Interrogate the Information Society

By Guy Gough Berger

I f there is one thing journalists should know about the "Information Society", it's this: never use the phrase as if its meaning speaks for itself.

This is one of the most slippery and contentious phrases yet to grace contemporary discourse. For a start, why "Information Society" and not "Knowledge Society"? And why "society" and not "economy"? This is not academic semantics. There are wholly different meanings at stake with different implications for journalists, politicians, policy makers and many more.

It is also very political. Compare these divergent interpretations of "Information Society":

♦ "An invention of the needs of globalisation by capitalism and its supporting governments" (Media Development, the journal of the World Association for Christian Communications).

♦ The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) is a time when "makers of equipment, programmes and channels will be licking their lips (accompanied by) … a deluge of hymns, hosannas, panegyrics and eulogies" (Antonio Pasquali, former Unesco official).

♦ "Information and communication for all" (Adama Samassekou, president of the WSIS preparatory committee).

Part of the diversity in how people understand "Information Society" is also the result of whether they use these buzzwords to describe the current epoch – or something up ahead. For some folk, we're already in the "Information Society". For others, it's still a goal.

However, it makes a difference whether we're talking here and now, or about some state in the future:

If we are not there yet, is it really inevitable that we are en route? If so, will the "First" World arrive first, and with what consequences for the rest of us?

If we have already arrived, from whence did we come? How much history continues to be with us? And, is this destination an end in itself – or a means to yet another end, and if so, what? Is there a post-"Information Society" era ahead?

In a nutshell, is the "Information Society" something we already see and know, or something yet to be decided and determined? Could it be both things simultaneously – something here and now, and something still to be? Answer: it could – if we conclude that it exists for some, and not for others.

In this hybrid view, some of us have arrived in the land of plenty; the rest lag behind, empty-handed and hopeless, and urgently need to play catch-up or even leapfrog. Yet even if you think this sums things up, another issue needs to be resolved. If "Information Society" is a label for something (present or future), what is this thing?

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"Information Society" discourse rests on three assumptions about **goodness, power and neutrality** that journalists should not take as givens.

In order to explore this question, we can draw from academic Frank Webster, who has usefully distinguished five schools of thought on the "Information Society", each with their own primary emphasis:

1. Technicist approach – tools for the job:

The assumption in this view is that we can define a society by its production technology: the Stone Age, the Iron Age, the Steam Age... now, the Information Age. In this perspective, the key means of production are neither human brains nor heavy machinery, but Information and Communications Technology (ICT). For example, even modern farming hinges on computers.

Webster's reservation is that this view characterises a whole society on the basis of technology. He opposes reducing human existence in this way, and he argues that society determines the nature of technology, rather than vice versa.

2. Economistic definition – info rules, OK?

This approach goes beyond tech to look at the wider economy. Accordingly, the "Information Society" is where information is both the critical raw material and the central product. The modern value chain, in this view, is determined by adding information at various stages. As a result, much information has become a tradeable commodity with financial value, and information industries contribute a growing percentage of GNP.

Limits to this view immediately come to mind. The collapse of Internet businesses and the troubles in telecoms show that "old industry" commodities are still essential: people cannot live on data alone! A further criticism, made by Webster, is the failure to distinguish between different kinds of information. Pornography may be a major money-spinner, but its social value is rather different to that of investigative journalism.

Further, by reducing economies to what Marx called the forces of production (the relation of humanity to technology and nature), this view ignores differences in the social relations of production (the relation of people to each other). For example, does it make sense to call everything "Information Society" when there are significant differences between neoliberal, social-democratic and state-commandist types of capitalism? Worst of all, the economistic approach implies that we can successfully harness ICTs for development, as in the paradigm of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad), without needing full freedom of expression. In other words, this approach fosters the illusion of an African Information Society without free speech.

3. Occupational – information workers of the world:

This third school of thought interprets the "Information Society" as referring to increasing numbers of jobs dealing with information – lawyers, data capturers, accountants, brokers, public relations officers, educationists, politicians, entertainers, etc.

The critique of this is that it is not necessarily the case that there are proportionally more info-workers than previously. Much of the heavy work has simply been relocated to the Third World. In addition, the approach is seen as fuzzy, because information work is a factor in any job. It becomes difficult to separate out the occupations. Take a tour-bus driver who talks into a microphone while ferrying passengers to a destination: is this work within the information or the transportation sector?

4. Spatial school – real-time global village:

In this approach, physical distance and time constraints are seen as being eliminated by information networks. Manuel Castells points to an integrated global informational system wherein nodes and hubs (like the Wall Street stock exchange) determine the state of the entire world's economy. In this view, what defines the "Information Society" is the transnational interconnectedness and interdependence due to the speed and spread of information flows.

Again, there are limits to this approach. There have long been international linkages, eg: global post and telecoms. So what has changed to the extent that we need a new name to describe it? In addition, it is debatable how much space and time has actually shrunk, when there's increasing congestion on the Internet, on roads and at airports. In short, how convincing is it to proclaim an "Information Society" on the basis of hype about information networks transcending space and time?
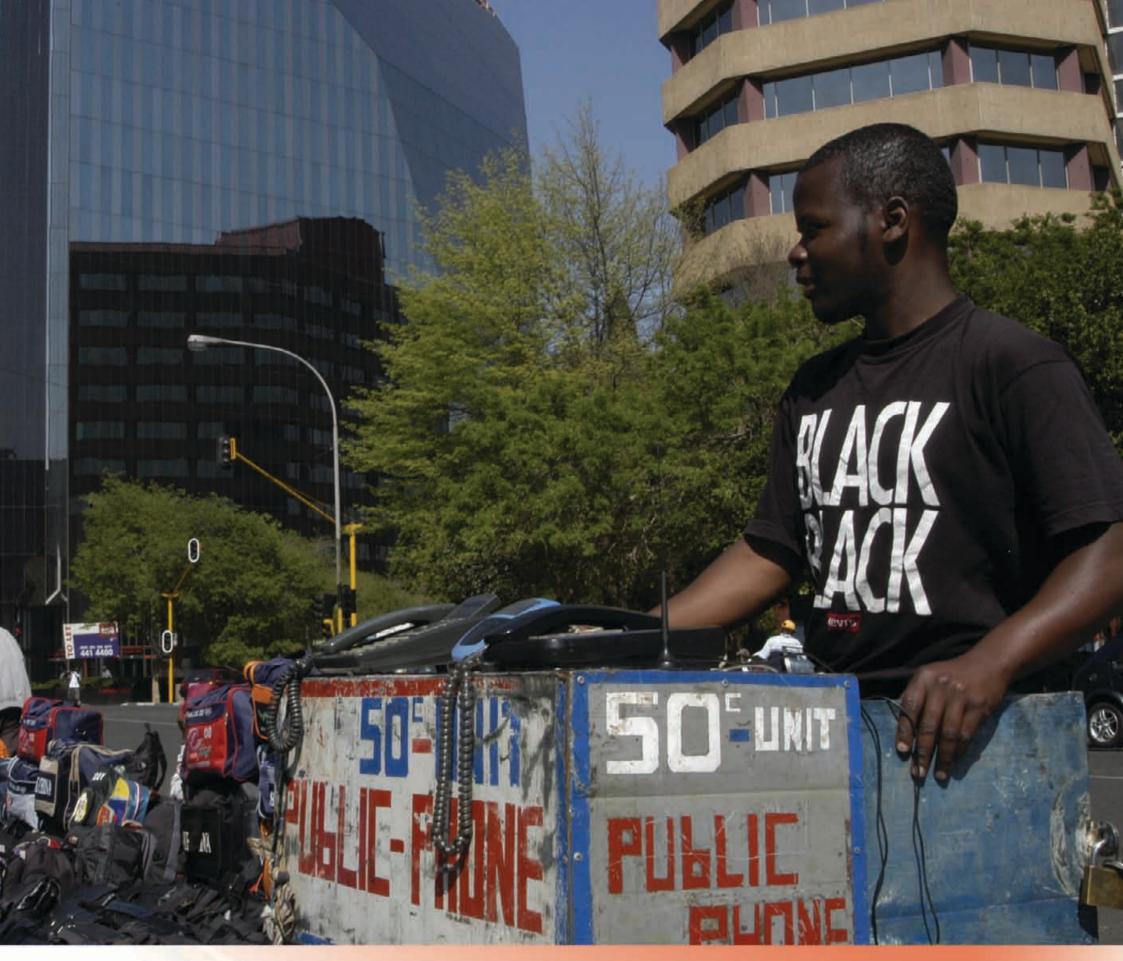
5. E-nough information – mediated messages everywhere:

This cultural interpretation of the "Information Society" takes cognisance of the ubiquitous presence of information. For example, previous generations were not exposed to brands in the same way as today. This view claims that the huge volume of information today defines and shapes our very identities. It affects our politics, public life, clothes, tastes, aspirations and dreams.

To the extent that this interpretation captures a certain (expanding) reality, the question is whether it merits the neutral label of "Information Society"? Why not "Entertainment Society", or "Commercial Images Society"? The criticism here is that the glare of the "Information Society" phrase blinds us to the concept of "cultural imperialism". Who wants an "Information Society" that has McDonalds arches in each and every human settlement?

Finally, and as pointed out by Webster, there seems to be a paradox of more information, but less meaning. We become inured to televised images of

violence; we screen out the muzak and the blaring bill-boards. The phrase "Information Society" becomes a misnomer.

To sum up these five approaches, one can say that "Information Society" is often used to mean one or more of the following features:
• The role of ICT as a means of production
• The importance of information in national economies
• A changing occupational structure
• The importance of global networked systems
• The ubiquity of information in cultural life

The criticism of these interpretations of "Information Society" is that they overstate the case singularly and even collectively. As demonstrated, they detract from other vital social issues like the need for traditional industries and media freedom. Similarly, they skim over the quality of information and the social relations of production. There's a blind spot about real space and time, and silence about cultural contestation. The gender question is absent.

The lesson for journalists from this assessment? Immediately you encounter the IS buzzwords, interro-gate which feature/s people have in mind. And keep a sharp eye out for what they exclude in the process.

That's just the start, however. Because you also need to know that whatever the one-sided emphasis (technicist, economistic, cultural, etc.) in interpreting "Information Society", there also tend to be three com-mon – and dubious – assumptions at play in the dis-course. These assumptions are: that information is a good thing, that it is powerful, and that ICTs are neu-tral.

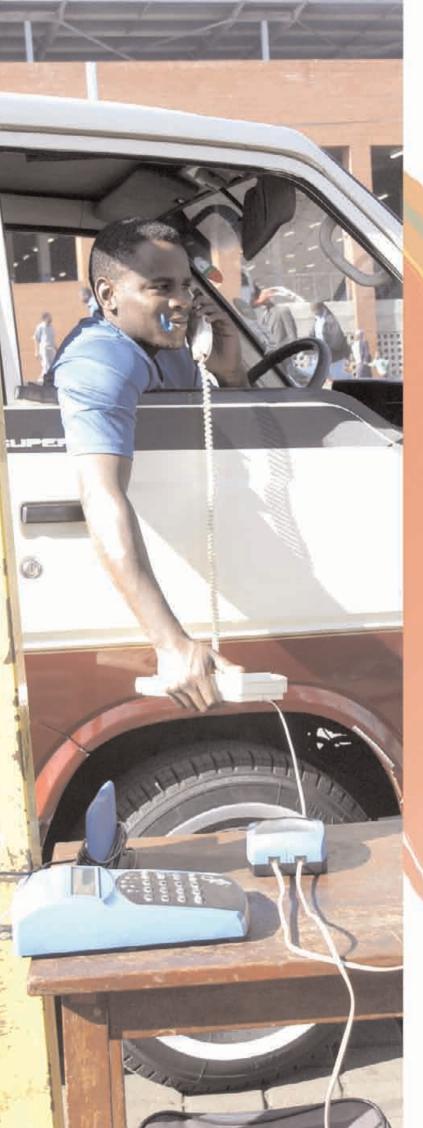## Here's how and why you should question these beliefs:

Suppose the US exhibits many of the five features highlighted above, and therefore counts as an "Information Society". Yet, we know that this is also a society that has not helped its citizens ask, or answer, the post-September 11 question: "Why do they hate us so much?" And if the information in this same society feeds its citizens unilateralism and jingoism which, inter alia, conflates Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein, then we need to ask more fundamental ques-tions. Information, it appears, is not always and auto-matically a good thing. To avoid a "Dis-Information Society", we need to focus on more than the quantity of information. Quality is also, a surely critical matter if we are to accept that information is a "good thing".

Information is supposed to be power – and nowhere more so than in the "Information Society" paradigm. But this cliché is open to qualification. For example, warfare may be increasingly information-alised, but nonetheless heavy weapons, not words, still do the killing. Take also the troubles over trade protec-tionism – arguably these are not to do with issues of information, but simply with interests. Further, an exaggerated belief in the power of information can misread causes (and remedies) – for example, diagnos-ing child abusers as simply information-deficient.

In fact, the notion of information as power often assumes that humans are rational beings, guided by facts and logic. This ignores the deep emotions and contradictions at work in how we negotiate, co-opt or ignore information for our own purposes.

There is, in short, more to power (and power-lessness) than information.

In most "Information Society" thinking, ICTs are assumed to be a neutral tool that anyone can use, for any purpose. But consider this: personal computers derive from a society premised on atomised individuals; whereas a community ethos would see scores of dumb terminals linked to powerful computer servers. Another example: today's entry-level new computers and software offer power and features way beyond that which most users need. But you can't get cheaper and simpler devices – which, in particular, might help increase workstation access in Africa. This is not even to touch on the issue of the dominant languages and purposes embedded in most software packages. The point, therefore, is that ICTs come with their own baggage.

Summing up thus far, not only does "Information Society" discourse tend to highlight some things and hide others, it also rests on three assumptions about goodness, power and neutrality that journalists should not take as givens. And yet, despite all this, a salvage operation, rather than a death sentence, is needed for the concept.

Here's why:

First, the phrase has a relatively popular currency, and cannot be wished away. Second, it serves as a strong mobiliser: like the catch-phrase "sustainable development", it has resulted in a major UN Summit – the WSIS. Third, the notion of the "Information Society" puts important items onto the international public agenda. In turn, this process will profoundly influence global policies on investment, donor direction and state regulation.

Lastly, the three-year-long WSIS process provides an opportunity to explore the role of information, communication and technology in solving social problems. It is a chance for African journalists to give our interpretation of what this "Information Society" could and should be like. And here we come to one final aspect where media people should actively engage with talk about the "Information Society".

This aspect concerns the uneven development of informationalism. In recognition of this, the "Information Society" paradigm is often interpreted in terms of "information rich" and "information poor". The challenge that follows is to deploy the latest ICTs so that the "have-nots" can vault over fixed "stages of development" and thereby join the "haves" already in the "Information Society". In this view, African journalists, armed with ICTs, would be part of the mission to spread the information goodies of the rich to the ranks of those who are deprived. Journalism is reinvented as an e-enabled charity crusade, and ICT is the equivalent of powerful weaponry.

This perspective is not entirely without truth, although it is clearly an overly optimistic view of the role of journalists and ICTs, even in conditions where there is full freedom of expression. More fundamentally, it is also a very biased model. It sees the digital divide as a chasm that prevents the Third World from drinking at the fount of information in the First. Accordingly, Africa is seen as backward, and in danger of getting even further behind as the "Information Society" surges ahead on the advanced side of the divide.

Absent in this whole discourse is the idea that (ordinary) Africans have something to say and contribute to a global "Information Society". Missing is the recognition that the so-called "info rich" are ignorant about many things. As a result, indigenous knowledge, wisdom and culture (if they are not co-opted and ripped-off) are entirely undervalued. Information about African experiences is discounted or marginalised.

An alternative paradigm sees Africa's digitally-excluded not so much as needing to enter the "Information Society" and share in its benefits, but as helping to change that selfsame society. In this vein, information about African experiences can help to shape a world that takes cognisance of issues that would otherwise be left off the table.

In particular, an African media contribution to defining and shaping a global "Information Society" could highlight the importance of issues such as:
♦ freedom of expression and media freedom;
♦ combatting racist information which portrays Africans as backward, and as lacking any information of value;
♦ values that are humanity-centred, not technology- or economy-centred;
♦ values of community, not only of individualism;
♦ priority not purely of profit margins, but of mixed measures to promote popular capacity to receive and to impart information;
♦ information and communication towards promoting peace and putting an end to poverty;
♦ counters to information imperialism and colonialism;
♦ respect for minority languages and culture; and
♦ information and communication to build international solidarity with victims of wars, famines and repression.

At the 2002 WSIS preparatory meeting in Mali the participants spelt out a welcome dialectic in their vision. Thus, their declaration mentioned not only the benefits that global Information Society development could bring to Africa, but also what Africa could contribute to it. The question now is: how?

Part of the answer is that within such a new and preferred paradigm, African media need to impact on discussions and decisions about the global "Information Society".

This, then, is what's needed from you:

♦ Engage with the concept and the process, and put the issues onto the agenda of your own coverage.
♦ Critique the common rhetoric and one-sided and exaggerated views on what "Information Society" means.
♦ Monitor government and other agencies who commit to information issues.
♦ Ensure that African voices join the global discussion.

In sum, Africa's journalists can, and should, bring the global "Information Society" story to the continent's audiences, and bring these people into that same story.

In this way, we can move from margins to mainstream in regard to making useful sense out of the "Information Society". As key stakeholders in the debate, we need to help transform the discourse, and help shape the dreams – or the dire results – that will flow from it.

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