

Illusions of Perfect Information and Fantasies of Control in the Information Society

Dwayne Winseck

Electronic media ... are dispersed in use and abundant in supply. They allow for more knowledge, easier access, and freer speech than were ever enjoyed before (Pool, 1983, p. 251).

The Internet interface must somehow appear “transparent,” that is to say, appear not to be an interface, not to come between two alien beings, and also seem fascinating, announcing its novelty and encouraging an exploration of the difference of the machinic (Poster, 1995, p. 19).

... the essential human attribute of speech provides the ground for an ideal society against which existing societies can be judged and found wanting and to which we can aspire (Garnham, 1990, p. 108).

The meaning of information is precisely a reduction of uncertainty (Arrow, 1979, p. 307).

The above quotes reveal a fascination with the idea of ‘perfect information,’ whether from the perspective of mainstream economics, postmodernism or the critical social theory of Jürgen Habermas, as represented in the quote by Nicholas Garnham. Despite the diversity of the authors’ positions, each shares a familiar view of information as knowledge, the antithesis to uncertainty, a source of transparency and other good things associated with democracy and capitalism.

The fact that such disparate perspectives can share similar assumptions is a key reason why the idea of the information society is such a powerful one. Essentially, this diverse base of intellectual props and the broader resonance of such views across the culture help propel the shift to information societies.

The information society promises to realize the basic assumptions regarding information held by sociologists, philosophers and economists alike. Thus, for Habermasian sociologists and communication scholars, the information age promises the decline of mediation and new forms of extended quasi-direct interaction, and, consequently, the possibility of non-distorted communication. The extensive, and almost single-minded embrace of Habermas’ idea of the public sphere by so much communication scholarship over the past decade reflects the allure of ‘perfect information,’ or, in Habermas’ terms, the ‘ideal public sphere’ (Garnham, 1990; Calhoun, 1992; Volkmer, 1997). From this view, the new media open opportunities for extended forms of communicative interaction that could escape the spatial, economic and technical constraints of the ‘old’ media, although, at least from critical perspectives, such potentials might yet be thwarted by continuing attempts to aggrandize power and