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Striking the right balance in disclosing information: a dream or reality?

Much has been said or written to the effect that the 21st century will belong to all the world's inhabitants, that it will be the century of full, free and protected expression of human personality and of the potential of each citizen's intelligence and hard work. And as the 21st century began in the context of the information and knowledge society, it will also see information and knowledge playing a decisive role in the economic development of states and in the shaping and assertion of each individual's personality. The 21st century is the century of information's great challenges, the century where learning the alphabet goes hand in hand with computer skills, the century of adapting to the new demands of society.

As knowledge has always been at the heart of economic growth and the gradual improvement in social welfare, economists have come up with new concepts with thought-provoking names, such as "knowledge society", "knowledge-based economy"¹, etc. This phenomenon appears to signal a discontinuity or break from previous times.

Society expresses the need for the world to be presented in a clear, orderly and coherent way, with everything making sense and obeying a specific hierarchy (upon which we can base the decisions we must take on professional or everyday issues). Because this is also the century where states and governments must ensure that citizens are well-prepared and desire to live and develop in an information society. Some analysts believe that information society has already come to an end and that the next stage in human evolution is a knowledge-based society, in which specialised institutions will no longer be happy simply to provide information but will also "plant" knowledge, through the direct involvement of information-science specialists (now known as "knowledge workers") in the knowledge process.

Transparent communication does, however, entail certain risks. Strict information policies must be laid down in accordance with institutions' data-privacy policies, something which only the institutions themselves and their specialists can do, despite the opinions and "advice" they may receive from outside... And good information policies can only function in tandem with effective international institutional-cooperation programmes, through networks allowing data to be exchanged quickly and with best results.

¹ David, Paul A., Foray, Dominique: *An introduction to the economy of the knowledge society. International Social Science Journal*, March 2002, No. 171: *The Knowledge Society*, p. 9 – <http://www.unesco.org/issj/rics171/fulltext171en.pdf> (Last consulted: 13 July 2003).

When security requirements are not met, we feel in a position of insecurity, that epistemological state whereby we do not believe (or know) something which is certain. It has to be said that insecurity is a subjective, not an objective, state².

Since the beginning of the 20th century we have seen a new characteristic of economic growth in the form of greater “intangible” capital as compared to “tangible” capital (as demonstrated by Abramovitz and David)³. And in developed countries, the expression “knowledge-based economy” has sprung up. The problem is that access to knowledge-based economies is still very restricted and there are big disparities between different countries and different social strata.

Paul David and Dominique Foray are of the opinion that knowledge economies come about when a group of people co-produce (i.e. produce and exchange) new knowledge on a mass scale using information and communication technologies⁴. They analyse the start of the digital era as a revolution in knowledge instruments, and as being of great importance since it influences the technologies used to produce and distribute information and knowledge. Although these instruments allow us to access remotely both information and knowledge, they also have had terrible effects since they appeared in their first forms during the fifties. They allow us to transmit written and digitalised messages or even to gain access to knowledge systems from afar – for example, distance learning (tele-education – the framework of a dynamic relationship between student and teacher) or distance experiments and full virtual access to databases.

Differences between information strategies arise due to the different technical, technological and economic starting conditions of each country as well as their human, economic and financial potential.

On 19 July 1994, the first European action plan for information society, “Europe's Way to the Information Society“, took many European countries by surprise. Some had better communications infrastructures than others, some had more developed electronic-product industries while others had not even thought about this issue as they were too busy trying to find solutions to domestic economic and social problems, such as economic recession, rising unemployment and inflation, etc. They realised very quickly that this new information and communications technology together with the EU's modern plans for building a global information society constituted a solution with much potential and which was able to deal with the problems they were facing, whether it be creating new jobs, improving public services at low cost, reducing pollution and traffic congestion in large cities and on motorways or improving educational standards and skills (particularly among young people) and sustained economic development in general. EU candidate countries are making a valuable effort to reach certain standards in global cooperation on information. For example, in 1996 Romania took its first steps in the fields of computerisation and creating a fundamentally information-based economy on a national scale based on the free exchange of information, the precondition for any genuine “information-broker” activity.

The EU and EC have been and still are the logistical and administrative hub for a coherent European strategy and action plans for the Information Society. To solve the security problem which stems from full access to information, it is necessary to devise strategies for information processing and decision-making. The quantitative analysis of risk, the principle of precaution, reversible decisions, end-user involvement and participatory procedures are some of approaches researchers and professionals

² Ove Hansson, Sven: *Uncertainties in the Knowledge Society*, *International Social Science Journal*, March 2002, No. 171: *The Knowledge Society*, p. 39. <http://www.unesco.org/issj/rics171/fulltext171en.pdf> (Last consulted: 13 July 2003).

³ Abramovitz, M., David, P.A.: *Technological change and the rise of intangible investments: the US Economy's growth-path in the twentieth century*. In: Foray, D., Lundvall, B.A. (eds.): *Employment and Growth in the Knowledge-based Economy*. OECD, Paris, 1996.

⁴ David, Paul A., Foray, Dominique: *Ibid*, p.15.

have adopted to develop these strategies. In order to solve security problems and the risks involved with full access to information, it is doubtless necessary to gain a better understanding of the flow of information in modern societies and its social repercussions⁵.

To this end, OLAF's decision to consult specialists in the field is a worthy one and should be imitated by other Community institutions as a guarantee of adaptation to the demands of the global information and human-rights society. Although external solutions may be found (such as "filtered" transparency through inter-institutional networks), the decision to "lift the veil" which, for security reasons, conceals information on their investigations, should ultimately be left to the sole discretion of the institutions concerned.

⁵ Ove Hansson, Sven: *Ibid*, p. 48.