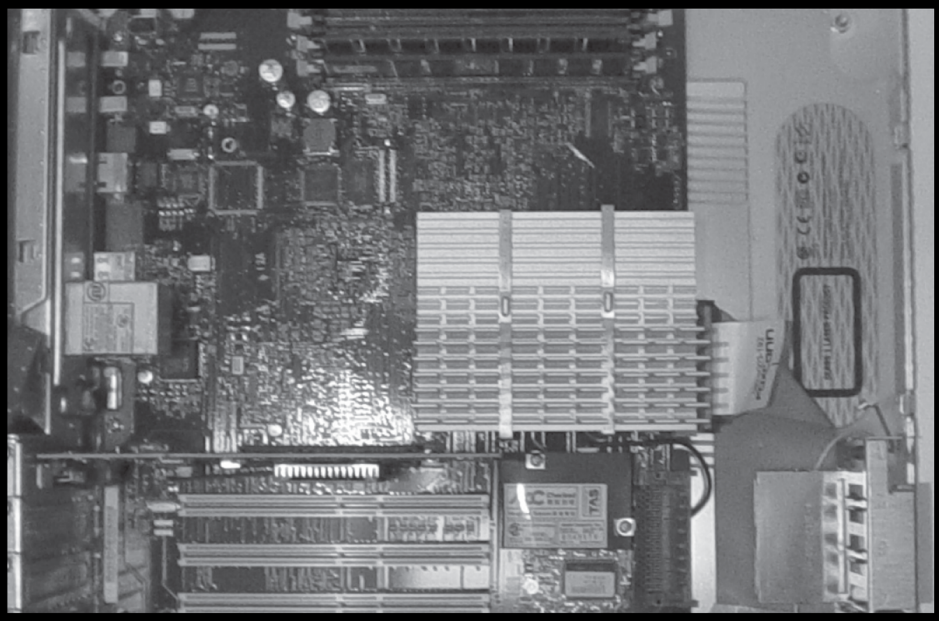
THE INFORMATION SOCIETY READER



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ROUTLEDGE STUDENT READERS

The Information Society Reader

There has been much debate over the idea of 'the information society'. Some thinkers have argued that information is becoming the key ordering principle in society, whereas others suggest that the rise of information has been overstated. Whatever the case, though, it cannot be denied that 'informatization' has produced vast changes in advanced societies. *The Information Society Reader* pulls together the main contributions to this debate from some of the key figures in the field. Major topics addressed include:

- Post-industrialism and Globalization
- Surveillance
- Transformations
- The Network Society
- Democracy
- Digital Divisions
- Virtual Relations.

With a comprehensive introduction from Frank Webster, and section introductions contextualizing the readings, *The Information Society Reader* will be an invaluable resource for students and academics studying contemporary society and all things cyber.

Frank Webster is Professor of Sociology at City University, London. He is author of *Theories of the Information Society*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2002).

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The Information Society Reader

Edited by

Frank Webster

with the assistance of

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Series editor's preface

WELCOME TO THIS, the fifth in our series of *Routledge Student Readers* and one that is very much concerned with both the condition and signs of our times. Sociology has always been centrally concerned with describing, analysing and accounting for social change at the level of face-to-face interaction and through to the level of social structures. Although there are often disjunctions between these different levels what is most significant is the way that, over time, they stabilize and fit. For most of the last century social theory has been able to recognize major differences between societies or stages of development within the same society according to the organization of the division of labour and, to a large extent, the mode of economy that gave rise to such an organization. So dominant notions like pre-industrial and industrial, pre-capitalist and capitalist have served us well. However, towards the end of the twentieth century social change appeared to accelerate more than we had previously acknowledged and the social orders that we cling to became far more fragile, tenuous and liable to fragmentation. One of the main reasons for this transformation occurs in relation to both the product of our labour but also in our ability to communicate that product to one another. This is the age of 'information'.

Of course people still make things, though increasingly machines do such work for them, but the major currency in the contemporary market place is ideas. Whole industries have become established in the production of ideas, images and processes all in the form of information. Alongside this development and having an elective affinity with its progress is the growth of information technology.

Although it could not be argued that this is yet a global phenomenon, in as much as people still die of starvation in Ethiopia despite, or some might say because of, the information explosion its influence is extensive and growing. Within the nations that previously comprised the Western world information and IT permeate

social relations. Explanation and, to some degree, knowledge has become formulaic, packaged and systemic, and people expect it to be so. Means of communication are legion and personalized and instant. The handcrafted letter and the large black Bakelite telephone *per* family now recede as distant memories. Now everyone of a certain age (and above) seems to sport an earphone and/or a microphone. People in public as well as private places speak into objects the size of their palms or tap maniacally at them in order to 'text' an absent friend in abbreviated code. I begin to sound disapproving yet inevitably admit to the possession of such gadgetry and confess to the inability to begin the day, let alone regularly punctuate the day, without visits to my omnipresent screens and keyboards to reply with absolute priority to the endless accumulation of email traffic.

This all-pervading presence, use and expectation of information makes up the 'information society'. But this is not just a way of describing contemporary accessories, styles, patterns of consumption or fashion. This sense of information describes the manner and the texture of social relations both face-to-face and at the level of the social structure. Wars on television, political 'spin', public relations, air traffic control, international money markets, banking, new forms of educational delivery, entertainment, interior design, eating, personal relationships, talk – all of this, and more, is part of the information society. So, now, are you and I.

Frank Webster is the ideal person to provide us with a guide and a critical appraisal of these overwhelming developments in modern society. He has been researching and publishing in this area of work for the last decade and has a reputation, both national and international, based on his seminal contributions to this field. I believe that this reader will soon establish itself as an important and well-regarded landmark in this area of sociological thinking.

The way this work is organized will surely provoke the reader's critical awareness. It is most important that those of us who are living through or perhaps inheriting the 'information society' as a way of life and a future, should be able to appreciate its possibilities for liberation and creativity but also that we should never be forgetful of the constraints, the surveillance, the differential exercise of power and the reconfigurations that it places on our day-to-day activities and relationships.

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Acknowledgements

IN PUTTING TOGETHER THIS READER we have been compelled to reduce the length of most of our selections for reasons of limited space. We wanted to offer a large range of work within the covers of an affordable student text, and this we have done, but a price is that many contributions have had to be severely edited. We thank our authors for their forbearance in this and would warn our readers of the attendant dangers. We recommend advanced readers especially to return to the originals wherever feasible in order to gain the fullest appreciation of the authors' intentions. Full details of our selections are given on the first page of each chapter.

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A special thankyou to Howard, who reached out:
He is as full of valour as of kindness, Princely in both.

Introduction: Information Society Studies

■ Frank Webster

THERE IS WITHIN CURRENT social science a view, frequently advanced, that information is now more central to our way of life, so much so that many scholars conceive of the emergence of a new entity, the Information Society. From this perspective the Information Society is seen to be as different from Industrialism as the Industrial Society was from its predecessor, the Agricultural Society. In the industrial era people made their livings by the sweat of their brow and dexterity of their hands, working in factories to manufacture products. In contrast, in the Information Society livelihoods are increasingly made by the appliance and manipulation of information, be it in software design, branding or financial services, and the output is not so much a tangible thing as a change in image, relationship or perception. This being so, Information Society Studies are set to become a central component of contemporary social analysis. And of course the emergence of such Information Society Studies is a reason why we have put together this Reader.

Though the concept developed inside academic circles, the idea of an Information Society has taken an even stronger hold outside higher education. Nowadays businessmen, media pundits and politicians evoke the Information Society as a matter of routine. This resonance has been amplified by countless feature articles and paperback books with punchy titles and an assured vision of the future, such as *The Wealth of Information* (1983), *Being Digital* (1995) and – from the leading American popularizer Alvin Toffler – *The Third Wave* (1980) and *Powershift* (1990).

So prevalent is this belief that we are entering a new Information Society that many may be surprised to encounter those who challenge the validity of the term, though in the scholarly realm many consider it inappropriate and misleading (Webster 2002). Nonetheless, though many academics reject the idea that a novel

Information Society is emerging, no one denies that what might be called informatization is of major significance for advanced (and other) societies. This is a clumsy word, but informatization points to the heightened importance of information, and its insinuation into all that we do nowadays, though this of itself may not signal a systemic change. Whichever interpretation one takes of what it all amounts to, information, and its movement (communication), are undeniably of enormous import nowadays (Duff 2000). Indeed, any serious effort to understand the character of contemporary societies must come to grips with information. Whether it be the mediation of so much of modern life (notably through mass media, but also the telephone and internet), or electronic dealing in currencies and investment funds which raise profound questions of national sovereignty, or even the signs with which people decorate and display themselves in this postmodern epoch (hairstyle, clothes, even body shape), then informational matters are to the fore. Such is the context and reasoning that lie behind this Reader.

In the wider society the idea that we are entering a new Information or Knowledge Society is commonplace (those who adopt the word knowledge generally do so in order to associate their vision with still grander notions). For example, take a recent book by Charles Leadbeater (1999) called *Living on Thin Air: The New Economy*. Mr Leadbeater, who worked for the influential British think tank Demos (with which he remains associated) and who reputedly developed the government White Paper, *Building the Knowledge Driven Economy* (December 1998), argues that 'knowledge capital' is the key ingredient for the 'new economy'. The flyleaf of his book quotes Premier Tony Blair to the effect that this 'book raises critical questions for Britain's future'. It also cites the opinion of an architect of the 'third way', former Minister of State Peter Mandelson, which is that 'this book sets out the agenda for the next Blair revolution'. The notion that we are entering an Age of Information can scarcely reach higher than the Prime Minister, though it extends up to the Presidency of the USA – it was Vice-President Al Gore who claimed to have coined the term the 'information superhighway' in the early 1990s. The European Union and Commission have been committed to building a European Information Society for well over a decade, to which end heavy investment has been made in research programmes, educational initiatives and numerous policy papers (the Commission's Information Society website is at http://europa.cu.int/ISPO/basics/1_basics.html).

People who are sceptical about all this talk of the new may prefer to speak of a Neo-Liberal Consensus that has engulfed the world, leading to the dominance of market criteria in everything that we do, something which subordinates informational developments to very long-established pressures. However, even these critics concede that information has become prioritized in social, economic and political affairs over recent decades. Hence whichever position one adopts, whether one is persuaded we are entering an Information Society or rather that we inhabit a much more informationally intensive environment, there can be no doubt that the issues matter enormously, both intellectually and practically.

Moreover, as readers will see more clearly as they make their way through this text, the theoretical ideas developed in academe over the last thirty years have had

important influences on contemporary politics, so this isn't just a matter of academics trailing behind 'real-world' changes. Anthony Giddens (1984), a recent Director of the London School of Economics, reminds us that how we talk and think about phenomena shapes how we act (to use his sort of language, theory and concepts, and abstract knowledge more generally, are *constitutive* of the way we live). Consider, for example, how we discuss, feel and act upon theoretical ideas about 'national identity', 'race' or 'postmodernity' in this respect. Or reflect how much we are influenced, even in our most intimate relationships, by knowledge we have gleaned from abstract data (often academic, though probably mediated through television, radio and magazines) about, for instance, divorce rates, cohabitation, child rearing and romantic ideals.

In this Reader we want to engage with popular and practically influential ways that people talk about, and act on, the sort of society in which we find ourselves. The selections cover a lot of social theorists (by which we mean a range of sociologists, economists, political scientists, geographers, even a few philosophers), for two main reasons. One is to demonstrate that some theory is a very *practical* tool to help us better understand the real world. The idea that 'theory' is impractical is a caricature. Though appropriate enough to describe some writing, usually that excessively concerned with epistemology (how we know what we know), theory of a sort is crucial to how we see and think about the world around us. Theory helps us better comprehend how we live by scrutinizing evidence, and by involving itself with substantive developments. There is some theory in sociology which is armchair in the negative sense, but this is often of a sort which confuses that discipline with philosophy. The sort of theory from which this Reader draws its inspiration, that represented by the likes of Anthony Giddens, Ralph Dahrendorf and Zygmunt Bauman, has long been concerned with applying theory to illuminate the real world, as equally it has been concerned with the ways in which empirical trends feed into and reshape theoretical positions.

The second reason is because much recent social thought is, in very large part, focusing around informational issues – not surprisingly given its centrality to contemporary life (even philosophers use word processors, sociologists are on the World Wide Web, information work is expanding enormously, the explosive growth of media, new and old, is of enormous significance to how we live today . . .). In recent years, for example, arguably the single most significant piece of social analysis to have emerged is Manuel Castells' *The Information Age* (1996–98, in three volumes), a sustained account of the importance of *information networks* to how we live today. John Urry (2000), one of Britain's leading sociologists, draws on and extends this notion to emphasize the centrality of *mobilities* (of symbols, ideas, capital, images as well as people) to our present ways of life, something in which *information flows* are critical. Moreover, Daniel Bell, probably the most influential post-war American sociologist, reissued in 1999 his *Coming of Post-industrial Society* (first published 1973), a book which presaged a great deal of current thought and action as regards the Information Society (e.g. the role of higher education, the significance of service sector employment). Again, Anthony Giddens, arguably the world's leading social theorist and probably Britain's major public

intellectual, places a premium on the capacity for 'heightened reflexivity' – i.e. on greater use of information/knowledge to make choices about things great and small (Lash 2002).

The mention of these thinkers leads us to an important point. Castells, Bell and Giddens are, by any standards, major social thinkers, but they share something else. This is that they are all deeply engaged with both understanding how the world is changing and in suggesting how it might change for the better. Giddens is well known today as Prime Minister Tony Blair's leading intellectual, as the codifier of the 'radical centre', also known as the 'third way' (Giddens published his book, *The Third Way,* in 1998). Daniel Bell was a political activist from the age of thirteen, and a major 'cold war intellectual' in the 1950s. Manuel Castells, born in 1942, fled Franco's Spain in the 1960s because of his political activism as a teenager, was a radical in Paris during 1968, and is now a 'post-Marxist' and adviser to the European Union and the Russian government.

Another way of putting that is to say that they all are politically committed. No one should take this to be a simplistic thing, as if we can understand them by 'reading off' their arguments from some political affiliation. By commitment we mean that these people are deeply concerned about the ways of the world, that they are involved in 'theory' because this is a requisite of knowing better the world so that its direction may be better comprehended, and its redirection influenced. We think this engagement gives an urgency and 'edge' to their work, something evident in all compelling intellectual ideas. But one should not presume that they then 'sign up' to political manifestos, or that their intellectual integrity is compromised. There is a necessary tension between their intellectual thought and political convictions, as there is in most significant social analysis. One might think here, for instance, of Max Weber's tortured essay, 'Politics as a vocation' (1918), in which Weber contrasted an 'ethic of responsibility' with an 'ethic of ultimate ends' in political matters, admiring and despising both simultaneously. Or think of Emile Durkheim's anguish about the spread of 'anomie' in modern societies, or of Ralph Dahrendorf's passionate commitment to 'liberty', instilled during his teenage experiences of Nazi Germany, or of C. Wright Mills' American populism so evident in *The Power Elite*, or of Ann Oakley's feminism which informs her academic research on the position of women as housewives or recipients of medical treatment.

It seems that among the best social thought there is found almost always a commitment to influence the world. But this isn't something that can be reduced to a straightforward political programme (though we can readily imagine ways in which a political commitment has compromised good scholarship). At the same time, it lets one better appreciate that political activity, in the more orthodox sense, is not sharply divorced from intellectual activity. When it comes to the Information Society, we find politicians have a big stake in shaping the development of this 'new' order, and intellectuals who construct the term also bring with them their own – usually more nuanced and qualified – agendas (that shouldn't be regarded as necessarily superior – politicians must act on the world, academics usually enjoy the luxury of not having to take full responsibility for their ideas which can be developed away from the pressures politicians must respond to).

All of which is to say that, while this text takes students to academic sources to study the significance of information today, they will quickly appreciate how central the matters are to contemporary commerce, work, politics and everyday life.

Organization of the Reader

The structure of this book reflects these interests and concerns. Part One considers the popular notion of the Information Society. It offers three statements from advocates of the view that we now inhabit an Information Society. This concept is frequently presented as being self-evidently accurate, but articles by three critics who reject the term give reasons to suggest that the Information Society concept is partial. Indeed, to evoke the term may be to misunderstand profoundly the character of the world that we inhabit. At the least, any serious student of contemporary society will take information very seriously, but will also need to ask hard questions regarding the value of ascribing this an Information Society.

Part Two takes us to the father of contemporary thinking on the Information Society. Daniel Bell coined the concept of 'post-industrialism' almost forty years ago now. Over the years this transmuted into a synonym for the Information Society. In all major respects it highlights features of post-industrialism which recur in most descriptions of the Information Society. Bell's major critic is Krishan Kumar whose demolition is instanced here, though – as John Urry's essay reveals – even those who accept the criticisms of Bell can find something about 'post-industrialism' appealing as a means of understanding the present.

Part Three highlights the work of Manuel Castells (born 1942) which has been so influential in shaping the way we think about the 'information age'. Castells' trilogy, produced in the late 1990s, has had a huge effect, notably on scholarship concerned with informational developments. Its encyclopaedic knowledge and impressive powers of synthesis, combined with theoretical nous, make *The Information Age* a towering achievement and an indispensable source for students of information. However, Castells does not go unchallenged, and here a vigorous and oppositional contribution from Nicholas Garnham is included which suggests an ongoing critical engagement with Castells' terms of reference.

Part Four comes to grips with the undoubted centrality of information to the deep and rapid sets of changes we have been experiencing over recent decades. Call it globalization, de-industrialization or post-Fordism, the scale and scope of these transformations is hard to deny. The articles in this part range from those which attempt to recast the way we imagine societies in John Urry's suggestion of 'mobilities' (of ideas, people, images and products), proposals to prioritize higher education to cope with and adapt to change, analysis of the centrality of information to present-day work, production and consumption, to an insistence that gender relations be given due attention amidst all the upheaval of transformations.

Part Five highlights the brute fact that informational developments occur in an unequal society and accordingly reflect and influence those social divisions. There has been much concern in recent years of the emergence of a 'digital divide', a fear

that the more privileged groups will race ahead with access to new technologies and high-grade information sources, while the poor will be left further behind. Some commentators dismiss this anxiety, convinced that, at least in the longer term, 'trickle down' will ensure that all get access to information and its associated technologies. Broadly speaking, most commentators in this sphere ally themselves with scepticism (and even hostility) towards pronouncements of the novelty and beneficence of the information explosion. Some elements of this strain of thought are present in Part One's criticisms of the Information Society concept. Here the insistence is on the power of corporate capital especially, and long-term historical trends more generally, to shape the 'information revolution' in directions which deepen entrenched interests of class, nation and capital.

Part Six provides a focus on surveillance, since information gathering and analysis is so much at the heart of the growth of information. This is evident all around, from company records, closed circuit television cameras (CCTV) in high streets, to computerized tills in supermarkets. However, surveillance, as the readings extracted here make clear, is not necessarily sinister or even a threat to liberties. Indeed, it may be an essential element of modernity itself, as well as necessary to the delivery of personal freedoms and civil rights.

Part Seven acknowledges the centrality to information's expansion of the media in all its forms. Whether it is television, cable, satellite, video or the combination of PC terminal with the tv monitor to surf the internet, media are a major expression of the 'information age'. As such, electronic media merit very close attention. Part Seven investigates this by paying attention to Jürgen Habermas' influential thinking on the 'public sphere' as a core ingredient of the democratic process which, argues Habermas, requires a space in which information may be freely developed, discussed and disseminated so that the public may make decisions on confident grounds. Some argue that this came through 'public service broadcasting' systems such as the BBC, but where might it be found in the era of the internet? And is it worth striving for, or even feasible, in the present era of digital television? From proponents to critics of the public sphere included here, readers will be able to assess the pertinence of the concept today.

Finally, Part Eight places information in a context of discussions of the arrival of 'virtualities'. This can be a weasel word, yet conceiving of the Information Society as one in which 'virtuality' predominates lends itself to thinking of a postmodern era in which the artificial (the image, the simulation) substitutes for notions of the 'real'. Our knowledge of what takes place beyond direct personal experience is phenomenal, but all of it is mediated and – for ourselves – the symbols and signs are the only reality that we may know, so perhaps the Information Society is also postmodern? And beyond the mediated, what of the ways in which reproduction itself is an artifice in an era of genetic engineering? If so much is 'unreal', shaped by media or interventions from sophisticated technologies, then might we announce postmodernity's arrival?

The Reader is designed for students, with an eye to going beyond simplistic approaches to the Information Society which presuppose that everything is happening because of a wave of technological developments. The serious student

will soon appreciate that examining change is very much more complicated than that. We may all agree that information is central to the word today, but how and why and with what significance is much harder to gauge (Karvonen 2001). This Reader invites students to become engaged in these questions.

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Chapter 24

Nicholas Garnham

THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

From *Capitalism and Communication*, London: Sage (1990), pp. 104–14.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE TO ASSERT that public communication lies at the heart of the democratic process; that citizens require, if their equal access to the vote is to have any substantive meaning, equal access also to sources of information and equal opportunities to participate in the debates from which political decisions rightly flow. I want to argue that it follows that changes in media structure and media policy, whether these stem from economic developments or from public intervention, are properly political questions of as much importance as the question of whether or not to introduce proportional representation, of relations between local and national government, of subsidies to political parties; that the policy of western European governments towards cable TV and satellite broadcasting is as important as their attitude towards the development of a United Europe; that the FCC's policy towards broadcast regulation is as important as the question of States' rights and that politicians, political scientists and citizens concerned with the health and future of democracy neglect these issues at their peril.

II

However, political theory has largely neglected the implications of such a position and, in particular, has neglected the problem of how, materially, the institutions and processes of public communication are sustained. It has ignored the specific ways in which a given social formation may provide those resources.

I argue elsewhere that our inherited structures of public communication, those institutions within which we construct, distribute and consume symbolic forms, are

Cardiff, D. (1980) 'The serious and the popular: aspects of the evolution of style in the radio talk 1928–1939', *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1).

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