

The European Information Society in the Academic Context

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ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

This study explores the connection between the emergence of the discourse on the information society in the European Union and its dissemination through the academic circles. My main goal, in this respect, was to develop an understanding of the values and functions placed by academics on the notion of information society through the use of this concept in the official *eLearning* documentation of the European Commission. Their perspectives on how the concept of information society is operationalized in European higher education through the application of the EU's *eLearning* programmes and, consequently, on how the universities contribute to its propagation in the public domain of specific EU countries form the basis of this inquiry.

In this context, how do universities view the concept and why should universities be concerned about the Commission's drive to bring about the Information Society? What does Information Society entail in the opinion of academics and practitioners at universities in the Member States? In what ways do universities contribute to the emergence and propagation of the Information Society? How do the universities' application of *eLearning* initiatives, whether EU or national, concretely shape the notion of Information Society? Is it influenced by EU, national policies or a combination of both?

2. Methodology

For the purpose of this study, I selected three Member States of the EU, namely Germany, Portugal and Sweden. The rationale for choosing these countries is based on their progress in adopting ICTs in education or the society at large. Each member state of the union is at a different stage of implementation of ICT, both in the public and private sector. I selected the three countries based on the various surveys or studies that consistently divide the countries of the EU in what I call the three tiers of ICT development. The first tier belongs to the countries that are most advanced on this path, the second tier comprises the ones that have had mixed success, while the third tier contains the countries which are least advanced in this field. Thus, Sweden belongs to the first tier, Germany to the second, and Portugal to the third. Though my intention was to restrict the scope of the study to the three countries mentioned, the chain of contacts led me, on several occasions, to developments elsewhere in the European Union. Contrary to my expectation, the additional findings from other Member States not only enriched the picture provided by the principal three countries investigated, but also reinforced many of the findings in Germany, Portugal and Sweden. Thus, my research trail eventually took me to Belgium, France, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, and United Kingdom.

My primary target participants were faculty members at universities in the three principal Member States. The sample also includes five Commission officials. The intent of approaching the Commission was to balance the stories that would emerge from the interviews in the Member States. I contacted, primarily between March 2005 and January 2006, approximately 70 individuals from Germany, Portugal, Sweden and other countries in Europe. Eventually, 25 participants granted me an interview in some form by the end of my self-imposed deadline.

3. Findings

The concept of information society presents us with a jigsaw picture of the countries included in this study. If the e-learning dimension displays many common traits among the countries studied here, the information society facet does quite the opposite. What is even more remarkable, the attitudes and mentalities about the information society in the three principal countries justify their placement in the rankings of ICT sophistication and adoption. I have not referred to the positions of the secondary countries in such rankings, but they complement and diversify the picture of the information society in Europe.

Unsurprisingly, Sweden, the stories suggest, is clearly at the vanguard of this virtual race towards an information society, given its government's extensive support for ICTs and its constant concern for social inclusion, a theme that has been running deeply in the Swedish society even before the advent of modern technologies.

Germany offers a sketchier picture, partly because of its strong culture of traditional scientific research and its emphasis on sophisticated manufacturing technologies (e.g., automotive industry).

Portugal still suffers from a very slow start on the path of ICT integration in society. It cannot be said that the term information society applies to Portugal, due to the still poor familiarity of the public with online services, where they exist.

The outlooks in the secondary countries compound and at the same time diversify the representation of the information society in Europe. It is easy to see that distinctive priorities, cultural specificity and the discrepancies in economic development make it a difficult task to speak in unison of an information society. It is clear, and expectedly so, that information society conveys different mental actualizations, as disparate from one another as the social environments within which their carriers live and function.

A shared thread that runs through this kaleidoscope of images on the information society is the place of the university as the cradle of knowledge. Academics and Commission officials alike, the latter casting aside for a moment their status of public administrators, indirectly confirmed each other in upholding the role of the university in knowledge formation and transmission and, by extension, eventually shaping public opinion on the utilitarian attributes of the information society. These are all concerns that have repeatedly cropped up during the stories, giving a rather discouraging outlook to the realization of the information society in Europe.

4. Conclusion

As I expected, the answers on information society revealed a mosaic of interpretations stemming from the personal experiences of the interviewees and their understanding of the complexities such a term produces. To avoid repetition here, I will not recount the stories on the information society for each country as I covered them in detail in the previous two sections. Suffice here to say that most of the

academics interviewed see beyond the practical or technical side of the information society and even question the so-called social intentions of the term. Cultural, social, political and economic considerations all factor in to render the subject even more ambiguous.

Of course, the main rationale for the Commission's use of the term was a combination of meeting the needs of a society increasingly reliant on modern digital technologies, ensuring the skills necessary for the new "information-intensive" economies and the recognition of the ripple effect that both elements would have for the social environment. The use of *e*Learning and universities to pass on the notion of information society in the public domain, I think, looks rather naïve in retrospect. If the intent is to drive purely political and social programs embracing technologies, then the association of the term information society with digitization is likely to develop those "synaptic" connections in the public mind needed to nurture its acquiescence. But if the ambition is to use universities as incubators of those political ideals, it is the wrong path to follow, as people in academia are far more discriminative and critical of ready-made easy labels than the public at large. That academic restraint that dictates an analytical view of concepts and ideas is likely to go against the political urgings of officialdom, be it European or national.

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