



Keynote Address to the IFIP WG 8.2 - IFIP WG 9.4 Conference “IS Perspectives and Challenges in the Context of Globalization”

DEVELOPMENT, GLOBAL FUTURES AND IS RESEARCH

A Polemic

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the meaning of the term development as something of concern for all individuals, groups, organisations and societies, and I argue that many different global futures are possible depending on how well we succeed in realising our development goals and aspirations. Information and communication technologies are deeply implicated in approaches to development and in making global futures, and I argue the need for IS research which addresses a diversity of development arenas with context-specific studies, broadly critical in their approach, and aimed at making a better world with technology. I draw implications for action on the part of IS researchers in terms of research agenda, teaching activities, publishing, and institution building.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article was written as the basis for my closing plenary presentation to the IFIP Working Conference on ‘Organizational Information Systems in the Context of Globalization’ held in Athens in June 2003. The papers presented at the conference described and analysed the use and impact of information and communication technologies and systems in many different organizations and societies, and clearly demonstrated the diversity and complexity of the process of ‘globalization’. The conference proceedings (Korpela et al., 2003), and the additional work-in-progress papers presented at the conference, devoted serious attention to IS in the so-called developed countries of the world and the ‘developing countries’.

In this paper, I start by discussing the term ‘development’ when applied to countries as above, or to smaller entities such as individuals, groups and organisations. Secondly, I look to the future created by such development, and I argue that many different global futures are possible, depending on our aspirations, plans and actions. Finally, I consider the relevance of these thoughts to the future of IS research and the role of IS researchers. I have subtitled the paper ‘a polemic’, which is defined (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1979) as a ‘controversial discussion’. This article represents some of my personal views of contentious issues such as the meaning of

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development, desirable future states of the world, and what IS could and should contribute. I hope that my polemic will stimulate discussion and debate. It is not a final word, except in the sense of being the closing conference contribution.

2 DEVELOPMENT

In my view, development is a complex multi-level ongoing process for all individuals, groups, organizations and societies. It is not something possessed by one group of countries as distinct from another. I therefore find the linguistic distinction of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries rather unfortunate and in some ways offensive. It is patronising to the latter group, and an inaccurate description of the former. This is, of course, not an argument that we should ignore the very different economic living standards in different countries, or the different standards within a given country. For example, Castells (1998) defines the Fourth World as the economically underprivileged throughout the world, including the urban poor in the western countries for instance. However, we should not conflate the need for improved material living standards with ‘development’ in a fuller sense.

This argument can be sharpened by thinking of development at the level of the individual. Being ‘more developed’ is not a property of individuals within one country or group of countries in contrast to others. Many people would accept that Mahatma Gandhi (1949) and Nelson Mandela (1994) travelled further on the individual development path than most of the rest of us, even though they came from ‘developing countries’. Members of the Ku Klux Klan in the USA, or the far right in Europe, provide good examples of lower personal development levels in the western countries. Groups and organizations in all countries display enormous diversity in their levels of ‘development’, regardless of what definition one wishes to choose for that term.

If the reader thinks this is all obvious, well so do I. But the rhetoric which equates ‘development’ with ‘economic development’ is pervasive. It is often supported by the ideology of ‘globalism’ (Beck, 2000):

“By globalism I mean the view that the world market eliminates or supplants political action – that is, the ideology of the rule of the world market, the ideology of neoliberalism.”

Beck argued strongly against this ideology, citing many different reasons. For example, he argued that globalism reduces the complexity of the globalization process to a single economic dimension, showing no understanding of specific political and cultural meanings in particular contexts. Globalism also ‘sings the praises’ of worldwide ‘free trade’, but Beck pointed out that we live in a world far removed from any fair model of free trade due to enormously skewed initial conditions. In the conference proceedings itself, Avgerou (2003) argues that the rhetoric of market-driven economic development does not match well to evidence from ‘successful’ Third World countries.

So, why do people, organizations and governments adopt simplistic notions which equate development with economic development, and argue for unproblematic ‘free-market’ solutions? Two reasons can be offered, the first of which is ignorance. In the ‘globalized’ world of the early 21st Century, it is striking how little people in general know about societies and social practices other than their own. A good example is knowledge about Islam on the part of non-muslims.

Despite the increased world visibility of Islam, for reasons which are known to us all, most non-muslims have little idea of the major tenets of that religion, and do not even know the location of major muslim population concentrations. A second reason for crude notions of development to be propagated is perceived self-interest. For example, organizations in the rich countries wishing to sell their goods to 'developing countries' are greatly helped by a non-questioning attitude to the precise meaning of development, and by the maxim of 'free trade' across borders.

3 GLOBAL FUTURES

A cynical view would argue that ignorant self-interest is the dominant mode of human behaviour. Therefore those people, organisations or countries that get themselves into a powerful position will inevitably exploit others, and there is little that we can do about it. According to this resigned position, altruism, anti-ethnocentrism or egalitarian approaches are doomed to failure in the context of a world dominated by powerful self-interested players.

I don't accept this position. If we start at the level of the individual, all the major world religions and philosophies reject the notion of helplessness. For example, the core of Buddhist teachings emphasises that self-development is the immediate task for everybody. This may seem paradoxical in terms of being 'selfish', but the argument is that an enlightened person, who has gone far on the path of self-development, will recognise that the use to which all self-development should be put is in helping of others. As to freewill and fate, Buddhist teachings consider that, although we are now what we have made ourselves in the past, we can create a better self in the future by the effort of our will:

"Every action we make depends on what we have come to be at the time, but what we are coming to be at any time depends on the direction of the will" (Humphreys, 1951).

If we aggregate across individuals striving for personal self-development, much can be achieved at the level of the group, organization, society or even the world as a whole. Those who argue that major social reform is not possible at the level of institutions or societies, when such reform would oppose the vested interests of the powerful, ignore the lessons of history. The capture of Africans in previous centuries, and their transport and enslavement in western countries, was justified on economic grounds, and those opposing it in the slave-owning countries were accused of trying to undermine the economic well-being of their societies. Child labour in the mines in the West and the institutional racism of Apartheid South Africa are further examples of abuses justified in their day largely for economic reasons. The suffrage of women was opposed by powerful men on the grounds of the 'inferiority' of women. All of these examples demonstrate the eventual success of the persistent efforts of reformers in the face of strong and sustained opposition, including the use of force, by the economically powerful.

Now, we have some equally shocking inequities and abuses in the contemporary world. It is truly obscene, in the archaic sense of repulsive or loathsome, that the world has plenty of material resources for all, and yet many people are deprived of the basic necessities such as adequate food, clean water, health care and the education of their children. Obesity is a major problem in rich countries while many in the world have little to eat. Ethnocentrism and blind nationalism are major forces in all countries in the world. Spiritual poverty is a major problem, perhaps particularly in the rich countries, as exemplified by the empty pursuit of materialism, or the

interest of many western males in pornography. Women have achieved equality in voting rights in most countries, but they still suffer many subtler forms of discrimination. Is social reform possible on all these issues, or is the global future determined already by the rich and powerful? I would argue that there are many possible global futures, and where we arrive at will be determined by the aggregate of our collective wills. The 'market', that reified concept much cited by the proponents of globalism, is after all only an aggregate of the behavioural patterns of us all as individuals, and these reflect our personal aspirations and goals.

4 THE ROLE OF ICT

What has all this to do with the topic of information and communication technologies (ICT)? I wish to argue that ICT are deeply implicated in the approaches we take to 'development'. ICT are involved in the way that we as individuals carry out our work and leisure activities, in the way that we organise ourselves in groups, in the forms that our organisations take, in the type of societies we create, and thus in the future of the world. I suggested in a recent book (Walsham, 2001) that we should be trying to make a 'better' world with ICT. I argued that this should not mean better in purely economic terms, but related to a wider global agenda of social and spiritual welfare.

Let me give some brief examples of particular issues where ICT are implicated in development and particular global futures. The term 'digital divide' is somewhat ambiguous and hard to define, but reflects genuine concerns that the rapid development of ICT, for example the exponential growth of the Internet, may further widen the gap between the rich and poor. This issue is sometimes addressed in terms of the need to provide much wider access to the Internet for the disadvantaged, but it is not as simple as this. As with ICT in general, the provision of hardware, software and systems is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective use. The issue is how the technology can be harnessed and used to make a better world for the poor and disadvantaged. This is a major challenge for us all. An interesting example of a particular effort in this direction is the HISP programme aimed at improving health care in 'developing countries', which started in South Africa (Braa and Hedberg, 2002) and is now being adapted for use in a range of other countries.

ICT are also implicated in ethnocentrism, often in its persistence it has to be said. The technologies were initially developed in the rich countries of the world and they reflect to some extent the cultures and lifestyles of those countries. For example, we have discussed elsewhere (Walsham and Sahay, 1999) how geographical information systems (GIS) reflect the map-based ways of conceptualising space which are prevalent in western countries. In India for example, this is not the case, in the sense that space is not normally thought of as 'out there' and something to be represented in a map, but as 'in here' and personal. This is not to argue that GIS are of no value to India, but rather that we need to be more sensitive to our implicit cultural values and the ways in which these differ across the world. For example, unexplored cultural differences and contradictions can lead to conflict in cross-cultural working (Walsham, 2002).

A third example of the role of ICT in global futures concerns gender issues. It is surprising in some ways that so little has been written on this in the IS research literature (Adam et al., 2001). Yet, even a cursory glance at many contexts of ICT development and use, for example women in call centres or men in the software factories of India, shows that gender matters in the way in

which work is conceptualised, organised and carried out. It is perhaps the male domination of academia which leads to a relative blindness to gender issues on the part of many men, and to a reluctance on the part of many women to be seen to prioritise gender in their work, for fear that this distances them from the male-dominated mainstream. In any case, surely this is an area where substantial future work is needed, and where better global futures could be generated with a fuller representation and reflection of the views and aspirations of half of humanity.

5 WHAT CAN IS RESEARCHERS DO?

I have given some examples above of broad areas where ICT are implicated in development and global futures, and thus where IS researchers might wish to make a contribution through their work. The examples are far from a complete list, and there are a myriad of general areas and specific topics for research with a broad focus on whether we are making a better world with ICT. I have neither the space nor the knowledge to produce a comprehensive list here. However, I would like to offer three general comments about the style of IS research which seems to me to be needed to contribute to the agenda which I have outlined in this paper. Firstly, I have argued earlier (Walsham, 2000) for the need to:

“study particular individuals, groups, organizations, or societies in detail and in context ... There are a range of ways of approaching this, such as interpretive case studies, ethnographies, or action research projects, but we need to see more of these as a proportion of the totality of IS research in the future.”

This suggestion was cited by the current conference organisers in the call for papers, and my view is that the conference proceedings reflect very well what I had in mind. It is heartening to see such a wide range of topics, approaches, theories, and geographies represented in these papers.

A second point which I did not emphasise directly in my earlier paper, but which is implicit in many of the conference contributions anyway, is the need to celebrate diversity. This is not a form of naïve relativism which argues that anything goes. The world is a world of difference (Walsham, 2001) and many aspects of this should be welcomed in my view, such as differences of gender, religion, and many manifestations of culture. It would be a dull world indeed without dichotomy and contrast. However, judgements need to be made on aspects of difference that are not acceptable, such as stark asymmetries of wealth, power and the consequent ability to lead a full and rewarding life. We should be trying to use ICT to help overcome such problems, and thus to make a diverse world that we can all celebrate.

Finally, I would like to add the need for IS researchers to adopt a critical approach to our work. Critical research in the IS community a few years back often concerned a relatively narrow set of studies drawing specifically on the critical theory tradition of Habermas. Whilst I would wish to include such studies in a definition of critical IS research, I would argue for a much broader definition, such as that given by Saren and Brownlie (1999):

“By critical perspectives we mean modes of theorising and research practices which regard ... knowledge and its related technologies as socially constructed and enacted; which take

those practices to be historically and culturally contingent; and which are understood to shape and be shaped by vested interests and power”.

I would argue that many of the studies reported in the conference proceedings fall within this broader definition of critical. Saran and Brownlie also give a wide definition of the type of ‘critical theory’ which can be brought to bear in critical studies, including such approaches as critical ethnography, hermeneutics, environmentalism and feminism. So, my appeal for us to focus on critical approaches should not be taken to imply a narrow agenda or set of supporting theories, but rather a broad philosophical approach, analysing issues such as the social construction of ‘truth’, historical and cultural contingency, and power relations.

6 FURTHER AREAS FOR ACTION

The last two sections focused on the broad agenda, possible topics, and methods of approach to specific research projects. In this section, I discuss three further areas for action on the part of IS researchers. These are the domains of teaching, publishing, and institution building. I will draw from the earlier discussion to argue for ways in which we might approach each of these domains to be in keeping with the broader agenda of making a better world with ICT, rather than merely making things more efficient or effective through the use of technology. Please treat these remarks, as with the rest of this paper, as my current inputs to a discussion, since I am not claiming that I hold a faultless blueprint for action, neither for myself nor for my IS colleagues.

6.1 Teaching

I would like to say first of all that, in my view, students are not customers. The term customer implies the existence of some product or service at a specified price, and a person who can decide whether they wish to buy it; and the ‘customer is king’. If the customer does not like the smell or the price of a particular bar of soap, we are willing to accept that the producer has failed to satisfy this person’s taste. Those of us working in education are not selling metaphorical soap. What is good for the student may not be what the student perceives themselves as wanting, and the ultimate responsibility for what is offered should rest with the educator not the student.

Let me give an example. When I was Director of the Cambridge MBA, we had (and still have) a core course on corporate governance. Some students queried this with me, since they said that they would have preferred alternative courses, more focused on the nitty-gritty of business life. However, corporate governance deals with broader ethical issues of how corporations should be governed and the role of business organisations in society, and therefore in my view this should be part of the compulsory core of the MBA. The students should, of course, be allowed to express views, and these should be taken seriously. But they should not be allowed to determine the precise specification of the ‘product’ they wish to buy. We must not abdicate our responsibility to provide what we believe to be good for students, and thus society.

The implication of this for IS teaching is clear if one accepts the arguments I have been making so far in this paper. We should be teaching students in ways which sensitise them to broader agenda of whether we are making a better world with ICT. We should be drawing on critical research studies to enable them to learn about how ICT are implicated with respect to

topics such as globalization, ethnocentrism, gender, the nature of work and leisure life, and relations between the more and less powerful in our societies. Of course, one needs to preach to one's congregation, or in other words to find good points of contact with the starting positions of the student body. One way to do this for business students is to choose topics which are perceived by them to be important, such as knowledge management, ERP systems, or e-commerce; but then to treat these topics in a broader critical way, rather than teaching in an instrumental manner as to how to use such systems to make more money.

6.2 Publishing

Our published work is used to assess us for promotion and other forms of reward and punishment, and we are therefore quite sensitive about the status of particular journals, books or conference papers. For example, most authors of the published conference papers here will receive less 'credit' for their paper in assessment terms than they would for a comparable journal article. MIS Quarterly and Information Systems Research are ranked at the top end of IS publications by most tenure committees and the like, although the journal Information and Organization, for example, publishes articles which are on average of more interest to me, and to some other IS researchers with an interpretive or critical bent.

Many of the articles published in the proceedings of this conference match well to the criteria that I have been discussing in this paper for broader critical studies. What comments can be made about journal publication for such work? It is probably more difficult to get such articles published in MIS Quarterly than, for example, a standard positivist study with narrow research goals and a tight quantitative methodology. This is not an argument against trying, however, since if we go back a few years, interpretive studies were actually debarred from MIS Quarterly (Walsham, 1995). Is it possible to infiltrate 'top' journals such as this with broader critical studies? Can we make the future this way by a concerted effort on the part of people such as the delegates to this conference?

An alternative to infiltrating the IS establishment is to create an alternative community and related publication outlets. This has happened to some extent through the activities of groups such as the IFIP Working Groups 8.2 and 9.4, and through various journals which are not so tightly tied to the historical IS establishment. I do not have a simple answer to which is the right approach. I tend to adopt a 'shotgun' method to my own publishing, aiming large numbers of pellets at a wide target range, hoping some of them will hit! My serious point is that these issues of where to publish are not simple apolitical matters, and journals do not fall into a neat hierarchy like a football league table. The politics around IS journals exert a major influence on our publishing activities, and thus the structuring of the IS field as a whole. We need to debate such matters, for example by opening up the black box of what is meant by 'top journals', and what power relations and vested interests are involved in such categorisations.

6.3 Institution Building

This moves me on to my final action area, namely that of institution building. Journals are themselves a form of institution, and we can change those institutions by involvement with them. We need critical IS researchers with broad agenda who are on the editorial boards of all the IS journals, who are willing to referee submissions of this type, and who submit their own work for

peer review without watering down their conclusions to some perceived conservative agenda. We also need to tackle our own universities to define our own view as to what constitutes good work in the information systems field, and to challenge the orthodoxy of narrow instrumental IS research agenda.

Other institutions which fulfil important roles in the IS academic world includes the annual ICIS conference and the Association of Information Systems (AIS). ICIS papers are often rather dull positivist studies, hermetically sealed as one of my colleagues once said to me. I wouldn't wish to try to eliminate these shrink-wrapped offerings in their entirety, but couldn't we try to redress the balance towards richer interpretive and critical papers with broader research agenda and wider author aspirations? I must confess to being less knowledgeable about the politics and workings of the AIS, but it seems to occupy an important position of influence in the IS world, so my comments on infiltration, or perhaps participation would be more politically correct, also apply.

Working Groups 8.2 and 9.4 are thriving institutions themselves, and we don't need to infiltrate them. It is a pleasure to see the groups come together at this conference, and I believe that it has produced a rather unique and promising blend. Where do we go from here? On the one hand, there are good arguments for keeping the groups separate, developing their own ways and approaches as they have in the past. On the other hand, it would be a great pity if the collaboration at this conference proved to be a one-off endeavour, since I do believe that there is much potential synergy between the groups. Further joint conferences in the future are one possibility, but I am sure that my working group colleagues on both sides will have other constructive ideas.

My final point on institution building concerns alliances with other 'disciplines' and bodies concerned with overlapping agenda to our own. I believe that the IS field should preserve its distinct identity, but I also believe that our borders should be moveable, and highly permeable to outside influences. We are not the only ones concerned with the role of ICT in society. Groups with related interests include the field of organisation studies, which has taken a greatly increased interest in the role of ICT in the last decade or so, the CSCW community, and the field of development studies. It is difficult for us, as individuals, to participate in a substantial way in all such communities, and some individual choices are necessary. I have, myself, had the most interaction with the organisation studies community through submission of my work to their journals, through refereeing for these journals, and through the maintenance of personal connections with members of that community. I would like to see all members of our 8.2/9.4 community extending their networks outside the narrow IS community boundaries to open us up to outside ideas and influences.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have challenged the narrow definition of development as implying solely economic development. Development is crucial for us all, both individually and in terms of the groups, organisations and societies to which we belong. We can learn from each other about how to develop, and development is not something which can be reduced to 'best practice' transferred from the 'developed' to the 'developing' countries. I have argued that those of us working with ICT should be concerned with this broader agenda of development, so that our focus should be on

how to make a better world with ICT, and thus a more developed world for us all. Inequities and abuses persist in the contemporary world, sometimes in a quite shocking way, and we should be trying to address these problems in our professional work.

I have also challenged the concept of helplessness in the face of powerful forces outside our control. Of course such forces exist, but we can change ourselves at the individual level, and in combination with others we can affect wider issues. With respect to the specific issue of the IS field and the activities of the IS community, we can have a major influence on research agenda, teaching practices, the published literature, and the form of our IS institutions. Global futures in general, and the IS field in particular, are not pre-determined, but result from our own efforts and actions.

Which brings me to my final point. I see this conference as a beginning rather than a climax. The conference has brought together an unusual set of people and papers with a wide diversity of topics, theories and geographical/cultural foci. The conference has been one of the most genuinely international or global which I have attended. Many of the papers demonstrate a shared agenda in terms of what I have called a broadly critical stance in the academic sense of that word. Let's try to use the conference as a springboard to affect the future of the IS field, making it more concerned with issues of development in the wider sense, and with making better global futures.

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