

Introduction

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Over the past 40 years, America has become a leading Information Society (Dordick & Wang, 1993). Conceptualists have characterized it as the “technological society” (Ellul, 1964), the “post-industrial society” (Bell, 1973), the “post-capitalist society” (Drucker, 1993), and the “network society” (Castells, 1997). Regardless of the name, there is general agreement that America is engaged in a massive transformation of its society from an industrial one to one that is based on the production and distribution of information (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). This transition is changing the future of information and communications systems in this nation and the way that our society functions in general.

The Information Society of which we speak is the contemporary societal condition of America as it transforms itself into a society that relies on information and its dissemination as a basis for sustaining the society itself. Speculations abound about how the emergence of the Information Society will affect the lives of Americans and others around the world. Some argue that it will improve the economic power of individuals as well as corporations (Baldwin, McVoy, & Steinfield, 1996; Gates, 1995); and others say a global democracy will emerge in which there will be electronic participation in government (Arterton, 1987). Many expect that there will be expanded educational opportunities because information and knowledge will be shared all over the world through vast computer and telecommunications systems such as the Internet (Gates, 1995). Still other predictions are that new employment opportunities will arise from the fields of information and communications (Dordick & Wang, 1993).

Other analysts have contradictory perspectives and see the Information Society as not enhancing the lives of everyone involved. Such pundits predict that the Information Society will be a society of controllers and controlled (Gandy, 1989) and the information-rich and the information-poor (Haywood, 1995). Castells (1989) argues that “people live in places, but power rules

through flows” of electronic data. Information controllers, therefore, have become more concerned with worldwide networks of information flows than with communities, cities, or other locales. Castells sees the emergence of the Information Society as an opportunity for the organizations of power and production to continue to dominate society without submitting to its controls. He says: “In the end, even democracies become powerless confronted with the ability of capital to circulate globally, of information to be transferred secretly, of markets to be penetrated or neglected, of planetary strategies of political-military power to be decided without the knowledge of nations and of cultural messages to be marketed, packaged, recorded, and beamed in and out of people’s minds” (p. 349). Castells concludes that the result of this process is that “there is no tangible oppression, no identifiable enemy, no center of power that can be held responsible for specific social ills.”

Gillespie and Robins (1989) point out that new global communications systems are not established for the universal access of the members of various societies but are set up to expand the reach and centralize the interests of transnational corporations and government organizations. They comment that the “new electronic highways of the Information Society are not, therefore, public thoroughfares but are more akin to a myriad of private roads.” This widening chasm of power between members of society and bureaucratic organizations is of critical importance in the information age. Gandy (1989) argues that the main function of the new technologies of the Information Society is surveillance of individuals in that society.

The emerging information order is replete with the contradictions discussed earlier. On one hand, analysts of the optimistic perspective see the Information Society as an enlightening, empowering, and egalitarian system that holds unlimited opportunities and potential for advancement for all within its boundaries. On the other hand, critical writers say that it is a system that is changing societal arrangements to the advantage of those who are already powerful and to the detriment of those who are less influential.

But what does all this mean to a historically disadvantaged people who are striving to maintain their well being and pursue advancement in the midst of the rapid changes taking place in American society? In this book, we explore America’s Black community to find answers to this query.

The Black community of which we speak is the sector of American society that is populated by African Americans at the dawn of the twenty-first century. It should be noted at the outset that the terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably throughout this book to refer to people who live in the Black community. During the 1980s the African American population grew to 30 million. This population continued to grow during the 1990’s and as the year 2000 begins, the Black community is made up more than 35 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, March 1999). As the largest minority community in the leading Information Society in the world today, the Black community in

America is an excellent place to assess how well a historically disadvantaged societal group can cope with a society as it changes its socioeconomic configuration from one based on industry to one grounded in information production and distribution.

This transition is already having a devastating impact on large sectors of the Black community. Too often Blacks are concentrated in industries that are now on the decline (Marable, 1983). Wilson (1996) argues that the decline of the mass-production system, decreasing availability of lower-skilled blue-collar jobs, the growing importance of training and education in the higher-growth industries, and the growing suburbanization of jobs are having a dramatic, adverse effect on low-skilled Black workers. The nation's ghettos, which are occupied by nearly 6 million Blacks, are places where work and the ability to work are disappearing as the Information Society steadily advances.

Since the evolution of the Information Society is having serious impacts on some parts of the Black community, a serious discussion must take place about Blacks and the position that they will occupy in the new information order of this country and the world. The following questions seem pertinent to such a discussion. How large is the segment of the Black community that is ready to "go on-line" in a society that works best for a societal group's interests when it has the ability to "hook up" to the nation's information infrastructure using devices such as personal computers, cable television, cellular phones, satellite dishes, and other interactive equipment? To what extent do Blacks own major information industries such as telecommunications and broadcasting systems? To what extent are school systems, including historically Black colleges and universities, making use of the capabilities of new communications technologies to enhance the learning of young African Americans? How many Black people are working in information industries, especially in leading, decision-making positions? What amount of influence and power will Black Americans exert in transmitting messages and images about themselves and their culture in a society that is grounded in information development, processing, production, and distribution? This book looks at these issues and attempts to discuss them in a systematic way in order to provide a clearer picture of the position that the Black community occupies in the American Information Society.

Frank Webster (1995) provides a framework for systematically analyzing Information Societies in his book *Theories of the Information Society*. He distills the thinking of numerous researchers and analysts into key categories that define the concept "Information Society." He posits that the five contexts in which information societies have been analyzed include technological, economic, occupational, spatial, and cultural. The technological analysis deals with the application of information technology in all concerns of society, especially the proliferation of computers and the imbrication and convergence of telecommunications and computing. The economic analysis concerns the size and growth of information industries, especially those dealing with mass media

and information services. The occupational analysis seeks to determine if the preponderance of occupations in a society is in the area of "information work." A major concern here is determining which jobs should be classified as information occupations because they are mainly engaged in the production, processing, and distribution of information. The spatial analysis focuses on the centrality of information networks in linking together locations within and between towns, regions, nations, continents, and the entire world. This linking has created an electronic environment commonly referred to as "cyberspace." The analytical focus is how these linking networks allow users to overcome the constraints of real time and space and deal with political, economic, and social enterprises rapidly and efficiently in cyberspace. Finally, the cultural analysis examines the explosion of images, messages, and symbolism in contemporary culture. The focus is the role of information technologies in increasing our abilities to record, transmit, and receive cultural images and messages about ourselves and others. These categories of analysis have been used to measure the informational dimensions of various nations to determine whether or not they should be classified as Information Societies.

We acknowledge the fact that America is an Information Society. In this book, we use Webster's (1995) categories to assess whether or not the Black community is progressing along the same lines as the American Information Society as a whole. In other words, we use them to assess the informational dimensions of Black America to determine if the Black community is an "information community." To this end, the book is divided into five parts: Part One deals with adoption of information technology by Black people as well as the use of information-gathering technology by the majority community to access personal information about people in the Black community; Part Two addresses economic factors that impact Black ownership and control of information industries; Part Three deals with professional training and employment patterns affecting Black people in the information era; Part Four deals with Blacks' abilities to enter cyberspace to solve social, political, and economic issues and to experience participatory democracy. Part Five concerns cultural issues in the American Black community and their connections to Africa and the rest of the world.

In this work, we seek to understand whether or not the Black community will progress in the Information Society, be left behind, or be left out. The contributing authors used research approaches that are quantitative, qualitative, and interpretive (Williams, Rice, & Rogers, 1988). Each writer or team has produced a chapter that deals with an issue that the editors feel is critical to understanding the relationship of the Black community to the American Information Society. In the final chapter, however, the editors draw some conclusions and make some predictions about the relationship of the Black community to the Information Society.

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