GENERAL EDITOR'S FOREWORD

V olume 28, Number 3 represents something of a new departure for *The Economic and Social Review*. Not only are all the papers in this number "sociological" — understanding that term in a fairly inclusive sense — but they are also all concerned with the same broad topic, the idea of the "information society". As social editor I very much welcome the opportunity the *ESR* afforded me of giving a platform to papers discussing this topic, which as the editors note below has tended to be relatively neglected by social scientists in Ireland, despite the critical importance of information technology in Irish industrial development. I hope readers will enjoy, as I did, the unexpected perspectives on many aspects of Irish society which an interest in new information and communication technologies can generate.

I would like to thank the two guest editors, James Wickham and Paschal Preston, for all their efficient work in translating the key debates from the conference room to the printed page. Readers' responses to the idea of occasionally devoting a full issue of the *Review* to an integated (in terms of topic and/or discipline) theme in this way are welcome.

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EDITORIAL

T his special issue of *The Economic and Social Review* presents a selection of papers from the conference *Ireland, Europe and the Global Information Society* held in Dublin in Spring 1997.

The background to this conference were the many claims concerning the changing role of the *information "society"* or the *"information economy"* associated with the diffusion and application of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). These issues have been highlighted in many recent European Commission and national government reports. For example, the EC's *Bangemann Report* in 1994 highlighted the emergence of

an information society and the wider implications of new ICTs for many aspects of economic and social life throughout the EU. These issues were also emphasised in the Commission's White Paper "Growth Competitiveness, Employment", in the 1994 Green Paper on the audio-visual sector and in the action plan for "Europe's Way to the Information Society", published in 1995.

New ICT raises substantial policy issues, ranging from the changing socio-economic role and characteristics of the information industries, through new modes of regulation of the telecommunications and media sectors, to industrial, social and educational policy matters. Some of these issues were addressed in the first official Irish policy document on the Information Society, the report *Information Society Ireland: Strategy for Action* which was published about one month before this conference (ISSC, 1997).

The subtitle of the conference was *A Conference for Social Scientists*. The term "information *society*" is, by definition, not just about technology but about (alleged) social changes — changes in society, economics and politics. Social scientists are meant to study these topics, but the serious academic study of information society issues is still relatively under-developed. Consequently many of the claims made about the information society are not subjected to serious scrutiny.

This is particularly so in Ireland where there has been relatively little empirical research on the socio-economic and cultural factors shaping the adoption, diffusion and use of new ICTs. This raises a paradox of recent Irish history. The Republic's economic development has depended massively on high technology industry (first electronics manufacturing, now software and telecommunications based services). At the same time its intellectual culture — and so the intellectual resources available to theorise one's place in the world — has remained determinedly oriented towards history and literature. Certainly, a few heroic individuals (such as Dr Roy Johnston) have raised the question of science and Irish society. Furthermore, both the environmental movement and the new audio-visual industries discussed in this volume do seem to be stimulating a greater technological awareness amongst the younger generation of Irish intellectuals. Yet overall, the enormous expansion of technological education in recent decades has occurred in an intellectual vacuum. Unlike other small European countries such as Denmark and Norway, there is in Ireland very little by way of a tradition of the social study of science and technology. One simple indication: in a recent review of technology studies in Western Europe there is not a single mention of Ireland (Cronberg and Sørensen, 1996).

In this general intellectual context it is not surprising that in Ireland social scientific research on information society issues is carried out by individuals isolated in different institutions and in different disciplines. In

fact the conference call revealed that quite a wide range of work exists, but that research networks are so under-developed that scholars are often more likely to interact with colleagues abroad than in Ireland. The first aim of the conference was to challenge this situation. By bringing together Irish social scientists with an interest in the "information society", we hoped to stimulate the exchange of ideas and facilitate intellectual networking.

As the *Information Society Ireland* report made clear, the limited information society policy debate in Ireland often ignores initiatives taken by both the European Union and other European countries. Thus *Information Society Ireland* pays little attention to the innovative Danish national policy discussed in this volume. The European Commission's Green Paper *Living and Working in the Information Society* was instigated by an Irish Commissioner, Mr Padraig Flynn, and released at a Colloquium in Dublin Castle during the Irish Presidency of the Union in late 1996. Equally, European Union research funds are central to Irish research in information technology. Yet *Information Society Ireland* makes no mention of these EU initiatives. Consequently, the second aim of our conference was to bring Irish researchers together with well-known scholars in the area from the USA, Britain and Europe. We hoped to explore with them the policy alternatives which the Irish information society debate so often ignores.

The contributions in this volume are revised versions of a selection of the papers presented to the conference in two days of plenary and workshop sessions.[1] As editors and conference organisers we would have welcomed more focused empirical research on information society issues. This lack probably reflects the paucity of national funding for socio-economic research in Ireland: academics write abstract "critiques" rather than carry out substantial (and more time-consuming) research. Nonetheless, the papers published here do point to the prospects and possibilities for developing social science research in Ireland on the implications of new ICTs and "information society" issues.

Our own separate papers raise some basic conceptual issues about the term "information society" as applied to contemporary Ireland. The paper by Christian Friis provides a detailed account and critique of the Danish national information society strategy — and a possible benchmark for Irish developments. The papers by Ellen Hazelkorn on the one hand and Brian Trench and Susan O'Donnell on the other, report research on two very different aspects of the Irish situation. All these papers have been refereed in accordance with the *The Economic and Social Review*'s normal editorial

1. Copies of other papers presented at the conference, together with the agenda and list of speakers, can be accessed at this World Wide Web address: http://www.dcu.ie/~comms/ppreston/ preston.htm.

Commission's *Bangemann Report* and the *Conclusions of G-7 Summit* "Information Society Conference".

As a result, the already vast and rapidly growing literature about information superhighways, national and global information infrastructures, and future information societies provides a very unclear and confused picture as to precisely what these visionary conceptions entail, how they will be implemented, and what the real effects might be. Estimates of specific costs and benefits are rarely found; and substantive policy directions that are backed up by operational plans, actual resource allocations and budgets are almost non-existent. Much of the literature is either unsupported "blue sky" speculation about future technological and service possibilities, or promotional "hype" by the industries trying to sell the new technologies and potential future services.

It is widely claimed that the future information society will be characterised by increased diversity and greatly expanded individual opportunities. As never before, individuals will be able to control and shape their lives. Ironically, in order to achieve this enhanced state of individual freedom and diversity, the mainstream information society literature provides little or no room for diversity among countries in the direction and speed of adoption of the new information technologies and services. It is suggested that implementation of the vision should be as rapid as possible in the direction of a single abstract model of a future information society composed of individuals spending a major portion of their lives in front of a terminal (PC, television, advanced telephone, etc.) engaged in some form of electronic communication. Apparently the only difference among countries — large or small, developed or developing, wealthy or poor, technologically advanced or not, literate or not — is that some have much farther to go than others along the path to the information society wonderland. National policymakers of all countries are being invited to submit themselves to the grand technological determinist vision.

As with all new technology systems, information and communication technologies portend both significant potential benefits and serious potential problems. Some investments may bring enormously high economic and social returns; others may result in enormous waste or even catastrophic loss. Wherever there are "winners", there are also likely to be "losers" unless quite specific steps are taken to prevent such developments. Soundly based public policy direction can increase the possibilities for benefit, reduce the risks of loss and harm, and ensure that the implications for all sectors of society are considered as the steps to an information society are taken.

Clearly there will be as many "information societies" as there are societies. All countries should not try to charge down a single path emulating the per-

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procedures. However, in order to raise issues and stimulate debate, we have also included three invited contributions from conference participants. These include the opening piece by Bill Melody which, drawing on his considerable international experience of research on economic and social aspects of new ICTs, stresses the importance of distinctive national strategies. We believe that this issue of the *Review* will further the work of the conference and contribute to the development of social science discussion and research on the "information society" in Ireland.

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