The Role of Local Governments in Information Society

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With the growing accessibility of electronic local governmental services local governments are facing new challenges both from the point of view of the organisation of duties and of their client services. If we analyse the network of relationships local governments have grown into with the development of information society, we will see that they will have to tackle many more and entirely different types of tasks. These tasks have broader significance than a simple reorganisation of the offices, the computerization of certain processes, the elaboration and the introduction of an internet-based front office. As I will point out, local governments will have a much more specific role in information society. They must find access between functionality and content, they need to find the opportunity that makes peace between the local identities and the global network.

Introduction

The subject of my essay is the role of local governments in information society. This participation or role involves obligations and additional work, the reorganisation of duties for the local governments; on the other hand it provides opportunities and more effective performance.

In order to obtain a more detailed picture, first we will review the various definitions and major problems of information society, then, following a short introduction to the notion of information region, we will, according to the analysis, elaborate on the main tasks indispensably necessary for the successful performance of responsibilities.

Informatisation of the Society and the Information Society

Traditionally we can discuss two opposing theories in relation to information society. The supporters (Daniel Bell, Nico Stehr), who are normally accused of technological determinism, with the arrival of the information revolution, believe to have discovered a radical change in social structure, economy and commerce. According to the doubters (Neil Postman, Marc Porat) it is a mistake to examine technology separately from other subsystems of society and to attribute to the development of technology an effect that would transform the social structure. According to their opinion, technical determinism simplifies the process of change, separates the social, economic and political aspects of technological innovation, and handles them separately. Technology however does not detach itself so evidently from society, it is an integral part of it, and therefore examining it separately would be an arbitrary act. According to this, in information society only the strengthening, supporting of already existing relations take place with the introduction and application of the tools and connections of ICT. Both sides emphasize the role of information, and they also agree that the amount of available information has grown to an unprecedented size that affects numerous areas of society. The question is how and to what extent does technology influence society, general processes, changes or whether it really boosts and modifies existing ones. Finally, the third side (Frank Webster) merely sees some gradual differences between the previous opinions, as according to the supporters the emphasis is increasingly on change, while doubters believe that the spreading of the IT environment is an inferior occurrence of continuity. They do not deny the importance of information but they consider that inferior to principles and practices stabilized for long. Both views recognize changes but they differ in their identification and in judging the role secured by the effects in society.

Webster sets up five definitions for information society[1]:

1. technological

2. economic

3. employment

4. spatial

5. cultural

All the above are based on the quantitative changes and they wish to deduce the coming of a new age based on these. The accelerating technological innovation,

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[1] Webster, Frank (1995) Theories of the Information Society. London, New York: Routledge

the increasing economic significance of activities, the increase of IT workforce, or the increase of the amount of informatic signs all point to the same issue: how long will these indicators have to be on the increase for us to talk about information society? What would divide information and non-information society? Debates around information society can be grouped essentially around the same problem: whether the easily identifiable, measurable quantitative changes cause quality changes? If the answer is yes, we can talk about information society.

Webster identifies one quality change: the growing significance of theoretical knowledge. This is the only quality-based difference. It cannot be a subject to quantitative measurement. Theoretical knowledge in itself cannot be considered new, but its significance has grown recently, and it can spread in an extent that would determine our daily lives today.

Information Society as Network Society

The information age, or information society, according to the supporters, results in such a new social, economic and cultural structure[2] where the dominant functions and processes are more and more organised around networks. In this sense Castells identifies networks (or rather a group of networks) as the social morphology of the information age[3], that were created based on different interests and represent the functional structure of the mechanism of social-economic representation. That is why we can rightfully name information society a network society as well.

Network society in itself is not information society as the networking form of the social establishment has existed in other times and spaces[4], but the new IT paradigm provides a base for its being widespread in the entire social structure.

The peculiarity of the new medium is that it modifies the notions of time and space. The time spent in the networks is the time of continuous occurrences. The network serves as a scene for non-stop events and in this sense it has "timelessness" that is not the same as the time and space experienced by

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[2] Manuel Castells (1996). The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol.I: The Rise of the Network Society. Cambridge MA. Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers
   ISBN: 1-55786-616-3 / 1-55786-617-1 (pbk)
[3] Manuel Castells (1996). The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol.I: The Rise of the Network Society. Cambridge MA. Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers
   ISBN: 1-55786-616-3 / 1-55786-617-1 (pbk)
[4] Jan A.G.M. van Dijk: The One-dimensional Network Society of Manuel Castells www.thecronicle.demon.co.uk/archive/castells.html

individuals. On the networks, the continuous flow of capital, information, organisational interactions, pictures, sounds take over from physical space, which is limited by physical, linear continuity. Space cannot be separated from time, it appears as crystallized time. It is the space of continuous flow and events creating a "timeless time" this way. In the network it is the consecutive quality of occurrences that ceases, many things happen at the same time and the linearity of things is broken up into URLs and menus. Therefore network people, the managers of leading companies just as well as the "citizens on the net" live in a constant time, in the space of constant events that differs greatly from usual physical living space. In network society production, capital and power manifest by flowing across the worldwide networks that are completely separate from the "space of spaces", rendering the latter unnecessary. According to Castells, deliberate projects are necessary in order to preserve the significance of the "space of spaces" otherwise so important for individuals, or, transformation is necessary to give it a new significance"

This is how information society is created as a basic problem of the network society, as the abstract general instrumentalism of networks and the concrete, individual identities are difficult to synchronize with each other. The participation in the information society comes together with the participation of various networks. Simplifying the problem: there is a wide gap between mere functionality and the meaning (content). The problem is similar to that of globalisation. The "scale growth" accompanying globalisation processes leads to "scale reduction", that is the intensifying of identities. Some analysts trace most radical movements appearing paralelly to the globalisation process back to this issue.

Networks connect some individuals, but with the same act, they also exclude others. The two groups are in great distance from each other, to such a degree that they are not even occupied by the same problems; they see the world and react to problems from two entirely different aspects and, what is worse, they do not even talk to each other as the first group communicates most of the time via the network. The digital gap therefore exerts its effects both against locality as well as for locality. The emergence and strengthening of relationships spanning across regions, even nations, do not serve the strengthening of local relationships; on the other hand, among those standing on the other side of the "gap", locality and provincialism will be important.

A new way of development emerges in information society. Understanding this way of development can greatly contribute towards the understanding of information society itself, and, via this, we can obtain a more detailed picture on the role of the local governments, as the main actors of the local society. The

definition of informationalism is normally compared to the method of industrial development. It has three principal characteristics[5]:

1. Self-developing communicational capacity, in relation to volume, complexity and speed

2. Recalculating, reintegrating capability via digitalisation and repeated communication

3. Transmission, the flexibility of publication on the digital interactive networks

The above three arguments require some explanation. In the first case the starting point is the speed of information processing. There is no debate concerning the fact that information processing has reached a speed previously not experienced before; however, there is debate about whether this issue in itslef causes change, i.e. whether the quantitative change causes qualitative change as well. According to Castells it does, as this technology has the capacity to increase and to continuously grow its data processing speed. This process relates back to itself as it is under continuous development and the results of this development can be applied to it via a continuous feedback connection, as the tools and the technology itself can be both reconfigured. Therefore the hypothesis is as follows: in the three decades of information and communication technology we could observe a self-generating, expansive capacity of information processing. The limits of programming, system integration and network development so far have all become obsolete; and, in all probability, this tendency will continue with the application of newer and newer materials[6].

On the other hand internet provides a chance to recombine information products in a chosen time or in real time, and that this processing can result in a new product that can be immediately forwarded. This process obtains a special significance as recombination is the tool of innovation and innovation is the tool of economic growth, cultural creativity and political power making. The new form of knowledge is peculiar as recombining is always effective for its purposes. Its characteristic is that it is continuously accessible together with the results of recombining, expanding the scope of this knowledge. By means of this characteristic a tool becomes available whose scope and applicability (due to the continuous reflection and regeneration) has increased significantly. The application of this knowledge improves efficiency.

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[5] Manuel Castells: Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint http://www.annenberg.usc.edu/images/faculty/facpdfs/Informationalism.pdf

[6] Manuel Castells: Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint http://www.annenberg.usc.edu/images/faculty/facpdfs/Informationalism.pdf

The third characteristic is the flexibility of ICT: it can be applied for individual purposes, in political activities, in military environments, in entrepreneurial and in public sectors alike. Wireless communication makes this knowledge accessible anywhere, anytime.

Societies do not become information societies because a certain social structural model becomes characteristic to them, but because their production systems are organised according to principles that maximise the knowledge-based production, manufacturing[7].

It is necessary to see that both theories declare knowledge as a distinctive feature in the process of the identification of an information society. Webster highlights the importance and the focus of theoretical knowledge; Castells sees the outstanding change in the easiness of the creation of new knowledge and in the possibility of the continuous assurance of its applicability, i.e. in its continuous workability. An essential condition for the dissemination of information society is a recipient medium in possession of appropriate tools and capabilities that provide for the social embedding of the information-based economy and culture. For this the majority of the society must possess the IT tools and the capabilities necessary for the application of these tools (e-skills). It is a principle innovation however compared to the earlier practice that, due to the networking social structure, this recipient medium can very easily and at anytime become an information-creating and -selling medium. The bipolar social description that differentiates between creators and receivers seems to be fading due to this. Network dynamics require the dynamics and flexibility of individual networks as well; therefore less dynamic networks can be dominated by other, more dynamic and stronger networks. "Information society is the symbolic name of an age where economy, society and culture are primarily based on the manufacturing, exchange and sales of information, but due to this reason alone information society is not yet created."[8] The production and sales of information is achieved via IT systems. These sort the various social groups of society into networks, where newer and newer nodes emerge, depending on their success in the process of information production and commerce.

Here we have the chance to clear a nowadays very frequently emerging misconception – however, without having to specify information society itself: information society does not stand for IT society; it does not only depend on the development and penetration of ICT tools. In my opinion information society is a social arrangement that is far too complex to be able to describe only by the expansive penetration of IT tools, or to be described merely as an outcome of this

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[7] Manuel Castells (1996). The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture Vol.I: The Rise of the Network Society. Cambridge MA. Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers
ISBN: 1-55786-616-3 / 1-55786-617-1 (pbk)
[8] Csaba Varga: The Three Basic Concept. www.inco.hu

occurrence. At the same time it would be an unforgivable mistake to diminish or ignore the additional effects of the spreading of the ITC tools to the creation of information society. Information society is the result of the complex fabric of content, infrastructure and receivers/participants, in which the relationship structure and ability of the various actors of the society are able to send, receive and interpret information. This needs to be complemented by the willingness to obtain and provide information. The presence of ITC tools and infrastructure can be built on this structure and can complement and amplify it. The informatic-communications support of the already existing informatic system of contacts enables the perfection and expansion of information society. Naturally, the establishment of information society is subject to the joint effects of many more factors; here I merely wished to point out that the dissemination of ICT tools only is not enough yet to talk about real information society. It is undeniable by now that, out of the three factors of the creation of information society (infrastructure, content and human) it is not the ones relating to technical factors that represent the problem, but the preparedness and receptiveness of the human side. Therefore the most important task of the near future will be the strengthening of the human factor.

The above quoted description of Csaba Varga is to be detailed further in a way that it is not the information, but the creation, exchange and sales of knowledge that matters, in spite of the fact that the meanings of information society and knowledge based society are not identical. Information aids orientation while it is knowledge that has an explicit, convertible value.

The Information Region

The notion of information region often emerges in argumentations relating to competitiveness. Information region was provided more emphasis in literature in the past few years, especially along the European Union (and governmental) intention to create digital exemplary regions or intelligent regions. An eloquent trend of the notion of the information region appeared thanks to the activities of the creators of Finnish local, regional studies – their most eminent representative being Ari Veikko Antiroiko[9].

Antiroiko examined the information region mainly from the point of view of competitiveness, flexibility and adaptability (the expression of high performance region comes from him). His survey provides some interesting conclusions in relation to our subject as well.

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[9] His relating work in Hungarian translation: www.inco.hu/inco3/infopol/cikk1.htm

Our author also discovers the contradiction between "business oriented global networks" and local conditions. He believes the token for the development of the regions hides in the participation in these networks, but he also warns about the unwished for side effects of developments relating to this as well. This represents the difficulty for regional governments: to find the balance in this contradiction, e.g. to participate with minimizing the harmful effects of participation.

Referring to the example of the United Kingdom he claims that local, regional governments must play a decisive role in the creation of information economy. He discusses at length what local governments need to do in order to be able to succeed among the changing circumstances; he attempts to uncover possible dangers and the most characteristic mistakes. He emphasizes particularly the importance of decentralisation. From the point of view of our subject at the same time his opinion on local participation is more important. In his opinion local leaders in certain cases, in order to achieve more successful operation, should create neighbouring or community governments on the ground of functional decentralisation, regional administration, community or neighbouring action groups.

It is important to remark that the regional governments are to exercise their management roles independently, as "good farmers", they need to create good neighbour relationships, co-operations in order to achieve better work, better effectiveness, and in this process they should enjoy full autonomy. In other words: in all probability it would not lead to results if they were restricted in this role, they could only work really effectively if these relations were not only organized along the individual interests, but according to local cultural and social traditions. It is at the same time entirely unimaginable that they would create partnerships under the influence of the central government, and that they would participate in these as if the relationship was created based on their own initiative, according to their free will. They need to feel ownership concerning these relations, the same way how they must feel the ownership of their area as well in order to be successful in utilizing all resources available to them.

Duties and Possibilities of Local Governments

At this point we are able to set up a draft outline for the roles of the local governments in information society and what they need to do in order to comply with these roles the best possible way.

In information society the changing of the position, role of settlements greatly depends on the ICT (and along with this, economic, commercial, etc.) networks becoming dominant. According to the most widespread point of view, in the race for economic development the criterion of survival is to belong to the individual networks, as well as the absence from these. According to this, apart from the

determining aspiration of settlements to build as wide international relationships as possible, the participation in international networks should be decisive. This stems from the similarity to the tasks and roles of the information region.

As we have mentioned in the introduction, with the utilization of ICT technology, local governments are provided a chance to undertake their task really effectively; however, this possibility also means serious tasks from the point of view of development, work organisation and HR. First, we approach the problem in general from the point of view of the three factors of information society (infrastructure, content, human). In order for the local governments to effectively participate in information society they must keep an eye on the most basic condition of ICT, infrastructural development. They must understand that ICT is not a goal but a tool for effective task accomplishment, for the successful communication with citizens and for smooth bureaucracy. In this sense the IT component is invisible, operates in the background, it merely supports the individual work processes. It can only emerge to the foreground if something does not work properly. For smooth operation networks and operational units of great performance and reliability are necessary that are suitable for the uninterrupted transmission of large amount of data and that comply with the requirements of classified security data handling. In order to achieve this, local governments must set up both their outside contacts and their internal ICT connections among various internal departments and the possible independent organisational units as described above. It is not a subject of present essay to describe and elaborate on the individual technical solutions, but all the above can be elaborated up to a required extent with the technical applications available today. In case of the second factor the situation is somewhat more difficult. Local governments are in possession of "peculiar" knowledge that mainly consists of data, but any other piece of information belongs here, even information provision on individual cases as special service. The Act on Local Governments and the Act on the Liberty of information determine those information-handling rules that are to be undertaken by the local governments. No information provision belong here concerning electronic bureaucracy (e.g. resolutions of the assembly, electronic publishing of official resolutions, the publication of the minutes of the assembly as well as of the professional committee, etc.), which could however be provided by the local authorities of larger towns on a minimum cost. It is evident therefore that they must perform beyond their legal obligations in order to achieve a citizen information service of an appropriate quality. It is an interest of the local governments to represent their settlement in a way that is beneficial from the point of view of the settling of various investments, enterprises. Accordingly, data that is suitable for aiding the preparation of strategic and financial plans of companies about to settle down must be provided. Profound analysis must be undertaken on the knowledge and "data pool" accumulated in the office environment in order to be able to present these the most suitable way on the networks. Under abilities necessary to possess in the information society we understand those abilities that are necessary from the point of view of handling and using ICT tools, but apart

from these, they enable the workforce to recognize the changed situation of the local government and to be able to provide the specific knowledge and information accordingly towards national and international networks that enable their presence in these. It is necessary to recognize that the external relations of the local government have gone through significant changes, and that the tasks relating to settlement management, town operation and customer services are perceived as services not only by the companies, but by the population as well, and the corresponding quality is expected from them.

Naturally these tasks are not only present as concrete activities, but they also relate to a change of perception concerning duties, scopes of authority and general approach.

Finally we will discuss the area where the local authority can exercise a really unique and irreplaceable activity. The basic problem of information society, as we indicated above, is the contradiction present between functional networks and individual identities. Local governments must find a way to settle this contradiction; they must act as bridges in this process. In order to accomplish this they must become a determining actor in the local community. They must make their internal case handling, their work processes smooth and fast, while information relating to these activities accessible and contacts with individuals involved in individual cases must also become easier. It is such activities that enable them to create and enforce the image of attentive, client-friendly local authorities. The other side of the task is the presence in networks; the successful communication of professional and other knowledge available has a similar importance. The decisive presence in the networks has a vital importance in the information society. By undertaking twofold, parallel activities the local authorities obtain a task that is essential in the information society from the point of view of the local community. The full accomplishment of the task eliminates the principle problem of the information society, and as such, has a special significance.

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