

Transforming communication for future generations

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Sohail Inayatullah

The coming of the information era, ostensibly providing untold riches in bits of freedom for all, in fact limits the futures of others. It robs them of their future alternatives – it does not create a communicative vision of the future, a gaia of civilisations.

Excessive speed of change isolates already fragmented individuals. At the speech (speed) of light, man has neither goals, objectives or private identity. He is an item in the data bank – software only, easily forgotten – deeply resentful.

Marshal McLuhan

I pledge to act to the best of my ability to make the Earth a secure and hospitable home for present and future generations.

Earth Pledge, Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro

This book, through exploring the futures of communication, particularly transformative scenarios, offers alternative renderings of what it means to communicate, who should be included in the communicative community, and what is to be the purpose of communication.ⁱ Contributing authors approach the question of the futures of communication from outside the lenses of instrumental rationality.ⁱⁱ They move away from limited technocratic readings of the exchange of bits of data to the larger meanings we give to the data, and the worldviews that inform such interpretations. Technology is considered part of society, firmly embedded in the social, with power, class and gender as central variables. The ideals of the information society are eschewed for the vision of a gaia of civilisations, of authentic global communication.

Realising a vision of authentic global communication means creating communication processes that are inclusive, especially of the ways of knowing of ‘others’ in society – women, the non-West and most significantly, future generations; that is, those not yet born, who’s future we are currently creating (or destroying).

The issue of inclusion is not just one of representation in terms of the number and class of users of new information and communication technologies, although access is crucial, but a question of whether ‘other’ ways of knowing can be represented on the Net. Are women’s perspectives (often more social and collaborative) negated by the new technologies? Can silence – not in the postmodern sense of negative silence, but in the indigenous Tantric and Maori sense of positive silence – be a formative site for communication?

So what is being communicated and to whom? Communication, we argue, is not just the sharing of stories, but communicating to each other the possibilities of creating sustainable futures for future generations. Communication that is transformative essentially rejects modernity – capitalism – as unstable, as destructive of nature, as oppressive of men and women, and as a foreclosing of our futures. It is thus not an accident, writes Michael Tracey, that:

(just) as 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’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Communication thus is far more than simply sending or receiving information through politically neutral channels. At issue is not only who sends and receives but the social, gender and civilisational context embedded in this process.

Transformative communication is future generations oriented, inclusive of alternative ways of knowing, critical of technocracy, and based on direct and structural free flows of ideas and of the worldviews that are seeded in them.

While the above is ideal, however, more often than not communication is captured by information, is exclusive, ego-driven and used not for the protection of future generations but for the appropriation of other cultures – past, present and futures.

Who speaks?

The politics of who speaks, who is on the Net, and who's ways of knowing are privileged are pivotal guiding questions. In this book, Grace and Lennie, Jarva and Milojevic, in particular, focus on the gendered dimensions of the new technologies. While Grace and Lennie show the power of new technology in linking women so that they can converse about their daily lives and thus find escapeways out of the dreadful monotony of modernity, one woman on the Web-chat system set up by Grace and others, offered the following comment.

I like women's company but I hate it when they go back to their old traditional roles .. like it's an enormous frustration, because the chat about the daughters in law at the moment, it's interesting but ... I listen and think, this group of women need a huge dose of feminist theory... I have to zip my lip up a few billions time ... I'm very select about what I'd say.

This is also Finnish researcher Jarva's essential concern: can women use the new technologies to create networks to break out of traditional roles, or will conversations remain structured by the past, by traditional gender roles?

While the woman in the example above remains silent because of the group's lack of critical approach to gender and power, Milojevic believes that the Net, and the news media system it is part of, silences billions:

It is my belief that the new communication technologies will further enhance differences between poor and rich, between women and men, and between the world and that narrow part defined as 'the West'.

While Milojevic does accept some of the liberating aspects of the new information and communication technologies, she also reminds us of real-politik, of the power of nation-states and global media groups. 'If the world, and women, catch up with the dominating forces, it will be on the terms and in the language (techocracy, English, and male language) of that dominating force.'

Perhaps the most likely scenario in the long run is one where technocracy wins utterly and totally. Information technologies will replace god, clones will replace us, and our souls will be downloaded so that we can live eternally. And what will we do when that is done, with the climax of history being the end of nature? Nothing. Painfully smile and dream of when connection, being connected, meant more than a speedy modem.

The Information Era

The claims for the future of the information era are huge – decentralisation, information at our finger tips, personal computers for all ... '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.' Or in the words of Bill Gates: 'it will affect the world seismically, rocking us in the same way the scientific methods ... did.' And, according to Nicholas Negroponte, 'Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people together.' While the fall out from the battering of .com stocks throughout the world has dampened some of the hyperbole, the myth behind technology as the saviour of humanity remains. And yet strangely – or predictable enough given the accepted model - as the world soars through globalization, the United Nations Human Development Report tells us the following: the 225 richest individuals have a combined wealth of 2.5 billion people or 47% of the planet. The three richest individuals have a combined wealth of the 48 poorest nations. "According to the UN's Human Development Report (1998), in 1960, the income of the richest countries was 30 times greater than that of the world's poorest countries. By 1995 this income disparity had increased to 84 times. In over 70 countries, per capita income is lower today than it was 20 years ago. And according to World Bank sources in 1999, almost three billion people - half the world's population, live on less than two dollars a day."^{iv} And: "People in Europe and North America spend \$37 billion a year on pet food, perfumes and cosmetics, a figure which would provide basic education, water and sanitation, health and nutrition for all those deprived."^v

While the world sinks into deep structural inequalities, it is hard to believe that digital technology will create a new truly democratic world. We have heard such claims before; indeed, the history of utopias is the graveyard of such claims. Ashis Nandy's warning is instructive. We must remember that yesterday's utopias, unless resisted, can become tomorrow's nightmares.^{vi} The end of

history means the end of conversation, the end of negotiating reality, ultimately eliminating those who are not quite perfect, those outside of technocracy. Critic Kevin Robbins argues that not only are claims for the new ICTs similar to the classical opiate of religion or the modernist idea of progress, they impoverish our futures as well. This is so not only at the economic level where ICT adoption has yet to show productivity increases (leisure certainly hasn't increased) but at the deeper level where the future becomes technocratised. The future is so framed that even criticising new technologies forces one into a luddite position where the only possible future is technology led.

Which scenario?

It is the grand task of identifying alternative futures that Tony Stevenson seeks to address. He writes that two scenarios are possible. They are: an information society with the industrialised commodification of information in a technological *cybermarket*, a global *cyberfantasy* video game, or a communicative society where the Net empowers collaborative community development, human creativity and well-being. In this latter society, capitalism itself begins to break down, as, according to Hazel Henderson,^{vii} new ICTs with their computational size and speed may help create an economics of abundance, wherein a grand *cybermarket* of bartering occurs – economies becoming demonetised, and instead of goods and services being cannibalised by the financial-speculative economy, they become revitalised by the information economy. Instead of middle-men profiting from incomplete information, the web allows for real-time information with real-time access to the small and large. This leads to the transformation of capitalism since buying low and selling high based on privileged information disappears.

But what of power, and tribal historical structures? Can ICTs really transform deep hierarchical structures? Rakesh Kapoor sees the most likely emerging future as that of the rise and rule of the techno-brahmins. In his scenario, most nations have secular, formally democratic governments guided and controlled by the techno-bra(hm)ins. Dissent is made official through the electoral party system and through giving the underclass consultative status. The system while appearing to be malleable, in fact, is almost impossible to change.

However, Kapoor does imagine an alternative scenario of global partnerships where social development, global ethics and sustainability form the dominant paradigm. In this scenario there is a genuine shift from ethnocentrism to dialogue across cultures, toward a *gaia* of civilisations, a communicative vision of interpenetrating processes – cosmology exchange. Power in this latter scenario comes to be more widely shared and authentic meritocracy emerges.

Thus it is not merely technology nor software but their embedding in culture, gender, civilisation and history that is far more crucial. As Stevenson writes: 'the society which decides to focus on cultural and social infrastructure as opportunities for commercial and collaborative community development will distinguish itself from the many others which are still competitively rushing toward some technology-first option.' However, it is technocracy that dazzles, with policy makers forgetting about the society in which it is created and the worldview and metaphors that write it.

Telephones and orality

It is this point that Levi Obijiofor makes. In his assessment of the future of technology for Africa, he comes to the startling conclusion that it is the telephone and not more advanced ICTs that offers the brightest hope, since it best fits traditional African culture. The telephone with its focus on orality best meets and can further sustain the four crucial institutions in Africa: family, villages, markets and age-grades (peer groups). Whether or not the telephone is indeed the future, the key point is that Africa must match new technologies with sociocultural practices. 'Those [practices] that possess the potential to cause social dislocation will be rejected while those that fit into the culture... will be adopted.'

Obijiofor reminds us that when ICTs are implanted in Africa, they are most often done so without concern for servicing, without understanding the existing hierarchical social relations. The computer will go to the director who will have it displayed for prestige (for fetish purposes) and not for use, while the teacher or educator will merely have a blackboard to write a diagram as to how email is supposed to work. In that context, arguing that new communication technologies will allow Africa to leapfrog industrialism to post-industrialism seems trite. Again, such an argument assumes that technology is outside society, and that communication is primarily instrumental, transparent to oneself and others; a matter of merely stating what one wants or desires. It ignores, as Milojevic also notes, the many levels of meaning embedded in any utterance and the historical structures of power, the grander epistemes that frame meaning.

What is currently needed, then, is not more personal computers, but a debate on the role of communication technologies in Africa. Without such a debate, there will be a further imposition of commercial interests by multinational manufacturers. Africa, after all, has been 'wired' many times before – colonialism and globalisation most recently – with disastrous results each time.

Empowerment through conversation

Agreeing with Obijiofor's call for culturally appropriate communication, Frances Parker and Rahmi Sofiarini argue that the most appropriate transformative sociocultural practice is conversation. Using the action learning model and building on research by Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh's Grameen Bank, they asked the following simple questions: 'What can be done to improve the conditions of the poor?' 'How can communication transform daily conditions?' This framework helped transform the real-life conditions of landless women on Lombok Island in Indonesia.

The success of the cooperatives that were formed was partly about breaking the hold of technocracy, of having top-down ready-made solutions and a grand plan:

We attribute this success to the process used, and particularly to the decision to go into the village with an open agenda, to be flexible, and to have conversations with village women to understand their lives and needs... It was crucial to work slowly and carefully, paying attention to detail, to always try to understand the situation, and to be responsive and flexible.

What this means in day-to-day terms is that they made and shared cakes with village women and had meetings at times that suited them. By creating a participatory process, women felt empowered, their self-esteem was enhanced and the vicious cycle of poverty began to break down. Village headmen and others who resisted this process, and may have sabotaged it, were brought into the action learning process by giving them credit for it – everyone claimed and received credit. It was authentically participatory, creating an expanded communicative community for everyone's future generations.

Which future do we want?

The politics of empowerment, of creating a sustainable world for future generations, are crucial to this discussion. And the question of politics cannot be left to the pre-packaged future. Indeed, writes Richard Neville, the future is for rent at the video store – 'the landscape throbs with cyborgs and psychopaths, jet motorbikes and aerial taxis, mad monks and malevolent black holes, oozing gore and adrenalin' – but, he asks, is this the future we want?

Part of the problem is that the future in itself has become colonised, commodified. One way out is future generations thinking.^{viii} This approach to thinking about the future moves the future away from prediction – of banal trend analysis, of cliched technological forecasts of the latest mobile phone or car – to the needs and rights of future generations, of our children's children.

While the future is given to us as declared, we can critically uncover the future, we can contest the future. Instead of globalisation as our given future – the victory of capital over labor and the environment – perhaps, as Neville suggests, true pricing, the incorporation in the balance sheet of social and environmental costs, should be the likely future; a future where the rights of future generations matter.

The solution, however, is not merely the simple recipe futurists often give: positive visions of the future. For example, John Kennedy's vision of a man on the moon ultimately further technocratised the state, making science a reason for the state.^{ix} This victory of the future, while exciting for space travel, has created a world where engineers and managers believe that the future can be engineered, that the problem of poverty is technical in nature, instead of being a crisis of the spirit, a loss of political will, a cycle of self-defeat, and essentially about powerlessness, about fear, about the deadening realisation that one's children will not have a better life.

Technocracy, food and future generations

It is this fear of the future that informs Mary Mahoney. In her essay, she questions the politics of our current food system, wherein food has become technocratised. Its source, its relationship to the environment, to production and distribution channels have been lost sight of (who gets the profit) – food has become merely something that magically appears on our shopping cart. But it does not need to be that way. She offers us alternative futures to begin to open up spaces for transformation. Her preferred future is that of transformation: a return to personal responsibility; permaculture, and an acceptance of diversity and difference.

Caroline Smith is more specific in her advice as to a way out of this current predicament: permaculture, not just as an agricultural strategy but as a way to connect with land, with others, as a way to give meaning to life. She provides us with the following comment from a convert. 'Every morning when I get out of bed I know what I'm doing and what I'm working towards. . . I'm always moving forward, confident.' It is this *connection* that she believes does not come from the Internet. The Net can help with information flows, but communication is different – it respiritualises self and other. Indeed, Zia Sardar argues that the Net is a Western distraction from its inhumanity and spiritual poverty.^x After all, it is a 'net'

used for capturing and enslaving others and not a link with others creating personal and social transformation.

Sustainability is thus the operating model, an expression of concern for future generations. Alan Fricker writes of his own transformation working as research scientist for the mineral industry where he states that: 'I had a certain discomfiture in the mid-1960s about working for a company that discharged 3 million tonnes daily of mill tailings.' And: 'Two thirds of those alkaline and noxious residues were deposited on river banks and the fertile plains that the indigenous people derived their living from.' Fricker asks, 'how can intelligent, educated, skillful and powerful people do this to an unsuspecting community?' The answer is that the very nature of capitalism, and of technocracy, creates policies that steals the future from future generations. In his own journey, Fricker believes that now that he is in his 60s, his emotional self is maturing, but hopes future generations will not have to waste their lives in confusing real education (and understanding) with institutional training.

Creating other systems and spaces

Creating a sustainable future means transforming the current world economy away from capitalism and towards other systems. Doing so means engaging in a debate not on efficiency but on ethics, what ought we to do. Doing so means seeing our long term past linked to our long term future. For Geoff Holland this is the active timescape, a framework that is broader than our own generation. Moving from short term passive timescape to longer term temporalities, however, is not something we can wait for. Indeed, Jérôme Bindé asks: can we continue to discuss our futures without focusing on our responsibility to the future, without entertaining the precautionary principle? We must urgently rehabilitate the long term and declare our solidarity with future generations, he writes, echoing the words of Federico Mayor.

The future should not be modernist with all 'old' things to be destroyed but part of a link with ancestors and 'futurecestors', as Paul Wildman and Bilyana Blomely argue in their chapter. They offer a method in which to rescue the future. It is a process using the metaphor of the *Magani* whirlpool, from Torres Strait Islander tradition, which they believe can assist in reconciling Western and indigenous tradition, indeed, in reconciling modern and traditional.

The process of communication thus is a central way out – conversation both as methodology and as solution. It is this imagination of conversation – of deep participatory democracy – that is central to the creation of a third space of social and political activity outside the sphere of the prince (the state) and of the merchant (capital). The Net does aid intellectual/activists in the development of this global civil society. It helps them link quicker, and with fewer resources. Information about state oppression and multinational abuse can be relayed quickly to concerned citizens throughout the world. The power of international news media and the power of capital can be potentially balanced.^{xi}

This third space contests the private/public discourse and creates instead a configuration that is more local/community and global/planetary. The role of the intellectual/activist expands from public/national space to community/global space. The intellectual/activist becomes networked, not in the sense of handing out business cards, but in the sense of engaging in transformative conversations and actions throughout the world, and within her/his local community (including family).

Of course, even while the Net helps create this third space, conversation on the Net is still framed in larger modernist organisational terms. It is often an escape – after all it is still a screen one is looking at, the presence of the other is not there. Communication at the level of the body and thus spirit, in the sense of Sarkar's idea of *microvita*, or vibration, is missing.^{xii} Moreover, as Stevenson points out, while the Net is creating a new social body, it is not yet interactive in ways that can create global conversations that acknowledge our grand differences, although chat groups, message groups, have opened up possibilities that did not exist before.

How then can we transform communication? First, it is understanding that there are levels of communication. Individuals and societies exist in different worlds, privileging different ways of knowing. Technologies are part of culture not outside it. Technologies can create new possibilities – as the Net has done – but to assume that technology will somehow transform evil or make the world instantly a better place ignores their social context and the capitalist logic of winners and losers. One key, then, is in the purpose of the communication. In this book, writers argue for communication for the sustainability of future generations; technology in the context of a postcapitalist civilisation where the other is not marginalised, but embraced; where global conversations assumes that the process is about honouring difference and creating equal spaces. Such a process is not merely a postmodern response – of inviting all the world's leaders, civilisations, and religions over for breakfast and writing a charter of difference – but very much part of creating a shared destiny, a shared ethics of the future.

Tony Judge asserts that most conversations are part of a global 'meetology':

A global conversation would not ... seek exclusively to move people from their places towards

the place of the communicator, the essence of present-day competitive communication in pursuit of a conceptual market-share. It would be more concerned with movement in other dimensions at the place of each communicator; some kind of transformative movement, rather than an amalgamative movement toward homogeneity of perspective. This is perhaps captured by the sense of being moved to a magical conversation.

Or from a poetic perspective:

A global conversation would perhaps be meaningful as verse-making together, in which associations resonate to define unforeseen wholes.

Ultimately it is about conversations that are sustainable: meaning cooperative, shared and concerned with future generations.

Creating a new future

Can it be done? We do not know. Certainly the new technologies can be part of the solution, but as Kapoor points out, they can equally make things much worse – the techno-brahmins. But perhaps instead we should envision an expanded communicative community, a *gaia* of civilisations, with worlds in *prama*, or dynamic or chaotic balance. While this is a grand term, in my imagination this world would have strong global institutions – a real world peace force,^{xiii} consisting of healers, therapists, counsellors and a rapid response force with big and nano-guns. Such a peace force would need both international rights tribunals (but regionalised in Africa, Asia, South America, the Pacific-Oceania), and a strong commitment to alternative culturally-appropriate dispute resolution, as Blomely advocates with the *Magani* whirlpools. It would be based on restorative justice, Bishop Tutu's South African model, where deep historical wrongs are righted through confession and through creating future healing relationships.

Such a world would have a clear and dynamic link between maximum and minimum wages and profits. The ratio could not be the current 225 individuals having the same wealth as 2.5 billion of the world population, but more of a 1:10 ratio. This existing deep inequity means that our collective wealth is not appropriately used. Intellectual and spiritual resources are largely wasted.

Thus, while global conversations that can transform our communication worlds are central, part of the debate must also be on what is non-negotiable. Globalism has yet to break the bonds of labor and knowledge hierarchy or of the nation-state system. States can mistreat their individuals since nation-state sovereignty remains a guiding dogma, but if our world is for all of our future generations then the behaviour of states toward their citizens cannot go unchallenged, not just through moral force, as international agencies are doing, but through other legal avenues as well. Part of the solution is the further porousness of the nation-state, seeing it as one of our identities, a weaker one, perhaps like where we work, a useful place but not the end all of life.

In addition, real globalisation, not just the globalisation of capital, is the globalisation of markets. What this means is the globalisation of labor, of unrestricted travel for individuals, and the globalisation of ideas. The latter involves not just the movement of ideas from Hollywood to the rest of the world – the Americanisation of all there is – but the global circulation of ideas, the seamless transport of paradigms through the noosphere.

Expanding the communicative community

But what is to be circulated? The solution offered in this book is a concern for future generations in terms of appreciation for them and empathy with them, as well as institutional implementation of their rights. Geoff Holland writes that it is this latter concept that is paramount; without alternative indicators, of measurements of quality of life, we continue to reinscribe the capitalist present-generations system (well not even that, since present generations are not doing that well either). Empirical indicators need to follow with our metaphors of a better world, he insists.

But as we do this we need to find a language to converse with future generations. Darren Schmidt offers the term pre-emanants for those not born, for those with whom we must converse. However, modernist, largely Western, communication theory, offers us little help in creating a framework for such talk. It is from non-Western approaches that have a place for conversations with those who do not physically exist that Schmidt draws theoretical inspiration. Citing Maori writer, Ramana Williams,^{xiv} Schmidt asserts that a theory of positive silence, where silence that has ontological depth – that is filled with possibilities and meanings, filled with the possibility of conversation with animate and inanimate – creates the framework for transformative communication with future generations. This positive silence essentially expands who can communicate.

It is a conversation that must be conducted silently, for pre-emanants have no voice and cannot hear. It is a conversation that does not use language to mutually create or promulgate a reality,

for no mutual reality can exist at this level of communication. . . They live in our lives, and we live in theirs, figuratively and transcendently. And it's time to talk. And Create.

Notes

ⁱ I wish to thank Susan Leggett for her considerable editorial assistance in the preparation of this introductory chapter.

ⁱⁱ Chapters were originally input into the World Futures Studies federation September 1997 Brisbane Conference titled, 'Global Conversations – What you and I can do for future generations', and to an invited seminar at the conference on communication technologies. They, of course, have been considerably revised since that meeting.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Tracy, 'Twilight: Illusion and Decline in the Communication Revolution', in Danielle Cliche (ed.), *Cultural Ecology: the Changing Nature of Communications*, London, International Institute of Communications, 1997, 50.

^{iv} Roar Bjornes, "Strategies to Eradicate Poverty: An Integral Approach To Development" in Sohail Inayatullah, theme editor, *Global Transformations and World Futures, Unesco Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems*. Oxford, EOLSS, 2001.

^v Adele Horin, "For Richer or Poorer," *Sydney Morning Herald* (12/9/1998), 25.

^{vi} Ashis Nandy, *Tradition, Tyranny and Utopias*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987.

^{vii} Hazel henderson, *Building a Win-Win World: Life Beyond Global Economic Warfare*, San Francisco, Better-Koehler Publishers, 1996.

^{viii} See, for example, Richard Slaughter and Allen Tough (eds.), Special Issue, Learning and Teaching about Future Generations, *Futures*, Vol 29, No 8, 1997. Futures generations thinking includes a commitment to the family; to sustainable social and economic practices; to an intergenerational approach balancing ancestors and future generations; a global focus; inclusion of all sentient beings; belief in the repeatability of time; and to a spiritual and collective view of choice and rationality. See, Sohail Inayatullah, 'Future Generations Thinking', *Futures*, Vol 29, No 8, 1997, 701-706.

^{ix} Ashis Nandy (ed.), *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity*, Tokyo, United Nations University, 1988.

^x Zia Sardar and Jerome Ravetz (eds.), *Cyberfutures*, London, Pluto, 1996.

^{xi} One recent example is that after the torture of Dr. Munawar Anees by the Malaysian government under Prime Minister Mahathir, while human rights activists were unable to secure his release, they could quickly publicize his case. A Web site was set up for him weeks after his arrest. It provided information about his case, and actions that could be taken. See: www.dranees.org. Dr. Anees eventually managed to escape Malaysia and now lives in the United States.

^{xii} P.R. Sarkar, *Microvita in a Nutshell*, Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1991. For more information, contact the Microvita Research Institute, Weisenauer Weg 4, 6500 Mainz 42, Germany.

^{xiii} See www.transcend.com – Johan Galtung's world peace initiative.

^{xiv} Ramana Williams, 'Reclaiming Silence', *New Renaissance*, Vol 8, No 2, 1998, 14-16 (www.ru.org). Also see: Ramana Williams, 'Beyond the dominant paradigm. Embracing the indigenous and the transcendental', *Futures*, Vol 30, No 2/3, 1998, 223-233. Special issue edited by Sohail Inayatullah and Tony Stevenson, Communication Futures.