

**Maglič, Marko (2004): Information – Knowledge – Power:
Information Man vs. Information Society?**

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Abstract

We live in the Information Age, in which Information is the oxygen of the modern age. The new concepts of information and the use of new technologies exercise a strong impact on society.

While knowledge formerly was in a sense a public commodity, modern industrial sciences rediscovered knowledge a potential source of private or sectional power. Today's organizations' strive for power – or information – on the one hand, and the need for privacy on the other led to a continuous and self-generating conflict between state and individual.

Information – Knowledge – Power: Information Man vs. Information Society?

We form part of the Information Society. We live in the Information Age, in which **Information is the oxygen of the modern age**. *It seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire, it wafts across the electrified borders*, as Ronald Reagan observed in 1989.¹

The advantages and achievements of this our Information Age are being burned into our heads day by day: Politics, media and large companies present it as some luminous *Brave New World*, while issues like abuse of ICT, surveillance, social control, hidden structures of power, manipulation through media, criminalization of critics, or weak legislation are usually not to be found in the *light* of public discussion.

They are being hidden and kept away from the public eye, in the same way the individual's role in the Information Society is not an issue discussed largely in public.

Though we are not able to define whether we are at the beginning of this age, right in its middle or maybe even at its end, we already note the strong impact of its new technologies on society. The traditional conceptions of information and knowledge have altered due to the impact of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Whereas it could be questioned that the notion of an Information Society implies an augmentation of information quality, it can be affirmed that the quantity of information man is confronted with has grown in an extreme manner.

A question arising in this context is of course this leading to the origins of the complexity of information and knowledge. Why is its handling so complicated, and why does it have such a strong social impact?

¹ <http://www.informationweek.com/story/showArticle.jhtml?articleID=10300367>. Retrieved 22.09.2004.

Defining Information implies the differentiation between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom.² Boisot and Canals, when depicting the different approaches to the concept of knowledge, summarize accurately that *we might say that information is an extraction from data that, by modifying the relevant probability distributions, has a capacity to perform useful work on an agent's knowledge base.*³

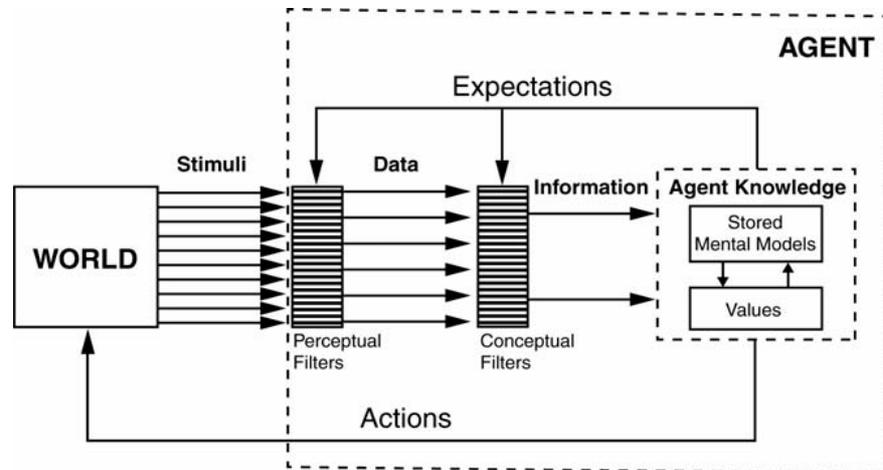


Figure 1: Boisot, 2004. 48: The agent-in-the-world.

When/after receiving data through perceptual filters, the *agent* uses conceptual filters to identify and extract the information from the data. Then knowledge can be generated on the base of an association with already stored mental models and values.

The conclusions to be drawn are decisive: As *There are physical limits to our access to data and hence to our ability reliably to extract information from data,*⁴ we can conclude that due to the differing abilities the extracted information must differ, and that accordingly all knowledge created must differ due to the differing agents:

We observe that there is no common knowledge, because the differences in the individuals' abilities lead to differences in knowledge itself. Finally this represents the base of what governments officially claim to be avoided: The digital divide.

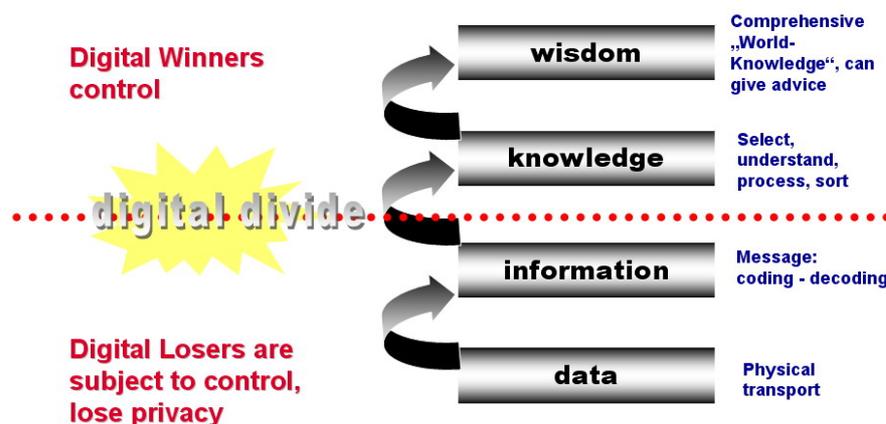


Figure 2: Maglić, 2004. Digital Divide

² For the concept of information refer to Capurro, 1996, Boisot & Canals, 2004, Günther, 2004. 61-62. Capurro, 2001 depicts the different approaches to the concept of knowledge.

³ Boisot & Canals, 2004. 47.

⁴ Ibid. 57.

While knowledge formerly was, in a sense, a public commodity, the modern industrial sciences rediscovered knowledge: *The notion of knowledge as a source of general enlightenment began to be overshadowed by the idea that it was a potential source of private or sectional power.*⁵

Knowledge is Power – in today's world the old adage opens new dimensions: Information is an enabler for commercial profit and social control.

Governmental or commercial institutions have always been profoundly concerned about what other people do, think or say. Today, the strive for power – or information – on the one hand and the need for privacy on the other led to a *continuous and self-generating conflict between state and individual.*⁶

Reagan, continuing his initially cited metaphor of information as the oxygen with the statement that *The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip* apparently was profoundly mistaken, as Madgwick suggested already in 1974:

Of all the threats posed to privacy in a rapidly changing and developing world, none is more sinister in its potential, more far-reaching in its implications, than the computer. Within a couple of decades it has revolutionized the conceptions of centuries, becoming like some demon god of primitive mythology.⁷

The microchip has now become the Goliath, starting a “war for information” and enabling surveillance in forms even Orwell could not imagine: Cybercrime, Information Warfare, the American surveillance systems Echelon and Carnivore, Data Mining and KDD, the RFID-Technology, and the impact of the Mass Media form part of a surveillance machinery never experienced before.

Privacy – though regarded commonly as a fundamental human right – is not welcome any longer, and reaching it is being impeded by those striving for more power and wealth: Enlightenment and legal protection is something to be avoided for them.

Due to the central role information plays in our society it is more than self-evident that – being the premise of knowledge – information represents money and thus power.⁸

Power [...] is not a possession but a strategy. Power makes for constant tension and struggle as those subjected to it resist it with their own tactics. In modern societies people are increasingly watched, and their activities documented and classified with a view to creating populations that conform to social norms. The knowledge of what happens is thus intrinsically bound up with power.⁹

As governmental and commercial or financial organizations intend to maintain or increase their power, they have to collect as much information as possible about the individuals.

Man's need for privacy counteracts with society's need for security is the *pass par tout* argument pretended by the ruling classes in order to achieve their goals, as the examples of the Flight-Data-Affair or the Patriot Act illustrate.

⁵ Barnes, 1979. 42.

⁶ Madgwick & Smythe, 1974. 1.

⁷ Ibid. 20.

⁸ Cf. Brin, 1998. 89.

⁹ Lyon, 1994. 26.

We can thus agree with Lelia Green, that *Privacy is a modern right sacrificed as part of the price of participation in post-modern information societies*¹⁰

Privacy as a fundamental human right is being neglected by the ruling classes. Basically we could believe in official propagations insinuating that the definition of the term is so difficult that until today no working and effective legal definition could be given. On the other hand we could doubt whether world's elite lawyers and scientists are simply not able to provide such definition.

A clear, legally binding definition of either privacy or data protection is almost never given. In the legal context, *adequateness* serves as a term for escaping *concreteness*. While today it seems almost impossible to find a working and valid definition for privacy, we on the other hand dispose of absolutely useful definitions which lead us quite back in time:

In 1890 the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis defines privacy as *the right to be let alone*,¹¹ and in 1952 Halmos stated that *Privacy is freedom from social contact and observation when these are not desired*, [...].¹²

Halmos' definition could perfectly work as a *working* definition because of the following reasons:

- (1) *Social contact and observation* imply all potential forms of such. A further distinction between physical, psychological or electronic contact/observation is redundant.
- (2) *When these are not desired* clearly points out that the will of the subject of the social contact/observation has to exist. For me – furthermore – it implies as well that this will should be provable in the same way that a conclusion of a contract has to be proved.
- (3) The attempt to more differentiation (or *the* normative definition) would only lead us into the same dilemma contemporary scientists are confronted with: Some kind of *chicken-egg* discussion which will not result in any agreement and impede a constructive discussion.¹³
- (4) It is an operational and operationable definition, whereas the normative approaches currently are not helpful.

The lack of valid definitions thus seems somehow artificially generated. In case we analyse legislation protecting our privacy, we have to find out that they mostly do not work: *There may be a lot of laws, but there is not much protection* experienced Bennet in 1997.¹⁴

Public interest and security is governments' standard argument used for adjusting the desired grade of privacy to its needs. When talking about data protection and privacy, the term *appropriate* or *adequate* seems to be *the* solution for the issuing organizations. De facto it is the escape from fostering enforceable legislation, which in case it was enforceable everybody would have to follow.

¹⁰ Green, 2002. 93.

¹¹ Cavoukian & Hamilton, 2002. 40.

¹² Halmos, 1952. 102.

¹³ As Hunter, 2002. 66. fears: *I'm sure we'll still be working around the privacy issues in 2010.*

¹⁴ Bennett, 1997. 113.

To point out again clearly: Security serves as a *pass par tout* argument for total surveillance which – by opening all doors of man's existence to governmental and commercial institutions – enables social control.

Privacy is no longer an issue for the *small guy*; it is *big business* to be controlled by the powerful:

In discussing the question of privacy, then, we are not discussing a peripheral nuisance that will yield to a few simple remedies, though we shall give due consideration to these matters also. What we are really discussing is the problem of power itself, its uses and abuses, and the tyranny it inevitably engenders unless the citizen is constantly vigilant.¹⁵

Within this context man's urge for privacy cannot be regarded as a desire opponent to the security needs of society. Security does neither inhibit nor exclude privacy. The fact that privacy as a right of human beings is not very welcome is to be led back to the fact that it counteracts with the ruling organizations' strive for power.

To draw some **final conclusions** we should bear in mind the realizations achieved so far: We observed that though information is not knowledge, it is a prerequisite for power because it is the central essence for generating knowledge, and thus again power.

Information Man's need for privacy counteracts with the propagated society's need for security, and this constellation leads to a *continuous and self-generating conflict between state and individual*.¹⁶

The most critical and dangerous point man is being confronted with in the *Information Age* is his unconsciousness: If he is not aware of what he is doing and what others might do on the base of his actions, he will be the sheep among a lot of wolves. Man should thus procure to deliberately employ the means of protection which are at his disposal, like e.g. encryption of his electronic correspondence, etc.

Prerequisite for such deliberate employment is that he informs himself about his possibilities: In order to get an objective impression of his possibilities man should not be frightened or impressed by new technologies: He shouldn't only take care of commercial and promoted instruments, but as well refer to sources of *the other side*: Critical / alternative websites in the Internet, books like Wallace Wang's *Steal This Computer Book 3: What They Won't Tell You About the Internet* or Gerald Reischl's popular publications could serve as a means of emancipation, a means to escape the threat of belonging to the *digital losers*, the dominated and domesticated sheep.

Furthermore – and this I regard as the most essential point for surviving in a reasonable manner in our age – man should seek thoroughly to escape the constant exposure to the information-flood generated by mass media.

Information is the essence out of which man generates knowledge, and wisdom. From knowledge – only achievable through personal experience and reflexion – man can generate his own, personal power which enables him to face the challenges of our and the coming ages.

¹⁵ Madgwick & Smythe, 1974. IX.

¹⁶ Ibid. 1.

Hence he should care, guard and protect his knowledge in the way the British poet Sir Edward Dyer does it: *My Mind to me a Kingdom is*.

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