

The Information Society

Prof. Simon Rogerson

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This edition of ETHIcol draws from participating in the Information Society and Intelligent Information Technologies in the 21st Century conference held in Moscow in April 2001. In his address to the conference, Ivan Sergeev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation explained that the information society needed to recognise cultural diversity and a multi-polar world structure. If we are to achieve an inclusive information society then this must be taken into account.

The key issue is one of enabling citizens. The recent report from The British Council entitled "Developments in electronic governance" suggests an evolution from passive information giving to active citizen approach. Conditions for participation are categorised as:

- enabling participation in the information society
- creating the infrastructure for the information society
- fostering a sense of citizenship and cultural identity using ICT

In a previous edition of ETHIcol a series of six questions was posed about the reasonableness of computing applications. These can be used to consider the issues surrounding building an inclusive Information Society based upon the three conditions above.

So does the Information Society:

promote social and economic justice?

Clearly the emergence of electronic governance has great potential to promote such justice. The proposal by Citizens Online to create a Civic Commons in Cyberspace is a good example of realising this potential. However, we must be aware that such advances will change the relationship between citizens and government. The ramifications must be considered very carefully.

restore reciprocity rather than consolidate power in the hands of the minority?

The first point leads on to the issue of reciprocity. Media moguls are already wielding great power in the Information Society. Unhampered access to the on-line world can become very difficult in this situation. It is unclear how the Information Society will unfold now there are a small number of big players controlling strategic elements of content and infrastructure.

benefit the many rather than the few?

Currently the vast majority of the facilities are available in English using a standard interface and presented with a Western culture bias. It requires a high level of literacy and numeracy to navigate to a chosen facility. Much more must be done to ensure access to people who do not have English as their mother tongue or are of lower intellect or have a physical or mental restriction or are from a different culture.

put people first rather than the technology?

The tools of the Information Society are still primitive. The day when the technology is transparent will be the day people have been put first. Gone will be the need for identity numbers, digital signals and the like. Gone will be the need to be computer literate and dextrous.

limit economic gain because of potential social and environmental cost?

The much heralded efficiency gains through computerisation become questionable as more socially sensitive applications are implemented. The abolition of data redundancy may appear to be key in efficient computerisation but may be unacceptable if having only one occurrence of a data item causes socially and ethically unacceptable data relationships within the system in question.

favour the reversible over the irreversible to ensure impact of rogue ICT applications can be reversed?

Systems of the Information Society require massive investment. This means traditional systems are likely to be left in poor state of repair or may be phased out completely. There is no going back and there is no choice in such situations. This may prove disastrous for society. Perhaps the Information Society should be developed as having complementary systems - some computerised and others non-computerised.

Clearly there is much to be done in realising the inclusive Information Society. What are you going to do by way of contributing to universal access so all of society can flourish in this new age?

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

Professor Simon Rogerson
Director
Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility
Faculty of Computing Sciences and Engineering
De Montfort University
The Gateway
Leicester
LE1 9BH
Tel:(+44) 116 257 7475
Fax:(+44) 116 207 8159
Email:<srog@dmu.ac.uk>
Home Page: (<http://www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk>)