

# **The Place of the University, Teaching and Research in the Information Society**

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 A note of caution**

Zoological gardens, museums, libraries, and lecture halls in universities - what do they seem to have in common? They are at the beginning of becoming extinct. We do not seem to need them any longer in the Information Society. They will become artefacts of an archeology of knowledge.

Indeed, talking about the University and the Information Society at the same time is a unique opportunity to feed melancholic memories, prejudices and projections from two favorite conversation subjects into one stream of talk. Unfortunately the organizers have refrained from adding "at the turn of the millenium" to the prescribed title to give a third highly favorite topic a chance to join.

Furthermore, having such a general theme one can elegantly do what one teaches - particularly law students - *never* to do except in special training courses for court room pleading: mixing indiscriminately fact and fiction, statements on what is happening, with observations on what should be happening and what may be happening.

If this is so let us least begin in an orderly fashion and give a definition:

### **1.2 What is meant by Information Society**

"Information Society" comprises a set of phenomena :

- the advances in information and communication technology,
- the uses of this technology in social, economic and scientific life,

- the impact of categories like information and communication systems, cybernetic cycles, etc. on our ways of perception, analyzing, seeking for and transporting meaning,
- juxtapositions like the real and the virtual, the local and the global, dissolution and identity,
- and finally as the environmental factors of the information and communication society: highly competitive markets, service and network economies, event and entertainment society, liberalization, privatization, deregulation, globalization and economization of all spheres of life.

In the context of this presentation I will use Information Society as an abbreviation comprising all these elements.

### **1.3 Approach**

In the first part I will approach my subject by speculating on the likely impact of the Information Society on the university. These statements you may read, depending on your personal experiences, either as a description of changes already taking place or as an assumption of future changes. Whatever they are they are meant to be read in cold blood. Also, if you happen to fall into this age bracket, much of what will be said may remind you occasionally of the days when television had just arrived on campus...

The second part will be dedicated to some comments on how the university could have an impact on the Information Society. This part may sound superfluous, since e.g. the Internet as the symbol of the Information Society is a product of the university or at least of a certain type of university. However, in this second part I will try to recall my *déformation professionnelle* and point to some possible impacts the university *should* have on the Information Society.

## **2. The impact of the Information Society on the University**

There are three areas where I see such impact: the environment of the university will change the demands on the university. The way the university will operate will continue to change, and the place the university will have in the Information Society will be different.

## 2.1 Impacts on the environment of the university

The Information Society changes the environment of the university and at least by this effect will eventually change at least the demands on the university.

In the Information Society the economy is changing and these changes of the economy result in new demands or in the reinforcement of already existing demands on the university: The university has to "produce adequate human resources" for this economy:

- The university shall help to transform traditional disciplines and manners of working by introducing and furthering the use of information and communication technologies.
- The university shall work closely with industry to further develop information and communication technologies and to find new ways of using these technologies.
- The university shall prepare the students for the demands of the knowledge society to teach them the skills of acquiring, transforming and transporting knowledge regardless of the current stage of information and communication technologies.
- The university shall prepare the students for cultural changes in a global world made global if not exclusively by but certainly with the help of information and communication technologies.
- The university shall foster the creativity of students to answer an ever increasing demand for contents, meaning and diversion.

## 2.2 Impacts on the way of operating universities

The Information Society not only has a secondary effect via the environment in which the university operates but it also has a *direct* impact. I shall only name the two perhaps most visible consequences of this impact: globalization and mediazation:

- In the Information Society the university will still be known by its local name but due to the possibilities (and demands) of information and communication technologies the university will compete internationally for students. It will distribute CDs internationally, put advertisements in foreign newspapers, elect internationally well known figures as presidents (well known not necessarily only - if at all - in academic circles). The university will be tempted to trigger email spams, and at least try to be highly visible on the Internet.

- Students and professors will mix media in teaching and learning and consequently both groups will spend more time with their learning and teaching machines than in lecture halls. The traditional lecture, even the traditional text book will lose its central role in university teaching.

### **2.3 The changing role of the university in the Information Society**

Partly in parallel, partly caused by these changes and partly inducing these changes the university will gradually change its role in the Information Society:

- Information and communication technologies seem to question institutions that stand between the producer (of services, goods) and the end user (consumer). The university is such an institution. Its future will therefore depend on its capability to turn into a complex service package that will be able to compete with other service packages in the market of students, professors, and requesters for graduates.
- Since globalization and localization are connected by a "mutual increase" relationship (globalization and localization effects will grow together rather than exclude each other), globalization will increase local demands on the university. To nurse its local roots to make it different from other universities, the university needs a close link to local culture and values; it will be asked to introduce these values into the global market, to produce knowledge for the local market so that it can compete globally.

These changes in turn will change attitudes. The university will change into a consumer university. To the extent that the service package "university" has to be marketed it has to raise its appeal to the three demand groups that will primarily pay for it or be involved in its operation: students, professors, and end users of students.

- Students will consume the service packages produced by the university and will require consumer choice, transparency, guidance, quality standards but also viability, ease of consumption and ease of use, transferability into job chances and quality of life expectations.
- Professors will consume the infrastructural and multiplication devices the university provides for their teaching and research purposes to promote their own individual market value.
- Global as well as local economic players will consume the university output in terms of human capital, products, concepts, mean-

ings, intellectual property rights, cultural gadgets and structure their demand accordingly.

In these offer and demand processes we shall observe centripetal as well as centrifugal effects.

In the production, distribution and consumption of these services economies of scale as well as economies of scope will come to play, as well as network effects, which in turn will lead to structural changes like mergers and specialization, niche and mass production.

The production of service packages for these groups in a highly competitive environment will also most likely lead to some processes which affect social cohesion both within and between these demand groups which will - together with technical progress- question the infrastructural function of the university. Just like authors might emancipate themselves from publishers, professors and students might emancipate themselves from the university infrastructure and form their own ad-hoc "universities". Summer schools are the early predecessors of such trends.

There used to be an understanding that the university was supposed to serve society as a whole. However, while there may be a demand, payment mechanisms for this type of demand have become highly critical and less certain in the environment of the Information Society. It may well be the case that "universal service universities" or at least "universal service courses" will develop which every university will have to offer, the costs of which could be put on all those profiting from the service package market "university".

This universal service consideration leads me to the second part of my presentation.

### **3. The possible impact of the university on the Information Society**

#### **3.1 Some puzzling observations as a starter**

I have already hinted to the fact that some of the demands on the university in the Information Society hide an absurdity: If e.g. the university had restricted itself to demands from the end users of human resources, the Internet would never have happened.

Another observation: At a recent press conference the president of the University of St. Gallen made two announcements: The University of St. Gallen intends to become a key player on the virtual campus Switzerland to be created in the context of the Information Society Switzerland program. His second announcement related to the building

program of the university which would be substantially increased over the next two years to enlarge the University campus which then would help to create a real "campus feeling" among the university participants.

Furthermore it seems obvious that there is not only competition among the groups that constitute a university and between universities but universities as such will increasingly have to compete with other institutions, some existing, some yet to be formed in the knowledge economy.

In such a situation, my colleagues in economics and management tell me, it is useful to reconsider areas of core competence and of competitive advantages:

### **3.2 The future of the University as Theatre**

I believe the future of the university, its role for the Information Society, will be to become the *theatre* of the Information Society.

Theatre, the way I want to use this term here, means to create and to maintain the unity of action, space and time for reflection in the Information Society.

#### **3.2.1 Time**

Time in the context of the "university theatre" means spending time together for a period of one's life, experiencing being part of a generation group, passing through these groups, and seeing the other groups simultaneously moving in time: Being a first year student, envying the second and third years, moving through these years, realizing that with every year, a year becomes shorter, turning into a graduate, a post-graduate perhaps and becoming a teacher or one of the alumni: It is for the university in the Information Society to make time felt as social time.

Time in the context of the university theatre means that by experiencing time together one realizes the importance of time on the subjects one learns and one teaches, in short, one learns the importance of history in the time of synchronicity.

There was e.g. a time when people taught and learnt public law. There was a time when communication law was public institution and public service law. Not necessarily a better time but there was time before this time, and there may be another time looking back at this time and calling it not necessarily a better time.

It is for the university in the Information Society to recall that there was a time and that there will be a time. No other method, it seems to me, is a better opener to questions and occasional answers to what this is all about.

### 3.2.2 Space

The St. Gallen paradox is a clear indicator: There are other examples: You never can be a real Harvard graduate without having had breakfast in that little cafe at the corner of Harvard Square next to the Harvard Coop. You have not been to the Facultés Universitaires Notre Dame de la Paix without having at least once had lunch in the roof top restaurant of the Arsenal. Just as the global and the local experience relationships of simultaneous increase, so the opportunities of virtual space will increase the demand for memorable real space.

It is for the University in the Information Society to provide such memorable spaces for common reflection.

As with time space will also become an important subject to teach: Spatial orientation is one of our basic capacities which we have to maintain and develop and transform into adequate devices to create and move in informational spaces.

It is for the University in the Information Society to bring across the importance of space for our handling of knowledge.

### 3.2.3 Action

But what action to fill this time and this space in the Information Society? What is that added competitive advantage of action no other space and time can provide but the university?

The university is the space and time for dissent, for practising - to use the words of the current president of Germany's best known private university and a former head of department at the most state orientated university in Switzerland - *the culture of dissent* (Walther Ch. Zimmerli).

And indeed there is no other space and there is no other time in the life of the students and there is no better opportunity for teachers than the university where they have to collect their arguments, where they can practice and will have to endure face to face the consequences and the impact of dissent.

It is for the University in the Information Society to provide time and space for practicing the culture of dissent.

The university may e.g. the place - to provide an example and to move a little closer to our cherished subject areas - where jurists might want to explain to economists that they the jurists are those who move with time because jurists do not wait till the market has (or has finally not) sorted out failures because values are affected today and need redress now even if this means to create new failures.

And, indeed, exploring areas of dissent will also be the main impetus for research at the university of the Information Society. There will be plenty of research at all those other institutions that will compete with the university as we have known it in the knowledge industry market but there will be no better place and time to explore the areas where dissent may one day might become not only a methodological design but a material necessity for the Information Society.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The title of this presentation has, indeed, been incomplete. It should have read "The Place of the University, Teaching and Research in the Information Society and How to Get Money For All This". My answer has been simple one: By recalling the poetics of the university: the unity of place, time and action./--