

When More is Less: Time, Space and Knowledge in Information Societies

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the 1960s, social scientists and others began to conceptualise the future in terms of a dawning information society. What this has meant and the policies related to it have changed with emerging economic needs, political developments and technological potentials. But information society policies also have been driven forward by shared mythologies, powerful interests and scant empirical evidence (Webster 1995; Huws 1999). While this has escaped the attention of most, the writings of William Melody have been important exceptions.

The claim that widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) will facilitate economic development for the majority is based on a number of assumptions. More information available to more people, it is thought, would facilitate better, that is, efficiency-enhancing, decision making in more parts of the world. Furthermore, as the world's economy is increasingly interconnected, it will become more competitive and, as a result, efficiencies in production, distribution and consumption will emerge. More wealth and better living standards thus will be attainable for more people. In sum, new technologies, according to this mainstream mythology, will allow real markets to become more like neo-classical textbook ideals 'where markets are frictionless and operate under conditions of perfect information' (Melody 1985c: 524).

Most social scientists and policy makers appear not to be interested in winnowing the potentially correct from the patently false components of this model and grasping that such economic theories are, in fact, *theories*. Melody recognises this phenomenon as a complex reflection of predominant power relations. As the World Bank and other international organisations are now beginning to accept, the implementation of neo-liberal policies since the 1970s and the accompanying dissemination of ICTs has not produced development for all. In fact, the world's poor have been getting poorer and the rich, richer (UNDP 1999). Beyond the questionable assumptions associated with the information society ideal, how we think about this society and how this way of thinking shapes policies affecting the lives of billions of people around the globe constitute more pressing concerns.

In assessing information society issues in such broad conceptual *and* real life terms, Melody's work clearly has been influenced by the writings of the early 20th century political economist, Harold Adams Innis. In Melody's (1981b) introduction to a collection that he co-edited honouring Innis, the latter's concepts of time, space and monopolies of knowledge are emphasised. I revisit these as a means of contextualising Melody's writings and, in keeping with his political concerns, challenging predominant mythologies and stimulating an appreciation of the role of power in sustaining them (Melody 1981b).

MONOPOLIES OF KNOWLEDGE

Compounding the theoretical problems facing mainstream economists is the fact that understanding and, subsequently, formulating policies involving information-related developments are inherently problematic. This can be appreciated when we try to assess or measure the main component in such analyses – information. The commonest means of assessing information is to view it as a component of individual and group knowledge (that is, what is 'known'). Information, in this context, is the raw data from which knowledge is constructed. But what precisely is the relationship between information and what is known? More information does not necessarily lead to more knowledge. As Melody indicates, for some, more, under prevailing conditions, may well result in less.

We would be hard put to demonstrate that the quantum leap in communication technologies, and the vast increase in communication and information transfer that now takes place using these technologies, have led to an increased understanding of human and social affairs [Indeed,] improvements in communication have ... contributed to an increase in the complexity of economic and social relations, introduced new elements of uncertainty, had negative effects for some people, increased class disparities and in certain instances debased our information and communication currency (Melody 1990a: 28).

Information does not become knowledge as a result of some kind of innate and progressive mechanism through which the more information we have, the better our decisions will be (as in the neo-classical concern with perfect information). Instead, as Melody understands, the mechanisms used by individuals and cultures to process information into knowledge are mostly learned. Such filtering and interpreting capacities have been referred to as conceptual systems (Carey 1975: 45) and these are shaped by socialisation processes involving various institutions, organisations and technologies that

mediate norms of thought and behaviour. Not only do we learn what to attend to and what to ignore, we also learn how to interpret or make sense of the information received.

It is in the context of this essential but often under-assessed process that Melody's awareness of what Innis calls monopolies of knowledge is so very important. For Innis and Melody, this concept refers to control over not only what information is made available but also to the dominance of particular ways of interpreting it. *Structurally*, a monopoly of knowledge implies the production and distribution of particular kinds of information instead of others and differential access based on technological and other factors (for example, information that can generate profits instead of information in the service of other pursuits). In a capitalist market system, for example, in which the public service model has been banished to the policy periphery, access to wealth is a primary determinant of who gets what information. *Culturally*, a monopoly of knowledge refers to the norms shaping how information is processed into what is known. At this level of analysis, what is realistic and unrealistic, imaginable and unimaginable, are framed through both socialisation processes and the information available to people as a result of prevailing structural conditions.

For Melody, predominant thinking about and policies related to the information society are being directly influenced by a contemporary (and deepening) monopoly of knowledge. It is a monopoly characterised by a particular conception of the future involving new technologies and a mythological market system. This monopoly of knowledge has been perpetuated by the world's powerful at the expense of the relatively weak and it is facilitated by the construction of information highway infrastructures involving massive investments, political and economic pressures, and a commercial agenda in which particular kinds of information from particular sources tend to dominate discourse and debate.

BIAS

Significant and widespread communication technology developments influence how people organise themselves politically, economically and socially. Such modes of interaction shape individual associations and identities. In conjunction with their implications for entrenching or challenging monopolies of knowledge, new communication media entail certain biases. Biases, broadly speaking, are organisational and conceptual orientations most generally expressed in terms of the two most fundamental indices of human existence – time and space (Melody 1981b: 5-7).

Innis' (1951) discussion of bias of communication (involving core institutions, organisations and technologies as nodal points through which what we know and how we know are produced and reproduced) is one of his more important and influential theoretical contributions. A communication technology for Innis may facilitate control over space (or territory) as a necessary pre-requisite to increasing control over time (involving duration and sustainability). Radio, television, and now the Internet, for example, can be assessed as technologies that have been increasingly structured to serve advertisers and marketers. As such, capitalism has been sustained through the widening and deepening of marketplace relations involving, in this instance, the promotion of consumerism. In another analytical light, such attempts to control space could lead to a decline in the ability to control time. The globalisation of commercial radio, television and Internet technologies since the beginning of the 20th century through their promotion of consumerism – with its requisite propagation of short-term and individualistic thinking – may well undermine the ability of a culture to make the long-term and collective commitments needed to survive. The recognised but seemingly irreversible spectre of ecological collapse is just one of the more obvious examples of this.

For Melody, already dominant interests and ways of thinking are able to extend their control of the world through the application of contemporary ICTs to military resources, flexible production strategies, and efforts to open up markets. But this understanding that new technologies play crucial roles in the struggle to control time and space should not be read as some kind of technological determinism. For Innis and Melody, both historical contexts and the cumulative effects of how people communicate through a broad range of media over any given time and in any particular place are not reducible to the characteristics of a given technology, organisation or institution. Instead, as the examples noted above indicate, a comprehensive assessment of history is required to elaborate the influence of given technologies, organisations and institutions and to delineate future policy options. Indeed, this is precisely what Melody has demonstrated through his work. Again and again, he applies the concepts of time and space as heuristic tools, as means of escaping and subsequently redressing those monopolies of knowledge shaping information society developments. Rather than embracing the information society as the path toward some kind of ideal global village, Melody's writings reveal mythological constructs, complex power relations, and real world potentials to use new technologies for the good of the many rather than just the few.

CONCLUSION

In the context of early 21st century political economic conditions, ICTs are likely to extend the dominance of the already powerful (Comor 2001). Melody's writings contain suggestions of strategies to redress the deepening imbalance. In response to recent national and international policies obsessed with the rapid building of information infrastructures, he stresses the need for governments to pursue policies in terms of their particular circumstances and to focus on the development of the skills and intellectual capacities needed to take advantage of them. This entails a conscious effort to resist the smoke and mirrors of forging ahead with infrastructure supply before demands and capacities are clearly addressed. 'If government policy makers succumb to the siren song of the suppliers,' warns Melody, 'it will inevitably lead to inefficient investments, unbalanced growth and the cultivation of an elite information class in societies characterised by increasing divisions between the information rich and poor' (Melody 1996c: 259). It may be extrapolated that efforts to control space through ICTs before local potentials, vulnerabilities and needs have been identified must be resisted through the ultimate sovereignty of the nation state over domestic developments – in effect, a government's (and people's) control over space as a means of better controlling the future.

The monopoly of knowledge over information society developments thus must be challenged through the carefully articulated needs of citizens, workers, small businesses and other interests whose fates may appear to be out of control. But the potentials of new technologies to serve the needs and desires of people rather than powerful vested interests, according to Melody, will involve the use of space to regain control over time. The tendencies generated by existing biases and the complex relation between information and knowledge are implicitly or explicitly dealt with in Melody's (e.g., 1990a: 30) writings on the information society. 'The public interest', he states, 'requires that the diffusion of the new opportunities be planned and implemented at a pace which minimises the losses imposed on those who cannot benefit from them, and is accompanied by programmes to help the potential victims of change become beneficiaries of it'.

William Melody's work on information society developments reflects an awareness of, and an extraordinary ability to apply, Innis' concepts of monopoly of knowledge and time- and space-bias. This application is important because Melody demonstrates through these heuristic tools that what is thought to be feasible or realistic today – since it largely reflects a biased way of processing information into knowledge – may well serve to buy time and deepen the powers held by the already powerful. As such, the seemingly rational application of

particular economic ideals in which 'more is more' may serve to exacerbate existing disparities and cultural problems, making future political and economic crises more probable and less correctable. As Innis pointed out, the cumulative tendencies of monopolies of knowledge and related biases perpetuate often unconsciously constructed barriers to the long-term resolution of systemic problems. Melody, in his ability to historicise information society developments using accessible and applicable abstractions has produced a body of work that compels us to pause, question entrenched assumptions, and re-think how we want to move forward, collectively and democratically.