The unique information society in Europe: a debate on information policy in the digital age / Michal Solomon

Abstract:

We are witnessing a new era, the post-modernistic era, where information and knowledge have become the new commodity – the new power. Information is the base for knowledge, and knowledge is the physical manifestation of information.

One of the reasons for the lack of consensus surrounding the definition of the term 'Information Society', is, that indeed, it is difficult to define, and that many definitions exist. Researchers in this area tend to define and assign criteria to the Information Society according to their own believes. The most prominent definitions today are based on Technological, Social, Cultural, and Political criteria.

However, we have to take into account, that it may be possible that the Information Society is not definable at this stage, and a more retrospective view is needed in order to attempt such a definition. Furthermore, it is certainly difficult to either measure or evaluate the impact of technological change on society, but despite the arguments, it is clear to all, that the Information Society is here, and is here to stay.

One thing is clear: it is acknowledged that a common and clear policy is needed, in order to deal with the challenges of the Information Society. Such a policy needs to set guidelines in order to accomplish the Information Society: In the social field – inclusion, cohesion, open information systems for all, information have's (and not have nots), low cost services and hardware, skills acquirement, security on the net, etc. In the technological field – market driven and government initiative, deregulation in the Telecom sector, etc.

This paper will look into the evolvement of the Information Society policy in the European Union. The European Information Society is derived from the politics and history of the European Union, which put the people of Europe first.

The nature of this paper requires a complex methodology. A historical review of the European Union and its institutions will be given. A qualitative study and content analysis will be performed on EU documents, relating to the Information Society, and the reflection and application of the Information Society in Educational and Environmental policies will be studied.

This paper will focus on formal documents (reports, communications, green and white papers), published by the EU. The documents chosen are the most important policy shaping papers.

The main research question in this paper is:
Have there been changes in the development of the European Union Information Policy in the years 1993-2002?

This question intends to prove the hypothesis, that the Information Society in the EU as undergone a change of concept – from a concept where technologies are in the center, to a concept where technologies and social aspects have equal footing, and the citizens of Europe come first.
The content analysis performed on the documents relating to the Information Society Policy shows, that there have indeed been changes in the Information Society Policy in the EU during the 1990's.

One can definitely say, that the hypothesis is correct. Based on the chosen documents, it is clear that the Information Society in the EU has undergone a change in concept – which has influenced policy making – towards a more social view of the Information Society, and of it's impact on EU citizens. The

EU Information Society Policy now puts EU citizens first, and combines Technological, Economical and Social concepts.

The definition of the Information-Society Policy in this paper is as follows: Formal initiatives and plans, which intend to realize a series of moves, combining technological and social aspects, with the intent to create an equal and just society, and realize the European vision (an economically and socially cohesive Europe).

One can, undeniably, say, that the first half of the 20th century was extremely traumatic for Europe. The two hideous world wars have driven Europe to seeking different solutions to their problems – through integration, and the weakening of the nationalistic elements in European countries.
One can, definitely, say, that the favorable integration process has strengthened the inclination to integrate further, without loss of individuality for each country. Also, a common social tradition exists in Europe.

The unique way in which Europe has developed, creating a multi-level system of local, regional, national and supranational levels of interaction, also contributes to the formation of unique institutions. The EU is neither a state, nor an international organization, but has similar characteristics to both.

It is quite clear, that we have before us a special and complex system, with a unique historical development. This system combines many actors, who interact with each other on several levels, and on many subjects.

American and global initiatives regarding the Information Society are the main reasons for getting Europe to realize the importance of the Information Society. The old European fears of American takeover of the worldwide communications sector, leaving Europe behind, have contributed as well.
In the early 1990's, the Information Society in Europe was perceived as a technological and economic society, in the creation of which the private sector

had the leading role – a similar approach as was embodied in the American Information Superhighway. However, after a few years, it was realized in Europe, that this approach was not enough. It became obvious, that a social approach needed to be incorporated as well. The European Information Society is characterized by the fusion of a market driven economy, technology and strong social orientation.

The test cases submitted here, the subject of which is the impact of the Information Society on Education and Environment, are both high on Europe's priority list.

In the next decade, Education systems will need to deal with many challenges, a growing amount of study subjects, the use of new ICTs, and new teaching (and learning) methods. In addition, one must not forget, that most Western societies today have to deal with growing immigration issues, which are also reflected in the Education systems.

But the biggest challenge is, no doubt, the technological challenge – ICTs – as a new tool in the classroom, and as a new study subject. Having the skills to use the new ICTs, has become part of the societal skills needed in this day and age, and the Education system has a major part to play in helping to achieve this. The Education system also plays a leading role in the creation of European citizenship.

The Environment is perceived as one of the most important subjects in the EU. Information and knowledge are perceived as power, and part of the decision making process, especially with regard to sustainable development. One of the ways to marry these two fields is the Internet. The Internet allows the EU citizen to participate in the decision making process, especially on the issues of the Environment.

The European Commission established the European Environment Agency for exactly this purpose – the EEA deals with the collection, preservation, organization and dissemination of Environmental data, allowing free access to this information to all European citizens, with the view that this Information will contribute to the decision making process.

The research questions for both test cases are as follows:

- Is the EU Information policy reflected in Education and Environmental policies?
- In both fields, are ICTs used in order to implement the goals of the Information Society?

The hypothesis for the Education test case is as follows: the Education policy is derived from the Information Society policy, the goals and principles of the Information Society policy enrich and drive the Education policy, and the Education policy helps to implement the Information Society.

The Education System has a strong connection to the Information Society. A lot of emphasis is put on Education in all the policy shaping documents. Several projects, which are part of the EU Education program, stand out: The Netdays project – combining ICTs and Multimedia for cultural, solidarity, inclusion and cohesion purposes, and ECDL – through which EU citizens can gain Technological knowledge and know how, which will, again, allow for a more inclusive and cohesive society in Europe.

One can conclude that the hypothesis brought forward in this paper is correct. The connection between the Information Society Policy and the Education Policy in the EU is a symbiotic-circular connection. The Information Society will not be able to exist without Education, and the Education Policy is definitely in line with the challenges of the Information Society.

The hypothesis for the Environment test case is as follows: the EU perception of Information and Knowledge in the Environment sector, is derived from the social vision of the EU (people first). Use has been made of the ICTs in order to deal with environmental challenges, with the purpose that use of proper information will benefit the decision making process.

The Information Society Policy is most definitely visible in the European Environment Policy, Mostly through the need to include EU citizens in the decision making process regarding the Environment, one of the issues that define the Information Society as a whole, and the EU Information Society especially.

The establishment of the European Environment Agency is the perfect example of the materialization of the Information Society. The EEA, whose job is to collect, catalog, and organize Environmental Information, and bring this Information through the Internet to all EU citizens, with the understanding that Information = power, and with the will to include all EU citizens in a knowledge based decision making process, most certainly embodies Information Society's aims.