

A Theory for Knowing in the Network Society: Connectivism

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ABSTRACT

Rapid changes and developments in the information and communication technologies have led to societal transformation and emergence of new social structures. In consequence of these, information has become a vital necessity for every individual in the 21st century, and the social structures have been shaped within the framework of processes for diffusion of information. Moreover, technological and societal changes gave rise to the changes in the nature of information (formation and diffusion) and in the process of having access to the information. In this study, changes in the nature of information and knowing are being discussed on the basis of the theories explaining societal change after the industrial revolution. The study will refer to the characteristics of the learning theories and theoretically assess Connectivism, which is suggested to be a theory for the contemporary era. This paper discusses Connectivism as an approach which explains learning within the social structures of the Network Society and the Post-Industrial Society based on the review of the theories.

Keywords: Connectivism, Network Society, Post-Industrial Society, Social Structures, Societal Change

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 20th century, media have been the structure, assuming the most effective role in the transformation of information to knowledge. In the last thirty years, many social, cultural and economic changes and developments have occurred in the world. The main reason of this versatile change is the increasingly acceleration of the developments in the information and communication technologies from 1970s. The technology utilised steam power, coal, steel and oil in the past, is now being restructured around microelectronics (Castells, 1996: 29-30).

As a result of the rapid developments of the information technologies, the form and

the characteristics of information sharing has changed locally and globally. In the 21st century, information has become vital necessity for the survival of the individuals. During the first quarter of 2000s, the development of information and communication technologies has become the most effective structure in the diffusion of information to the basis of the society and in the change of social order.

Marshall McLuhan foresees a global world system of interconnected people through the development of mass media utilising electronic technology. Similarly, among the theories trying to explain societal change after the industrial revolution, - as different from the technological determinism approach - Daniel Bell's Theory of Information Society and Manuel Castells'

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Theory of Network Society point that the new social order consists of the communication among the individuals connected to each other through technological means. In today's social structure in which the information is shared through networks and in which immediacy and capacity to stay current have gained importance, workforce has an increasing need for knowledge. However, learning theories of the past century fail to explain the most effective way of knowing in a social structure where learning and obtaining knowledge is realized through networks and the nature of information has changed.

In this study, the change in the nature of information and knowing is discussed within the framework of the theories explaining societal change after the industrial revolution. In this context, the first part of the study, McLuhan's theory of mass communication technologies, which emphasises the effect of information and communication technologies, is reviewed as it provides basis to the theories explaining societal change after the industrial revolution like Bell's Post Industrial Society and Castells' Network Society concepts.

In the second part of the study, propositions of the learning theories which emerged before the idea of Network Society, a new social structure in which information is being shared through networks will be reviewed. After the review of the learning theories founded in the past century, in the last part of the study, the Connectivism-based learning explanation in today's social structure is discussed.

LITERATURE

McLuhan (1964: 10) said that, the medium (technology) is the extension of the human body. Mankind has created the extensions of himself in many ways and these extensions have affected the relation among each other.

Based on the view that people create extensions of their selves by means of technology McLuhan put forward the slogan: *the medium is the message*, which claims that the

media became the extensions of our body as each new technology are in fact messages. McLuhan suggests that, the medium itself is more important than the content carried by the medium. For example, McLuhan argues that the electric light is pure information. As long as it is not used to express a word or name, it is a medium including no messages. The content of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print the content of the telegraph. McLuhan (1964: 10) suggests that a medium affects the society not by the content delivered through it, but by the *characteristics* of the medium itself.

In his book titled: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan (1964:7) states that after three thousand years of explosion, by means of mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. In the Mechanical Age, each process of the work was separate but in today's world, they are carried out through programing, and therefore, all of them have integrity and all these processes are united. Accordingly, instead of the unilateral information flow in the mechanical age, it is necessary that the organizations in the production process should have a bilateral and rapid information flow both within and among themselves in today's electronic age.

Bilateral information flow has become possible with the innovations of electronic age and with the technological development of the mass media, and it has enabled the interaction of various sub-systems within the social structure. McLuhan (1964) claims that electronic media are the extensions of our central nervous system and it is clear that specialization and division of labour in the mechanical age also existed in the electronic age. Individuals apart from each other due to the division of labour will be able to integrate as the mass media renders the world to a *Global Village*.

Within this framework, it is possible to say that McLuhan (cited from McLuhan 1964 by Oskay, 1982: 217) regards technological structures of mass media as the basic factor enabling the social development of the society.

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