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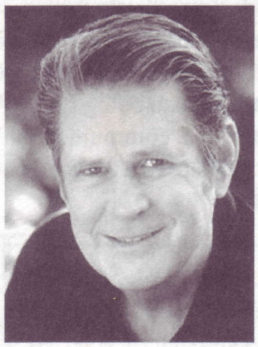

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Exclusion and communication in the information era

by Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojevic

Can the Net be communicative, in the widest sense of the word? Reflections on the role of new technologies in creating greater world harmony.

Many claim that with the advent of the web and internet, the future has arrived. The dream of an interconnected planet where physical labour becomes minimally important and knowledge creation becomes the source of value and wealth appears to be here. For cyber-enthusiasts, the new information and communication technologies increase our choices. Bill Gates believes "it will affect the world seismically, rocking us in the same way the discovery of the scientific method, the invention of printing, and the arrival of the Information Age did."[1] Author of *Being Digital*, Nicholas Negroponte writes that "while the politicians struggle with the baggage of history, a new generation is emerging from the digital landscape free of many of the old prejudices. These kids are released from the limitation of geographic proximity as the sole basis of friendship, collaboration, play, and neighbourhood. Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony."[2] Douglas Rushkoff[3] believes that computers are creating a generation gap between the "screenagers" and others, with screenagers having the most important skill of all—multi-tasking, choosing and doing many things at the same time (of course, forgetting that women have always had to do many things at the same time—taking care of the home and children as well as other types of formal and informal work). In any case, ICTs are creating a new world, an interactive, truly democratic world.

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For proponents, the new technologies reduce the power of Big business and Big State, creating a vast frontier for creative individuals to explore. "Cyberspace has the potential to be egalitarian, to bring everyone into a network arrangement. It has the capacity to create community; to provide untold opportunities for communication, exchange and keeping in touch."[4] Cybertechnologies will allow more interaction creating a global ecumene. They create wealth, indeed, a jump in wealth. The new technologies promise a transformational society where the future is always beckoning, a new discovery is yearly.[5]

Critics, however, argue it is not a communicative world that will transpire but a world of selves downloading their emotional confusion onto each other. Writes Zia Sardar, "Far from creating a community based on consensus, the information technologies could easily create states of alienated and atomised individuals, glued to their computer terminal, terrorising and being terrorised by all those whose values conflict with their own."[6]

Social scientist Kevin Robbins is not convinced that our lives will be meaningfully changed by the information revolution; rather, he believes the information and communication technology (ICT) hype merely replaces the classical opiate of religion and the modernist idea of progress. Indeed, for Robbins, the new technologies impoverish our imagination of alternative futures, particularly our geographic imagination. Focusing on distance, Robbins quoting Heidegger reminds us

that the end of distance is not the creation of nearness, of intimacy, of community. "We are content to live in a world of `uniform distancelessness,' that is, in an information space rather than a space of vivacity and experience."[7] There is the illusion of community—in which we can create virtual communities far and away but still treat badly our neighbours, partners and children.

But, writes Robbins, more than destroying the beauty of geography, techno-optimists such as Bill Gates, Nicholas Negroponte and others take away space for critical commentary (personalising the discourse by seeing critics as merely imbued with too much negativity), that is, for the creation of futures that are different. Critical commentary, however, is not merely of being pessimistic or optimistic but a matter of survival. As Paul Virilio writes: "I work in the `resistance' because there are now too many `collaborators' once again telling us about salvation through progress, and emancipation, about man (sic) being freed from all constraints."[8]

Earlier it was Comte's positive science that was to solve all the problems of religion, of difference and now with the end of the cold war, it is liberal democracy. Michael Tracey in his essay "Twilight: illusion and decline in the communication revolution" writes that it is not an accident that just at the precise moment "the planet is being constructed within the powerful, pervasive all consuming logic of the market, there is a second order language, a fairy tale ... that suggests in Utopian terms new possibilities, in particular, those presented by the new alchemies of `the Net.'" [9] What was once the cant of progress is now the cant of cyberspace—from love to democracy, from evil to poverty, all will be delivered, all will be redeemed—virtuality is "here".

Thus, while the internet helps connect many people (especially those in the North) and supplies much needed information (especially important in the South) it also represents a specific form of cultural violence. While it intends to create a global community of equals, making identification based on age, looks, race, (dis)ability, class or gender less relevant, it also, through promoting, enhancing and cementing current ways of communicating, silences billions of people.

Exclusion

Some of the excluded are non-English speaking nations, "irrelevant" nations and peoples, national, religious and ideological minorities, poor in poor countries and poor in rich countries, the majority of women, most old and disabled, and almost all children (although certainly not Western screenagers). In the 21st century most of the world's population will still be silenced. Reality will still be that of the strongest and most powerful. The new communication technologies will further enhance differences between poor and rich, between women and men, and between the world and its narrow part defined as "the West". And once poor, if the world and women catch up with the dominating forces, it will be on their terms and it will be in their language.

What is needed is the creation of a progressive information society. It would be a world system diverse in how it used knowledge to create better human conditions.

Women and Global Conversations

Before crying for our lost battle, we (women, non-English speaking people, not so technically-oriented individuals) can start thinking in terms of what exactly is silenced, and what can we do about it. How can we engage in global conversations while not losing our own identities, our own understanding of reality, our ways of speaking, or our own language? How can we use the Net without being used by it?

Women and others do not necessarily have to be disempowered. Women have proved they can speak the language of their "enemy" (as has the South of the North). After all, that is what women learn in schools, gather from books and from all the other print media: someone else's history, someone else's perspective and someone else's knowledge. Most feminists agree that in order to achieve this women had to either became bilingual (some successfully and many through the destructive process of othering their own selves) or to abandon their own traditional language. While it is not so clear what this traditional language might be, obvious differences between women's and men's ways of speaking are found to exist. Research, in general, shows that women ask questions while men make statements, that women talk about people and feelings while men talk about things, that women use more adjectives, more modal forms such as "perhaps", "sort of", "maybe", and more tag questions and attention beginners.

It is often stressed that language not only reflects but also perpetuates and contributes to gender inequality, and that through language hierarchy between genders is "routinely established and maintained". Feminist researchers find that men are more likely than women to control conversation while women do "support work" being some sort of "co-operative conversationalists" who express frequent concern for other participants in talk. The main solution for the transformation of current conversational division of labour between sexes cannot be only in the area of language because even the most "neutral" terms can always be appropriated by the dominant culture (like the meaning of the word "no" can be at time constructed to mean "maybe" or "wait a while"). Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King write: "Because linguistic meaning are, to a large extent, determined by the dominant culture's social values and attitudes, terms initially introduced to be non-sexist and neutral may lose their neutrality in the "mouths" of a sexist speech community and/or culture". The organisation of words and ideas into

knowledge was similarly done in a context of masculine power where women were made invisible, their existence either denied or distorted and their ways of knowing and issues of interest labelled irrelevant. While many feminist linguists are attempting to reinvent language and support women's emancipation through linguistic interventions, it is clear that this has to be done simultaneously with political, economic and cultural transformations in the areas of knowledge, language and the written word. The question is: can the Net become a site for this reinvention? Can women's and others' ways of knowing and speaking find space and voice on the Net? Can we escape the tool-centric approach of the new information and communication technologies to create a softer, listening future in which we co-evolve with nature, technology, the spirit, and the many civilizations that are humanity? Can the Net be communicative, in the widest sense of the word?

While it is obvious that women can and do use the most dominant language, it is also claimed that women would rather use "softer", more intuitive and face-to-face approaches. In a future controlled by women, oral tradition, body language, sounds, dreams, intuitive and psychic ways of communicating possibly would be equal with the written text, or at least not so much suppressed. Maybe, in such a society where women would participate at all levels and in all spheres it wouldn't be necessary to introduce "dressing Barbie" video games in order to make girls more interested in new computer technologies. Maybe new software would be more interactive and more user (women/other) friendly and maybe new communication technologies would look completely different. Maybe they would not be so individualised, and maybe, netweaving would be done in a context of community or friendly groups and not in a context of alienated individuals. Priorities would certainly be somewhere else: where the quality of life of majority of people would have the highest value.

Thus, there are, and can be even more so, progressive dimensions to the new technologies. As Fatma Aloo of the Tanzanian Media Women's Association

The Internet: Just for the rich, male elites?

Exclusivity in access to the Internet has led many to brand it as yet another technology that is available only to the wealthy and powerful elite in developing countries. The true picture is more complex however and despite lack of access the Internet is having a real impact.

One consistent criticism centres on the domination of Internet use by men. Access to information means access to power and most societies continue to exclude women from both. Estimates suggest that the global Internet gender ratio has remained static for a number of years, with around 63 per cent male users and 37 per cent female users. Less optimistic is the Association for Progressive Communications' claim that "male domination of computer networks" is as high as 95 per cent.

For many activists, the concept of "cyberspace" is critical to understanding the importance of the new technology for women. "The issue of space has always been central for women and is highly sensitive, particularly in Africa", argues Marie-Helene Mottin-Sylla of the Synergy, Gender and Development Programme of the NGO, ENDA Tiers Monde, in Senegal. "The freedom to have access to spaces other than the bedroom and the kitchen, and to fully and safely be able to act in other public spaces is key to women's full participation in the world's future. Unless African women can participate fully in cyberspace, they will face a new form of exclusion from society."

What the Internet means for women is reflected in other traditionally marginalised groups. Much of the South's Internet use, particularly in the earlier years (1993-1995) has been attributable to low-cost NGO networks. The earliest users and disseminators of Internet use and technology were academic and research organisations and organisations belonging to the Association of Progressive Communications (APC), such as GreenNet (London) and the Institute for Global Communications (San Francisco). These have actively supported or established networks in Asia, Africa and Latin America for years, and often provided countries with their only link to the Internet. Partly because of these initiatives, the Internet may have a greater social impact in developing countries than anywhere else.

These networks successfully targeted key actors in the development process - international NGOs and local civil society groups. APC currently claims "a consortium of 25 international member networks [providing] vital links of communication to over 50,000 NGOs, activists, educators, policy-makers and community leaders in 133 countries."

The early march stolen by community organisations and academics meant that some of the best informed organisations in developing countries were those campaigning for greater democracy, social equality and protection of the environment.

However, this is now changing as the Internet becomes more commercialised. The Internet sector in industrialised and developing countries alike is now highly competitive, profitable and likely to flourish with or without the help of the NGO or donor communities. Egypt, for example, now has more than 15 commercial Internet service providers, all of which have started since 1995. More than 100 Internet service providers have been established in sub-Saharan Africa in the past two years.

This is an excerpt from a report by Duncan Pruett with James Deane and Omar Sattaur for the Panos Institute London (http://www.oneworld.org/panos)

argues, "They are a necessary evil." Women and other marginalised groups must use and design them for their own empowerment or they will be further left out and behind. Without being part of the design (the "knowledge ware") and use process, they will further have to other themselves when they use the ICTs.

What is needed then is the creation of a progressive information society. It would be a world system that was diverse in how it viewed knowledge, appreciating the different ways gender and civilization order the real. It would not just be technical but emotional and spiritual as well and ultimately one that used knowledge to create better human conditions, to reduce *dukha* (suffering) and realise *moksa* (spiritual liberation from the bonds of action and reaction). The challenge then is not just to increase our ability to produce and understand information but to enhance the capacity of the deeper layers of mind, particularly in developing what in Tantric philosophy is called the *vijinanamaya kosa* (where knowledge of what is eternal and temporal is touched). Certainly, even though the web is less rigid than a library, it is not the liberating information technology some assume—spiritual energies and shamanistic dissenting spaces cannot enter. Of course, underlying an alternative view of an information society is a commitment to *prama* or a dynamic equilibrium wherein internal/external, "male/female" and spiritual/material are balanced.

From Global Conversations to a Gaia of Civilizations

We thus need to imagine and help create social spaces so the new technologies participate in and allow for the coming of a real global civilization, a prama, a gaia of cultures; one where there is deep multi-culturalism; where not just political representation and economic wealth are enhanced but the basis of civilization: the epistemologies of varied cultures, women and men, how they see self and other, flourish. To begin to realize this, we need to first critically examine the politics of information. We need to ask if the information we receive is true; if it is important, what its implications are, and the who is sending us the information. We also need to determine if we can engage in a conversation with the information sent—to question it, reveal its cultural/gendered context, to discern if the information allows for dialogue, for communication. We thus need to search for ways to transform information to communication (going far beyond the "interactivity" the web promises us), creating not a knowledge economy (which silences differences of wealth) but a communicative economy (where differences are explored, some unveiled, others left to be).

To do so, in addition to engaging critically with the assumptions beyond the information discourse, we also need to expand the limited rationalist discourse in which "information" resides. What we learn from other cultures such as the indigenous Indian Tantric is that the new electronic technologies are just one of the possible technologies creating world space. Indeed they just act at the most superficial materialistic levels. As important as cyberspace is microvita space[10] or the noosphere being created through our world imaginations, through our increasingly shared collective consciousness.

Certainly while the reality of the information era is one of exclusion, the potential for shared communication futures remains. To do so will require far more communication—sharing of meaning—than we have ever known and at far greater levels, in light of the many ways we know and learn from each other. While we have highlighted the structures of power that create colonization, we also need to acknowledge personal agency; we particularly need to be far more sensitive to how we project our individual and civilizational dark sides on others. The information era will further magnify our assumptions of self-innocence and other-as-guilty unless we begin to reveal our complicitness in soliloquy posing as conversation.

If information can be transformed to communication, the web then can perhaps participate in the historical decolonization process giving power to communities and individuals in the overall context of global human, economic, environmental and culturally negotiated universals.

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2. Ibid., 200. Quoted from Negroponte, Nicholas (1995) Being Digital, *Hodder and Stoughton, London, p. 230.*

3. Rushkoff, Douglas (1997) Children of Chaos, *HarperCollins, New York.*

4. Spender, Dale quoted in Carmel Shute (1996) 'Women With Byte' Australian Women's Book Review, *Vol. 8, No. 3, October, p. 9.*

5. Serageldin, Ismail (1996) 'Islam, Science and Values,' International Journal of Science and Technology, *Vol. 9, No. 2, Spring, pp. 100-114 compiles an impressive array of statistics. "Items in the Library of Congress are doubling every 14 years and, at the rate things are going, will soon be developing every 7 years. ...In the US, there are 55,000 trade books published annually. ...The gap of scientists and engineers in North and South is vast with 3800 per million in the US and 200 per million in the South. ... [Finally], currently a billion email messages pass between 35 million users, and the volume of traffic on the Internet is doubling every 10 months," 100-101. Of course, why anyone would want to count email messages is the key issue—as ridiculous would be to count the number of words said daily through talking, or perhaps even count the silence between words.*

6. Sardar, Zia (1996) 'The future of democracy and human rights,' Futures, *Vol. 28, No. 9, November, p. 847.*

7. Robbins, Kevin (1997) 'The new communications geography and the politics of optimism' in Danielle Cliche, ed. Cultural Ecology: the changing nature of communications, *International Institute of Communications, London, p. 208.*

8. Ibid., 210. Quoted from Virilio, Paul (1996) Cybermonde, La Politique du Pire *Textuel, Paris, p 78.*

9. Tracey, Michael, 'Twilight: illusion and decline in the communication revolution' in Danielle Cliche, ed. Cultural Ecology: the changing nature of communications, *International Institute of Communications, London, p. 50.*

10. For example, as mystic P.R. Sarkar reminds us that behind our wilful actions is the agency of microvita—the basic substance of existence, which is both mental and physical, mind and body. Microvita can be used by minds (the image of monks on the Himalayas sending out positive thoughts is the organising metaphor here, as is the Muslim prayer in unison throughout the world with direction and focus) to change the vibrational levels of humans, making them more sensitive to others, to nature and to the divine. And as Rupert Sheldrake and Elise Boulding remind, as images and beliefs of one diverse world become more common it will be easier to imagine one world and live as one world, as a blissful universal family. See Sheldrake, R. (1981) A New Science of Life, *Blong and Briggs, London. See Boulding, E. (1990)* Building a Global Civic Culture. *Syracuse University Press.*