

The mis-information society

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It is now more than four years since James Callaghan urged the British public to 'wake up' to microelectronics. Since the then premier observed that 'we may be on the threshold of the most rapid industrial change in history' we have been inundated with appeals to alert ourselves to the Information Technology 'revolution'. Vast sums of money were spent on the *I.T.* '82 publicity campaign which demanded of people whether 'the revolution [has] started without you' as it urged them to seize this 'once-in-a-century chance to create new wealth, higher standards of living and a world . . . in which all of us have more time, freedom and ability to pursue our interests.' Mrs. Thatcher, well pleased with the success of this propaganda which the pollsters report as effective, has promised further funds to 'continue to encourage people to *accept* the new technology' (8 December, 1982).

I.T. has been sold as part of an 'Information Age', a 'post-industrial society' into which we are rapidly evolving and for which we must prepare ourselves. Promised is a future high tech 'information economy' where computer terminals extend into each home allowing the populace access to vast data banks, repositories of society's wisdom, to which it can add and subtract at will. Information and Information Technology — the two are often difficult to separate since *I.T.* is information materialised (e.g. robotics, computer aided design, computer numerical control) as well as an enhanced means of handling information — are presented as the heralds of an age of unimagined material abundance and unprecedented quality of life, of a society in which 'everyone [is] an aristocrat, everyone a philosopher'.¹

All this talk of an 'Information Society' is of course attractive: the prospect appears one in which people will in some sense be

more intelligent knowledgeable and rational. Who wouldn't be wooed by such a scenario? To be sure there has been concern expressed about the employment consequences of I.T., but this trade union response, which is itself ambivalent, appears hangdog in view of the promise of 'Post-Industrialism'. Moreover, restricting itself to concern for the work implications of I.T. it has scarcely begun to gauge the enormous significance and scope of what lies behind the rhetoric of the 'mighty micro'.

What is camouflaged by the notion of an 'Information Age' is a massive process of social, economic and political restructuring which is taking place in an unequal and crisis-ridden society that is shaping forms of information and I.T. to suit particular interests. We are experiencing a process by which information collection, handling and dissemination (what is defined as information, how it is to be used, how it is to be made available) has moved to the very core of our society and its attempts to escape from recession while containing dissent. What we are witnessing is an unprecedented degree of corporate and governmental activity in this arena, the consequence of which is that certain forms of information and I.T. are destined to impact not only on work (the major focus of concern to date and understandably so since in advanced societies so much labour is 'information work'), but on all other spheres where the effects of these agencies are felt — on our leisure pursuits, political procedures, educational institutions, national sovereignty and even our interpersonal relations.

This development has little to do with the emergence of a new 'Information Society' — though the concept does at least indicate the crucial role in our age of information and information technology — and everything to do with the continuation of the old order which shapes technologies and information to suit its own ends. The results of this combination, a society in the midst of acute recession seeing in I.T. and information a possibility of escape, are of the most serious kind. These include:

A renewed emphasis on market criteria for information supply and use which entails the development of information and I.T. that are above all saleable and to be made available on a basis of an ability to pay. Visible results of such an emphasis include: (a) for the domestic sphere a heightened supply of what Herbert Schiller has called 'garbage information'² for the, revealingly termed, *consumer* of video recorders, cable services, breakfast

television, tv games and the like. What the 'Information Age' is bringing to the domestic arena is an intensification of the established diet of diverting 'entertainment' rather than information in any meaningful sense. The new technologies for the home are largely enhancements of the television and the contents are to be more of that which has been most successful to date. In the search for profit there will be further stress on movies, sport, games and soft pornography along with a strengthening of the individualistic 'stay at home' trend that television-centred leisure supports.

Moreover, as private interests direct these innovations, criteria of public service broadcasting are being steadily undermined. Production for ethnic, cultural or political minorities, presentations of considered and in-depth documentaries on social, political or economic themes – assets of a public service ethic that are valuable in spite of the dangers of elitism – will be denuded given that the raison d'être of the new is profitability.³

The consequence of the motivation to maximise economic return will be a diet of easily-digestible, tasteless 'information' of the McDonalds variety. We can see this logic being worked out on all fronts – in proposals for cable, in the surge of video tape rentals, in the flurry of Pacman-type cassettes for use on personal computers . . . and in the current demise of *TV-am* where Peter Jay's pleasant dream of an 'electronic newspaper' has been replaced by the nightmare of the Aitken family's 'younger and more popular show'.

It is supremely ironic that it is the BBC which captures the lion's share of the breakfast television audience at the moment by capitulating to the 'entertainment' ethos that is the hallmark of commercial groups, being light, breezy, trivial, insubstantial. In truth, the competitive success of the BBC in the ratings for breakfast television is a worrying portent. The BBC, wary of and anticipating further competition from commercial interests, is in response already starting to shift away from its public service role with its plans for the introduction of Direct Broadcast Satellite in 1986 which will be made available on a subscription basis and for which it has opted to co-operate in the making of films with Home Box Office, the leading U.S. cable company with over half the market, a subsidiary of the giant Time Inc. which owes its success to offering movies on its channels.

While the move away from the public service character of the BBC to commercial practices is itself of concern, since this must impact on what will be shown, it is equally disturbing that this key British cultural institution is simultaneously introducing inequality into its viewing by making some programmes available only to those able to pay the requisite fee. Unwilling to turn to advertisers for subsidy the BBC still will compromise itself by charging for premier channels.

This is an instance of a steadily growing trend – the spread of the ‘information haves’ and the ‘information have-nots’ – which is something seemingly inevitable where profitability is the *sine qua non* of information providers and where customers have unequal means of payment. Because of this it is of course possible that a few, carefully targeted and created, television and cognate facilities will provide information of worth, but this will be at a price that can be commercially justified and the quality of information will be closely correlated with ability to pay. Such a vista, already in evidence with the viewdata service which has rapidly shifted from a home to business tool, is a far cry from the information-rich environment envisaged by the I.T. acolytes.

(b) the intrusion of corporate interests into the rapidly-expanding ‘information industry’. ‘Information’ is nowadays a very hot commodity and because of this a locus of private enterprise. This is evident in the domestic markets discussed above, but it extends much further and its consequences are that much more weighty. RCA’s identification of the ‘greatest potential’ for growth lying in the ‘inter-related areas of communications technologies, consumer and government electronics, and entertainment and information services’ is the characteristic reasoning of a number of giant corporations (Xerox, IBM, AT&T, ITT) that have targeted I.T. and information as areas of investment. Their emphasis is currently on the office, a large and lucrative area ripe for automation where we are witnessing a veritable explosion of technological innovation, but the same motivation (and frequently the same corporations) is evident in cable production, satellite exploitation and other sectors.

Because these companies operate from a principle, quite proper from their perspective, of private interest rather than social good their products and services are aimed at the most promising markets – with predictable results. The major uptakers of the new

technologies are those best able to pay for them and the new technologies have been designed and developed with the most affluent in mind: the integrated computer/communications facilities are being operated by and supplied to large corporate bodies (and some state agencies, of which more below) to better enable them to centralise, rationalise and co-ordinate their dispersed activities.

In turn, these purchasers are searching to maximise their private interests the results of which are contracting for technologies and services which are justifiable in terms of profitability to the company. The consequences in terms of 'staff saving', increased intensity of labour, and more machine pacing are already well known in factories and offices. Less well known, but equally important, is an increasing internationalisation of affairs in the hands of a group of transnational corporations that, in the words of Citicorp (one of America's biggest banks), is enabled by their adoption of 'increasingly sophisticated satellite technology' that leads to 'a completely integrated market place capable of moving money and ideas to any place on the planet in a matter of seconds'.

Powerful organisations do not merely both produce and take up the new technologies: they are also providers and users of specific forms of information. It is a truism that the more pertinent the information the more expensive it will be. In this light it is worthwhile observing that information services of a financial kind (market trends, stock exchange listings, investment research, currency flows) such as supplied by the bullish Datastream are produced for and made available only to those groupings with the means to afford them. Thus Telerate, a U.S. computerised financial information service (itself owned largely by Exco, an international money broker which is in turn threatened with take-over by the behemoth of the information business AT&T) which supplies updated data to banks and finance institutes is currently enjoying rapid growth on the basis of revenues from subscription fees which average some \$700 per terminal per month. Telerate's data may well be important, but at that price it is by no means available to everyone.

These examples — and there are many others — reveal that the results of I.T. and information services being developed in a context which emphasises market criteria are discernably strengthening the power of the already powerful whether by producing technologies that incorporate the skills of their workforce, facili-

tating the centralised control of multinational enterprises or by supplying information of a sensitive, strategic and expensive kind while the domestic consumer, with the possible exception of an affluent minority, gets pap.

A second major result is a changing state role, which is especially important since the state holds a prominent position as information supplier, user of I.T., funder of research and development and wielder of socio-economic power. In the U.K. under the incumbent government there has been a long-held recognition that 'Information is the commanding height of tomorrow's economy' (Conservative Party policy document, 1979) and it has acted energetically upon this perception in producing a sustained and coherent policy orchestrating the 'information revolution' in terms of 'Freie Wirtschaft – Starker Staat' (free market – strong state). This has been expressed in a number of ways including:

(a) the privatisation policy which 'continues to be a key element in our economic strategy' (M. Thatcher, 17 Feb. 1983). The Conservatives have struggled for a 'free market' in manifold ways, but none more determinedly than in the I.T. and information sphere. The overall logic has been to release from public holding assets that can be worked for private gain. British Telecom, a strategic service in any 'Information Society', is the jewel in this crown. Soon 51% will be made available to private investors because Patrick Jenkin wants 'industrial and commercial decisions to be determined by the market and not by the state' (Hansard, 19 July, 1982). Associatedly, the National Enterprise Board's holdings in I.T. have been reduced as part of the formation of an emasculated British Technology Group.

Privatisation has not by any means meant an end to state subsidies (cash allocations for 1982–83 stand at £134 million for numerous I.T. projects), but it has meant market viability is emphasised. This demands that products and services which are unprofitable will either not be supplied or supplied at an inferior level. Thus rural areas will in all likelihood experience a reduced level of telephony and will have a long wait for cable; subsidisation of unprofitable by profitable services will be abandoned (thereby giving higher price rises for domestic rather than business customers). In addition, an entirely new telecommunication network, Mercury, has been established by a consortium of Cable and Wireless (privatised November 1981), B.P. and Barclays Merchant Bank

to supply services, not to the general public, but to 'the business community in the UK' (Cable and Wireless, Annual Report, 1982) which offers the greatest spending power. (Mercury extends from the south of England only as far north as Leeds which is a revealing comment on its concerns). Another consortium, British Aerospace (privatised 1980/81), IBM and British Telecom, is planning an advanced satellite service in Western Europe – to link business users.

(b) Privatisation has operated hand-in-hand with a policy of cutting public expenditure which is having a profound effect on the Government Statistical Services that are the source of the vast bulk of material concerned with social and economic affairs in the U.K. A feature of this has been, following Sir Derek Rayner's 1981 review at the behest of the government, changes in the frequency and coverage of government information that have led to the loss of data such as on take-up rates of means-tested benefits and less regular release of data on those living below the poverty line consequent upon targeted reductions of about twenty-five percent in staff and administrative costs by 1984. In tandem with this have been severe cuts in the funding of other bodies such as the Social Science Research Council which investigate social, economic and political issues. With such developments information on certain sectors of the population risks never being collected.

Another feature of Rayner's advice for the Government Statistical Services has been an insistence that the cost of making information available to the public is recoverable. The result of the policy that 'Information . . . should be charged for commercially' has been an astonishing increase in the price of government-produced publications such that HMSO materials of but a few pages generally cost a matter of pounds. In turn this can mean the exclusion of much vital information from many individual and institutional parties.

A third characteristic has been the hiving off of government information services to private organisations wherever feasible. This is only in the preliminary stages, but already the contract to disseminate statistics in computer readable form has been awarded and there are plans to allocate part of the work of Companies House to commercial groups. Such developments threaten not only the distribution of information to interested parties as market criteria must lead to the charging of commercial rates,

but they also endanger certain forms of information (for example, who with money wants information on the leisure activities of old-aged pensioners in the North East?). When information comes to be treated as a commodity, when information garnered for the public domain is deemed something to be assessed by the standards of the marketplace, then surely a foundation of democracy is undermined.

(c) A cognate feature of reduced public expenditure and a zeal for privatisation has been manifested in education, an area usually regarded as the epitome of the 'Information Age'. There have indeed been made available large sums of money for the propagation of I.T. at all levels and even directives from on high for its incorporation into syllabi.

However, more significant than such attempts to engineer an 'Information Society' has been that the reality of generalised cuts in government support has sent higher education flocking to industry for sustenance. One result of this frantic search for provender is the 'science parks' currently sprouting across the country. Many aspects of these will no doubt be worthy, but we should not blind ourselves to the fact that the education they practice, the technologies they generate, the information they create are of a kind which necessarily and systematically excludes that which is deemed irrelevant to their paymasters. When Racal-Decca founds a chair in Information Technology at the university of Surrey it is not altruism on the part of this specialist in 'electronic warfare': it is a conscious business decision from which Racal-Decca requires a return.

Science parks are simply an indication that higher education is being forced to sell itself, to turn itself more and more into a service of industry. Doing so it becomes unavoidably dependent on the whims of the market which subsidises it. The 'Information Society' which this presages will have a spectrum of opinion within which the arts and social sciences will be hard put to survive. Relatedly, the arts, themselves starved of public funds increasingly go begging for sponsorship of their productions with the inevitable loss of independence to interested parties that such indebtedness entails. We may see this happening in the malaise of the Arts Council, but it extends through to the new media such as Channel Four and plans for cable which, lacking public funds, are compelled to seek private sponsors if they wish to survive. Whether the

sponsors be oil consortiums desirous of an enhanced public image or advertisers plying their wares, the consequences are similar for the programme makers — the tyranny of the ratings along with dependence on the economic controllers. One has but to glance across the Atlantic to better understand the 'Information Society' being created in this country — a comparative exercise particularly apposite in view of this government's conscious emulation of the United States as regards I.T. and information policy.⁴

(d) There is a final aspect of the government role in I.T. and information which is related to the above though it is not nearly so clearly economic in motivation. This is the way in which in recent years the state has strengthened its means of control over the populace, partly at least as a better means of freeing the market (anti-union legislation), but also in the form of increased police powers and military build-up. Information collection, handling and distribution are integral elements of this move to the strong state.

We witness these developments in areas such as police forces' adoption, nationally and locally, of sophisticated computer/communications technologies. *Computing* (9 July, 1981) recently reported that 'half of the 51 UK forces have installed computer networks, with nearly all the rest following close behind' and it is known that regional networks are inexorably expanding outwards. The best known police use of I.T. is the Police National Computer (PNC) set up in the early seventies and based at Hendon with a capacity for forty million separate records and according to *New Society* (13 Jan. 1983) already holding 36 million. The PNC can be accessed across the whole country by over eight hundred terminals located mostly in police stations. While the PNC is a national resource for the police, increasingly local forces are moving beyond merely drawing on and inputting the PNC towards integrating their own systems with the national one. As early as June 18, 1981 *Computing* reported on this drift and more recently *New Scientist* wrote that eight police forces in Britain have plans to link their computerised files with the PNC (7 April, 1983). In addition, though it is easy to overexaggerate in this murky area, there are some signs that this integration of information networks will extend even beyond computers in the domain of the police. Already a number of forces have interfaced their computers with those of local authorities on the technical grounds

of handling routine personnel problems and cohering emergency services such as fire brigades, ambulance and the police which are the responsibility of the area.⁵

It should be said that the police take on these sophisticated devices both because they have the resources made available to them by a government which is keen on 'law and order' and, since information (and the vaguer 'intelligence') is the life-blood of policing, because there is a clear rationale for taking up I.T. which improves its circulation, quantity and, hopefully, quality. However, as the technologies are introduced and increasingly integrated on a national level the centralising powers of our law-enforcers are massively enhanced.

There is a widespread feeling that the police, particularly those in the larger cities, are less accountable than they ought to be. Recent leakages to the press of some of the information kept on the public that came to light during a trial for which the jury had been vetted have inflamed these concerns.⁶ Police accumulation of technologies for information storage and handling make it that much harder to make them more answerable. The refusal of the Metropolitan Police to grant the Lindop Commission permission to examine their use of computers is an indication of this problem — and it is rather a grim picture to counterpose to current idealisations of an imminent 'Information Age' in which the people will have ready access to data banks.

The Commons' Defence Committee⁷ report on the handling of the 'information war' during the Falklands conflict is also instructively juxtaposed with images of an 'Information Society'. What we read here is that 'censorship can be justified'; that the Ministry of Defence closely controlled the journalists who accompanied the expedition (and excluded all foreign journalists); that having learned from Vietnam the risks inherent in offering open access to the media, coverage, especially pictorial, was severely curtailed; and that 'it is clear that information matters are an intrinsic part of war and should therefore form part of the planning for war' in future.

One of us happened to be in the United States during the battle of the South Atlantic. A report in the *New York Times* during that period observed that it was a 'perfect war' from the point of view of the British in the sense that information was totally under the control of those waging the war. Thus the British reporters

were the eyes and ears not only of the people at home but also of those in Europe and North America. Following this war and acting upon the recommendations of the Defence Committee the Ministry of Defence is working on details of a plan in which a number of journalists would be appointed as accredited war correspondents, under military control, in the event of a 'period of tension' involving NATO forces. Such a prospect, given the periods of tension during which we are currently living, cannot but make one quail.

There are other instances of more state control of information and I.T., but none can outstrip that of the defence agencies. The handling and deployment of nuclear weapons; the crucial role in their operation of C3I (command, control, communications and intelligence); the fact that the arms race is centrally one of competition over I.T. improvements; the staggering sums of money involved in research and development (Britain's R&D budget is made up of about a fifty percent state contribution of which half goes on defence projects and defence procurement) (supply estimates total £7.6 billion for 1983–84 of which a large share is for I.T. products⁸ while it has been estimated that some 20 percent of the revenue of U.K. electronics corporations comes from defence orders⁹) are all illustrations of the intimate relation between military interests, high technology and information. The needs of defence dramatically distort the production of new technologies (what are the civilian uses of cruise missiles?), they are increasingly seen to be a millstone around the neck of British industry,¹⁰ and the information they gather is far beyond the reach of public examination (the operation of national security institutions in the U.K. is, for example, poorly understood).

Behind the plethora of writing, speeches and television shows that have extolled the 'Information Age' that is supposedly unfolding before our eyes, behind the splendours of the new technology about which we hear week in and week out, lie tumultuous changes that are far removed from the fantasies of the futurists. What is in evidence is that information and I.T., while undoubtedly of crucial importance to our social, economic and political arrangements, are implicated with ongoing trends of our society: we are witnessing the market as arbiter of what is to constitute information and what types of I.T. are to develop alongside the spread of an increasingly strong state which is making sure that these will serve its purposes. These, verifiable features of the

current period of history, are light years from the imaginings of believers in the 'Information Society'.

Notes

¹ T Stonier. *The Wealth of Information: a profile of the post-industrial economy.* (Thames Methuen, 1983.)

² cf. H I Schiller. *Who Knows: Information in the Age of the Fortune 500.* (Ablex, New Jersey, 1981.)

A R Schiller and H I Schiller. 'Who can own what America knows?' in *The Nation* 17 April, 1982, pp. 461-63.

³ cf. R. Hoggart. 'Must we be casualties in the tv explosion?' in *The Guardian*, 13 Sept., 1982.

R. Hoggart. *The Hunt Report and Cable Regulation: an alternative.* (Broadcasting Research Unit, British Film Institute, 15 Feb. 1983).

P. Elliott. 'Intellectuals, the "Information Society" and the disappearance of the public sphere' in *Media, Culture and Society*, (4), 1982, pp. 243-53.

⁴ See E. Barnouw. *The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate.* (O.U.P., New York, 1978).

⁵ See G. Tyler. 'Reorganisation of a police communications network.' in *Computer Communications*, (2), 3, June, 1979, pp. 115-16.

⁶ D. Leigh. *The Frontiers of Secrecy: Closed Government in Britain.* (Junction Books, 1980), pp. 160-78.

Guardian, 20 September, 1979.

⁷ House of Commons. *First Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1982-3: The Handling of the Press and Public Information During the Falklands Conflict.* 2 volumes (HMSO, December 1982).

⁸ *Supply Estimates 1983-84 for the year ending 31 March, 1984.* (HMSO, March 15, 1983).

⁹ House of Commons. *Second Report from the Defence Committee, Session 1981-82: Ministry of Defence Organisation and Procurement.* 2 volumes (HMSO, 16 June, 1982).

¹⁰ Sir Ieuan Maddock. *Civil Exploitation of Defence Technology.* (N.E.D.C., April, 1983).