

Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

This issue of *The Information Society* features four articles and a perspective piece, and 8 book reviews. While the topics vary among the five papers, they tend to fall into two clusters: works that create integrative conceptual frameworks and highly textured case studies that provide critical insights. The former cluster includes Gripenberg et al., Sein and Harindranath, and Prakken and the latter Caidi, and Coco and Short.

Gripenberg et al. study how the macro level “European information society for us all” policy discourse translates into projects on the ground via their examination of four ICT development projects sponsored by European national governments and EU. They include IT-Families, a pilot project that provided computers and training to 50 families in southeastern Finland; BookTownNet which connected 13 book dealers in Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, France and Wales; Tax Team that networked tax offices in the Alpine region in northern Italy; and Valley Net that connected enterprises in northeastern Italy. Gripenberg et al. find that opportunities created by political initiatives at the national and pan-European level generate peculiar dynamics within the communities that are intended beneficiaries of these projects. The possibility of access to significant resources induces partnerships among local groups so as to make their communities eligible and/or attractive to external funding agencies. Later, after the funding has been attained, the project implementation becomes problematic as these groups have had little prior interaction with each other and over time their agendas diverge. Gripenberg et al. make a valuable contribution as they take their analysis beyond the descriptive level and lay out elements of the underlying network development dynamic across the four case studies. For instance, they point out that the initiators’ plans are often more ambitious than the ability of the facilitators and the communities to carry them out and this discrepancy is a major source of implementation problems. Their paper gives pause to top-down prone policymakers to consider bottom-up issues before launching grandiose projects.

The second paper—“Conceptualising the ICT Artefact: Toward Understanding the Role of ICT in National Development”—also takes the discussion to a higher conceptual plane in an area largely marked by descriptive case studies. Here Sein and Harindranath argue that the lack of conceptual clarity about the role of ICT in development has impaired theoretical development. They locate the root

problem in our tendency to treat ICT as a monolithic and homogeneous entity. Sein and Harindranath problematize the ICT artefact by pointing out that there are significant differences among technologies, and their impact varies with the context. They then set out to create a tripartite framework by drawing on the literature on uses of ICT, views of ICT, and ICT’s impact on development. They develop their own categories for the first dimension and use those created by Orlikowski and Iacono (2001) and Malone and Rockart (1991) for the second and third dimensions respectively. Their main innovation is that they transform Orlikowski and Iacono’s categories for classifying how ICTs are viewed—Nominal View, Tool View, Computational View, Proxy View, and Ensemble View—into a hierarchy. This transformation allows them to create an integrative framework based on the notion that the interaction between ICT views and ICT use determines ICT impact.

Infrastructure networks are complex socio-technical systems that are shaped by the interplay of the visions and agendas of different groups in society. Caidi, in her paper “National Information Infrastructures in Central and Eastern Europe: Perspectives from the Library Community,” explores how the National Information Infrastructure was being imagined in the late 1990s in Visegrad Group countries: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. She focuses specifically on the discourse within the library communities since it is a particularly influential group in these countries. Her analysis draws on fieldwork that involved in-depth interviews with forty-nine senior library officials in thirty-seven institutions. The methodology she employed for conducting these interviews is notable. She adopted Kahin and Wilson’s (1997) conceptualization of the policy debate as a four-stage process—technical discourse, societal discourse, institutional discourse, and scholarly discourse—as her basic framework. Thereafter she attached illustrative statements from the literature to each of the four phases in the framework. The interviewees were asked to reflect and comment on the four statements. The resulting transcripts provided a wealth of data for deciphering the “frames” held by the influential librarians. One of the interesting insights her research brings out is the disquiet that the word “national” in National Information Infrastructure created among the interviewees. For them, unlike for us in the West, the term carried socialistic overtones. It took them back to a time in their recent history when the state controlled all aspects of life.

By this and other findings we are constantly reminded of the importance of the socio-cultural context within which an infrastructure network is created.

Papers on community networks and digital divide invariably have an "inside-out perspective" wherein they focus on a technology and then see how it can be used as a vehicle for fostering community and bridging the technological divide. Coco and Short's paper "History and Habit in the Mobilization of ICT Resources" has a refreshingly different "outside-inside perspective." In their case study of a city council's initiative to provide public access to computers and training in a community center in Queensland, they lay out the social context, focusing on the web of interpersonal relationships within which the technology was inserted. Their findings challenge the widely held assumption that people in disadvantaged groups will be willing partners in community network initiatives if they were given the necessary resources and training. They show how the pre-existing relationships among local participants and those formed in the early stages of the project influenced what happened at the center. The fact that the participants were driven by personal and pragmatic needs as opposed to communitarian ones makes them question the notion that intended beneficiaries of such projects can be called upon to sustain the network once it has been established. They urge a "careful study of local needs, local history and local habits of communication" before a new technology is inserted into the social fabric.

The last article by Prakken is in the Perspective section as it synthesizes various strands of research and articulates a point of view for designing organizations. Prakken critically examines the way information problems are formulated by organizations. He points out that organizations tend to articulate information problems in the image of

the available technological solutions. The root problem is rarely understood. On a very fundamental level, information is needed to deal with uncertainty. In our rush to employ the latest technology and generate more information, we tend to overlook the fact that a more elegant solution could involve a reduction in uncertainty and thereby the need for information. He provides two concepts—complexity and dynamics—and an overview of information reduction techniques under the rubric of The Dutch Sociotechnical Approach for developing such solutions. He goes on to illustrate how this approach can be implemented via an insightful case study of a firm of consultants.

Finally, this issue has reviews of books on a wide range of topics. While each paper and book review had its own particular disciplinary origin and journey through the review process, they sit well together on the pages of the same issue suggesting a resonance at a level deeper than the specifics of any particular topic area. As a collection, the varied pieces reflect both the breadth of TIS and the diverse interests of its readership.

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