Chapter VI
The EU and the Information Society:
From E-Knowledge to E-Inclusion,
In Search of Global Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The rhetoric used worldwide by policymakers in promoting the uptake of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) emphasizes the advantages deriving for all citizens from the advent of the Information Society (IS). Among the democratic features of the IS particularly praised are despatialisation processes, leading to a sort of "death of distance" mainly benefitting the inhabitants of territories traditionally located in peripheral and backward areas, as well as the enlarged global market. However, research shows that the uptake of ICT varies territorially, mainly following wealth distribution, among other variables. This consideration would corroborate the view of those reading the rhetoric over IS as a facade covering the restructuring of capitalist economy at the global level and arguing that the uptake of ICT, based on an unequal model of development, further strengthens rather than reduces the territorial and socio-economic divides between centres and peripheries. The chapter confronts those two readings of the main rationale behind policymaking for the development of an IS by looking at the case of the European Union (EU). The argument is that, although global economic competition in the ICT sector seems to be the mainspring that led the EU to promote policies for the IS, social concerns are emerging as the flagship of the policy, increasingly tuned with other policies within a wider European developmental strategy, which may start up a new field on which to compete for global leadership.
INTRODUCTION: THE DOUBLE VISION OF INFORMATION SOCIETY

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are today considered as one of the crucial policy fields in which to invest in order to achieve economic competitiveness within a globalized market. This belief is strongly upheld in governmental records of different countries (Brazil, 2001; Commission, 1999; US, 2001) or in policy recommendations of international organizations (OECD, 1986, 2003; WB, 2002) supporting the expansion of the ICT sector, both at the national and international level. Although the measures proposed by those documents mostly have a techno-economic character (as in the case of infrastructure or e-business development), they are usually inserted within a wider discourse on the Information Society (IS). This evocative policy-frame generally implies the desirability of shifting from the age of industrial modern democracy to a new era brought about by digital revolution.1 The ‘Information Age’ is in fact usually presented as offering unique opportunities for regenerating, restructuring, or reinventing democratic societies in the direction of a more participatory, accountable and efficient structure and a better provision of education, health care, business and administration services. Thus in information societies access and use of ICT become considered as part of citizenship rights to be granted by governments committed in the removal of ‘digital divides’ or ‘digital inequalities’. A fundamental role in the production of IS democratic features is played by the despatialisation processes that would follow ICT uptake, leading to a sort of ‘death of distance’ mainly benefitting—in the medium to long term—the inhabitants of territories located in peripheral and backward areas.2

To allow communications to work their magic, poor countries will need sound regulations, open markets, and, above all, widely available education. Where these are available, countries with good communications will be indistinguishable. They will all have access to services of world class quality. They will be able to join a world club of traders, electronically linked, and to operate as though geography has no meaning. This equality of access will be one of the great prizes of the death of distance. (Cairncross, 2001, p.16)

However, research in the field describes the diffusion of ICT as featured with inequalities in terms of access and use, mainly related to wealth, social status, gender, age, and ethnicity (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Martin & Robinson, 2004; Norris, 2001). The persistence of those inequalities is advanced by those authors viewing the IS not as a democratic and open society, but as a new form of capitalism, oriented towards accumulating economic, political and cultural capital and based on structural inequalities (Schiller, 2000; Webster, 2002). Disguised behind the illusive image of an IS, ‘transnational informational capitalism’ (or ‘digital capitalism’) would enhance competition by promoting greater concentration of capital and centralization of production, further exacerbating existing social and territorial inequalities (Fuchs 2008; Dawson & Bellamy Foster, 1998).

This view relates current governments’ policymaking on the IS to the neoliberal turn waving since the mid 1980s in Western democracies (Dyer-Witheford, 2002; Stewart et al., 2006). A particularly evident case of this alliance is considered to be the United States (US), where the trend towards ‘hyper-commercialism’ in ICT policies3 prompted by globalization processes appears to be little resisted by governments – of both sides – seen as increasingly prone to the dictates of the market.4 From this view governmental policies, speaking of IS but promoting a commercial use of ICT, are seen not only as not favouring democracy but as representing a frontal assault to its principles (McChesney, 2000).

Based on the assumptions of market economies, the internet has come to be defined mostly as a
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