

14.1 Additional Student Essay(s)

1. Evaluate the claim that we are now living in an information society

It has been claimed that the vast development of technology in recent years has changed the way we live, that we now live in an ‘information society’. We no longer rely on agriculture or manufacturing to fuel the economy; it is knowledge and information that is at the economic core. The availability of information is facilitated by new communications technologies, which some see as revolutionizing society. This essay will consider the arguments of Manuel Castells, who posits the information society as the revolutionary organizational structure of contemporary society, involving changes in the uses of time and space (Hamilton, 2002, p. 113). It will also offer an alternative argument from Peter Golding, who considers the information and communication technologies of today as continuities with the past, along with relevant historical evidence. Finally the essay will evaluate the presented debates and evidence and assess the relevance for our understanding of contemporary society.

Manuel Castells identifies changes in the use of time and space – from agrarian time relying on nature to the onset of industrialization with factories and regulatory clock-time – that, he argues, are key aspects of social change. The move now is towards ‘timeless time’, which involves less rigidity and increased flexibility, a veritable annihilation and de-sequencing of time. Instantaneous communication and global transactions are possible; life-cycle timings are becoming indistinctive, for example reproduction and life expectancy (Lury, 2002, p. 151). Castells suggests that this is made possible by the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), indeed he claims these technologies are as revolutionary as those of the industrial era. This information age, according to Castells, is organized by a

‘network society’ (cited in Hamilton, 2002, p. 123).

For Castells the information/network society is a new and revolutionary social form. Whilst he sees this as dominated by ICTs he does recognize other contributing factors, such as the restructuring of capitalism, the collapse of communism and the increase of social movements, such as feminism and environmentalism (Hamilton, 2002, p. 113). This is in line with the notion that social changes co-exist and are multiple (Jordan and Pile, 2002, p. xiv).

One significant area of social change is the increasing influence of globalization, which links closely with the information society and networks theory. Castells sees networks as interconnecting nodes across geographical locations, used to an immediate advantage but disposed of when no longer beneficial. This is opposed to former, centralized, hierarchical forms of organization (Bashforth et al., 2004, p. 72). According to Castells these networks and ICTs have had such a significant impact on the reordering of time and space that a new societal form has emerged.

Castells argues that ICTs enable simultaneous and instant actions without physical contiguity. Purchases made by telephone, or global transactions, occur in what he terms the ‘space of flows’. The space of flows has contributed to the emergence of ‘timeless time’, which according to Castells is a ‘... relentless effort to annihilate time’ (quoted in Hamilton, 2002, p. 126). Time is compressed and de-sequenced, for example, shopping via the internet at anytime. This aspect of societal change is acknowledged positively by some. Negroponete sees that the availability of ICTs and access to knowledge can have an equalling effect on society (cited in Hamilton, 2002, p. 111). However, Castells also notes negative consequences on societal inequalities, in particular, the power of the knowledge providers and those excluded through lack

of access to the technologies, leading to a polarized society (Mackay, 2002, p. 143).

Castells also observes the impact of technology on a cultural level. The technology available within the home no longer flows one-way. Communication technologies facilitate interactivity and a wide range of information is streamed into the home, creating diversity and agency. These seemingly extensive changes are shown to impact society on a micro-level within the private sphere of the home. This, according to Castells and Thompson, is a characteristic of modernity (Mackay, 2002, p. 144).

Whilst Castells claims this new society is revolutionary, Peter Golding argues that these technologies are just a progression of what has passed before, allowing increased speed and efficiency: he classes these as 'technology one'. What Golding sees as revolutionary are the bio and nanotechnologies, classed as 'technology two' (Hamilton, 2002, p. 129). Golding cites the significance of the telegraph in Victorian society. The telegraph challenged boundaries of time and space in ways never experienced before. Technology journalist, Tom Standage (1998) comments that, '... it was the Victorians, not today's internet generation that experienced most fully the shrinking of time and space' (quoted in Mackay, 2002, p. 152). Golding therefore refutes the claim that contemporary ICTs are revolutionary.

Golding also questions the claim of the information society's theory of the compression of time and space. He draws attention to the increase of traffic congestion and air travel. He notes that the majority of travel is functional rather than leisure orientated (Hamilton, 2002, p. 132–133). Golding perceives the reordering of time and space as a feature of modernity, identified by Giddens as 'time-space distanciation'. This refers to the stretching of relations over distances of time and space, for example, the long distance telephone call. Golding considers this an aspect

of modernity, rather than a revolutionary effect of ICTs.

In questioning the claim that we live in an information society, Golding refutes the notion that ICTs will be available and beneficial to all. Negroponte claims that inequalities will be generational rather than class based. However, Golding cites evidence confirming the social division of internet access, with higher income groups being the high users. Golding points out that ICTs need constant updating, thus incurring continuing costs and inhibiting availability to lower income groups, and thus distinguishing social groups. This reinforces societal structures of inequalities (Hamilton, 2002, p. 130). This is also a key aspect of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital (Savage, 2002, p. 77).

Golding also observes inequalities within the employment sector. He disputes claims that work has been revolutionized by noting the increase of working hours. Alongside this, and despite the growth of the ICT sector, unemployment rates are higher now than in previous generations. Low paid sectors of IT work exist, with mainly female employees, thus reinforcing gender inequalities (Hamilton, 2002, p. 130). Golding sees this as continuities persisting. As Keohane and Nye (1998) remark with regards to theories of new societies, '... overlook how much the new world rests on the traditional world...' (quoted in Hamilton, 2002, p.130). This raises the question of just how new is the structure of the acclaimed information society?

Having presented the competing theories from Castells and Golding on the information society this essay will evaluate their claims and account for their relevance in today's society, beginning with Castells' revolutionary claim of a new information and network society. A revolutionary claim implies a sudden event resulting in a new social form (Hamilton, 2002, p. 119). However, Castells' logic is

flawed as he himself acknowledges that ICTs have developed gradually. His theory lacks empirical adequacy as he overlooks the significance of past history, as in the case of the telegraph. Whereas Golding, by contrast, offers a more coherent framework by acknowledging the significant impact of the telegraph on society (Mackay, 2002, p. 152).

Castells' argument also seems contradictory at points. He observes emerging societal inequalities induced by ICTs; the dominance and power of the knowledge providers – and the exclusions. Yet, the theory focuses on the transformation of society through the use of ICTs. This suggests that the theory is not comprehensive enough to cover all aspects of society (Mackay, 2002, p. 143). In contrast, Golding provides quantitative evidence of inequalities with regards to ICT usage – and demonstrates the continuity of structural inequalities. This position is supported by a Marxist and Weberian perspective. The Marxist stance views ICTs as a progression of a capitalist structure. Weberians see it as rationalization of society – or increasing regulation of the people (Hamilton, 2002, p. 104).

A key feature of Castells' theory is the reordering of time and space. Castells assumes that this change is solely due to ICTs. Although compression and de-sequencing of time is partly due to ICTs, it is also an aspect of modernity. Furthermore, Hamilton highlights the fact that society is still mostly, '... time-bound, place-bound worlds' (Hamilton, 2002, p. 115). This is evident in Silva's study of everyday routines showing daily life is organized through patterns and routines of time (Silva et al., 2002, p. 284). Even Castells notes that his networks require a material infrastructure, suggesting a further lack of coherence in his theory (Hamilton, 2002, p. 126).

Perhaps a major critique of Castells' framework is the exaggeration of the impact of ICTs in today's society. Alternatively, Golding perhaps underestimates the progression of ICTs. His understanding that the need for social interaction and the tangible experience of shopping being the reasons for the early lack of popularity of internet shopping seems somewhat naïve, when mail-order shopping had been a feature of society for many years (Hamilton, 2002, p. 132), although he does comment that with technological advances this may change. Likewise, Mackay (2002, p. 162) acknowledges the unpredictable future of technologies.

This essay has aimed to present debates regarding the claim that we live in an information society, from Castells' revolutionary claims of the impact of ICTs transforming social structures to Golding's argument that society is undergoing constant change and progression. It seems that Castell's claims are over-optimistic and ambitious. Whereas Golding's argument more coherently explains today's society, with his acknowledgment of increasing social divides and the seeming tendency of ICTs to inadvertently reinforce inequalities. Golding observes that aspects of society progress through constant change, which is multi-faceted, coexisting and consists of multiple changes (Jordan and Pile, 2002, p. xiv). Therefore, it is reasonable to accept Golding's position that today's society is not a new information society, but one of progression and continuity.

(Word count: 1598)

References

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Commentary on Essay 1

As with the first two essays, we are less concerned with whether the answer is 'right'.

The concept of the information society remains a contested one, so our interest is in whether the essay compares well the two main theorists introduced on this module, Castells and Golding, using a social scientific approach. While there are flaws in this essay, you will probably recognize that it is a strong answer in many regards.

Structure and writing skills

- The introduction begins with the oft-repeated claim about the ‘information society’, effectively rehearsing the title of the essay, but in the student’s own words. It signals the key debates (revolution versus continuity) and theorists (Castells and Golding) to be cited, and clearly signposts the sequence of the discussion. (See Chapter 7.)
- The main section uses a compare-and-contrast approach, with Castells, the author of *The Network Society* and therefore its main proponent in the essay, given primary attention. (See Sections 4.3 and 8.1.)
- In the first part of the main body, different concepts illuminating Castells’ argument are rehearsed. Some of the complexities – and inconsistencies – of Castells’ arguments are acknowledged, but the general point that we are living in a ‘new’, ‘revolutionary’ network society, facilitated by ICTs, remains central. (See Sections 6.1 and 8.2.)
- In the second part of the main body, Golding’s contrasting position is explored in some depth. In addition, some of Golding’s (and others’) empirical evidence is presented. (See Section 8.2.)
- The third part of the main body evaluates Castells’ and (to a lesser extent) Golding’s claims by using some of the basic tools of social science

evaluation: evidence, coherence, comprehensiveness. (See Section 6.1.)

- The conclusion summarizes the main discussions, the flaws in Castells' claim, and concludes that, on balance, there is stronger evidence for 'continuity' than for 'revolution'. (See Sections 6.1 and Chapter 9.)
- The word count, set at 1,500 words, is within a 10 per cent allowance. (See Section 2.3.)
- The spelling, grammar and punctuation is generally all good, although there are a couple of incomplete sentences, e.g. 'from Castells' revolutionary claims of the impact of ICTs transforming social structures to Golding's argument that society is undergoing constant change and progression.' (See Section 11.4.)
- The logic of the essay is good and the flow is okay, although at points the essay feels a bit like a 'list' of Castells' key concepts. This is, however, a promising attempt at building a discussion sequence, if not fully realized. (See Section 8.1.)
- The reference list is well set-out and broadly follows the Harvard style. (See Chapter 10.)

Content

On this module, it is acceptable to use only the set texts and consequently all of the references are from these. On a more advanced course, it would probably be required to read Castells in the original and the tutor might expect a longer set of 'outside' references. Castells' arguments are generally well drawn, as are the criticisms of his

claims, from Golding and others. There is also an attempt to synthesize the meta-theories of Marx and Weber, and Bourdieu, although in each case a clearer discussion of why their thinking was particularly helpful would have strengthened the essay.

Now, there is potentially a serious problem with the essay – one might argue that it doesn't really answer the question. An obvious approach to the question would have been to consider in greater detail the evidence that our lives remain predominantly concerned with our immediate environments and face-to-face relations and that these still happen primarily in 'real time'. Further evidence might have included employment in the service sector – which includes call centres, but also includes hairdressers, shop assistants and other personal and professional services. This might have been set in contrast to the claims and evidence provided by Castells. However, this student chose to prioritize the theoretical debates informing our notion of the information society – and the question of whether this is, indeed, something 'new' – and within the context of the module, this was appropriate.

Social scientific skills

This is a real strength of this essay:

- The essay addresses the question, albeit in a non-obvious fashion, in appropriate, depth given the short word count. (See Sections 2.3 and 4.1.)
- The citations are close to perfect, although in a few cases Giddens' ideas are represented as Silva's (when, in fact, Silva was reporting Giddens' arguments). (See Section 8.3.)
- There is a good selection of quotes, although these are not integrated into the essay in a particularly fluid way. They do, however, illuminate the

argument. (See Section 8.3.)

- The student deployed both theory and empirical evidence (both quantitative and qualitative) and made a suitable attempt to evaluate both, using tools of critical analysis – discussing, for instance, whether Castells’ argument was coherent. (See Sections 6.1, 8.2 and 8.3.)
- If you look carefully through the essay, you will see that the student effectively works through the circuit of knowledge in her discussion of the ‘claim’. (See Section 2.2.)
- There is a strong use of key concepts that are generally defined correctly. (See Section 8.3.)
- The evaluation is clear and the judgement ‘sound’, based on the evidence provided and the argument developed through the essay. (See Sections 6.1, 6.2 and 8.2.)

Essay 2

Evaluate the claim that we are now living in an information society

The information society is all around us: we are surrounded by technology that influences every aspect of our lives. We go to bed listening to the radio and wake up and watch TV, we talk with our friends on the phone and play computer games in our leisure time. In the West, our economy is dependent on technology and socially we could not live without it. This is very different to the past when people didn’t have technology and society and the economy were organized differently.

In agrarian societies, people were dependent on the sun to wake them up and they

only worked when there was light. The patterns of work were determined by the seasons and the harvest. People were mostly very poor and lived in a subsistence economy, which means they only produced enough food to live on, and didn't trade for better goods. Because of this, they also only really knew the people that lived close by and there was a lot of competition for food, water and shelter.

Nowadays, according to Marx, we live in a capitalist society. There are those who own the means of production and those who only own their own labor. They are, respectively, the capitalist class and the proletariat. Capitalism emerged at the same time as the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution meant that people no longer woke with the sun, but were dependent on the factory clock for telling them when to work and how long for. As people left the land, they became urbanized and accustomed to working shifts and the electric light meant that people could work longer hours. All of this labor and capital investment made for a surplus of goods which could then be sold for a profit, making the capitalists richer. But it also meant that we could buy more things and as industrialism progressed and the factory systems became more efficient (Taylorism) we could buy them cheaper; so in a capitalist economy everyone benefits. People were also able to socialize more because they were living in cities. Vaudeville was popular and then the invention of cinema meant that people could join in great crowds to enjoy modern culture together.

Now, however, products are available globally. We live in a time of globalization. According to Castells, time and space have been annihilated (Hamilton, p. 126). For instance, call centre workers in India can support IT users in the US, which means that there is IT support 24 hours a day. This is good because it means that we never have to be without our computers and the economy can keep going 24/7. Also,

because of automation, we can shop whenever we like on the internet. Security is less of a problem nowadays because of the encryption of data on secure websites. In fact ICTs have changed the way that we live beyond all recognition. Castells, according to Hamilton, talks about the concept 'space of flows' which is when the geographical location of people is irrelevant, but because of telephones and computers, transactions can still happen instantaneously even though we are not face to face in the same geographical location. We can also keep in touch with friends and family abroad. Email and Facebook are good examples of this. A more extreme example is 'World of Warcraft' where people can be friends and play against each other, even if they have never met – and, because of living in different parts of the world, never will.

Castells says we live in a 'network society' (the title of one of his books), which means that things are no longer organized from a central point, but may be diffuse and connected by nodes. According to Negroponte, this is a good thing. If things aren't centralized, or hierarchical, there is a chance they can be shared on the ground-level. In other words, the network society is more egalitarian – we have an equal shot at getting information and knowledge, which are the key drivers of the information society. An example of this is Wikipedia which ensures that everyone can have access to the same information – and if they have specialist knowledge they can add it to the pool.

In agrarian societies and even in the early periods of industrialization it was difficult to share knowledge and information, partly because most people couldn't read, but also because there was no way of linking people together beyond their immediate communities. So, while the industrial revolution was a revolution, the information society is even more of a revolution, according to Castells.

Castells says that 'timeless time' (Hamilton, p. 126) and the 'space of flows' mean that we are living in a new type of society and that this is a major break from the old society. We are still a capitalist society and Castells is a Marxist who recognizes this, but what gets traded isn't so much food, but more money, investments and information. Money is no longer 'real' but is just represented and traded electronically, as though it were. Some people now live their entire lives online. For instance, last year a woman became the first Second Life millionaire by selling accessories for your avatar in her Second Life store (The Guardian). She has an avatar, a store and products, none of which are real, but gets actual money through PayPal for her products. This way of working and living is revolutionary.

However, not everyone agrees with Castells. Golding, for instance, says that the information society is just a later version of modern capitalism. All the ICT technologies have done is speed things up and made them more efficient (Taylorism). For Golding, the real revolution is yet to come and will be driven by bio and nanotechnologies which will change us biologically (Hamilton, p. 129). Social change is also just a progression of the changes that occurred with urbanization and the factory system. He gives evidence that the wealthy will continue to increase their wealth because they can afford the new technologies, leading to a 'digital divide'. Unlike Castells, Golding suggests that this divide will be between nations and between individuals in nations and that egalitarianism is unlikely. In fact, he says that people are working longer hours at less satisfying jobs and that call centres are just factories by another name. They are mindless and soulless and people are driven to work in them for very low wages because there is a surplus of labor (Marx). There is a surplus of labor because new technologies are more efficient (the hours worked in the home have reduced because 'white goods' and other labor-saving devices have

meant less time is spent cleaning, etc.). There is also a surplus because workers can live anywhere, and capitalists can shop around different countries for the cheapest labor.

Critics such as Frank Webster argue that:

contemporary society first of all is still a capitalist society oriented towards accumulating economic, political, and cultural capital. They acknowledge that information society theories stress some important new qualities of society (notably globalization and informatization), but charge that they fail to show that these are attributes of overall capitalist structures. Critics such as Webster insist on the continuities that characterise change. In this way Webster distinguishes between different epochs of capitalism: *laissez-faire* capitalism of the 19th century, *corporate capitalism* in the 20th century, and informational capitalism for the 21st century. (Wikipedia, 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Information_society](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_society), accessed 26 August 2010).

However, all this is only possible because of new technologies. Castells is right to say that information and knowledge are the defining features of contemporary society and our economy. Without computers, I would be unable to write this essay, or research it and I wouldn't be able to keep up contact with my friends. In the future, I am likely to work in an industry that is completely reliant on new technologies. We live in an information society. This is completely different from agrarian societies where you only knew and worked with the people close by. It is also very different from early industrial societies because we are not dependent on the clock or the location of the factory for our work – we can live anywhere and still be employed. Castells is right.

(Word count: 1361)

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Commentary on Essay 2

You will probably notice that Essay 2 has a structure that is recognizably inspired by the question, in particular the content word ‘now’. However, it is a weaker essay than Essay 3 for reasons to do with its writing, content and social science skills. This is not to say it is without merit – it is quite enjoyable to read, and there are sections that work well, but it is not a *good* social science essay.

Structure and writing skills

The essay has an introduction, a conclusion and some recognizable structure to the main body. However, signposting is limited and the essay relies on colloquial expressions rather than clear and consistent academic prose:

- The introduction makes a claim that is in accord with the question, but doesn’t introduce the possibility that this claim might be contested, nor does it suggest how this might be evaluated. What it does do is indicate that the contemporary period marks a break from the past, suggesting that a historical approach will be taken. (See Chapter 7.)
- The main body is organized to consider ‘earlier’ historical periods – agrarian society and the early period of industrialization – and then to consider whether ‘society’ and the ‘economy’ are organized differently today. (See Section 8.1.)
- Although most of the sentences make sense, there is less coherence to the paragraphs, with many lacking a topic sentence, containing tangential material or concluding on an unrelated point. (See Section 8.4.)
- There is no signposting of the direction of the essay, nor are there transition

words or phrases to help guide the reader. (See Sections 7.1 and 8.4.)

- Towards the end of the essay, criticisms of Castells' position are introduced, but not developed – and they are summarily dismissed in the conclusion. (See Chapter 6.)
- The essay question expressly asks for evaluation, but there is little evidence of this. Most of the essay is descriptive. (See Sections 2.3, 4.2 and 4.3.)
- The writing is quite engaging and lively, but the colloquialisms are a distraction. (See Section 8.4.)
- The large (and only) quotation is not integrated with the rest of the essay and seems to be doing most of the work of presenting a counter-claim to Castells. It is also lifted directly from *Wikipedia* (although it is referenced). (See Section 5.3, 8.3 and 10.2.)
- The conclusion restates the introduction and also introduces new illustrations ('Without computers, I would be unable to write this essay'; 'In the future, I am likely to work in an industry that is completely reliant on new technologies'). It also makes the bold statement that 'Castells is right', but doesn't draw effectively on the discussion in the main body of the essay to justify this conclusion. (See Chapter 9.)
- In addition, the sudden shift to the first- and second-person singular in the conclusion undermines the academic authority of the essay. (See Section 8.4.)
- The word count is a little low, but within the 10 per cent range of 1,500

words. (See Section 2.3.)

Content

There is relevance to the set question, but the essay focuses almost exclusively on addressing the content word ‘now’, rather than on the contested ‘claim’ that we are living in an ‘information society’. Despite the process word ‘evaluate’, much of the essay is descriptive. As the question is from a second level module, it is probably expected that the essay would compare and contrast, as well as evaluate, different theoretical positions. In this case, only Castells’ theory of the information society is explored in any depth and even this is largely peripheral to the description of the changes in social activity and the economy. The empirical evidence cited is largely unreferenced and anecdotal. It is not clear that the student understands some of Castells’ key concepts, for instance ‘timeless time’, although it is certainly helpful to have attempted to use them. There are far fewer references than in Essay 3, and many of them are vague (e.g., ‘Taylorism’, ‘Marx’). The lack of references, inconsistent use of key concepts, inadequate discussion and evaluation, anecdotal ‘evidence’, etc., make this a much shallower essay than Essay 3.

Social scientific skills

- Given that the student has chosen to take a historical approach, there is surprisingly little exploration of possible *continuities* with the past, nor is there a consideration of contemporary agrarian societies/labour. Contextualization of the discussion is poor. (See Sections 2.2, 4.3 and 6.1.)
- The use of theory is very thin and one-sided. The essay would be more appropriate to an advocacy question, but as evaluation is required, at least one contrasting theory to Castells’ claim needs to be adequately explored.

(See Section 4.3.)

- Contradictions in the discussion go unnoticed, for instance the student claims that money is no longer ‘real’, but then uses the example of the Second Life millionaire who has earned ‘actual money’ from her Second Life store. (See Section 6.1.)
- Social scientific tools are not in evidence: there is no interrogation of the ‘claim’, no weighing-up of empirical evidence, and what evidence is cited is poorly referenced and largely anecdotal, etc. There are also innumerable unsubstantiated claims and assumptions about agrarian and early industrial societies. (See Sections 2.2, 6.1, 8.2 and 8.3.)
- Referencing is incomplete and the use of Wikipedia is unhelpful. In addition, the student claims to have read Manuel Castells’ *The Rise of the Network Society* (see References list), but there is no evidence in the essay that she has done so. (See Section 5.3 and Chapter 10.)