

# Position Paper for Women in the Information Society Seminar in Brussels, 5/4/2005

## TOWARDS A GENDER-NEUTRAL INCLUSIVE INFORMATION SOCIETY: PRESERVING THE EUROPEAN MODEL IN THE INFORMATION AGE<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The creation of “the bodiless society”— a gender-neutral society of services that is gradually replacing industrial society— is the result of accelerated technological developments in combination with the globalization of the economy. The products of this technological revolution are in reality services, a factor that has foundational consequences on society. The creation of thousands of specialized employment positions in the distribution and use of new technologies, whose hard nucleus is made up of specific knowledge and technological know-how is currently denied to the less-privileged gender subjects, the citizens who have particular difficulties in adapting and comprehending this transitional stage of the postmodernist period. Will our future society be a globalized technological ‘paradise’ of an abundance of information, products and services, achieved through the marginalization of the vulnerable gender subject, specifically that of non-mainstream social groups, and women in particular?

The paper argues that policy measures at EU level, are needed to maintain a high level of gender-inclusion in the Information Society. In this context, the EU is examining the present state of affairs – mainstreaming and promoting equality —

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working towards establishing an action plan for a better integration of women and non-mainstream social groups in the Information Society. The crucial issue of equality in Information Society must be dealt with and confronted, not only as a question of how to increase the number of consumers or the production of goods and services, but rather as an opportunity for all citizens to become active agents or active members in society, regardless of gender, race, colour, religion, etc. To fight digital illiteracy and future social exclusions the paper suggests three areas of action: Firstly, educational reforms, notably, the institutionalization of mandatory ‘techno-education’: compulsory technological training as an integral part of the curricula of EU public schools, beginning from kindergarten and extending to vocational training. Secondly, international, inter-cultural interdisciplinary research must be progressively and systematically promoted. The new realities of a technological society must be clearly defined and described through interdisciplinary collaborations. We need to look into the present state of affairs before working towards establishing strategies and an action plan for the better integration of women and other vulnerable groups into Information Society. And thirdly, a techno-ethical code to ensure that Europe’s achievements in past are transposed into the Information Society and the virtual environment.

### Introduction

Everything as we know it today is in the process of transformation due to significant changes in the global scene — the globalization of the economy, aggressive competition, and the ‘invasion’ of technology in every sector of public and private activity. Information capitalism, the management and manipulation of information according to the laws of economics, the invasion of privacy, electronic surveillance (Webster, 2002) and electronic terrorism (Bossis, 2000) are characteristics of postmodernity.

Today we are witnessing the creation of “the bodiless society”, a gender-neutral society of services that is gradually replacing industrial society — a result of accelerated technological developments in combination with the globalization of the economy. The creation of a service society requires the citizen to have technological literacy, training or know-how in order to avoid exclusion. We are in a transitional period that not only disorganizes and disorients but also marginalizes an extremely large sector of the population, women in particular (European Commission, 2001). The more technology develops, the more social exclusions are increased, so it seems. That which was familiar is being eradicated, and no longer understood, in view of the technologically induced rapid disorganization of existing structures. The gender subject has dramatic difficulties in adapting and comprehending what is going on during this transitional stage of the postmodernist period, and our social system is faced with difficulties in defining the problems and thus providing solutions.

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The “European model” has been characterized as a system of free market economy in combination with a certain degree of social security for all citizens. While there is no single European social model as such, all have a set of common features. For example, they all involve government interventions which reduce poverty and social exclusion, achieve a fairer distribution of income, provide social insurance and promote equality of opportunity. The basic pillars of Europe’s social models are pensions, health and long-term care, social protection for the poor or disabled, and the redistributive function of taxation. A techno-ethical code is needed to ensure that Europe’s achievements, in past, are transposed into the Information Society and the virtual environment.

Today, elementary or basic computer training is no longer sufficient for the citizen. Digital illiteracy has increased the ranks of the unemployed, while the appearance of a new information elite seems to be drawing the boundaries of exclusion for many more social groups or non-mainstream gender subjects. Moreover, a higher level of competency is required in order to avoid technophobia and social exclusion, as is evident in Greece and other developed countries. For instance, inadequate technological infrastructures within the Greek public school system, the deficiencies in vocational-professional orientation and the lack of cooperation-collaboration with the employment sector and the high-tech industry, lead to an incapacity to keep up with accelerated developments (Gibbs et al., 2003; Pantouli, 2005A; Pantouli, 2005B)<sup>4</sup> and seems to have blocked the average citizen from being included in the Information Society. International and European organizations have consistently warned against the dangers of technological illiteracy, and the exclusion of vulnerable social groups or non-mainstream groups, including women, who will be unable to follow or keep up with the high-speed developments in their societies in the field of computer literacy (Jenson & Brushwood, 2003). The crucial issue of equality in Information Society must be dealt with and confronted, not only as a question of increasing the number of consumers or the production of goods and services, but also as an opportunity for all citizens to become active agents or active members in society, regardless of gender, race, colour, religion, etc. As a result, the European Union is mainstreaming and promoting equality, as well as a technology that will be more socially orientated, accessible and more user-friendly, namely focused on the needs of diverse users (European Commission, 2001). To be precise, a technology designed for diverse social groups, for a diversity of users, with diverse needs and not

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<sup>4</sup> Greek female university graduates of Science Departments and Theoretical Studies (Faculty of the Arts) of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki filled out a questionnaire and discussed, in focus groups, the following: 1) The computer skills and knowledge they acquired in the school or out-of-school framework, and how their family environment, as well as their social environment influenced their decision to buy, acquire and use a PC. 2) How they structured, constructed or formed their identity on the basis of their familiarization or non-familiarization with a PC. 3) How they see gender, as an analytical category, formulating the social and professional reality of Greek society. 4) How they deal with the representations of the male and the female in the PC. At this point, gender, as represented through computers, was examined as a system that produces and reproduces social meanings.

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determined and established exclusively on the basis of technical, economic and commercial terms. In this framework the EU is examining the present state of affairs and working towards establishing an action plan for a better integration of women in the Information Society.

### Virtual servitude – the result of digital illiteracy ?

Within this new information world order, globalization is being established in the virtual domain, too (Kamberidou & Patsantaras, 2004). The information elite whose key objectives are to gain control over technological research, design, development and its applications seems to be characterised by a lack of support for human values. These are increasingly being sacrificed to technological progress and priority given to information — disregarding mind and body. The new class of information technologists, this ‘invisible elite’ that possesses the means and the know-how to promote the new technological society while bypassing and ignoring personal and ethical concerns as well as basic human principles, disregards social solidarity, gender equity, democratic dialogue, economic justice and aesthetical creativity. As a result, new questions and issues arise, such as: Has this new aggressive ruling class, the emerging information elite, divided the world into three functional-operational categories? 1) The informational classes, namely the information ruling masters, 2) the ‘clone-function’ class, and 3) the ‘slave-servant function’ class, clearly observed in Third World countries. Are we witnessing the beginning of new underprivileged social groups or non-mainstream groups? Is this a prediction or foresight into future exclusions, and primarily the exclusion of women? Are we confronted by a new form of modern ‘slavery’, virtual servitude and alienation, notably the appearance of new underprivileged and vulnerable social groups destined to become the servants of the new information elite, since they will not be able to participate in the socio-production processes, thereby developing, not only technophobia, but an imaginary or metaphysical relationship with technology rather than a productive one. In this form of alienation, do exclusion and technophobia go together? Does the production, transfer and distribution of information take less and less place in the centers of government and political parties and more in few large private industries? Does the private sector and the high-tech industry in particular devise “public opinion” and intervene decisively in the political process at national and international levels, to open roads to world markets, while marginalizing the role of national governments? Does this industry inherently promote cultural commonality and/or the loss of cultural identity - something that could lead to absolute control and domination?

Noteworthy examples for this loss of cultural identity are the current discussions and discourses concerning language. For instance, many young people have become accustomed to communicating, not only in brief, but also in incomprehensible forms of language. The computer version of Shakespeare’s “to be or not to be” (e.g. “2B or not 2B”) is linguistically destructive and devastating to the English language and

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culture. The so-called “greeklish”, notably the elimination of the Greek alphabet and language, is another example for this metaphysical–transcendental virtual environment. It leads to a new form of digital illiteracy: illiteracy that is virtually induced, characterized by the bombardment of images and out-of-context informational bits difficult to decipher, interpret or decode by those who have been traditionally educated.

A plethora of new questions and issues have emerged, such as the effects of technological developments on our natural environment (Gibbs et al., 2003; Papadopoulos, 2005). In order to preserve life and an environmental balance on our planet, we must look for solutions, not in the traditional economic profit rationale, but in the framework of a socio-economic-biocentric rationale and in the formulation of a technological code of ethics: a techno-ethos (Patsantaras & Kamberidou, 2004). Environmental policies and directives must be firmly implemented and self-restriction, self-restraint and self-control exercised as far as consumption and production are concerned, by avoiding or limiting the unnecessary, needless and extravagant squandering of sources. Additionally, a techno-ethos must be established to combat the violation-exploitation of the digital personality, the disrespect and castration of free-will: domination of the imaginary (fantasy), the explosion of pornography, the slave-trafficking of women and children, electronic conspiracy networks, electronic terrorism, surveillance, etc.

How can this digital despotism be confronted? The technological elite, including the social groups with the know-how, is in a position to determine the speed of developments and other social groups have to follow. Those who are unable to keep up, will consequently suffer exclusion, and “servitude” (Kamberidou & Patsantaras, 2004) under this new elite. If measures are not taken to broaden or increase the inclusion of the social subject into the Information Society, digital despotism may in the end succeed in drawing the boundaries of exclusion for many vulnerable social groups, and especially women— since the technological culture, undoubtedly, excludes the perspectives of women (Warrington & Younger, 2000). Studies throughout Europe have demonstrated that social exclusions - the digital divide - are gender specific and not only correlated with unfavourable socio-economic conditions. In order to prevent the establishment and institution of this digital despotism, democratic principles ensuring equal opportunities and gender equality must move beyond politically opportunistic rhetoric: 1) Educational reforms, policies and measures must be formulated and adopted, and 2) international, inter-cultural interdisciplinary research must be progressively and systematically promoted and encouraged.

Science and technology intertwine, intermingle and interact with society, thereby increasing the complexity of their nature and their relations. The technological revolution is not only about how the gender subject or the citizen thinks, produces, moves, communicates, shops, conducts transactions, is entertained or interacts with

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others. One of the most basic and crucial results of technology are the changes in the way the gender subject learns, is trained and has access to knowledge. Unquestionably, technology has made our life better in many ways. Certainly, there are many significant innovations in commodities, a new wave of products, health care innovations and services, social benefits, etc. On the other hand, although technology has made our life better and easier, sometimes the price is too great: the continuous and systematic destruction of our natural environment, as observed in Greece during the Olympic Games (Papadopoulos, 2005), the limited access or the total exclusion of women and the less privileged gender subject, the exploitation of the digital personality, electronic surveillance (the 'Big Brother' phenomenon) etc. As a result socio-ethical debates and arguments concerning commercialization, 'professionalization', information capitalism, digital exploitation, the invasion of privacy, the formulation of a new techno-ethos or ethical code, etc. have arisen and need to be intrinsically examined.

How can we address the real problems and realities of our emerging virtual society, of the new information world order? In order to begin discussing such problems, not to mention confronting them, interdisciplinary communication is required (Patsantaras & Kamberidou, 2004). Firstly, the promotion and support of research in the social sciences could provide us with a clearer picture, especially in reference to the topography of excluded social groups within the European Union. Secondly, the problems and the new realities of a technological society must be clearly named, defined, determined and described through interdisciplinary collaborations. We need to look into the present state of affairs before working towards establishing an action plan. Other than the many unresolved problems handed down to us from industrial and postindustrial society, today, we must confront new ones for which there is lack of preparation as far as a completed theoretical framework, structure, theorems, assessments, and methodologies are concerned. However, if we examine, study, analyze and define the multifaceted characteristics of Information Society on an interdisciplinary level, and determine the preconditions that have created them, only then can we begin to achieve some understanding and even start proposing and implementing solutions, an action plan, etc. In other words, we must first examine this society and determine, through our research, how we can formulate actions and strategies in order to begin progressing in the right direction, and consequently establishing an action plan for the better integration of women and other vulnerable social groups into Information Society.

### **The inclusive Information Society: A participatory society of information producers-consumers**

True democracy requires the participation of the citizen in the decision-making processes. However, decisions without knowledge and adequate access to information lead in the wrong direction. All important technological developments and innovations are based on knowledge, information and know-how, access to which the

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majority of the EU population is still largely unaware of (Schlager et al., 2003). Furthermore, the nucleus of new technologies is in applying information and not just in providing it, which also requires know-how, education and specialization. Due to an overabundance of information, the gender subject or citizen has difficulty in distinguishing between useful, credible sources of information and useless, incredible ones which manifests itself in an inability to process and interpret information as well as in an incapacity of choice. This is the primary distinctive factor of technology. Also, if technological innovations are made financially accessible and user-friendly then every gender subject, will eventually be integrated into the Information Society.

Furthermore, a new form of education is necessary in order to keep up with technological developments and alleviate the alienation, solitude and loneliness of the gender subject, in front of his/her computer as his/her only link to the information world. To achieve all of the above, the most fundamental requirement is that of basic-preliminary education. Specifically, the institutionalization of mandatory technological education and training in the curriculum of EU public school systems, beginning in kindergarten. Only in this way can the process of exclusion be avoided and, in the long run, the inclusive Information Society achieved. In addition to this, vocational technological training of specific social groups, namely non-mainstream groups, and primarily women of the lower socio-economic classes, must be a major priority. In a democratic society exclusions can eventually be abolished, in the long run, only through educational reforms, legislation and policies.

It is crucial to formulate and adopt educational curricula supported by specific teaching methods as well as methods of learning that will contribute to the gender subject's progression and future integration into the Information Society, into a society of information production and use, and not merely one of information consumption. A large part of the EU population will continue to be rejected, denied access or marginalized, if educational reforms and interdisciplinary research remain neglected, and access in this sphere of economic activity not ensured. The result will be social regression, and the creation, in the framework of Information Society, of a condition that should be called 'virtual servitude', since the excluded part of the population will unquestionably become the servants of the information elite. Since they will not be involved in operational or functional procedures, they will possess the distinctive characteristics of fear, exclusionist technophobia, alienation and marginalization. To reiterate, we must look for solutions, not solely in the economic framework, but rather in a holistic socio-economic and biocentric framework that requires the formulation of a techno-ethos, an 'ethical code' for the Information Society and the virtual environment in general (Patsantaras & Kamberidou, 2004).

However, educational reforms alone will have very limited and restricted results if international interdisciplinary research is not systematically promoted and encouraged. The establishment of an international, intercultural network of researchers from various fields — the social sciences, gender studies, women's

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studies, the sciences, technological research and development, industry etc. — is needed in order to influence, promote and formulate policies for inclusion, gender equality, technological education, vocational training, and further training designed for both genders. Moreover, an international research network could examine, re-evaluate and discuss current issues, such as 1) How can technological education become attractive and motivating for larger parts of the EU population and in the long run inspire and promote an engagement in its design? 2) How can it be made inclusive for both genders? 3) How can a techno-ethical code be formulated and established? These questions require interdisciplinary research on the factors that lie behind the disrespect, the violation and exploitation of the electronic personality, of individual “digital” human rights, etc. Furthermore, and in order to promote basic research aimed at eliminating social exclusion, indiscriminate cooperation between all stakeholders, the researchers, the citizens and policy makers is absolutely necessary, to guarantee success.

### Recommendations

1. The “European model” has been characterized as a system of free market economy in combination with a certain level of social security for all citizens. While there is no single European social model but many, all have a set of common features. For example, they all involve government interventions which reduce poverty and social exclusion, achieve a fairer distribution of income, provide social insurance and promote equality of opportunity. The basic pillars of Europe’s social models are pensions, health and long-term care, social protection for the poor or disabled, and the redistributive function of taxation. A techno-ethical code is needed to ensure that Europe’s achievements in past are transposed into the Information Society and the virtual environment.
2. The institutionalization of mandatory ‘techno-education’: compulsory technological training as an integral part of the curricula of EU public schools, beginning from kindergarten and extending to vocational training. Only in this way can the process of exclusion be avoided and, in the long run, the inclusive Information Society achieved.
3. The continued development of a wide-ranging network of public internet access points — free of charge and easily accessible to the public — in every prefecture or municipality, staffed with employees to assist users.
4. Interdisciplinary research: The establishment of an international, inter-cultural network of researchers — from the social sciences, gender studies, women’s studies, the sciences, industry, and technological research and development. Support of research in the social sciences to provide a clearer picture, especially in reference to the topography of the excluded groups within the European Union.



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Additionally, the results of intercultural gender research, which examine the perspectives of women, as well as those on women, can contribute to an opening up of the technological culture. Collaboration between industry and gender research could influence mainstream ICT development from a gender perspective, promote better technology, support enterprises run by women, etc. In order to promote basic research aimed at eliminating social exclusion, indiscriminate cooperation between all stakeholders, the researchers, the citizens and policy makers is absolutely necessary.

5. Gender equality in the Information Society may be achieved through a better balance of gendered content, thus encouraging female users to take a more active role, to establish a female culture and network on the Internet, to get involved and keep up with developments, to change gender attitudes and perceptions, etc. Undoubtedly, using the Internet as a tool of participating in the Information Society is a gender-neutral activity, but it is also a space that can be used by women for connecting, networking, and sharing information with other women. Additionally, it is absolutely necessary to involve, as active agents, professional women, already employed in the ICT sector through mentoring programs.

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