

Featured Article

A Philosophical approach to the Information Society

by Godwin Darmanin



Since the advent of personal computers and subsequently of the Internet in homes and offices, we have also started to hear our politicians and media moguls declare that we are now living in what they identify as the 'Information Society'. However, this is in fact a term (and consequently a society) which traces its birth prior to the 'personal computer' revolution which occurred during the 1980's and much earlier than the commercialisation of the Internet which happened during the 1990's.

Those of us who live in the 'Information Society' (or is it in one of the 'Information Societies?'), have to continuously interact with technology, but most of rarely (if ever) question the way how we approach the same technology. I firmly believe that for this to be the case, we need to approach the 'Information Society' and all that is within it (not just technology) through philosophy.

In order to do so, we need to first of all give a meaningful philosophical interpretation of the 'Information Society'. We need to philosophically deal with the 'Information Society' (and not with Information Theory or with Information Technology) because what we need to understand, deals with a specific type of development in human history: that part of contemporary human history of which a substantial part of humanity has already embraced, and of which the rest of humanity will start to embrace in the coming years (Karvalics László Z., 'Information Society – what is it exactly?', 2008).

Secondly, we need to provide a philosophical critique of the 'Information Society', and by this I do not mean that we have to portray this society as intrinsically bad, but I specifically mean that this is a critique which is addressed at this society's failing to recognise its own limits!

In his essay 'Information Society – what is it exactly?' (2008), László Z. Karvalics gives us 'Three Information Society Narratives'. These are the 'mini narrative', the 'small narrative' and the 'great narrative'.

Karvalics defines the 'mini narrative' as “praxis and reflection” with its analysis occurring at the 'micro level'. He then places the 'small narrative' within the context of 'development theory' with its analysis occurring at the 'meso level', and he finally places the 'great narrative' within the context of 'civilisation theory' with its analysis occurring at the macro level (Karvalics László Z., 'Information Society – what is it exactly?', 2008). The 'mini narrative' occurs at the 'micro level' because it analyses entities such as personal computers or the type of language used when sending sms messages over mobile phones. However, a philosophical analysis of the 'Information Society', is not done at this 'micro level'.

Also, with its context being 'development theory', a philosophical analysis of the 'Information Society' cannot be placed within the 'small narrative' because this deals with for example the examination of how the mass penetration of personal computers connected through a global network has transformed the social interactions of people who 'go online'. This is usually found within the realm of sociology (rather than philosophy) and hence that is why Manuel Castells' celebrated trilogy 'The Information Age' (Castells Manuel, 'The Information Age - Volumes 1 to 3: Economy, Society and Culture', 1999) is confined within the 'small narrative'.

Finally we have the 'great narrative' which as already stated, occurs within the context of 'Civilisation Theory'. Within the context of a philosophical analysis, a civilisational aspect can open up when for example investigating the question of whether this historically emerged 'Information Society', risks to eventually fall apart, because its driving force (by not recognising its own limits) is possibly sowing the seeds of its own destruction! This is indeed the kind of grand narrative which one would typically find within the realm of philosophy, and consequently this is the narrative, which any philosophical analysis of the 'Information Society' should boldly aim to adhere to!

*This short article was submitted by
Godwin Darmanin following his talk
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