Anytime, Anywhere Communication

A Societal/Cultural Perspective

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T he mass media are experiencing a chaos of change: technology, directions, utilization, communication messages, corporate relationships, fortunes, and public policy. Out of this turbulence, a new national, indeed international, order is emerging:

> A seamless high-speed network carrying voice, data, and video services to everyone...a pipeline to bring an expanded universe of information and entertainment into the home and the workplace.... The information and communication infrastructure of the future, based on fiber optics, will provide the principal conduits for global entertainment, commerce, information, and communication in the next century.[1]

Philosophically, systematically, and structurally, a new epistemology, an intrinsic redefinition of mass media communication, is being forged.

The New Order

The essence of this new order is the opposite of the "master-slave" architecture of the present system, the structure which has evolved since the beginning of broadcasting (a concept/term which is already becoming obsolete). This central, totalitarian-like system is characterized by a single source of information and images, distributed to many linked sites and receivers.

The new system will be more humane and less institutional, more open and less restrictive, democratic and individualistic, and of an interactive architecture. The implications of this new paradigm are anticipated eagerly by its enthusiastic supporters. The political consequences are particularly seductive. Mitch Kapor alludes to a realization of the Jeffersonian dream, a politic exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community.[2]

And one could add that it gives powerful leverage to a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people." The *people* would be able to interact with the processes that affect their lives, not remotely, not quadrennially (or biennially), not merely by marking a ballot, but by dynamic communication processes. Indeed, they did, as interactive Websites became a standard form of political communication in the 1996 presidential election.

The leverage works for the private interest as well as the public. Information technology will level the playing fields. As we see in corporate restructuring—really a metamorphosing into virtual enterprises— the pyramidal hierarchy flattens into heterarchies, "systems," as George Gilder tell us, "in which each individual rules his own domain...a society of equals...."[3] Authority, then, encased in the nature and structure of institutions—say, TV networks—slips from the pyramidal tip "onto the desktops of individual entrepreneurs and engineers."[4]
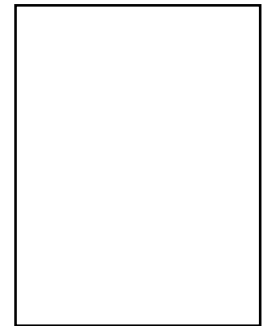
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This is corporate democracy as well as political liberty. Ray Smith stated the case for his company, Bell Atlantic, when he said the new paradigm represents " '1000 Points of Light' of an entrepreneurial culture."[5] And for the virtual enterprise that is organized in this configuration, it allows "a more democratic corporate structure as levels of management disappear that function only to oversee others and pass along orders."[6]

That's for the corporation! What about the body politic?

It will be the realization of l8th century enlightenment, the philosophical underpinnings of political democracy, or what Howard Rheingold calls "a living web of citizen-to-citizen communication—the public sphere."[7] And in this public sphere, there will be more gates than gatekeepers. Gone is the need for selecting from a few channels and managing scarce frequencies over which to broadcast. The driving concept is not scarcity, but abundance. According to Peter Huber, in a prophetic essay adapted from his book *1994 and After*, the elimination of scarcity obviates the need for regulation. Or, abundance means room for all comers:

> ...room enough for every sight and sound, every thought and expression that any human mind will ever wish to communicate. It will make possible a wildness of spirit, where young minds can wander in adventurous, irresponsible, ungenteel ways. It will contain not innocence but a sort of naive gaiety, a buoyant, carefree feeling, filled with confidence in the future and an unquenchable sense of freedom and opportunity.... It will bring about the greatest liberation in the most important marketplace of all, the marketplace of ideas.[8]

Thus, soon, the millennium is the symbolic, if not the real benchmark—the 20th century electronic, authoritarian model will be transformed into a mosaic of individual, interactive, optonic channels, providing new ways for people to relate to each

other, their communities, the larger society, and the world (the global village). The new system will effect new understanding of those relationships. Our base of knowledge about ourselves and our societal and cultural institutions will be enlarged and become more diverse.

At least, it could; but also...

> [W]e could wind up with networks that have the principal effect of fostering addiction to a new generation of electronic narcotics (glitzy, interactive multimedia successors to Nintendo and MTV), their principal themes revolving around instant gratification through sex, violence, or sexual violence. Their uses and content determined by megacorporations pushing mindless consumption of things we don't need or that aren't good for us.[9]

And, above all, we will be forced to choose, to make decisions about the information and services available to us. And therein lies the problem!

The Demise of the Global Village

It is the availability of a multiplicity of channels that puts a glitch into the picture-perfect "brave new world" of the media communication system; "500 channels" is the rhetoric for the multi-channel universe. In reality, the number of channels is unlimited—and irrelevant. Anyone will be able to connect with whatever they want, whenever they want. There will be a single line—maybe, two, telephone and cable—entering the living environment, enabling the individual to conduct two-way communication of text, data, graphics, voice, and still and moving images, anywhere in the world.

One concern is the loss of the shared experience that the historical media system has provided. Marshall McLuhan's prophecy has come to pass: the world is a "global village," interconnected, to witness the events that bind people and nations, and to participate, as one world citizen, in the experiences that entertain, educate, arouse,

or, inspire, whether it is the Olympics in Atlanta, the deposition and execution of a dictator in Romania, the massacre of democracy in Tiananmen Square, the disintegration of "Challenger" in the space above, riot and revolution on the streets of Los Angeles and Moscow, or trailing the white Bronco on the L.A. freeways. As one of McLuhan's disciples, Tony Schwartz, reminds us, "we share a collective consciousness and a synchronous relation to each other"— McLuhan's "tribal society." While the new media communication system promises decentralization, individualism, and a break from passive viewing, it will end the global village as a dominant environment, and the tribal culture which it has helped to recreate in the modern world.

That culture bespeaks a commonality, a unity which derives from powerful bonding forces: a shared vision, shared values, a shared sense of security and comfort, much as America has provided the many ethnic groups a new home in the New World and coalesced into the melting pot which was our societal core.

Today's societal core is different. And the changes in the American media structure reflect a change in the social structure as well. In the era of post-modernism, the nature of our society is shifting. In part, this is a result of the technology which impacts our lives and institutions; in part, it is a consequence of our seeking to affect that technology to serve society's needs. America is processing from "the melting pot" of the early and mid-20th century to a multi-culturally diverse grouping of individual components and separate identities. As society loses its centralized structure, media become more segmented and diverse. The centrality of TV by professionals at networks is crumbling in the face of TV merging with other technologies—the computer, the VCR, the satellite, and fiber optics—to provide connections for video information to individual communities, sites, homes, and personal computers. We are confronted with the opportunity for teleconferencing, multi-channel cable systems, low-power TV to serve communities or neighborhoods,

Multiple System TV to serve smaller geographic units or housing projects, or a VCR hook-up to a monitor for meetings, interviews, or libraried information. Even the technology reflects (or projects?) this restructuring: the dominance of the random, fragmentation of digital over the sequential, central analog.

More significantly, the redynamicizing and the extension of democracy that visionaries like Howard Rheingold and Mitch Kapor foresee, carry with it the seed of its own collapse. If we carry our communication "on the side of the highway,"[10] creating our own societies and neighborhoods, as columnist Bill Bishop forecasts, our communications lose their geographic character. Yes, they break down boundaries, cross state lines, and cross oceans. Our interests are, indeed, shared by a "virtual community" worldwide. But what about the communities in which we are physically, spatially, and temporally located? What about our "messy local problems, like roads and schools?"[11] What are the consequences for the "tribal society" when its members unbond to go their separate ways? What happens to tolerance and multicultural living when people become more self-centered as their communication becomes more self-directed and their media environment more self-contained? Narrow minds become narrower.

Indeed, one of the influences of the media is that it "teaches" us about others; for many, it is the only way to know about others—other races, ethnic groups, genders, religions—those different from us, whatever is outside of our own personal contacts with the world. We learn about professionals—lawyers, doctors, police, business executives. We learn about experiences like court room processes, conflict resolution, or life in a nuclear family, in a TV newsroom, or on a battlefield. Throughout the past two decades, an array of subcultures—from prosecuting attorneys, to gays, to women, to ethnic minorities, to Christians—have protested and petitioned the media and its advertisers about the consequences of the media depiction of their group to the society

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as a whole—and, ironically, of the failure of the media to depict them at all. In recent years, the pressure from various groups within the mix of our society has brought about changes in those stereotypical and inaccurate depictions. It has added to the body of "others" whom the media certifies because it includes them.

But, since the sense of "otherness" that many experience is mediated and achieved through images (where there is no reality connection), what are the consequences if society becomes more diverse while the communication system lures us to homogeneity? There is a tension, as the two forces draw away from one another—a need for more openness, but a tendency to closeness. A tear in the social fabric is inevitable, as we can see already occurring in what President Clinton has called "the coarsening of America." What is the consequence if these images are not part of the selection process of the all-controlling viewer?

The Implications for Education

The implications for education are evident. Much as Jefferson saw the interrelationship of education to political democracy, so the development of media democracy and the individualism within each media environment needs a commensurate media literacy to be developed through the education system. As we have learned how to gesture, to use voice, to incorporate language, to manipulate pencil, to touch keys, so now we must learn how to select buttons and switches to bring in and send out optonic media messages: not manual eye to hand dexterity, but how to differentiate, discriminate, and decide; to be active consumers of media messages.

In other words, our educational system needs to prepare us to function in a multi-choice society, much as today's schools prepare youth for citizenry, work, and to engage in societal and personal relationships.

To deal with our new-found power to choose, we need to acquire the skills of cultural decision making: to distinguish wants from needs. Our aesthetic sense

needs cultivation. We need to realize the values that are central to our society's being, to be aware of our heritage and the processes of our political system—in short, a humanistic education.

So, what's new? What's new is that while, in earlier times, confronted with the same learning goals, we could take it or leave it, actively engage the study, or mark time in passive absorption. Now, what is at stake is a culture, a politic, a communication that is receiver-centered, not sender-controlled. Knowledge is needed because we are active participants in the making of the culture, the politic, and the communication that binds us.

Media communication decisions were made for us by the TV networks (or publishers); the news was determined by producers of programs (or editors); the music we listened to was available because the DJ or program director decided it would be played. Walter Cronkite decided what made us informed and better citizens; Geraldo decided what titillated our prurient interests.

What Will We Choose?

Now, will *we* choose: Titillation or citizenship? Distraction or discourse? Conformity or dissent? Bigotry or tolerance? Do we "amuse ourselves to death," or do we confront the reality of our experience?

We need to learn what we *need* to know and be motivated to search it out. Schools still will prepare us for citizenship, but we will be citizens in a world of "info-tech," virtual communities, and institutions. In fact, we are already. We don't need to leave our media communication environment (formerly called "home"). We don't need to *go* to school. We don't need to *go* to work. We don't need to transport ourselves to accomplish the functions of daily living: financial transactions, shopping, or acquiring medical advice. We will be able to bring to our screens our daily newspaper, or that portion we wish to read at any given time. We could interconnect with the workings of government (attend a city council meeting, a national town meeting, or a congressional debate and

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participate in the discussion), play the lottery, view a lecture, observe the ski conditions at a favorite resort, monitor the schedule of an expected flight and purchase reservations, watch *Cheers* over and over again. There will be virtually no limit to the information possibilities with which we will be able to connect—only our ability to absorb.

And there will be much to absorb, perhaps an overabundance of information, which, as Aldous Huxley foresaw, could overcome us with irrelevancy, overloaded to either passively accept or be constantly distracted. The essential issue may not be freedom to choose or authoritarianism disallowing choice, but too much freedom which inhibits choice.

Conclusion

So, as we confront the new era of technology, the outcome is uncertain. It could be a *Brave New World* or *1984* realized. In actuality, however, both forecasts of "info-tech" societies are essentially the same, only packaged differently. In both societies, the human has resigned his/her humanity and action through decision, giving him/herself up to the tyranny of political despotism or the more gentle, yet still despotic, seduction of not having to choose. The former is based on pain; the latter, on pleasure. But it's all one, and still uncertain.

It will be an era which could strip the citizen of his/her humanity, sense of community, and global belonging. Or, it could manifest the Jeffersonian ideal, and empower the individual in an environment committed to "pluralism, diversity, and community." It depends on the engineering of the highway and the direction of the traffic.

What is clear is that it is not just technology that makes the new era uncertain, for it is not simply an era of technology. We are entering a new era of human communication, what has been described as "a social transformation of truly epic proportions."[12] We are experiencing a transformation—

societal, cultural, political, and economic—from an industrial age to the age of the "telecosm," the distribution of ideas and information through cyberspace. It will change the way the human person connects with him/herself, other persons, and his/her institutions and processes of living.

At present, the development of the new order of human interconnections is driven by nonhuman mechanistic forces of contemporary technology. Herbert Schiller describes it as a "control of our consciousness"[13] exercised by the mechanism of technology and economics. A humanistic system, commensurate with the technological and economic system structured on values as well as mechanics needs to be created—a philosophy, a hierarchy of priorities, and an epistemology. ᴎᴛᴏ

[1] M. Kapor, "Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?" *Wired* (July/August 1993): 53-59, 93.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[3] G. Gilder, *Life After Television* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992), p. 48.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[5] R. W. Smith, "Bell Atlantic's Virtual Work Force." *The Futurist*, Vol. 28 (March/April 1994): 13.
[6] *Ibid.*.
[7] H. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993), p. 13.
[8] P. W. Huber, "Screen Play," *Reason* (May 1993): 46.
[9] Kapor, "Where is the Digital Highway Really Heading?" p. 54.
[10] B. Bishop, "Info Highway Contains Potholes for Civic Life," *The Corvallis Gazette Times* (June 27, 1994): A7.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] H. I. Schiller, "Public Way or Private Road?" *The Nation,* Vol. 257 (July 12, 1993): 64.
[13] H. I. Schiller, "It's the Economy, Stupid," Presentation at the Developing an Equitable and Open Information Infrastructure Workshop, Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (April 1994).

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