

Knowledge or 'Know-less' Societies?

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The conditions of freedom of thought are in danger of being destroyed by science, technology, and the mechanisation of knowledge ...
(Harold A. Innis 1951: 190)

DECEPTIONS OF DOMINANT DISCOURSES

Since the 1980s, the dominant economic and political discourses have tended to characterise the present era as one of radical, if benign, transformation. Such discourses mobilise a common set of terms to describe the transformations that are said to be underway. These include: 'the information society' or 'the knowledge economy' or 'the technological society', or indeed, 'the techno-culture'. Yet when we look beneath the glossy surface of such slogans to seek some enlightenment about the nature, direction and causes of socio-economic change, not to mention the potential for alternative paths of future development, we are generally disappointed. We confront a profoundly grey and dull cluster of chaotic concepts, linear conceptualisations and some extraordinary extrapolations (speculations) that are being used to define the role and meaning of technology or information in societal change. We are greeted by a heady cocktail of speculative 'dreamware' based on techno-centric analyses of clusters of technological innovations. Or we find idealised conceptualisations of the distinctive features of information as resource or product. These are usually laced with a strong dose of doctrinal prescriptions, especially those celebrating the idealised virtues of the 'invisible hand', the 'naked cash nexus' or the sovereignty of the consumer.

Beneath the gloss on so many technocratic strategies or guides to the national, European or global 'way to the information society', we find a subsidiary and subliminal marketing campaign on behalf of the producers of new technology products and services. Not only is information relegated to the margins and subsumed under the primacy of the 'technology' imperative, but the wider use and consumption of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are prescribed as both *end* and *means* of economic and social development. We meet a 'born-again', fundamentalist version of the linear modernisation theory of the 1950s. New ICTs are deemed to operate not only as the universal 'magic multiplier' or tool to drive socio-economic development, they also become a core indicator of societal development (Preston 2001).

The foregoing highlights a poverty or implosion of meaning, a veritable 'imaginative failure' as well as a void of values. These are found at the heart of the rhetoric advanced by our dominant political and economic elite with regard to the changing roles and features of technology, and especially information, in contemporary social development. These features exist despite a quantitative explosion of information and communication overload. This is manifest especially in the specialist knowledge domains addressing the fundamental changes in economic, managerial and policy making processes and practices.

This particular realm includes the surge of contributions to public discussions of the 'new economy' and the rise of the Internet over the 1995-2000 period. We have witnessed the publication of a vast number of books, articles, and radio and television coverage celebrating the emergence of the 'new economy' and the information age. This wave of publication amounts to a distinctly new multimedia publishing niche; a virtual information sub-sector in its own right. This niche is replete with its own superstars in the form of gurus and high priests, each out-bidding the other with lofty promises of technology-based plenitude and bliss. But, much like the claims of prophets of earlier times, these promises are vacuous when it comes to grounded analyses of 'what's really going on' in material terms, not least with respect to how different socio-economic interests may survive, develop and prosper in our times.

The quantitative explosion of information about the 'new economy' has not been matched by qualitative advances in public debate or understanding of important structural changes in technology, information and related shifts in economic structures or policy processes. Nor has it been matched by robust debate on the alternative forms, or fundamentally different paths, of socio-economic or cultural development that may open up for citizens of democratic polities. Indeed, the contrary is the case. We are confronted with a classic case of more is less when it comes to grounded knowledge of the distinctive features and strategic contours of change in the economy. In this realm, we confront an especially impoverished or distorted version of the public sphere. Reputation and status seem strongly correlated with the degree of hype and speculation being pedalled and with the intensity of each author's refusal to test key hypotheses. Many prominent technogurus proclaim the demise of the old media in the face of the new but their predictions rely on simplistic assumptions about substitution effects. Distinction in this genre is negatively correlated with efforts to produce empirical analyses of socio-economic processes and sustained, critical engagement with the accumulated knowledge-base of prior research.

These discourses amount to a particular manifestation of information overload: a quantitative explosion of data, but a diminution in the level of understanding of what is really going on. The same criticism applies to alternative models of socio-economic development centred around maximising the use and adoption of ICTs. Indeed, when it comes to public understanding of the key features and potential directions of change relating to the knowledge economy, there is the ironic prospect of eliminating any potential for democratic choice and decision making. As models to guide or inform our future paths of socio-economic development, the imaginative reach of such technocratic discourses rarely extends beyond the cul-de-sac of an information-consuming, but 'know-less society'. We appear to be 'lost in the void of information' – to borrow a phrase from that high priest of post-modern theory, Jean Baudrillard (2000).

TOWARDS GROUNDED KNOWLEDGE

The above summarises a comprehensive and sustainable critique of fundamental blind spots in the content and method of accounts of the role of technology and information in the process of socio-economic change (Preston 2001). In this contribution, I consider alternative approaches and methods and offer some conceptual resources for a more grounded analysis by focusing on an important stream of work which contributes to a robust knowledge-base for technology, information and communication studies: a diverse Canadian school of pioneering research within which William Melody's work is located. This body of work provides a starting point for alternative approaches and methods to prevailing orthodoxies (Preston 1994). This contextualisation of Melody's work must be qualified by acknowledging the formidable and distinctively international dimensions of its range, influence and mode of operation. The lineage of this work includes J. E. Cairnes (1870; 1873) through to Thorstein Veblen (1898/1961) and John. R. Commons (1959).

In all areas of socio-economic and cultural analysis it is increasingly recognised that we live in technology-tempered times. There is little agreement on how to define or conceptualise the roles of technologies as drivers of socio-economic or cultural change. For one Canadian theorist, the answer was categorical: 'the medium is the message'. Technological change holds the key to understanding other aspects of historical change. Marshall McLuhan's fundamentalist message of the 1960s has strongly influenced the dominant code, grammar and content of contemporary discourses surrounding new ICTs. His fame and influence have been re-born in the era of Internet. Indeed, he has been canonised as patron saint of the wired generation. His ghost haunts newer disciplinary fields such as cultural studies, whose founders explicitly distanced themselves from the techno-centric

musings of McLuhan's earthly existence. This influence is manifest, for example, in the content as well as the operational devices of the influential postmodernist theorist, Jean Baudrillard.

Thanks in part to the critique provided by Melody (1999d), it is recognised that McLuhan represents one particular diversion in the Canadian tradition of research on technology and communication. McLuhan not only overstates the technological moment of the socio-economic and cultural change complex, his focus and method preclude him from providing a detailed analysis of such relationships. His work focused on the individual-media-machine relation, ignoring social and institutional contexts. As in the case of his contemporary counterparts, this limitation of focus or method 'didn't stop him from leaping to conclusions about institutions, the direction of human development, or anything else' (Melody 1999d: 376).

There is another stream of pioneering Canadian work that leads to much more productive concepts and insights relevant to present concerns. Harold Adams Innis' (1950; 1951) work addressed the intersection of technology, commerce and information – including its cultural components. Innis attended to systematic empirical methods and addressed sociological concerns; 'in his writings are found bits of geography, history, economics and political science', and the core of his theory 'lies at the point where they intersect'. It represents an 'intellectual voyage' worth taking and a 'rich lost continent awaiting exploration' (Hall 1998: 506).

Although he died before his main work was fully complete and his writings are often elliptical and fragmentary, Innis is recognised as an inspiring intellectual figure by researchers across a range of social science disciplines. Indeed, many of Melody's writings signal how Innis' work provides a productive starting point for researchers concerned with the political economy and spatial dimensions of new ICTs and the changing role of information. Innis' work provides a subtle and dialectical platform for understanding the distinctive character and role of technology in the process of socio-economic change. His distinctions between time- and space-biased communication provide a fruitful entry point for contemporary analyses of the spatial dimensions of change (Melody 1987b: 1322-24). Indeed, Innis' writings on changing systems of communication and their linkages to changes in social and political power, provide many pointers to the sources, limitations and biases of the hegemonic discourses surrounding new ICTs and information.

These are only starting points, however. Reflecting on insights from the relevant research is necessary to minimise the fashion for re-inventing the wheel that is so prevalent in contemporary discourse. But such reflection does not provide a royal road to a robust understanding of our times. This is because the very forms and categories of technology, information and communication, and the interactions between them, are dynamic and changing according to the temporal or spatial context of their development (Melody 1987b). Such starting points must be appropriated and developed through conceptual and empirical work that is: 1) attuned to the most pressing research questions and their particular socio-economic, political and discursive contexts, and 2) capable of crossing established boundaries of the social sciences and humanities fields. This is precisely the systemic, if challenging, road to research and knowledge that Melody (1985a; 1987b) demonstrates in his research and which he champions in his role as leader and facilitator of research.

We confront a tendency to conflate the categories of information (and knowledge) with technology and to confuse the inter-relations between them. This is manifest in many of the technocratic and policy discourses that undergird the information society initiatives that have emerged since the early 1990s. This conflation is quite pervasive. It is also evident in the allocation of resources within organisational settings, including those of those fonts of knowledge, the universities. In a recent case, a university's management responded to financial restraints by proposing to cut 50% of a Communication Department's journal holdings. The department's much larger expenditure on computers was not touched. The techno-obsessive thinking was that access to a technology tool is more sacred than access to a traditional resource of learning, knowledge stored in journals. Yet technology is no substitute for the latter, as Melody (1985b: 7-8) warned many years ago.

In the face of the conflationary tendencies, Melody's work is a particularly fruitful resource. He provides many stimulating insights into the differences between the categories of information and knowledge, and their relation to the technology category. He has suggested how (new) technology may be defined as a particular type of embodied knowledge or as a codified sub-set of the overall stock of knowledge (Melody 1987b: 1317). He has considered the nature and role of societies' shared knowledge (Melody 1993b: 66-68). This work is useful in addressing the obsessively sacred status accorded to technology in our present culture. But it is in his applied work on the frameworks of information society policy that Melody (1996a; 1996b) makes his most compelling contributions. These should be compulsory primers for all consultants and technocrats before they engage in the production of information society policy reports.

Robust analyses of contemporary social and economic change require subtle and sophisticated understandings of the changing roles and characteristics of information. This requires that we challenge what C. Wright Mills (1959/1970) identified as the tendency to diminish the importance of historical analysis. This syndrome is evident in new economy discourses and in the mystifying babble of boundless information frontiers that helped to fuel the dot.com bubble. It points to the importance of theoretical work, which aims to offer an archaeology and a reworking of the categories of information and knowledge both before and since the advent of capitalist modernity. What is required is a theory-building project that is empirically grounded and attentive to the empirical complexities of changing institutional forms and diverse categories of information resources and products.

In sharp contrast to McLuhanite techno-centrism and methodological individualism, Innis' work is a 'rich continent' and provocative starting point for historical analyses. Here, too, Melody's writing and his leadership of research have contributed to a grasp of the changing institutional dimensions of information and communication services in the modern era. His intellectual voyage in exploring the role of information in the evolution of economic thinking has drawn attention to the distinctive socio-economic roles of different categories of information (Melody 1985c; 1987b). His work offers a nuanced understanding of the importance of the 'information commons' and the role of public communication institutions, an aspect that is rare in information society policy discourses and in the work of other economists. In Melody's (e.g., 1985c; 1990a; 1993b) work we also find sophisticated and empirically-grounded analyses of the limits of the 'invisible hand', not least in the domains of information and communication services; these serve to fracture the cosy slogans of neo-liberal rhetorics.

KNOWLEDGE MATTERS

The prevailing orthodoxies that steer the contemporary information society policy initiatives that were summarised above are framed as visionary strategies for socio-economic development that take account of the implications of technological and information-related trends. Yet at their core, these initiatives represent a failure of political imagination, a confusion of the ends and means of social development and a conservative politics.

The nihilistic language of much post-modern theory captures the evacuation of politics and the general void of values, which are at the heart of these developments. Post-modern theory matches the trajectory of real world developments much better than the idealised contours of the 'coming' information

society so confidently promised in the work of Daniel Bell (1973). But neither the naïve optimism of the latter nor the apocalyptic pessimism of former accounts for our current condition. These texts do not provide the intellectual resources to challenge orthodoxies or to effect a radical shift towards a robust vision of ‘the good society’. Yet, knowledge and ideas do matter in the struggle for the just and the good society. We are not yet completely lost in the void of information nor are we locked into the iron cage of a deterministic technological logic. There are rich veins of intellectual resources that provide alternatives to prevailing orthodoxies. The extent to which these and other such resources will be harnessed and appropriated to develop socially cohesive, futures projects is, as always, a matter of politics and practice.