Chapter 3

The Convergence Theory on ICT, Society, and Human Beings: Towards the Good ICT Society

Gunilla Bradley
Royal Institute of Technology (KTH,) Sweden

ABSTRACT

The convergence model illustrates ongoing changes in the Net Society. The theoretical model synthesises the theoretical framework in the author’s research on the psychosocial work environment and computerization. Interdisciplinary research programs were initiated by the author in the 1970s, leading to analysis of societal changes related to various periods in ‘the history’ of ICT. The description of the convergence model is structured with reference to the core concepts of Globalisation, ICT, Life Environment, Life Role, and Effects on Humans. Convergence and Interactions are important features of the model that organizes analysis at the individual, organisational, community, and societal levels.

INTRODUCTION

When I celebrated my 70th birthday we arranged a huge party for friends and relatives in a former palace in the centre of Stockholm. Old schoolmates also attended. A family orchestra played and people danced. There were many speeches. Dr Darek Haftor informed us that he and Professor Anita Mirijamdotter, with the support of the newly established Linnaeus University, planned a Festschrift and a Fest to honour me. I was delighted by this wonderful initiative; to my mind this initiative usually occurs after you have died. So why not!

Early on the editors had asked me to contribute a chapter about the development of my convergence theory. Should I write a paper in my own Festschrift? Nonetheless, I went ahead and submitted an outline. I later learned that many chapter authors had referred to my convergence model. So when the editors elaborated a structure for the Festschrift chapters, they created a section on the ‘Convergence theory on ICT, Society, and Human Beings’, insisting that there were good reasons to get a concise description of the model ‘from the horse’s mouth’.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-057-0.ch003
Let me begin with some history of how the Convergence Model and its conceptual components developed. For this, we need to return to the 1970s, when countries like Sweden were attempting to build political, economic, and social structures that would shape a sustainable democratic society but also provide a balance between the main political systems of capitalism and socialism. This was a great challenge for a small country geographically located between the super powers that represented these political systems. In 1977, the Act on Employee Participation in Decision-Making (MBL) was signed. The concept of a psychosocial work environment was integrated in Swedish laws and in agreements between the labour market parties. Over the next 20 years, Sweden was on its way to introducing economic democracy through distributed citizen ownership of production. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, public anxiety grew that subsequently led to the election of a liberal government and many of the structures shaped during the former governments were dissolved. The evolution of societal structures and their representations in political action at the time were later described for international readers in my 1989 book *Computers and the Psychosocial Work Environment*.

During those 20 years, in the 1970s and 1980s, advanced studies examined the corresponding structures in work life that were facilitated by available superstructures at the societal level. The focus of information and communication technology (ICT)-related research was on participation in the development of computerised information systems. Some research programs also addressed the broader work life structures (illustrated later in my discussion of ‘Objective (Structural) Work Environment’ concepts in Figures 2 and 3). The focus was on monotonous and repetitive work that was by and large found in the industrial sector but also in the service sector. ‘Alienation among workers’ was the title of many articles during the 1970s, often with reference to Marx and to Blauner’s book * Alienation and Freedom*. Along with the change in governance philosophy that took place during the early 1990s, this dimension of the psychosocial work environment is no longer on the agenda of labour unions or is found in work life studies.

For many years theories, methods, and results from my research were published only in the Swedish language. *Psychosocial Work Environment and Computers* was my first international book (1986 in Swedish; 1989 in English). The research programs I initiated and led dealt with the four principal historical periods of computerisation and ICT: from the mainframe period with the use of batch processing systems; to the online period and use of display terminals; later to micro-computerization at the appearance of microchips; and to the net period where communication technologies have played a dominant role in the convergence of computer, tele-technology, and media technologies.

During these many years I worked and developed my theoretical framework independently of other theorists who have contributed to thinking about the Information Society. To exclude them from my personal history would neglect how their thinking helps locate the evolution of my own thinking about the complexity of interactions with technology and its effects on the individual, work life, and society; thus a section of this chapter briefly summarises their major theoretical contributions. The reference list at the end of the chapter provides some of the sources where I describe the model in detail and how it was developed as a result of the interaction between theory and the more than 30 years of empirical research that I have been involved in.

The convergence model has become kind of ‘life partner’ when I reflect on my personal history as an academic and when I look at the world around me. My focus has always been on analysing problems in the world that I have perceived as important, not defined in a disciplinary way as a sociologist, psychologist, computer scientist, or informatician. Nearly every day I get ‘confirma-