

# Introduction

The conquest of the cyber-frontier is a sequel to the grand technological narrative of the conquest of space. The latter gave us the cliché ‘global village’, whereas the former has already enshrined the expression ‘global information society’. The irresistible rise of the notions of ‘information society’ and ‘information age’ has become indissolubly linked to the spectacular rise in the use of ‘global age’ vocabulary. Alongside the two notions, a whole machinery of apologetic discourse has developed, including promotional sales pitches, official proclamations, trendy manifestos and scientific or quasi-scientific studies, purporting to show that these terms are self-evident. We are promised a new society that will necessarily demonstrate ‘greater solidarity’ and be ‘more open and more democratic’. The referent of this inevitable ‘Republic of Technology’ has thus been sealed off from controversy and debate at the grassroots level. Yet the notion of a global information society itself is the result of a geopolitical construction. We tend to forget this under the heady effect of ongoing technological innovation. The aim of this book is precisely to unearth the foundations of this construction: in other words, its underlying assumptions.

A new ideology that dare not speak its name has become part and parcel of 'the nature of things' and suddenly ranks as the dominant paradigm of social change. The notion of the 'information society' carries with it a body of beliefs that release symbolic forces, which not only enable action, but in fact trigger it and orient it in certain directions rather than others. These forces set the agenda for action and research programmes run by governments and supranational policymakers. Witness the number of Ministries of Industry, Technology and Science throughout the world that have appended 'and the Information Society' to their names, or even abandoned their former label in favour of this new one.

The same beliefs guide the strategies for worldwide expansion devised by so-called 'global' companies. They have mapped out the way military and diplomatic institutions are to make war and peace. They have given rise to a definition of change and of 'novelty' focused exclusively on technological progress. They have universalised a new sort of 'common sense' to legitimise these choices and distinctions, as if they alone were possible or reasonable, when in fact they belong to a particular system of truth. This form of hocus-pocus recurs in contemporary history. Indeed, the scheme of the information society arose during the Cold War as an alternative to the two conflicting systems embodied by the superpowers, at the same time as the 'end of ideology' thesis.

The notion of the information society took formal shape in the wake of the invention of artificial intelligence machines during the Second World War. It became a standard reference in academic, political and economic circles from the 1960s. The manufacture of a world of images related to the 'information age' continued apace throughout the following decade. The true geopolitical meaning of the neologisms created at the time

to designate the new society would not come to light until the eve of the third millennium, with the proclamation of what is usually called the ‘information revolution’ and the arrival of the Internet as the new public-access network.

The second half of the twentieth century has indeed witnessed the creation of belief in the miraculous power of information technology, but this should not obscure the long view of its development. As evidence, we might point to the early utopian yearning for a universal language, long before computer language gave concrete expression to it. As hope in the possibility of determining the classifying principles of a world language grew, the pursuit of the Holy Grail reappeared in the form of the ‘Library of Babel’, as large as the universe itself, encompassing all of human thought and storing all possible books – an important theme in the work of Jorge Luis Borges.

The stakes of the new digital universe are too multiform and interdisciplinary to be left to technological determinism alone. They concern a multiplicity of social, political and economic actors. This archaeology of the ‘information age’ is thus, at the same time, an invitation to rethink the complexities and contradictions involved in the way information and communication technologies are appropriated by each society, in a world economy containing radical inequalities and conflicts of interest.

