Abstract The paper questions the ability of current university systems to respond appropriately to the complex demands of an Information Economy. It argues that new relationships between creative subjects and technology require new thinking about the nature and purpose of universities per se. In particular, attention is drawn to the growing involvement of the private sector in higher education. It is argued that it may not be appropriate to think of the ‘university of the future’ in terms of current public sector and quasi public sector institutions, but rather in terms of an emporium, based on an international trade in educational services, and with the ‘University’ as we now understand it occupying the functions of licensing, quality assurance and cultural custodianship.

Keywords Convergence · Cultural industries · Digital arts · E-learning · Universities

1. Introduction

If the industrial age was enabled through human control of mechanical (and chemical) energy, the enabling factor in the post-industrial ‘Information Age’ will be the control of what might be called ‘Information Energy’. For the first time in our history, society must maintain itself through the mass deployment of human intelligence, rather than by the direction of the labour of the many by a small and privileged minority of thinkers. The implications for education are both radical and dramatic. The ultimate resource in the Information Society, as in any other society, is human ingenuity, creativity and wisdom. The paradox of the new era will be to exploit this resource without simultaneously destroying it.

It is part of the conventional wisdom of our times that we live in an age of technological convergence. This world-picture attaches great significance to the coming together of the technologies of computing, broadcasting and mass media, and telecommunications (see Maherzi, 1997). This ‘convergence’ is
expected both to transform core practices in all these domains and to enable the rapid evolution of a wide range of new practices.

The potential of convergence has been understood for a very long time. Garibaldo (1999: 7) points out that the idea can be traced back to Norbert Wiener in the 1940s (see also Naughton, 1999: 56–76). Leaving aside the insights of the occasional academic genius, the technological convergences which are now bringing the Information Society to fruition have been apparent for some years now to serious commercial enterprises. Thus, in his McTaggart Lecture to the 1989 Edinburgh Television Festival, Rupert Murdoch predicted that the television set of the future will be in reality a telecomputer linked by fibre optic cable to a global cornucopia of programmes and nearly infinite libraries of data, education and entertainment. All with full interactivity.

These … will revolutionise the way we are educated, the way we work and the way we relax …

Progress towards this ideal has, of course, been rather slower during the intervening decade than Murdoch (or his technical wizards) seems to have imagined. But the recent commercial colonisation of the Internet and the almost overnight shifts in its underlying ethos from ‘hippy commune’ to corporate Klondike should alert us to the rate and the extent of change once it does actually begin to happen. We are faced by serious articulate global agendas. We cannot afford to be out-thought or outflanked by them.

Fortunately from our point of view, the transition from an economy based on design, development, manufacture and consumption of physical objects to one based on a complex hybrid of real and ‘virtual’ trade is still in its infancy. Indeed, as Francesco Garibaldo (1999: 7) points out, the specific details predicted for ‘la grande convergencia’ have yet to materialise: and may fail to do so. It is also worth remembering that even in the USA the penetration of online technologies is very far indeed from being complete. There are already disturbing signs that major sectors of the US population may be effectively excluded from participation in the Information Society (US Department of Commerce, 1999\(^1\)). In fact, this may extend beyond the borders of the USA (Denny, 1999\(^2\)):

The typical Internet user worldwide is male, under 35 years old, with a university education and a high income, urban based and English speaking – a member of a very elite minority …

The network society is creating parallel communications systems, one for those with income, education and – literally – connections, giving plentiful information at low cost and high speed; the other for those without connections, blocked by barriers of time, cost and uncertainty …

Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence for us to accept that Maherzi’s schematic of the convergence process (Maherzi, 1997: 34) is broadly descriptive of something real, happening today. There is also widespread agreement that our response to and use of convergence could change all our lives for good or ill in the very near future. Taking only the positive view, it is quite conceivable that people throughout the world could be freed from the necessity of drudgery and given opportunities for imaginative thinking and enabled to participate as both

\(^1\)This study, ‘Falling through the net’, is one of the best and most comprehensive to have been undertaken in recent years.

\(^2\)Newspaper article referring to an unspecified ‘UN Report, published this morning’.