

INFORMATION SOCIETY

European Strategy

ERMA IVOŠ
Filozofski fakultet u Zadru
Faculty of Philosophy in Zadar

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In this essay the author analyses and put some questions concerning the European Strategy document on Information Society and technological development. As the document mainly considers the needs and the future trends highly-developed European countries the question is whether this document can be applicable to the Eastern European countries.

KEY WORDS: technology, information, strategy, development

The emergence of an "Information Society", prompted by the on-going advances in information and communication technologies, is often referred to as a revolution. The deep transformations already perceivable or announced in economic, public as well as in private life, do indeed amount to an economic, societal and cultural revolution. According to most general opinion the "Information revolution" offers large opportunities for citizens, businesses and governments: opportunity in particular to meet the challenges of economic globalisation and unemployment; opportunity also for greater quality of life, more open and "citizen-friendly" government and greater quality of public services; opportunity finally for accelerating the advent of a new model of sustainable development.

Since December 1993, the European Commission has undertaken to formulate an integrated strategy to meet the challenges of the Information Society. An Action Plan was adopted by the Member States in September 1994. This Action Plan provides the European Union with an integrated framework encompassing all activities related to the emergence of the Information Society. This includes competition, telecommunications, the single market, audio-visual, regional cohesion, social aspects as well as the cultural and linguistics dimensions.

Principles underlying the European Strategy

The European strategy towards the Information Society rests on eight core principles:

1. Market forces must play a leading role in the emergence of the Information Society. The private sector has in particular the responsibility of important investments required to develop advanced communications infrastructures and services.

2. To maximise the driving role of market forces, telecommunications infrastructures and services must be fully liberalised. Liberalisation must ensure the provision of universal service as well as the interconnection of networks and interoperability of services. It must give rise to a truly trans-European information infrastructure.

3. European liberalisation must be echoed abroad by an equally open access to the telecommunications market of third countries.

4. A high level of protection is required for privacy, copyrights and intellectual property rights.

5. Businesses, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, must be made and kept aware of the opportunity offered by the new technology.

6. The public at large must also be informed about the stakes of the Information Society.

7. Cultural and linguistic diversity must be preserved and promoted.

Finally, developing countries must be fully associated to the development of the global Information Society.

The Goals of the European Strategy

This strategy has three specific objectives:

First, to ensure that the European information-related sectors, i.e. telecommunications, computing, consumer electronics and content industries, reap the benefits of the emerging multimedia market. The industrial, employment and cultural stakes are huge.

Second, to make sure that all potential users, whether individuals or businesses, enjoy the benefits of the new technologies. In the professional sphere, it is important that small and medium-sized enterprises, and not only large corporations, make full use of them. As for private users, it is crucial to prevent the creation of a two-tier Information Society, in which only part of the population would have access to new services.

Third, to ensure that areas of societal interest, for instance health care, education, training, the environment or employment systems, also benefit from the Information Society. Indeed, if the development of the Information Society is entirely left to the private sector, a number of public areas risk being left out because they lack the prospects of sufficient profits.

Regarding the creation of a new regulators framework, Member States had agreed to fully liberalise services and infrastructures by 1 January 1998, and important sectors have already been liberalised. Other initiatives concern intellectual property rights and the protection of privacy. The European Union also contributes directly and indirectly to the emergence of new products and services, and to the strengthening of Europe's information related industries on the basis of its existing instruments, in particular the innovation, research and development programmes. Where necessary, it launches new initiatives. For instance we mention here the initiative to support the development of trans-European telecommunications networks in areas of societal interest or the launch of programmes aimed at supporting some key segments of the European information industry, for instance multimedia content and educational software. As regards social, societal, cultural and linguistic concerns, the Commission has created two independent fore to address these issues, i.e. an 124 member Information Society Forum and an 14 member High Level Group of experts.

The Global Dimension

The European Union is of course not the only economic power to have developed an Information Society strategy. Many other nations have formulated their own plans, including its main economic partners, the United States, Japan and Canada.

The European strategy takes fully into account this world-wide drive towards a "Global Information Society". It recognises in particular that a number of critical issues have to be addressed internationally, for instance market access, interconnection and standards. The global debate on the Information Society was launched in 1995 at a G7 Conference on the Information Society hosted by the Commission in Brussels. During this landmark event, G7 ministers endorsed the European concept of "Information Society", which emphasises the social, societal and cultural dimension of the Information Revolution. The G7 also agreed on a series of core principles largely inspired to guide the world's entry into the Information Age. It has also launched a series of regional initiatives with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as well as its Mediterranean neighbours, such as for instance the Rome Conference held in May 1996. At the same time a number of important issues for tomorrow were perceived.

- The first concerns the social dimension and the Commission prepared a Green Paper on the Information Society and Social Policy.
- The second issue is whether or not new on-line services such as the Internet should be regulated. This issue has gained momentum in Europe over the last months with the circulation of offensive material on the Internet. A central question here is how such regulation could actually be enforced. This issue was raised at an informal Telecommunications Council held in Bologna in April 1996.

The third issue concerns the convergence between telecommunications and broadcasting. The separate treatment reserved to these two sectors in most Member States leads to a lack of coherence as telecommunications and broadcasting services are increasingly going to converge.

The specific themes are of utmost importance. The emergence of a new model of sustainable development which means that it is making sure that our children and grandchildren will live in a world where natural resources have not been plundered and where living conditions have not deteriorated. In this respect, the use of new information and communication technologies can have a direct contribution, for instance through a greater efficiency of environmental monitoring, road traffic management or the prevention of industrial disasters. Furthermore, the shift towards a networked economy means a lesser reliance on physical moves of both goods and people, which will indirectly save natural resources and curb urban congestion and pollution. The strategic importance of education and training is twofold. First, we have to learn to apply new technologies to education and training in order to improve the quality of learning and teaching, as well as developing new ways of learning such as Life-

long Education. On the other hand, education and training is the central means to enable people to work in the Information Age and make the best possible use of new services. And finally, the specific topics are **disabled and elderly people**. The contribution of information and communication technologies to the social and societal integration of the sick and handicapped people to improve their quality of life is already noticeable and facing the challenge that in highly developed societies population is growing older means that there is a need to provide more tailor-made services for the elderly people. Telematic applications is playing a leading role in these three specific fields.

Some observations on Technology assessment

The Husita Conference held in Helsinki (Finland, 1996) was likely to contribute to refine the European vision of the Information Society and the framework for questioning and reporting there was: human services and information technology, information for citizens, vocational education and training, provision of services and future development. Some questions were raised on Technology Assessment.

Technology Assessment is a rather vague scientific discipline but that doesn't imply that Technology Assessment is not relevant. Technology Assessment only takes into account societal, economical and technological effects of technological change in relation to each other. It takes the stand that **“technological developments should not be regarded as exogenous determining factors but rather as the product of activities and relationships within society as a whole”** Later concepts of Technology Assessment add to this that Technology Assessment should be seen as **“a response to an increasing necessity and need to socialize decision-making on technology”** (Smits and Leyten 1991, 339).

In the early years of its existence Technology Assessment was mainly driven by expectations, ideas perhaps, that scientific research was an instrument to manage technological change and a means to predict future trends. As many participants of the Husita Conference agreed, history has proven this to be very difficult, perhaps even false. The new concepts of Technology Assessment are therefore more driven by limitations: the limitations of researches predicting the future, the limitation of rationality as the driving force behind policy making and so on.

In the early nineties the concept of Technology Assessment contained a clear process driven approach. **“Technology Assessment is a process consisting**

of analysis of technological developments and their consequences and the discussions in response to those analyses. The goal of Technology Assessment is to provide information to those people involved with technological development in order to help them establish their strategic policy" (1991, 340).

Although Technology Assessment has been oriented towards policymakers, things have changed. In 1995 Rip. et al published a book - *Managing Technology in Society* - that addresses this orientation more extensive. Constructive Technology Assessment as it is called is very much focused on the relation between society, economy and technology. It is "...aimed at improving the societal integrating of technology and influencing the use and further development of technology" (1995, 44).

Essential in all cases and all verities of Technology Assessment is that it addresses technology as a **social phenomenon**. The essential question is not whether technological developments should steer society and societal changes, or vice versa, but the question of social learning. It is clear that new technologies find their way to us not via some predestined part, or by way of very elaborate scheme. Quite a few technological changes seem to be the product of a complex process of interdependencies and mutual influences. But in spite of its important role in a highly technological society Technological Assessment seems to be a threatened discipline. In the United States the Organisation of Technology Assessment / OTA found itself in the uncomfortable position of losing all financial support but in Europe the climate for Technology Assessment seems to be the right one. The exception are Central and Eastern European countries which are mainly in a state of chronic underdevelopment both in economic and technological, field. That is why the European Strategy is not without its doubts, Heather Menzies book called "Whose Brave New World? The information highway and the new economy" (1996) is filled with interesting observations and an essential one is that the slogan **Think Globally, Act Locally** is a dangerous one. Menzies suggests we should **network globally, but think and act locally** which implies for instance that all kind of initiatives should be based on the local situation, but carried out through the Internet. Dutch social scientist Jack Burgers argues for instance that although the world seems to be becoming smaller and smaller - or society is becoming larger and larger - as a direct result of new means of communication, the importance of local communities is not diminishing.

In such circumstances many citizens in Eastern European countries, Croatian included, don't know how their communities are preparing themselves for global networks and a competitive Information Technology environment, they have no opportunity to discuss how telecommunications technology can

improve education, health care, culture, entertainment, business concerns, economic development and government interaction in their communities. Broadly speaking, they have no knowledge nor tools to meet these challenges in their everyday lives.

Information Society and European Strategy OK, but indeed - Whose Brave New World? Whose dreams and whose realities?

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Erma Ivoš: INFORMATIČKO DRUŠTVO
Europska strategija

S a ž e t a k

U ovom se radu problematiziraju i aktualiziraju neki aspekti informatičkog društva koji proizlaze iz europskih dokumenata o informatizaciji i tehnološkom razvoju unutar Europske Unije.

S obzirom da postavljeni standardi odgovaraju potrebama i mogućnostima razvijenijih zemalja unutar Unije, postavlja se pitanje o tehnološkim perspektivama i mogućnostima istočnoeuropskih, postkomunističkih zemalja.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: tehnologija, informatizacija, strategija, razvoj