The Strategic Role of ICTs in the European Union Society of Citizens

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Introduction

Being a citizen of Europe as well as of the world at large requires in part the acquisition of different skills, abilities and knowledge. As the European community matures, new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) acquire increased importance for its citizenry. More and more references are made to the fact that current and future societies need empowered citizens who have knowledge and the ability to utilize ICTs. This is expected to play a significant role in the formation of a European society of informed citizens within a market society which is competitive in the Global Village. Understanding and use of ICTs are expected to help in preserving and enhancing the fundamental values but also rights of European citizens in relation to among other things freedom, safety, justice, and education.

The European Union (EU) through its policies and actions directs and supports the diffusion of technology of information, in public life, the home, the school and in the daily life of European citizen. Thus, its aim is to create a society of information.

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings from a cursory investigation of the function and discourse ICTs bring to the discussion of European citizenship so as to help determine what the composition and creation of a European Society of ICTs entails. Our hypothesis is that ICTs do not represent a neutral tool in the development of the desired European citizenry within the 'Polis' Global Village but rather that they take on a fundamental formative character.

Some of the changes ICTs bring to the Society of Citizens

Discussions on the question of the role and use of ICTs in a society of citizens have been at the forefront of topics related to social, educational, economic as well as political issues (Selwyn, 2004). According to Turnbull and Muir (2001: 429), 'The pace of technological and social change in the second half of the 20th century has left no section of society unaffected. While technological advances have wrought irrevocable changes to traditional work practices, social relationships also have been inevitably strained and tested...' Consequently, in a world where knowledge and information are paramount, it has been argued that European citizens need new skills to adapt to rapidly changing life and work environments and to thus be able to fully participate in society. A priority for the European Union is to ensure that everyone can effectively use and benefit from ICTs (Europa, 2006).

We see that having the ability to access and manipulate ICT literacy is becoming an essential life skill and that it is not neutral but a socially constructed one (MacKay, 1992). On the other hand, the inability to access or use ICT effectively is becoming a barrier to social integration and personal development. According the European Thematic Portal site, in order to ensure economic performance and social cohesion a

'digital divide' needs to be avoided between those with access to ICT and the knowledge and skills to take advantage of them, and those without (Europa, 2006).

In 2000, the Lisbon Agenda set the ambitious goal of ensuring that every citizen has the appropriate skills needed to live and work in a new Information Society for all. The challenge is seen as being twofold: a) to fully exploit the ICT potential to overcome traditional forms of exclusion, and b) ensuring that all citizens benefit from the Information Society.

However, some of the changes ICTs bring to the Society of Citizens that have to be taken into consideration if the goal is to be meet include:

1.   A new conception of time and space wherein production time is greatly decreased, problems and decisions are taken quickly whereas the place products are produced is no longer important. The important change in the time and space conceptions creates basic organizational structure that intensifies innovation and as Virilio (1998: 19, 109) points out, may lead to 'a disorientation of our relation to the real'.

2.   A different conception of reality, that is, 'virtual reality' wherein daily life in the European 'polis' (city) includes the substance of politics as referenced by Aristotle. Here the 'city' and political action are comprehended with the importance that Aristotle lends to this process. The increased speed and the 'space-less' character of action in general, converts political action, to that of a virtual and dominating 'city'.

3.   Reconsideration of the meaning of *individual 'citizenship'* against the negative effects of globalization. In this 'city', wherein individual citizenship needs to be contrasted with the negative effects of globalization, we cannot then but wonder and seek the nature of citizen action. The identity of the citizen is shaped and solidified at the boundaries of politics and 'city' that is merely a neighbourhood of global meta-city, the centre of which is found everywhere and its region nowhere (Virilio, 1998).

4.   New *ICT based economy* and *governance*, wherein ICTs convert the form and the content of world market society and where issues of governance play a fundamental role. In this 'new economy', organisations, institutions and citizens, are confronted with the necessity of creating new skills in areas where the new social and economic relations serve globalised structures.

Questions that arise

Given the fact that this particular presentation seeks to investigate the operation and discourse that ICTs bring to a European society of citizens, the determination of discourse that they import in the daily life of European Citizen also determines the composition and creation of a European Society of ICTs. Thus, we need to look at some of the questions that arise and touch on examples of the discussion that might follow:

What kind social divide is generated by the introduction of ICTs as fundamental tools of communication and access?

The social divide generated includes both power and symbolic control of the 'digital machine' towards education policy and the state. It is important to comprehend that ICTs have a regulatory function in the communication frame importing new layouts into everyday routines with global consequences. Digital technology is supported by two axes: on the one hand, 'communication' and from the other on that of the 'tool' (Wise, 1997). The 'digital machine' is important for its influence potential and as a transmitter of cultural importance, which has the potential of producing and of replicating culture.

It becomes clear that looking at the type of knowledge that is produced and how it is produced (sender, mode and receiver) and their cultural importance are essential for this study of uses and repercussions of technology on the education for a society of citizens. Reality is one and the same as the medium. The marketing director of Sony has said: 'We did not want to simply make a film for the Internet. We want to use the Internet in order to we sell our films. We create a message that advertises the means and we use the means in order to advertise the message. [It is] a recipe of unending feedback' (Giannopoulos 1995; 36). This dualism perhaps is one of the more basic characteristics of modern western societies. Technology as a structural-framework shapes the social space in an interactive relationship, but simultaneously as articulation of linguistic expression. Symbol and tool are revealed as basic elements regulating subjective action. Under this prism technology determines not only sphere of production, but also the totality of relations and action of subjects in the social space. The personal computer is thus rendered a machine of symbolic expression, but also the conception of social phenomena and relations (Lamnias & Kamarianos, 2000; Wise, 1997). This potential of the 'digital machine', and the relationship of technology and language, constitutes the source of its power and control articulations.

What are the boundaries and protection of 'civil rights'?

The relationship between the symbol and the tool designates the boundaries and the nature of the protection. This should not be considered exclusively as the relationship of tool to hand, but as the structure that pre-exists and quantitatively and qualitatively fixes the existence and the format of control, power and consequently, rights. The coexistence of symbol and tool pre-exists the relation of technology and subject and shapes the social space, legalising technology as a factor of action and rights. The particularity and the importance of this factor consist precisely in its ability to interact with its environment and consequently in its force to impose its regulating discourse on the other subjects (Wise 1997:69-70). These regulating practices and the normative codes constitute the boundaries set.

The swift moving changes constantly alter the boundaries and parameters. Speed is a given variable of the system, as much on the level of hardware as on that of software. The need for achieving system perfection and quality aims at increasing the speed of transmission of data on the one hand, while on the other it leads to attracting new users (Cebrian 1998).

The internal nature of technology is a political construction. The daily political practices reveal essential aspects of technocratic thought and language, the cohesive elements included in, technocracy, productivity and effectiveness (Rousseas, 1982).

What are the characteristics of the ICT 'discourse' (λόγου)?

These include the development of a new 'ethos' that relates to and is consistent with the spirit of productivity and effectiveness that are fundamental principles of our socio-cultural system. The definition of 'common goods' is differentiated at the individual as well as the social level. We have the strong and active supporters of ICT's role and importance versus those who are hesitant with respect to ICT and who may be fearful and employ avoidance practices with respect to technology or do not have access and are therefore in a disadvantageous position. This is something that education in general and citizenship education more specifically can influence.

What are the power frameworks and the identification of the 'Society of Information?'

Finally and perhaps most critical to our discussion on the role of ICTs in a 'society of information' as well as who has access and who does not, are the basic characteristics of information dissemination or diffusion. Actualizing these levels of diffusion is fundamental to developing an active and empowered citizenry within Europe. To this end we present the following three stages/levels:

1.   *Becoming informed*
2.   *Being convinced*
3.   *Making a decision*

With respect to the first of the power frameworks, that is *'becoming informed'* we see that this entails the access one has and/or makes use of and whether or not this access can permeate national borders. At this first stage/level, the individual or the group are informed about the existence of new technology, or the new computer program. At the second stage/level, *'being convinced'*, the user(s) seek out the usefulness and the value that it can have for them (i.e., the use of e-mail). He/she tries it out, and in essence evaluates its utility. At the third stage/level, *'making a decision'*, he/she will either adopt it or reject it. Finally, an *a posteriori* evaluation of the appropriateness of its adoption and its importance is taken. A variant of this allows the analysis of behavior of consumer of digital services (Pool. de Sola, 1983; Williams, 1991).

Discussion

The questions raised earlier promote a wide spectrum of reflection and discussion which impacts on the social, educational, economic and political in terms of developing a European society of informed citizens. The reformation of relations of citizens takes place on a global level. The internet portals through which information is diffused constitute points and indicators of national sovereignty, but also global objectives and competitions. According to European research on the society of information (Project

EISIS), the relatively newly established European industry presents decreased dynamics in relation to the sovereignty of American portals. Seven out of the eleven internet portals used in the EU are American in their conception. Most European portals, creations of the large national European telecommunications organisms, are limited to use within their national borders. In contrast, portals such as the *Yahoo* and/or *Google* have worldwide use (European Survey of Information Society, 2000). The European mean of users of the internet for 1999 was 19 users per 200 residents. North American internet users in the first months of new millennium were 136.86 million, in Europe 83.35 million and in Asia 68.9 million. With regard to Greek internet use, in 2001 these came to 1.89 million, while PCs with internet connection were 650.000; corresponding numbers for 2000 were 1.250.000 users and 430.000 internet connected PCs. In 2005, 43% of Europeans use the internet at least once a week; respectively, in Greece for the same year 18% of the population make frequent use of the internet (Eurostat, 2006). Thus, we see that the ICT phenomenon acquires importance and can influence the reformation of various forms of capital. It does so as much as an aid in respect to the role of large multinational organizations and corporations, as well as for the importance it holds for small specialised enterprises and more generally society.

However, this importance does not negate the fact that real space loses its value, becoming virtual, a-synchronic and impersonal. Nor that the individual name and the commensurate responsibility are lost. Globalised or not, users of networked digitally connected machines, spend countless hours in front of computer screens seeking communication with many hundreds of thousands of other users (Levinson 1999). The idea that the modern society is not social would astonish Freud, who founded his theory on the premise that our society dictates we collaborate between ourselves (Merton, 1952). The lack however, of visual contact and communication via an impersonal network with telephone lines, raises many questions. And while it can lead to the accumulation of an enormous volume of information, there are still unknown psychological repercussions with some of these having been linked to *Internet Addiction Disorder* (Virilio, 1998: 43). Furthermore, the reaction to and communication socialisation brought about by the 'digital machine', is something that needs to be considered; as in one respect, its uninformed use can be seen as canceling the individuals role of selecting time, space, and communication frameworks.

European societies press the state to incorporate the new technologies, in order that the public sector is more in concert with the discourse of the market society. European societies in their totality try to globally shape a state and public sector more competitively and mainly with lowered expenses. The state is not the only part of modern societies that accepts pressures for changes. Education and health constitute strategic institutions for the economies of knowledge. The new economy is an economy of knowledge. Knowledge as result of continuing education constitutes a vital obligation for the orderly operation of society.
Part of the knowledge the citizen is called on to develop is that of a new dexterity (digital) so that he/she can participate as both a transmitter and receptor, acquiring the facility to receive, to recognize and decode given content and the information, following programmed rules (Lamnias & Kamarianos, 2000; Wise, 1997). Communication is structured in a concrete code, which constitutes the final normative frame of operation of the 'digital machine'. Modern society appears to be structured on the basis of digital

social relations, adopting a new digital culture of programmed relations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Kamarianos, 2002). Concretely, the citizens participation in the digital daily life should be directed towards information highways so that they can isolate the message from the abundance of stimuli and finally be personally able to produce discourse with the rules of networked 'digital machine' as their axis. However, it appears that modern societies and particularly modern European societies are as yet unable to adequately respond to the necessity of rapid normative orientation to these digital avenues or highways.

Summation

Our cursory investigation began with our having stated that ICTs and the 'digital machine' do not constitute a neutral, benign process in the framework of European unification, but an important and normative factor in shaping the composition of a European society of information. The conception of citizen identity wherein he/she participates in the process of realisation of a European society of citizens cannot but also include the role and the operation of ICTs, from the moment where we conclude that the 'digital machine' constitutes the production pillar of normative control.

Understanding the particular nature of the 'digital machine' leads us to the conclusion that the 'digital machine' allows for manufacturing identity and participating in the organisational layout. It does so by strategically contributing to the process of assimilation (Agamben 1995; Foucault, 1994). Integration into the political sphere of decision making has historically existed as the fundamental activity of sovereign power (Agamben 1995). However, the introduction of the 'digital machine' into the 'polis', devalues the once dominant framework precedents while simultaneously and very rapidly shaping new ones. Basic characteristics of this deconstruction and redefinition of frameworks can be seen in the cancellation of time and space as points of identity reference.

The speed with which the networked 'digital machine' geometrically increases its potential, substantially imposes a weakness of control and structural planning. This acquires a normative character, which is as Tsoukala (1991) states, 'outside measurement, outside legality'.

Finally, the challenge of dealing with the sovereignty of technocratic discourse does not concern only technologists, but also social scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and mainly teachers. They represent the basic fields charged with confronting the real questions that emerge (Cebrian, 1998). Towards this end, we would argue that access and intelligent use of ICTs in the formation of a European society of citizens will depend to a large degree on the role and the use of ICTs as determined by those charged providing citizenship education, so that Europe is rendered not only competitive, but also creative in the Global Village.

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