

Chapter I

Knowledge, Culture, and Society in the Information Age

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ABSTRACT

Informational society, mainly after the development of online and mobile devices, is changing the forms with which we build our image of the reality. Speed, virtuality, and networking are three of the factors of this change. Speed means that information is circulating faster and faster, but also that it becomes aged very soon, with the necessity of being updated. Virtuality, after its first conceptualizations like a parallel dimension in the 1990s, is nowadays an integral part of our system of relations. Networking, finally, is becoming the main category for interpreting our culture, made of multiple dimensions of sociability, inside and outside the net. Knowledge,

in this context, is not yet a truth authenticated; it is, on the contrary, a social activity, a process quite similar to a conversation where each of the discussants is negotiating a point of view. This is the scenario into which modern teachers, parents, and youngsters are acting.

INTRODUCTION

Since a few years ago, the research in the field of social and communication sciences has described our time as a transition phase from the industrial age to the information age. This passage is usually seen as a substitution of machines and productive routines with information technologies, but we

need to deepen our analysis. Castells (1996) accurately suggests moving the discourse from technology protagonist to the ways in which knowledge is produced and relationships between individuals and systems are constructed within the society. According to this perspective, the industrial age ceases to be identified with Ely Whitney's cotton-gin, Stephenson's locomotive, or the mechanization of labour processes; it rather indicates a particular sort of social organization—based on Taylorism—regarding every single aspect of human activity, from school to family. If Castells' approach is worthwhile, a similar discourse can be promoted in relation to the information age. It cannot be identified with the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT); better it could be bended with the systematic reorganization that these technologies promote on social level. Rather than talking about information society, the Spanish sociologist prefers to refer to the concept of informational society. In the first case, information is the content of society, while in the second one it defines the nature of society itself. Informational society is a society “made out of information.” In the next paragraph, we will better understand how.

The process of rearrangement leading to this society might be interpreted according to at least three meaningful factors:

1. The **speed** of knowledge exchanges and knowledge aging. In fact, the transactions, thanks to network implementation, are not based on goods anymore, but on information. This makes the exchange almost instantaneous (i.e., in the case of tickets release or of home banking). The same speed hits the possibility of individual knowledge, capitalized in initial training through the educational system, to answer properly to the needs of a society adopting an innovative rhythm that is at least double with respect to knowledge updating.
2. **Virtuality**, which means the clearer disconnection between space and time, to which we can refer macrophenomena such as the globalization of industries and markets and micropractices such as teleworking or video conferencing. The separation between space and time means to emancipate information sender and receiver from the need of sharing the same place at the same time. This also means a great flexibility of places and time in information access.
3. **Networking**, which means that the net metaphor becomes a paradigm explaining most of our social practices. Our society is characterized by the need for a collective dimension, even if with evident contradictions: intelligence is collective, work is done in staff, and cooperation and collaboration seem strategic scenarios in different fields, from economy to didactics. The connectivity becomes a cultural macroindicator; the diffusion of the net is participating to a progressive move from the local to the planetary dimension: besides, in the economy development and in political and social macrophenomena (disappearance of the idea of nation, migratory movements, cultural melting pot), *globalization* mainly consists in aiding the circulation of symbolic meanings and this depends on the telematic-based connectivity.

The consequence of this set of so decisive changes, under the perspective of cultural sociology, has been a new importance of knowledge. Its creation, elaboration, and diffusion are nowadays the main source of productivity and power. This means a new protagonist of symbolic goods. Following Baudrillard (1976), in traditional societies goods had a specific value; today the value is represented by the good itself. It is possible to verify that thinking about commercial “objects” as television formats, Internet services, or about

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