

Terras, M. (2007). Review of "Challenge and Change in the Information Society". Susan Hornby and Zoë Clarke (eds). *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 22: 372- 374.

Hornby, Susan, and Clarke, Zoë (Eds) (2003). Challenge and Change in the Information Society. Facet Publishing, London.

The "Information Society" is a frequently used term to describe various aspects of modern life – from technology to economics, sociology to history. Yet the concept is poorly defined. Originating in the 1970s as a label for contemporary social change (although finding its origins in Economics a decade or so earlier), the term has been used in all manner of ways in business, politics, management, and information technology. A resulting analysis from Social scientists has asked "*what* information society?" (Webster 1994): although information is clearly important to contemporary society, it was a key feature of ancient civilisations, and is no more pervasive than other phenomena such as networks, electricity, surveillance, or motorised vehicles in today's world. Yet "Information Society" seems to have become the term to symbolise the modern, Western, capitalist, world-view; combining both "*technological determinism*, the belief that social change is fundamentally driven by technological development; and *utopianism*, the assumption of progress and improvement towards the ultimate goal of an 'ideal' society". (Muddiman 2003, p. 43). "Challenge and Change in the Information Society" sets out to explore the nuances of the term, using "Information Society" as a theoretical framework to analyse recent changes in society, as a means to analyse different scenarios for how future societies may be shaped, and as a means for information professionals to understand their changing role and the changing needs of their users.

Featuring contributions from various experts in libraries, information studies, information management, history, electronic communication, and industry, the book is split into four distinct sections, each featuring three or so papers. The first, "the information society: fact or fiction?", covers theoretical and historical perspectives, looking at how the information society can be used as a means to model economic, technical, sociological and historical change. The presumed utopian nature of the qualities of information, and resulting societies based upon it, are challenged, and the information society is placed in a theoretical framework which demonstrates the problematic nature of the concept to the reader. This section, in itself, is worth

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purchasing the book for: providing an accessible, yet challenging, overview, and pointing the reader to many other useful sources.

Further sections of the book continue to illuminate: "The information society and daily life" investigates the impact of technology and social change on present and future society, looking at the effect changes are having on both the individual, and communities, presenting issues such as the social implications of an increased networking environment, the link between information literacy and the information society, and the effect globalisation and increased networking is having on traditional communities, culture, and identity. "The information society and policy" looks at governmental, political, and policy perspectives: stressing the importance of information policies in the information society, examining knowledge management in government, outlining the impact technology has had to the public sector in the UK, and suggesting how improved management of knowledge can aid governments in communicating with and responding to their populace.

The final section, "the information society and the information professional" investigates the resulting impact these changes are having on those working in the library and information sector, examining the changing role of the information professional. Intellectual property is becoming one of the more problematic areas for professionals working in the information sector, as is personal data protection, and these two subjects each warrant an individual paper. The changing nature of publishing, and the impact of electronic technologies on the publication industry is addressed, as is what such developments mean to information professionals working in the information society. A strength in all sections of "Challenge and Change in the Information Society" is the breadth of outside sources discussed and presented by the authors; from Marxist theory, to governmental reports, and the philosophy of law, the references provided by each paper should serve as welcome starting points for students or researchers wishing to delve deeper.

By providing different viewpoints, the book presents a range of informed opinions of the information society to the reader. The editors have chosen contributors well: the strength of this collection of papers lies in the different voices, tones, and positions of

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the authors. For example, Chris Batt's chapter "Policy push, personal pull: trying to make sense of the journey towards the information society" discusses the potentially beneficial aspects of the information society, and technological change, and presents an optimistic, hopeful account of the benefits of increased access to information:

"I like to think that there is still the chance to create the sort of information society where... entertainment and learning can be intertwined... That more than anything we can use the technological opportunities to make people's lives better and in doing so create better, more stable and more tolerant communities" (p. 81).

In contrast, Dave Muddiman, in his chapter "World gone wrong? Alternative Conceptions of the Information Society" examines what currently exists, demolishes the utopian idea of the information society and presents: "the divided and fragmented universe of the new millennium" (p. 54). Muddiman hopes that the

"information and library community can challenge the inequalities, injustices and chaos of postmodern capitalism by building new pathways to knowledgability based on values of social justice, universal literacy, and the right to know". (p. 55).

Both authors hope for increased quality of life through technological opportunities, but voice it with very different energies and arguments. The book is full of such strong voices, and persuasive writing.

By the end of reading this book, the term "Information Society" becomes even more multi-faceted to the reader, and is revealed to be a complex, and often conflicting, spyglass with which to view modern society. This is an interdisciplinary book which presents the reader with many academic perspectives. Due to the historicizing nature of the text, and its accessible, yet thought provoking, overviews of the theories and practices behind the information society, this book will not suffer from technological obsolescence: if anything, the text is an important tool to understand the nature of the buzz word, and the impact technological change will have on modern society, the information sector, and those which work within it.

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