

Exploring dilemmas: Ethics, social values and e-Society

Project proposal

Deryn Watson

Professor of Information Technologies and Education, Department of Education and Professional Studies, King's College London, Franklin-Wilkins Building, Waterloo Road London SE1 9NN, United Kingdom

deryn.watson@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract: All agents for change come with a baggage - and there is now an uneasy balance between technological imperatives and opportunities on the one hand, and social and ethical values on the other. It is up to all stakeholders in society to accept the responsibility of ensuring that this e-world is informed by a range of perspectives and societal values. In particular we need to find a balance between technology shaping social events and vice-versa. Any knowledge society should be giving its citizens a sophisticated digital literacy that enables them to understand the e-world. A knowledge society would include a critical understanding of both the dilemmas that societies and individuals now face in this new e-world, and the different ways in which they might seek to address them. This < Dilemmas > project is rooted in the epistemologies of the social sciences and aims to help expose the multiplicity of perspectives and routes towards understanding issues associated with societal values in an e-world.

Key words: digital literacy, ethics, information age, responsibility, social values, vulnerabilities

DILEMMAS FOR KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES

Society has been following a heady route into the < information age >, but has only recently become aware of its limitations and dangers as well as its value and potential. All agents for change come with a baggage - and there is now an uneasy balance between technological imperatives and opportunities on the one hand, and social and ethical values on the other. One of the strongest drivers of the information age has been the technological world itself coupled with business and commercial interests. It is up to all stakeholders in society to accept the responsibility of ensuring that this e-world is informed by a range of perspectives and societal values. In particular we need to find a balance between technology shaping social events and vice-versa.

One example of the problem of balance has been the identification of digital divides. But not all divides are between the developed and developing worlds, the advantaged or disadvantaged. Because the complex reality of societal values are driven by the different histories, politics, cultures and traditions in which our societies are grounded. In some ways, all societies and their members are currently made vulnerable by this e-world - threatened by concerns such as privacy, crime, security, surveillance, legality, control, discrimination and rights. Engineering a knowledge society that supports human development demands that such vulnerabilities and related ethical dilemmas are addressed. And yet there will be differing means of addressing these vulnerabilities depending on how they are experienced in local contexts.

Any knowledge society should be giving its citizens a sophisticated digital literacy that enables them to understand the e-world. Those responsible for education must ensure that all citizens, young and old, understand the structures, concepts and organising norms of the e-world, in order to use it critically and be knowledgeable enough to make informed decisions. But these structures, concepts and organising norms are not simple. Indeed even digitalisation itself is an extreme form of abstraction. It may be insufficient for citizens to simply have the practical skills of using information technologies. Without a sophisticated understanding of the concepts and values embedded in these technologies, they will be unable to participate in deliberations about the dilemmas they bring, and be subject to pressures exerted on them by interested parties.

A knowledge society would include a critical understanding of both the dilemmas that societies and individuals now face in this new e-world, and the different ways in which they might seek to address them. A knowledge society would not be one which simply imposed one group's values on others, but one which understood and tolerated differing solutions for

differing societies. And finally, a knowledge society would find ways to harness the e-world to suit its aims and values.

A “DILEMMAS” PROJECT

This < Dilemmas > project is rooted in the epistemologies of the social sciences - here learning is often contexted in problems with no single correct answer, or definite route for arriving at a solution. Thus the project aims to help expose the multiplicity of perspectives and routes towards understanding issues associated with societal values in an e-world. The process of learning, discussion and collaboration generated, is as valuable as < finding an answer >. This is particularly important when social values are both culturally determined and contested.

The project seeks to use a range of contexts, settings and cases to identify paradigm dilemmas posed by information technologies for social values, explore how different groups are tackling these dilemmas, and reflect on the differing responses offered by different communities. The framework of relevant themes to be addressed in the project will include :

- How far does technology create or limit choices ?
- Can individual rights and informed choice be protected within frames of social control ?
- How can technology both empower and disempower ?
- Can there be an acceptable balance between censorship and individual rights ?
- How to balance the advantages and threat of digital surveillance ?
- How to protect the vulnerable from predators ?

The project would select a range of contrasting international contexts and settings, for example an educational institution (school, university), a community (commune or village, city authority) large organisation (professional, business, charity) and government department (regional, national). The selection would be on the basis of a range of differences regarding scale, nature of an organisation and cultural environment, rather than perceptions of advantaged or disadvantaged. Thus the contrasts between cases would reflect histories, politics, cultures and societal values.

The purpose of the project would be that project participants would identify dilemmas in their own terms. The way dilemmas are discussed, responses to the dilemmas, and the constraints participants felt they were under, would be used as a basis for exploring comparable processes for others. This analysis would clarify and elaborate the paradigm dilemmas in

this field. This would form a basis for developing concrete strategies and tools for others to use.

This analysis of dilemmas, and the different ways societies deal with them would have two outcomes. Firstly it would bring into the open the very real dilemmas that the e-world creates for human society, and the processes which groups and individuals use to seek compromises or solutions to address these dilemmas. Secondly it would provide rich and real examples of how societies, and individuals within them, interact; providing these grounded insights is itself an important part of social science education and understanding.

Indeed, knowing how to recognise and explore these dilemmas broadens our definition of e-literacy.

BIOGRAPHY

Deryn Watson, Professor of Information Technologies and Education, and Head of the Department of Education and Professional Studies at King's College London, studied Geography at Cambridge. After teaching in London schools, she became Humanities Director of the Computers in the Curriculum project (Chelsea College), developing computer assisted learning materials in the humanities, their potential for interactive learning, and exploring models of software development. She then researched the impact of IT on children's achievements, factors influencing the adoption of IT use in teaching (her doctorate, London University), and ICT and change in teacher education. Current research interests include issues which influence the use of ICT in education, professional development and change, and the social and ethical issues of the 'Information Age'.

Deryn Watson is a member of the Education Committee (TC3) of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP), and Chair of the working group of ICT and Informatics in secondary education (WG 3.1). She has served on committees of a many international conferences, recently Social, Ethical and Cognitive Issues in Informatics and ICT (Dortmund 2002). She has given keynote addresses at conferences in Canada, Australia, Taiwan, and the Caribbean, is Editor-in-Chief of the international journal, Education and Information Technologies (Kluwer Academic), and an invited expert of the Swiss Academy of Technical Sciences.