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PROPOSAL FOR A COMMISSION ON THE "GEOGRAPHY OF INFORMATION SOCIETY" 2000-2004

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1. RATIONALE

Since 1984 and for the last eight years the IGU enjoyed the extensive activities of its Commissions on Telecommunications and Communication Networks (the last one: IGU 96-CO4). This newly created field of study has focused on one of the most dynamic areas of contemporary social, cultural and economic life. Within the lifespan of the commission the focus in the social sciences at large moved from the vehicle (i.e. telecommunications) to a focus on the subject matter, namely information.

The proposed new commission intends to provide an international forum for the study of geographical aspects of emerging information societies. As such it will permit the broadening of discussion and participation on the one hand, while providing geographers with an organizational forum for the development and discussion of a most contemporary social and geographical trend. This will be done with a close collaboration with other IGU Commissions and Study groups, and also with a Multidisciplinary basis collaboration in conformity with the IGU Com. recommendations.

2. THE RISE OF INFORMATION SOCIETY

The term "information society" has been growingly in use as of the early 1980s, though earlier terms such as the "age of information" date back to the early 1970s. These terms emerged within the context of numerous attempts to coin

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1 Proposal to the International Geographical Union (IGU) (December 1999). This proposal was submitted by the new Chairman and unanimously Supported by the IGU 96-C04 Commission. (Prof. Aharon Kellerman former Vice-Chairman of the IGU 96-C04 Commission) is Professor of Geography and Vice-President of the University of Haifa, Israel.

societal transformations since the early 1950s. Beniger (1986, p. 4-5) counted 75 such terms proposed between 1950 and 1984.

Definitions for information society highlight two of its major facets, namely the economic and the cultural. On the economic end "in an information society, information is the most important commodity" (European Commission, 1996, p. 7), whereas culturally it is "a society that brings about a general flourishing state of human intellectual creativity, instead of affluent material consumption" (Masuda, 1980, p. 3). Castells (1998, p. 67) related these two facets by claiming that information society "is based on the historical tension between the material power of abstract information processing and society's search for meaningful cultural identity".

Information society consists of two major processes, production and consumption, and a given national information society does not necessarily have to develop high levels in all aspects of production and consumption of information. On the production end several things may be produced. One major production process may be the innovation and wide-scale production of the hardware of information society, such as computers and telecommunications devices and equipment. Another major production process may be that of computer software, and a third one may be information itself, notably electronic, such as Internet sites, television programs and movies, etc. High levels of consumption of information may too be expressed in both hardware, software and information per se. Thus, high levels of consumption of information and information devices may be expressed by a wide adoption of telecommunications and information devices such as PCs, telephones, TVs, etc. A high level of information consumtion may be measured by wide purchases of software, by the number and length of domestic and international phone calls, by the proportion of homes connected to cable TV, and the like.

The exact nature of the relationships between industrial society and information society, namely continuity or change, has been debated in the literature (see e.g. Gottmann, 1961; Bell, 1973; Kellerman, 1985; 1993; Schement, 1989; Masuda, 1980; Lyon, 1995; Castells, 1996, p. 228). On the one hand, the development of information technology and the need for skilled workers who consume and produce more information are viewed as nesting within industrial society, and the subsequent service economy. On the other hand, information technologies allow "a direct, on-line linkage between different types of activity in the same process of production, management, and distribution, establish a close, structural connection between spheres of work and employment artificially separated by obsolete statistical categories" (Castells, 1996, p. 228). Thus, at a certain stage information and knowledge may replace labor and possibly also capital as leading production factors.

Unfolding in the late 1990s towards the 2000s is a new phase in the rise of information society. Information production, transmission and use, becomes a

leading if not the leading economic and social activity, both as a major product or as a product and service complementing or involving the production and consumption of material products. As such, three additional characteristics are added to information society : information becoming a major product, information media beginning to fuse into each other, and information becoming a culture. To be noted also : the growing role of information as a "raw material" for Corporations, Organizations (Bakis, Abler & Roche, eds. 1993) and Social Networks (Offner & Pumain, eds. 1996 : 137-171).

Growing modification of information has accompanied information society since its inception. In the late 1990s the sale of information has reached levels reserved before for the sale of material products or services only. Major examples are the sale of data sets relating to Internet users, or the tremendous growth in the sales of software and TV programs. The U.S. has become the world leader in the sale and distribution of electronic information (Kellerman, 1997).

Liberalization trends in the provision of information services to households, as well as technological developments, have brought about early signs of possible fusions among different forms of information, their transmission and use. Thus it has become possible, for example, to use the computer also as a telephone, fax and TV, and receive several of these services from service providers who sell more than one type of information service. This fusion may possibly mature into unified service provisions using a single appliance for information consumption and production, as well as so-called "public networks" of data, software, communications etc. (Halal, 1993 ; Kellerman, 1997).

The emergence of information society was related, among other things, to viewing culture as information. One may view this dimension as «recognition of the cultural value of information through the promotion of information values in the interest of national and individual development» (Martin, 1988, p. 40).

Information may also turn culture into power : "Cultural battles are the power battles of the Information Age… Culture as the source of power, and power as the source of capital, underlie the new social hierarchy of the Information Age" (Castells, 1998, p. 348).

Another important cultural dimension of information is the changing significance of time and space. Instantaneous written and oral communications over global space intensifies the pace of work and alters working times. Even for cultural symbolism and realities the source and anchor has changed from traditional national territory to a global virtual one, bringing one to declare that "the space of flows of the Information Age dominates the space of places of people's cultures" (Castells, 1998, p. 349 ; Bakis & Roche 1997). Some argue that the shrinking of distance beyond national boundaries may threaten domestic democratic institutions while others disagree (Kitchin, 1998, p. 101-102).

In summary, contemporary information society is based on the following traits :

Technology : Sophisticated information technology for the production, recording, transmission and retrieval of information of all formats, bringing about high levels of interconnectedness, globalization and dependence on information technology.

Production : Extensive production of information, coupled with high proportions of the labor force employed directly and indirectly in information activities.

Economy : Information being a major commodity, bought and sold extensively.

Operation : Specialized channels and appliances for the handling of specific forms of electronic information may be replaced by integrated channels and appliances for the handling of information at large.

Culture : The economic and social accent on information have turned it into a culture, typified by an amplified sociopolitical role of the media, shrinking time and space constraints, and the emergence of global virtual symbolisms and realities.

3. QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

We forsee the following as pertinent areas and questions of study for the proposed commission.

3.1. Communities - The formation of communities of unknown kinds and of unexpected sizes raises the need to re-evaluate the concept of « community, » along with its idealized and critical connotations. The expression « virtual community » itself hints that it refers to something essentially different from our traditional understanding of "community" ; and that community, in turn, continuously alters its form as the communication patterns on which it was based change, become obsolete, or acquire new meanings.

• What patterns of communication are characteristic of the formation of face-to-face communities, and how do mediated communities differ from such patterns ?

• How can we characterize the formation, organization, and maintenance of virtual communities and what uses and gratifications are reflected by these processes ?

• How can we conceptualize the boundaries, size, and density of virtual communities, and what is the nature of the "space" in which they exist ?

• How do different communication channels contribute to the development and maintenance of community identity in a multicultural society ?

3.2. Global connections - The internet permits instant global connectedness and the integration of all forms of information (text, data, graphics, sound, films). The vast global flows of information call for extensive flows of technologies and people.

• How would various policies and legislation advance or hinder social and cultural priorities in this era of globalization ?

• What are the political, economic, and cultural ramifications of letting either market forces or legislation determine rights concerning information ownership and intellectual property? How should issues regarding intellectual property in cyberspace be conceptualized?

• What possible roles might the state play in regulating cyberspace and the information society in general? How do the policies of different states compare with one another in meeting the challenge of information and communication technology developments?

• What kinds of trends can we see in international communication flow, and how do these affect national and global power structures?

• What are the ramifications of a capitalist information society upon social gaps? Must information richness necessarily be accompanied by material wealth?

3.3. International differences - Despite the global nature of information flows the emergence of information societies is striking in developed countries. Developing countries move fast into a new era.

What is the role of the U.S. as the largest producer and mover of information?

How is deregulation going to affect EU countries?

Is there an "advantage of backwardness" for developing countries exposed to global information flows at a later stage of their development?

4. STRUCTURE AND SCOPE OF ACTIVITIES

The commission will be composed of 10 members from all parts of the word. The commission will arrange for at least one conference every year. It will publish a newsletter and will continue to support the journal NETCOM established in the IGU context since 1987 (84-SG ; 88C ; 92C03 ; 96 C04) and the IGU Commissions Web site (since 1994).

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