Preface

*Humanizing Information Technology* develops a dialogue between a stress on the autonomy of information and the determining power of economic base. The ideas of information as an autonomous variable and of the primacy of theoretical knowledge have been recurrent themes in discussions of the information society. A contrasting perspective, associated, although not exclusively, with Marx, would regard existence as producing consciousness, including information and theoretical knowledge. In view of the significance of the contrasting perspective, and of the wide currency of the information society concept, it is surprising that there have not been more deliberate attempts at this dialogue.

Empirical and historical studies are conducted in a dialectic with the theoretical view developed of information technology as a human construction. The chapters progress from outlining the theoretical perspective; to topics studied from, and developing, this perspective; to an anticipation of future developments, including situating information science in relation to contiguous disciplines.

The opening chapter, “An Information View of History,” develops a manifesto for the study of information technologies in human history. The proposed study is further developed by, “Organs of the Human Brain, Created by the Human Hand: Toward an Understanding of Information Technology.” A move is made toward a synthesis of the primacy of theoretical knowledge and the determining power of the economic base. Technology is fully recognized as a human construction and knowledge is understood as a social relation between men.

“Information Society or Cash Nexus? A Study of the United States as a Copyright Haven” is a theoretically informed historical study, concerned with the autonomy of information. It also serves to bring an episode that has been subject to collective forgetting or repression back to modern consciousness.
In “As Sharp as a Pen: Direct Semantic Ratification in Oral, Written, and Electronic Communication,” electronic communication is understood from the historical perspective of oral and written communication. The influence of technology on human conduct is recognized, while technological determinism is avoided, by admitting the possibility of reciprocal interaction between information technologies and the social conditions that produced those technologies.

“In the Catalogue Ye Go for Men: Evaluation Criteria for Information Retrieval Systems” brings a historical perspective on information retrieval to inform understanding of current developments. A design principle for information retrieval systems of an enhanced capacity for informed choice is advocated. The principle is closer to ordinary discourse understandings, as well as to historical precedents, than the dominant modern concern with the transformation of a query into results. “Meta- and Object-Language for Information Retrieval Research: Proposal for a Distinction” addresses the conceptual confusion of information retrieval research and proposes a more rigorous distinction between discussions of information retrieval systems and the transformations possible within such systems.

“Forms of Labor in Information System” looks at the labor involved in information systems. A dynamic involving the substitution of dead for living labor is detected. Developments in information retrieval systems and copyright are then considered, recombining theoretical and empirical contexts. Finally, “W(h)ither Information Science?” is concerned with isolating and carrying forward valuable elements in information science.

A humanistic and historical perspective on information and information technologies is offered to communities beyond information science. This book also cumulates and gives coherence to work, while readdressing the information science community (some of the chapters have been published as journal articles or delivered as oral conference presentations within information science).

The book, compared to the journal article, is customarily a dialogic form, inviting reviews. The value of the intellectual (and physical) labor embodied in this book, and in the dialogue it may generate, lies in developing an understanding of the conditions under which we make our own history and of the possibility of influencing our future history.
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