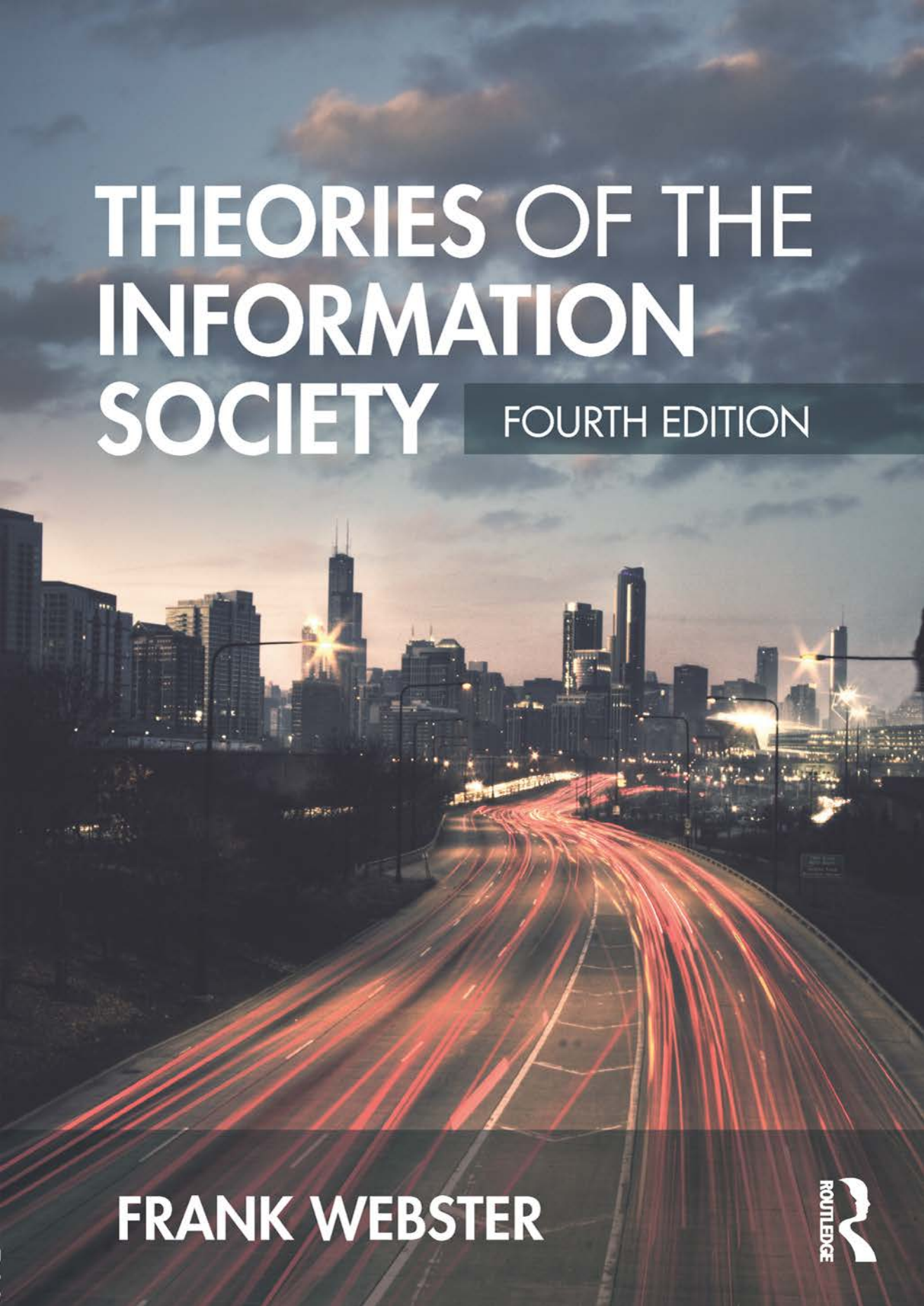
THEORIES OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY
FOURTH EDITION
FRANK WEBSTER
ROUTLEDGE

THEORIES OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Information is regarded as a distinguishing feature of our world. Where once economies were built on industry and conquest, we are now part of a global information economy. Pervasive media, expanding information occupations and the development of the internet convince many that living in an Information Society is the destiny of us all. Coping in an era of information flows, of virtual relationships and breakneck change poses challenges to one and all.

In *Theories of the Information Society* Frank Webster sets out to make sense of the information explosion, taking a sceptical look at what thinkers mean when they refer to the Information Society, and critically examining the major post-war approaches to informational development. The fourth edition of this classic study brings it up to date with new research and with social and technological changes – from the 'Twitter Revolutions' of North Africa, to financial crises that introduced the worst recession in a lifetime, to the emergence of social media and blogging – and reassesses the work of key theorists in the light of these changes.

More outspoken than in previous editions, Webster urges abandonment of Information Society scenarios, preferring analysis of the informatization of long-established relationships. This interdisciplinary book is essential reading for those trying to make sense of social and technological change in the post-war era. It addresses issues of central concern to students of sociology, politics, geography, communications, information science, cultural studies, computing and librarianship.

Frank Webster has been Professor of Sociology at Oxford Brookes University, the University of Birmingham and City University London.

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Frank Webster

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Theories of the Information Society

Fourth edition

Frank Webster

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In memory of Frank Neville Webster
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Preface and acknowledgements

I have been persuaded to produce a fourth edition of this book midway into writing one concerned with the relations between democracy, information and new technologies. I was prepared to be diverted from the latter because its core question – what is the connection between a healthy democracy and the information environment? – appeared to me to confront a closely related problem addressed recurrently in *Theories of the Information Society*. At root, this concerned the need to query assertions, however superficially persuasive or appealing, that technological breakthroughs are set to overturn our established ways of life. In recent years prophets aplenty have emerged to proclaim the democratizing effects of new media, whether it is through mobilizing of once ignored people (crowd sourcing), the interactivity affordances of computer communications, or the prospects for the decentralization of decision making.

In the early 1990s there was some advocacy of electronic democracy that made claims for holding plebiscites on just about anything with the convenience of the home terminal. However, commentary on democracy's extension and strengthening has increased apace since the millennium at the same time as it has become more measured and mainstream. Research grants and serious journals are now available to those who might examine what consequences for political participation might be offered by the internet, by blogging, by government information being available online or by Twitter.

My ongoing book sets out to challenge technocentric assertions, moderate as well as extreme, on grounds of oversimplification, of frequent wishful thinking and of starting from a wrong-headed position, as well as of ignoring evidence of what was actually taking place. *Theories of the Information Society*, the first edition of which was drafted in the early 1990s, set about related claims that a new world was coming into being largely on the back of technological breakthroughs. This was set to be a new 'weightless' economy, a 'flat' world that would overturn established ways of behaving, an epoch in which 'thinking smart' was at one with the emerging 'Information Society'. Editions two and three continued to engage with similar claims for technology's *impact* since it seemed that such claims for technology's effects could not be quietened.

It is remarkable to me that the bases of argument advanced by Information Society thinkers, however much they are thrown back, continue to return. It was once the Microelectronics Revolution that was said to be bringing about the Information

Age (back in 1979 the then Prime Minister James Callaghan told us we had to 'wake up' to the coming of the microchip). Thereafter it was the internet that was going to overturn set ways and now, more recently, we have witnessed many similar sorts of opinion on the consequences of 'social media' such as Facebook and Twitter. I was in my twenties when Lord Callaghan spoke out; now in my sixties I am astonished at the similarity of the messages across the ages. It seems that each new innovation sparks a firestorm of techno-prediction: this – or that – will change everything.

Over the past several years an abundance of writers have even begun to perceive the vitalizing of democracy as a potential gift of new technologies. I am certainly persuaded that democratization is a major feature of our times, taking to heart Amartya Sen's (1999) observation that 'it [is] difficult not to accord primacy to the emergence of democracy as the pre-eminently acceptable form of governance'. The processes whereby this sensibility and its practices emerge are remarkable: for their historical novelty, for their almost universal acceptance, as well as for the influence they exercise in current affairs (from Tony Blair's avowal of 'liberal interventionism' in the affairs of other countries during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the cries of dissidents that the war was fought 'not in my name'). In the light of my own concerns about democratization, it will not be surprising to learn that I have taken a particular interest in the words of those who see in new technologies possibilities of enhancing, even radically bringing into being, democracy. Such visions have come not only from naïve technologists and starry-eyed futurists, but also from serious scholars concerned about matters such as declining participation in established political parties and calls for more accountability of politicians. I was not disposed to think democracy comes courtesy of a computer console, or even from a Twitter account, so I began researching what turns out to be a complicated social, political, economic and even technological milieu within which democracy is both expressed and (re)conceived.

As I undertook this research I found myself returning to issues that had occupied earlier editions of *Theories of the Information Society*. It was not just that I found myself unhappy with the linking of technology and democracy. It was the case that the evidence requires more nuanced thinking about the issues than this sort of pairing allows, but it was also the implied causal chain: that technology *impacts* on society/politics to change the way we are. Adherents of this approach readily concede that sometimes the impact is unfortunate and disappointing, though for the most part they see its impact as positive, but *always* they accede to the view that to start from an impact assessment is an appropriate way to proceed. I do not accept this point of departure. It was a similar gripe I had when writing *Theories of the Information Society*: I could not accept that analysts should begin from the presumption that information of itself (and however it was measured, usually by technology, but also by numbers of white-collar workers or the revenue it generated) could bring about a new social order. Of course, one could see lots more information being generated, transmitted and stored, but the notion that this announced a new sort of society cried out for critical scrutiny. It was as if a conclusion (more information) was being transformed into an explanation, indeed a cause, of change itself.

When we look today we do see lots more democracy around. We even see changing conceptions of democracy (who would have imagined, for example, that tolerance of differences – of lifestyles, sexualities, religions – would have become so widely regarded as an index of democracy in less than a generation in the UK?). And there is certainly a great deal more computer communications technology around. But the suggestion that the latter impacts to increase (and occasionally decrease) democracy is not, I submit, the best way to understand the increased democratization of our world. The approach is mired in a technocentric approach; one that positively misleads on matters that, because they are urgent and important, require more than this.

When my editor at Routledge, Gerhard Boomgaarden, approached me for this fourth edition, the time seemed ripe to incorporate concerns about democratization, information and technology into the new edition while also recomposing the earlier manuscript of eight years ago. I have taken the opportunity to add new chapters as well as to thoroughly revise those that remain. Perhaps the most important addition is Chapter 10, on Friedrich von Hayek and his pro-market successors. I have not become a convert to Hayek, but his absence from earlier editions is inexcusable given the worldly significance of his ideas and his undoubted intellectual distinction. Capitalism is now without credible intellectual challenge (though it remains highly unstable and volatile, as well as callous and even cruel) and arguably its best-known twentieth-century advocate merits serious attention. That Hayek had much to say about information as well as democracy (though he was suspicious of it and lauded liberty more) provides further reason to include him here.

I have also endeavoured to retain a significant amount of exposition of argument in this book since I am aware that many readers will not have a grounding in the theory and theorists that dominate the work. However, I have taken the opportunity to be more critical than in earlier editions as well as to make more clear my own reasoning and conclusions. Arguing *for* a position as well as taking care to offer reliable accounts of those with whom I disagree is not always comfortable, but I have tried to restrain my opinions where necessary and to launch them towards the end of chapters and most directly in the final chapter of this book (see Chapter 13).

I produced this work while in the employ of City University London and leave that institution as I complete it. While at City, John Solomos (now at Warwick), Alice Bloch (now at Manchester) and Howard Tumber (a City lifer) were wonderful colleagues who sustained me through a troubling health episode. Kevin Robins, a colleague with whom I have written over decades but now far away in Istanbul, was often in my thoughts. Keith Lambe, a dear friend of more than thirty years, died in May 2011, a reminder of truly important concerns. I often discussed my work with Keith, who responded in his inimitable way: direct, sceptical and energetic. I miss him enormously and wish I could put a copy of this book into his hands.

Liz Chapman: thanks for being there since we were teenagers.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It seems to me that most people ask themselves, at one time or another, what sort of society is it in which we live? How can we make sense of what is going on with our world? Where is it all taking us? Where do we fit in all of this? This is a daunting and frequently bewildering task because it involves trying to identify the major contours of extraordinarily complex and changeable circumstances. It is, in my view, the duty of social science to identify and explain the most consequential features of how we live now, the better that we may see where we are headed, so that we might influence where we are going. Some people quickly give up on the task, frankly admitting confusion. Still others, encountering disputation, retreat into the comforting (and lazy) belief that we see only what we choose. Fortunately, most people stick with trying to understand what is happening in the world, and in so doing reach for such terms as capitalism, industrialism, totalitarianism and democracy. Most of us will have heard these sorts of words, will have voiced them ourselves, when trying to account for events and upheavals, for important historical occurrences, or even for the general drift of social, economic and political change.

In all probability we will have argued with others about the appropriateness of these labels when applied to particular circumstances. We will even have debated just what the terms might mean. For instance, while it can be agreed that Russia has moved well away from Communism since the collapse of the Soviet Union late in 1991, there will be less agreement that the transition can be accurately described as a shift to a fully capitalist society. And, while most analysts see clearly the spread of markets in China, the continuation of a dictatorial Communist Party there makes it difficult to describe China in similar terms as, say, we do with reference to Western Europe. There is a constant need to qualify the generalizing terminology: hence terms like pre-industrial, emerging democracies, advanced capitalism, authoritarian populism and state capitalism.

And yet, despite these necessary refinements, few of us will feel able to refuse these concepts or indeed others like them. The obvious reason is that, big and crude and subject to amendment and misunderstanding though they be, these concepts and others like them do give us a means of identifying and beginning to understand essential elements of the world in which we live and from which we have emerged. It seems inescapable that, impelled to make sense of the most consequential features of different societies and circumstances, we are driven towards the adoption of grand concepts. Big terms for big issues.

The starting point for this book is the emergence of an apparently new way of conceiving contemporary societies. Commentators began to talk about information as a distinguishing feature of the modern world forty years or so ago. This prioritization of information has maintained its hold now for decades and there is little sign of it losing its grip on the imagination. We are told that we are entering an information age, that a new 'mode of information' predominates, that ours is now an 'e-society', that we must come to terms with a 'weightless economy' driven by information, that we have moved into a 'global information economy'. Very many commentators identified as Information Societies the United States, Britain, Japan, Germany and other nations with a similar way of life. Politicians, business leaders and policy makers have taken the Information Society idea to their hearts, with the European Union urging the rapid adjustment to a 'global Information Society', thereby following in the tracks of Japan, which embraced the concept of Information Society in the early 1970s (Duff, 2000).

Just what sense to make of this has been a source of controversy. To some it constitutes the beginning of a professionalized and caring society, while to others it represents a tightening of control over the citizenry; to some it heralds the emergence of an educated public which has ready access to knowledge, while to others it means a deluge of trivia, sensationalism and misleading propaganda that keeps people stupid; to some it heralds a knowledge-led society, while for others we have entered an era of unprecedented monitorship. Among political economists talk is of a novel 'e-economy' in which the quick-thinking knowledge entrepreneur has the advantage; among the more culturally sensitive reference is to 'cyberspace', a 'virtual reality' no-place that welcomes the imaginative and inventive.

Amidst this divergent opinion, what is striking is that, oppositional though they are, all scholars acknowledge that there is something special about information. In an extensive and burgeoning literature concerned with the information age, there is little agreement about its major characteristics and its significance other than that information has achieved a special pertinence. The writing available may be characteristically disputatious and marked by radically different premises and conclusions, but about the special salience of information there is no discord.

It was curiosity about the currency of information that sparked the idea for the first edition of this book, which I wrote in the early 1990s. It seemed that, on many sides, people were marshalling yet another grandiose term to identify the germane features of our time. But simultaneously thinkers were remarkably divergent in their interpretations of what form this information took, why it was central to our present systems, and how it was affecting social, economic and political relationships.

This curiosity has remained with me, not least because the concern with information persists, and has, if anything, been heightened, as has the variability among analysts about what it all amounts to. While I was writing the first edition of this book discussion appeared stimulated chiefly by technological change. The 'microelectronics revolution', announced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, launched a fleet of opinion about what information technology (IT) was set to do to us. Favoured topics then were 'the end of work', the advent of a 'leisure society', the totally 'automated factory' in which robots did everything. These subjects went

out of style somewhat as full employment returned in the late 1990s and 2000s, but the enthusiasm for technologically driven changes remained.

Another agenda emerged that concerned the internet as it became widely available during the 1990s. This focused on the 'information superhighway' and cybersociety brought about now by information and communications technologies (ICTs). Hot topics were electronic democracy, virtual relations, interactivity, personalization, cyborgs and online communities. Much comment seized on the speed and versatility of new media to evoke the prospect of radical transformations in what we might do. Thus when a tsunami enveloped large parts of South East Asia on 26 December 2004, the phones went down, but e-mail and the internet rapidly became the means to seek out lost ones. And when, on 7 July 2005, terrorists bombed the London Underground and the bus system, the phone system shut down, yet people quickly turned to the internet for news and mutual support, while the photographic facilities on many mobile phones displaced traditional media to provide vivid pictures of the immediate devastation.

Most recently, there has been an explosion of interest in 'social media', a catch-all label for things like blogging, social networking, wikis and internet forums where users can both consume and produce information (leading to the invention of the neologism 'prosumer'). Increasing availability of computer communications technologies, accessed by easy-to-use programmes, has led to bold prophecies about the potential of 'crowd sourcing'. The notion that 'anywhere, anytime, always connected' technologies have the potential to bring together previously isolated people means that, for some, there will be radical transformation of investment patterns (microfinancing), of retailing (online shopping) and even political engagement, where the once disenfranchised are empowered. Indeed, for some the 'Arab Spring' that ignited through 2011 in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and even Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Republic has been the result of technologies such as the mobile phone, video cameras and the internet integrated in and through the 'affordances' of social media such as Twitter, Reddit, YouTube and Facebook (cf. Shirky, 2008; Howard, 2011; Castells, 2012). Elsewhere, there was instant commentary on the urban riots that struck London in the summer of 2011 that accounted for their virulence and efficacy with reference to the capabilities of disaffected and criminal inner city youth armed with Blackberry Messenger mobile phones that enabled participants to connect and converge with ease (Halliday, 2011). As the *Economist* (13 August 2011) titled them, 'the Blackberry Riots' (cf. Adams, 2011) appeared to be a vivid example of the capacity of social media to bring together adroitly formerly isolated people, thereby to inflate their power (for good or ill [cf. Dunleavy *et al*., 2012]).

In some quarters at least there has been a move away from technology as the source of comment towards what one might consider the softer sides of information. This is reflected in a shift from computer communications technologies towards interest in social media, where commentary moves from concern with what technology is doing to society towards what people can do with technologies that are now pervasive, accessible and adaptable. Among politicians and intellectuals there is also an increased concern for 'informational labour', for the 'symbolic analysts' who are best equipped to lead where adaptability and ongoing retraining

are the norm. Here it is people who are the key players in the Information Society, so long as they have been blessed by a first-rate education that endows them with the informational abilities to survive in a new and globalized economy. Now deal-makers, managers, software engineers, media creators and all those involved with the creative industries are seen as key to the Information Society. This shift in analysis from technology to people, along with a persistence of general concern for information, encouraged me to produce this fourth edition of *Theories of the Information Society*.

I focus attention on different interpretations of the import of information in order to scrutinize a common area of interest, even though, as we shall see, interpretations of the role and import of information diverge widely, and, indeed, the closer that we come to examine their terms of reference, the less agreement even about the ostensibly common subject matter – information – there appears to be.

Setting out to examine various images of the Information Society, this book is organized in such a way as to scrutinize major contributions towards our understanding of information in the modern world. For this reason, following a critical review of definitional issues in Chapters 2 and 3 (consequences of which reverberate through the book), each chapter thereafter looks at a particular theory and its most prominent proponents and attempts to assess its strengths and weaknesses in the light of alternative theoretical analyses and empirical evidence. Starting with thinkers and theories in this way does have its problems. Readers eager to learn about, say, the internet and online/offline relations, or about information flows in the Iraq War, or about the consumption of music that has accompanied the spread of file sharing, or about politics in an era of media saturation, will not find such issues considered independently in this book. These topics are here, often at considerable length, but they are incorporated into chapters organized around major thinkers and theories. Some readers might find themselves shrugging at this, tempted to dismiss the book as the work of a dreamy theorist.

I plead (a bit) guilty. As they progress through this book readers will encounter Daniel Bell's conception of post-industrial society which places a special emphasis on information (Chapter 4); the contention that we have undergone a transition from Fordist to post-Fordist society that generates and relies upon information handling to succeed (Chapter 5); Manuel Castells's influential views on the 'informational capitalism' which operates in the 'network society' (Chapter 6); a number of thinkers, notably John Urry, who conceive of 'mobilities' – of information, but also people and products – as the distinguishing feature of our world (Chapter 7); Herbert Schiller's views on advanced capitalism's need for and manipulation of information (Chapter 8); Jürgen Habermas's argument that the 'public sphere' is in decline and with it the integrity of information (Chapter 9); Friedrich von Hayek's view that only the market can ensure the information needed by a successful economy and liberal society (Chapter 10); Anthony Giddens's thoughts on 'reflexive modernization', which spotlight the part played by information gathered for surveillance and control purposes (Chapter 11); and Jean Baudrillard and Zygmunt Bauman on postmodernism and postmodernity, both of whom give particular attention to the explosion of signs in the modern era (Chapter 12).

It will not escape notice that these thinkers and the theories with which they are associated, ranging across disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, economics and

geography, are at the centre of contemporary debates in social science. This is, of course, not especially surprising given that social thinkers are engaged in trying to understand and explain the world in which we live and that an important feature of this is change in the informational realm. It is unconscionable that anyone should attempt to account for the state of the world without paying due attention to that enormous domain which covers changes in mass media, the centrality of *mediation* to our lives (from our knowledge of what is happening in the world through news services to the routine use of text messaging and mobile telephony), the spread of information and communication technologies, new forms of work and even shifts in education systems and services.

Let me admit something else: because this book starts from contemporary social science, it is worth warning that some may find at least parts of it difficult to follow. Jürgen Habermas is undeniably challenging, Daniel Bell – outside popularizations of his work – is a sophisticated and complex sociologist who requires effort to appreciate, and postmodern thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard are famously (and irritatingly) opaque in expression. So those who are confused will not be alone in this regard. It can be disconcerting for those interested in the information age to encounter what to them can appear rather alien and arcane social theorists. They know that there has been a radical, even a revolutionary, breakthrough in the technological realm and they want, accordingly, a straightforward account of the social and economic consequences of this development. There are paperbacks galore to satisfy this need. 'Theory', especially 'grand theory' which has ambitions to identify the most salient features of contemporary life and which frequently has recourse to history and an array of other 'theorists', many of them long dead, does not, and should not, enter into the matter since all it does is confuse and obfuscate.

Against this, I assert the value of my starting point. I *intentionally* approach an understanding of information via encounters with social theorists by way of a riposte to a rash of pronouncements on the information age. Far too much of this has come from 'practical' men (and a few women) who, impressed by the 'Information Technology Revolution', or enthused by the internet, or unable to imagine life without e-mail, or enraptured by bloggers, or wowed by the instantaneity of a tweet that has 'gone viral', or captivated by 'virtual reality' experiences that outdo the mundane, have felt able to reel off social and economic consequences that are likely, even inevitably, to follow. In these frames work will be transformed, education upturned, corporate structures revitalized, democracy itself reassessed – all because of the 'information revolution' (cf. Morozov, 2013).

Such approaches have influenced – and continue to influence – a vast swathe of opinion on the Information Society: in paperback books with titles such as *The Mighty Micro*, *The Wired Society*, *Being Digital* and *What Will Be*, in university courses designed to consider the 'social effects of the computer revolution', in countless political and business addresses, and in a scarcely calculable amount of journalism that alerts audiences to prepare for upheaval in all aspects of their lives as a result of the Information Age.

These sorts of commentaries of course have an immediacy that appeals, a 'real-world' engagement that readily pushes aside any concern for 'theory'. This latter itself evokes slow motion reflection, dust-gathering bookishness and retreat into an

unworldly and cosseted 'ivory tower'. In the here and now, the place where momentous changes are taking place irrespective of the academic's musings, theory has little part to play. How much better to read the forecasts of expert practitioners who have experience of developing computer communications systems and know what is happening from the rough and tumble of being in the business. It is just this that draws us towards – and makes eminently qualified to write – Google executives Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen (2013), whose *The New Digital Age* has this authority to pronounce on (to adopt their subtitle) nothing less than the *Future of People, Nations and Business*.

I have been a Professor of Sociology now for almost twenty-five years and throughout that period I have specialized as a researcher and writer on informational matters. I have lost count of the number of requests from radio stations, newspapers and television to provide an 'expert' opinion on children's vulnerabilities to computer games, on paedophile circles' use of the internet, on how blogging is transforming politics, on what online teaching is doing to education, on how computer dating is transforming relationships . . . I routinely turn these down. In so doing I have felt a lingering sense of being a disappointment to my employers (who are always eager to parade their brand) and even to my often beleaguered discipline: 'Come on, you're a sociologist and here is your opportunity to show the worthiness of our work.' The trouble is, I am convinced that this is *not* the position from which to start if one wants to adequately understand what is happening in the Information Society. I am intensely interested in the here and now, as I am in policies developed to direct change, but I am sure that the posing of questions that are journalistically arresting and have an immediate pertinence at a given time, while eminently practical, are *not* the best way to appreciate the information revolution, not least because they start with dubious suppositions about what caused change.

One needs, I feel, to be warned against the 'practical' men and women who have little time for theory. They often disavow it, but still theory intrudes into their points of view. Thus when asked, 'What is the internet doing to the family?' or 'What sort of occupations will be destroyed by ICTs?', researchers are being blinkered in ways that lead them away from a fuller understanding of the role of information in change because the questions presuppose (even where it is vehemently denied) a certain theoretical starting point. I demonstrate this later at some length, but for now commend Keynes's (1936) counsel in the final paragraph of his *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* that one should beware those 'practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influence (because they) are usually the slaves of some defunct economist'.

Keynes, of course, had an alternative theoretical model of the economy to the then orthodoxy that was not admitted to be anything other than 'obvious' to practical people. Part of Keynes's argument is worth revisiting since it has special resonance in our times of 'austerity'. We can all agree that the economy has been in deficit and has achieved minimal, if any, growth since 2009. Practical people, faced with debt, reduce their expenditure because we know that we cannot live beyond our means. This is what governments in Britain and elsewhere have been doing since 2010. This policy commands widespread support since it seems obvious that

debt can only be removed by making savings. The popular appeal of this policy (even where the effects are unpleasant) rests largely on the commonsense idea that a national economy is comparable to a household's. If the latter gets into trouble, perhaps because someone there loses a job, then it cannot afford to spend what it once did, hence it cuts its cloth to live within its reduced means. This is simply the practical thing to do, theory apparently having no part to play in the real world.

However, when it comes to a national economy, as opposed to a family home, the economy is decidedly *not* like a household, a lesson imparted in any introductory economics course. Cut public expenditure here, for instance, and this puts out of work many people, with serious knock-on effects that often lead to further losses of work, which in turn means that tax revenue is lost, welfare costs escalate and national debt is compounded. One easily develops a vicious downward spiral precisely because the wider economy is *not* like one's household. There is no need to be schooled in Keynesian economics to appreciate here that a practical rationale has its limits that theory can expose and towards which it can present alternative policies.

An aim of approaching information from an alternative starting point, that of contemporary social theory (at least that which is combined with empirical evidence), is to demonstrate that the social *impact* approaches towards information are hopelessly simplistic and positively misleading for those who want to understand what is going on and what is most likely to transpire in the future. Another aim is to show that social theory, combined with empirical evidence, is an enormously richer, and hence ultimately more practical and useful, way of understanding and explaining recent trends in the information domain.

While most of the thinkers I examine in this book address informational trends directly, not all of them do so. Thus while Daniel Bell and Herbert Schiller, in their very different ways and with commendable prescience, were insisting for well over a generation that information and communication issues are at the heart of post-war changes, there are other thinkers whom I consider, such as Jürgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens, who give less direct attention to the informational domain. I hasten to say that this is neither because they have nothing to contribute to our understanding of information nor because they do not consider it to be important. Rather it is because their terms of debate are different from my focus on the subject of information. For this reason I have felt free to lead off from discussion of, say, Habermas's notion of the public sphere or from consideration of arguments surrounding an alleged shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, more directly towards my interest in informational issues. Since I am not trying to provide a full exposition of particular social theories but rather am trying to understand the significance of the information domain with the best tools that are available, this does not seem to me to be illegitimate.

It needs to be said too that, throughout this book, there runs an interrogative and sceptical view of the Information Society concept itself. One or two commentators complained that the earlier editions of *Theories of the Information Society* were so critical of the notion of an Information Society that there seemed no point in writing a whole book about it. I return to this criticism in Chapter 13, but state here that it seems appropriate to give close attention to a term that exercises

such leverage over current thought, even if one finds it has serious shortcomings. The Information Society might be misleading, but it can still have value in a heuristic sense (Cortada, 2007). At the same time, a major problem is that the concept Information Society often carries with it an array of suppositions about what has and is changing and how change is being effected, yet it is used seemingly unproblematically by a wide section of opinion. Recognition of this encouraged me in my choice of title since it meant that people would see instantly, at least in very broad terms, what it was about. Nonetheless, I do hope to shake some of the confidence of those who subscribe to the notion of the arrival of a novel Information Society in what follows. I shall be contesting the accuracy and appropriateness of the concept in many of its variants, though I do find it useful in some respects. So readers ought to note that, though I am often critical of the term, on occasions, and with some qualification, I do judge it to be helpful to understanding how we live today.

In Chapters 2 and 3 I subject the concept Information Society to some scrutiny, and there readers will come across major definitional problems with the term, but at the outset I would draw attention to a major divide that separates many of the thinkers whom I consider in this book. On the one side are subscribers to the notion of an Information Society, while on the other are those that insist that we have only experienced the informatization of established relationships. It will become clear that this is not a mere academic division since the different terminology reveals how one is best to understand what is happening in the informational realm.

It is important to highlight the division of opinion as regards the variable interpretations we will encounter in what follows. On the one hand, there are those who subscribe to the notion that in recent times we have seen emerge Information Societies which are marked by their differences from hitherto existing societies. Not all of these are altogether happy with the term Information Society, but in so far as they argue that the present era is special and different, marking a turning point in social development, I think they can be described as its endorsers. On the other hand, there are scholars who, while happy to concede that information has taken on a special significance in the modern era, insist that the central feature of the present is its continuities with the past.

The difference between Information Society theorists and those who examine informatization as a subordinate feature of established social systems can be one of degree, with thinkers occupying different points along a continuum, but there is undeniably one pole on which the emphasis is on change and another where the stress is on persistence.

In this book I shall be considering various perspectives on information in the contemporary world, discussing thinkers and theories such as Daniel Bell's post-industrialism, Friedrich von Hayek's insistence that capitalism provides the optimal means of ensuring adequate information for everyone, Jean-François Lyotard on postmodernism and Jürgen Habermas on the public sphere. Doing so we shall see that each has a distinct contribution to make towards our understanding of informational developments, whether it is as regards the role of white-collar employees, the undermining of established intellectual thought, the extension of surveillance,

the increase in regularization of daily life or the weakening of civil society. It is my major purpose to consider and critique these differences of interpretation.

Nonetheless, beyond and between these differences is a line that should not be ignored, the separation between those who endorse the idea of an Information Society and those who regard informatization as the continuation of pre-established relations. Towards one wing we may position those who proclaim a new sort of society that has emerged from the old. Drawn to this side are theorists of:

- *post-industrialism* (Daniel Bell and a legion of followers);
- *postmodernism* (e.g. Jean Baudrillard, Mark Poster, Paul Virilio);
- *flexible specialization* (e.g. Michael Piore and Charles Sabel, Larry Hirschhorn);
- *the informational mode of development* (Manuel Castells).

On the other side are writers who place emphasis on continuities. I would include here theorists of:

- *neo-Marxism* (e.g. Herbert Schiller);
- *Regulation School theory* (e.g. Michel Aglietta, Alain Lipietz);
- *flexible accumulation* (David Harvey);
- *reflexive modernization* (Anthony Giddens);
- *the public sphere* (Jürgen Habermas, Nicholas Garnham).

None of the latter denies that information is of key importance to the modern world, but unlike the former they argue that its form and function are subordinate to long-established principles and practices. As they progress through this book, readers will have the chance to decide which approaches they find most persuasive.