

Marian Šuplata

University of Matej Bel in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

THE FUTURE OF EUROPE IN INFORMATION SOCIETY. SELECTED CHALLENGES AHEAD OF DECISION MAKERS

Motto

The age of information

Is now in your hand.

But the more I know

The less I understand¹.

W. F. O'Dell

Introduction

The post-modern society has moved to an era of information society. The aim of this article is to take a brief look on the impact of the information society concept on the contemporary and future Europe from trans-disciplinary point of view. We would like to reflect on selected challenges new information technologies mean to contemporary decision makers and reflect on what might be some consequences of their decisions in times of the global use of information means in the coming years. The purpose of this paper is also to offer some inspiration for European decision makers who are in a position to make the future of Europe better for the next generations.

¹ W.F.O'Dell: *Effective Business Decision Making... and the Educated Guess*. Chicago, NTC Business Book, p. 118; Compare: A. Čestnejší: *Manažérske rozhodovanie*. UK Bratislava 2004, p. 156.

1. Defining “decision making” and “information society”

For the purpose of defining “decision making” we will use the Drucker’s definition who perceives the decision making process as: “process with the following stages”²:

1. Problem identification.
2. Problem analysis.
3. Options creation.
4. Selecting an option.
5. Decision implementation.

For the purpose of this paper the decision maker therefore could be any person taking a decision – in private sector, in public sector or even in personal capacity. These decisions made have various degree of impact on the society.

Decision makers are interconnected to the information society via information channels. Decision makers deal with information management – therefore a collection and management of information from one or more sources to the distribution of that information to one or more audiences.

There is no unified definition of “information society”. In 1997 IBM Community Development Foundation defined it as: “A society characterised by a high level of information intensity in the everyday life of most citizens, in most organisations and workplaces; by the use of common or compatible technology for a wide range of personal, social, educational and business activities, and by the ability to transmit, receive and exchange digital data rapidly between places irrespective of distance”³. According to Rankov⁴, this term was coined for the first time in 1963 in Japanese language by Tadao Umesao in an article of evolutionary development of mankind towards a society based on use of information (Bendyk; Fleissner; Rose). McLuhan calls the world “Global village”. Masuda introduced his own concept of information society, called “Computopia”. It means an invisible civilization out of physical space in virtual world of computers and media. Baudrillard argues that we are aiming towards cloning of real by hyper-real that will lead to exterminating the real by its double (by medial and computer simulations). Virtual space is not characters describing the reality, rather of their “highest function is to cause disappearing of the reality”⁵.

² P.F. Drucker: *Making Decisions*. South Western Publishing, Ohio 1996. Compare: J. Papula, Z. Papulová: *Manažérske rozhodovanie. Vybrané problémy*. Kart Print, Bratislava 2005, p. 161.

³ See: <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/Information-Society>.

⁴ P. Rankov: *Informačná spoločnosť. Perspektívy, problémy, paradoxy*. LSA Publishers Group 2006.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

Two scientific theories concerning the future of Europe⁶When speaking about the influence the decision makers in information society could have on the future of Europe we would like to mention two theories which provide focus. First is the “biological” theory of Oswald Spengler known from his book “The Decline of the West” (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*), published in 1918, which describes a cyclical theory of the rise and decline of civilisations. Spengler believes that great cultural creations are influenced by a kind of “nature law”: they have their moments of birth, development, maturity, downfall, old age and death. On his point of view Europe and the Western Civilisation came to its last stage of life, and is dying, despite of efforts to avoid it. Even if Spengler acknowledges that, Europe might hand-over the best of its cultural wealth to another, newly created culture, he is convinced that this will not change the fact Europe as an entity has come to its end of history⁷.

The second is the the “voluntaristic” theory of Arnold Toynbee which puts strong emphasis on conditionality. Toynbee describes the differences between the “material and technical progress” on the one hand and the “real progress” of “spiritualization” of a society on the other. Toynbee acknowledges the fact that Europe and the western world has been in a crisis. The main reason he sees is the growing apostasy (loss) of religion and its exchange for the cult of technology, cult of nationalism and cult of militarism. For Toynbee the term “crisis” means secularism. However, he is keeping hope that the future, rise and fall of a society is potentially driven by “exceptional personalities and creative minorities – those who find solutions to the challenges followed by others⁸”.

The dispute between Spengler and Toynbee remains open-ended. Scientifically speaking, none of them is in a position to predict the future⁹. We can notice here that both Spengler and Toynbee refer to “crisis” of Europe and Western world were between the years 1918 and 1958. Today, in times of boom of information society we speak about “financial and economic crisis”. However, it becomes more and more evident that the “crisis” is primarily neither about finance and economics, nor about the failure on stock markets, but rather about the principles guiding decision making which are dominating in the existing architecture

⁶ M. Šuplata: *Citoyenneté et nationalités en Europe unie, les défis a relever*. Bruylant, Bruxelles, 2012, pp. 133-142.

⁷ O. Spengler: *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. C.H. Beck, München 1927.

⁸ A.J. Toynbee: *Der Gang der Weltgeschichte II: Kulturen im Übergang*. Europa-Verlag, Zürich – Stuttgart – Wien 1958.

⁹ Toynbee argues two possibilities for the four remaining civilisations (Western, Islamic, Hindu and Far East) of the 21st century: they might all merge with Western Civilisation, or Western civilisation might develop a ‘Universal State’ after its ‘Time of Troubles’, decay and die.

of finance and economics. The information society is both – underlining and multiplying it.

2. Europe and selected challenges ahead of decision makers in information society

In the final part we would like to identify some important challenges facing Europe, indicating some decision-making principles which might be of key importance to its future. We will take into consideration both Spengler's and Toynbee's theory as well as some own practical experiences from the decision making process. There was no ambition to name all challenges, rather to offer some inspiration for decision-makers in charge who might be able to influence the future of Europe.

The initial serious question, before we proceed with further challenges, is: Does Europe want to survive or not? The era of ever deeper globalisation has brought Europeans a lot of opportunities as well as threats. The concept of information and of knowledge based society can be one of numerous examples.

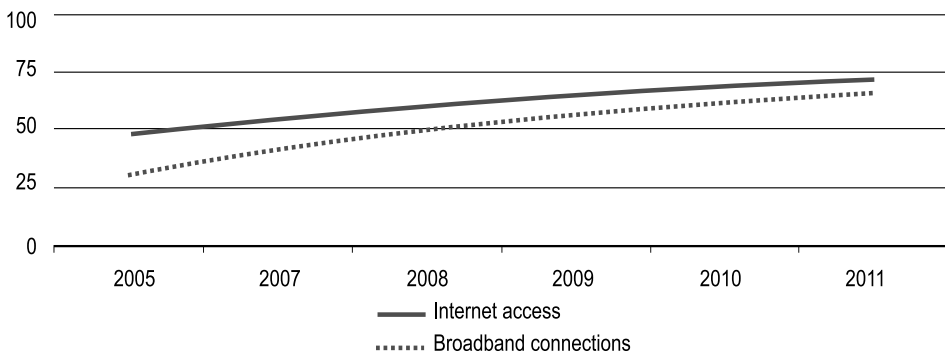
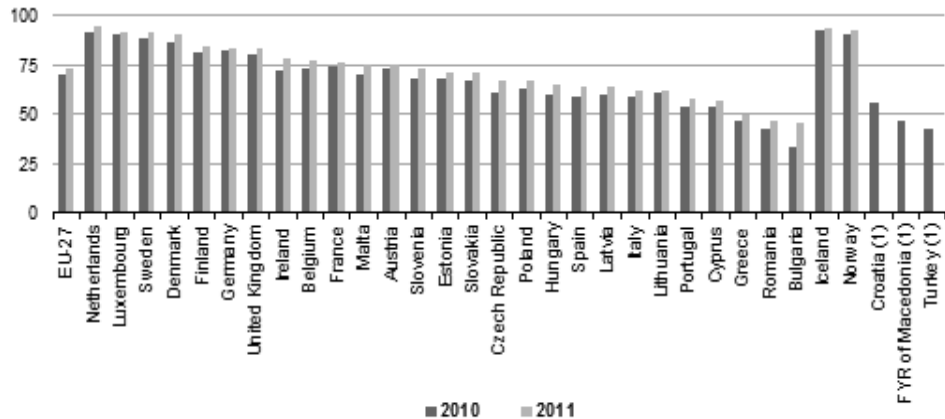


Figure 1. Internet access and broadband internet connections by households in Europe

Source: Eurostat.

As we can see from the both graphs, but also from our daily experience, Europe (as well as the whole globalized world) lives in times of unprecedented expansion of information technology infrastructure, which allows greater and faster spreading of information across the society (see Figure 1 and 2). This might be considered important for Europe to be able to compete to the outside world. When

we speak about “challenges”, we would not like to reduce them to some qualitative indicators and strategy how to achieve them, rather to focus on a vision which would allow Europe to survive respecting its originality and initial identity.



1) 2011, not available.

Figure 2. Internet access of households, 2010 and 2011 in Europe (% of all households)

Source: Eurostat.

In times of information society”, the decision makers in all areas are facing numerous challenges which decide about the future of our civilisation and of the world. The main general question which will have decisive impact on the future of Europe and the world is: How shall the decision makers use the unprecedented quantity of information they possess? The history (two World Wars, invention and use of nuclear weapon, “creative” cloning etc.) teaches us that any decision making not subordinated to common “values of higher order” might lead to progress of a society or even to pathologic use of reason. Here are three examples (with open-ended questions) where information society could potentially lead to:

1. Can the concept of “information society” and the “knowledge based society” without simultaneous application of the concept of “wisdom based society” – i.e. a set of supra-temporal values which has been well-tried through centuries? What will guarantee that pure “knowledge” separated from wisdom – does not sink just into upbringing of even more intelligent, smart and skilled criminals with even more sophisticated instruments they will use in their decision making? Creativity in the information society is able to invent a medication, which can cure mortal disease as well as to invent an atomic bomb for destruction. The current crisis might show the contribution of decision makers and intellectuals in it.

2. In information society media are an important co-creator of the public opinion, capable to use the effect of “virtual reality” with serious impact on masses. Thanks to media and decision makers managing them we might (dis)believe someone/in something, (dis)like somebody/something. Decision makers in media might try to be balanced in their service but since their very creation hardly ever “independent”. Media in information society have the ability to spread encouraging or negative messages around the globe, to interfere into politics, to turn a criminal into a hero as well as to discredit honest people.
3. Will technology in information society serve man or will man be enslaved by technology? Technology can help people to cultivate the soil in a more efficient way as well as to spy on them practically anywhere on the Earth’s surface. Today it is possible to see on-line what is happening in mountains, cities in bottom of the sea. The system Galileo is able to monitor the Earth’s surface in detail with about 30 cm exactness. Employers have the means for controlling their employees where they are, what they are doing, with whom they are communicating. Mobile phones can be used as senders or intercept device even when switched off. People are losing their privacy. In times of industrial revolution workers were a part of a machine, today people are becoming part of information system. According to their access or no access to information technologies people on the Earth are digitally divided. Those “out” who are cut off of the information society are economically losing. Those “in” the economically more developed space are connected via information channels. All their data or data about them (personal data, communication, bank transfers, contacts, relations, including sensitive information) is a part of one single information system. Centralisation of information often might pose questions regarding their eventual access by other person(s) and eventual misuse. Today, in times of “skilled” hackers and cult of capitalisation of information one can hardly seriously trust that this problem will be solved by a (commercial) offer of various IT security systems. Centralisation of data potentially brings questions on how and when they the data can be used by someone against somebody else. This might certainly become a part of a struggle in influence of power (for economic, political or other reasons). One of the most sensitive areas of scientific struggle in times of information society is the area of bioethics.

Question to which extent the current state of play of EU legislation is able to deal with problems and risks the information society brings remains for discussion. From institutional point of view the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon can be

a signal that Europe is looking for its Soul – therefore for application of the core supra-temporal values which could be called “code for Europe”. We realise that for defining “ethos” and its application in practice in the contemporary European Union, it would be difficult to find a scientific and political consensus. Founding Fathers of the European Communities were inspired by Christian heritage as the core value of European identity, of course, out of confessional borders. This seemed compatible with the great moral values of enlightenment which focused on rational dimension of Christian values.

For zooming-in on what we consider of the key importance for vital development of Europe that could be influenced by decision makers at any level in information society we were inspired by the Polish writer Cyprian Norwid who in 18th century states about the decadence of nations: it is not because of disrespect to power, especially of the King, some nations do exist and some do not. Because if that would be the case, Europe would have disintegrated. Norwid is convinced – and his views are also shared by Czeslaw Stanislaw Bartnik¹⁰, by Bogumil Gacka¹¹ and by Pavol Mačala¹² – that there is only one ground for the development or the decadence of a nation which is the “respect or disrespect to human person”. They all share the view that it is human “personalism” that is the main element for building true human solidarity¹³. And “solidarity” remains one of the key pillars on which the Common Europe is legally and culturally defined. This concept could be preserved only if it will be based on consistent concept of human rights and human dignity which can be respected only provided that decision makers will keep the principle of “unconditionality” and “indefatigability.” According to **Hirsch**, the fundamental human rights are neither created by a law maker nor are they given to citizens, but *exist from the law itself, a law maker have to fully respect them, they are for him “values of higher order”*¹⁴. Freedom without applied justice is anarchy and leads to the destruction of freedom. Former Norwegian State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Janne Haaland **Matlary** is describing challenges for decision makers in practical application of Human rights in her book with significant title: “Human rights endangered by power and by relativism”.

¹⁰ C.S. Bartnik: *Personalizm*. Lublin 2000.

¹¹ B. Gacka: *American Personalism*. Lublin 1995.

¹² P. Mačala: *Personalism of the Slavs*. “Personalism. Science – Philosophy – Theology” 2005, 8, Warsaw – Lublin – Radom, pp. 95-102.

¹³ J. Tischner: *Medzi slobodou a porobou*. Kaligram, Bratislava 2001.

¹⁴ G. Hirsch: *Ein Bekenntnis zu den Grundwerten*. “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” 12 October 2000.

Finally, we would wish to conclude in open-ended way by words of Bob Moorehead (Moorehead 1995) which could serve as a compendious summary for a reflection on what the information society could mean to our lives today: “The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints; we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy it less. We have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences, but less time; we have more degrees, but less sense; more knowledge, but less judgment; more experts, but more problems; more medicine, but less wellness... We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We’ve learned how to make a living, but not a life; we’ve added years to life, not life to years. We’ve been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbour. We’ve conquered outer space, but not inner space; we’ve done larger things, but not better things. We’ve cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul; we’ve split the atom, but not our prejudice. We write more, but learn less; we plan more, but accomplish less. We’ve learned to rush, but not to wait; we have higher incomes, but lower morals; we have more food, but less appeasement; we build more computers to hold more information to produce more copies than ever, but have less communication; we’ve become long on quantity, but short on quality. These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion; tall men, and short character; steep profits, and shallow relationships. These are the times of world peace, but domestic warfare; more leisure, but less fun; more kinds of food, but less nutrition. These are days of two incomes, but more divorce; of fancier houses, but broken homes. These are days of quick trips, disposable diapers, throw away morality, one-night stands, overweight bodies, and pills that do everything from cheer to quiet to kill. It is a time when there is much in the show window and nothing in the stockroom; a time when technology has brought this letter to you, and a time when you can choose either to make a difference, or to just hit delete...”¹⁵.

Conclusion

The paper identified selected challenges ahead of decision makers in information society from the European point of view. Although we perceive concrete quantitative challenges the Europe is facing, for the purpose of this paper we did not reduce the term “challenges” for Europe in information society on quantitative

¹⁵ B. Moorehead: *Words aptly spoken*. Overlake Christian Press, Kirkland WA 1995, pp. 197-198.

indicators and on strategy how to achieve them. We rather focused on the vision for decision makers in information society, which would allow Europe to stick to the values steaming from the heritage it was based upon. On our point of view, this is the only way if Europe in times of information society would like to stay whole and original – as a part of precious “world mosaic pieces”. The alternative, certainly less attractive for its inhabitants, is become geopolitically and economically speaking just one the satellites of global “melting pot”, which would mean a victory of indifference – especially in terms of culture and values. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is also to offer some inspiration for European decision makers who are in a position to make the future of Europe in “times of information society” better for the next generations.

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Summary

The post-modern society has moved to an era of information society. The aim of this article is to analyze the impact of the information society concept on the contemporary society in Europe and in Global context. We would like to focus on selected benefits and threats the new information technologies mean to lives of contemporary people and reflect on what might be some consequences of the global use of information society in the coming years.

Keywords: Europe, information society, decision making