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The Complex Imbrications of ICT and Society

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Chair:
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Panellists:
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ICT is deeply implicated in the shaping of the contemporary global socio-economic conditions. Research in the information systems field is often confronted with emerging new opportunities, risks and dilemmas at the work place, the business firm or the government, as well as the economy and society at large. Such changes are the object of study in the social sciences and we have a lot to learn from engaging in interdisciplinary debates. Already research in information systems has benefited from links with fields such as organizational theory or the sociology of technology, and has been informed by general theories of social change and globalization. Moreover, information systems research has also a lot to contribute to the development of theoretical perspectives on contemporary social change. The detailed knowledge on the processes of ICT innovation in changing organizations that the information systems field has developed offers important contributions to the understanding of contemporary socio-economic change.

At the core of this panel is Professor Sassen's presentation on ICT and unfolding social changes. Saskia Sassen is one of the most influential contemporary sociologists. Her views on the 'complex imbrications of technology and society' will then be discussed by two information systems scholars whose research has addressed ICT and contemporary social change questions, Claudio Ciborra and Lucas Introna.

Professor Sassen argues that understanding ICT from a sociological perspective requires avoiding a purely technological interpretation and recognizing the embeddedness and the variable outcomes of these technologies for different social orders. Moreover, new categories are needed to capture what is often conceived as contradictory, or mutually exclusive, attributes. These analytic issues can be examined in several substantive sociological arenas. One such case is the contradictory roles assumed by the Internet as a libertarian communication medium for the public at large and as the infrastructure of global capitalism – for example, in the financial industry, in e-commerce, etc. The perception of the Internet as a technology that overcomes the obstacles of distance, centralised control, and costs and thus allows unprecedented possibilities for public communication and free access to the vast resources of information of humanity at large is contradicted by the pragmatics of its current uses. Among the most significant ways the Internet comes to bear on the global society is as privately owned network infrastructure for economic activities, especially in the global financial markets, but also in firewalled industrial

networks. As a public communications infrastructure there is increasing concern in building security mechanisms that will create trust for e-commerce transactions. The question regarding the extent to which the Internet can or should be regulated receives increasingly more attention, but the concern tends to be on the relative power between the global market actors and national state in exercising control of the medium, its content, and its use. Is it still reasonable to think of the Internet as a force that strengthens the ideals of liberal democracy for free communication and public access to information?