

VITAL INFORMATION FOR SOCIAL SURVIVAL

by Caroline Nevejan and Patrice Riemens, Amsterdam, Calcutta

Chitrabani, the Institute and Society for Social Work & Communication is a chief Calcutta cultural institution in the field of the mass-media. It consist of a film-school, video centre, photographic collection and an extensive library. It also maintains a rural radio-station and gives courses in communication & social work.

This text was our contribution to Chitrabani's 25 Years' Jubilee.

www.chitrabani.com

(THERE ARE NO U-TURNS ON THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY)

If we should believe the mainstream social theorists, we have now fully entered the Age of Information. In the North, the so-called cold war is over and only one of the protagonist is left standing, its ideology having so ostentatiously triumphed, that even the end of history has been prophecized in some quarters. The "free market" and its concomitant doctrine of "market conformism", is ferreting out the last niches on Earth it did not already occupy. This "New World Order" is not only a universal economic regime, it also strives a total appropriation of discourses: King Dollar rules, while the minds are captivated, and held captive, by its "One Idea System" (Ignacio Ramonet) (1).

For many thinkers, nowadays frontier is electronic, be it in a political, military, financial, or even cultural sense. A new era of total, and instantaneous exposure to whatever kind of knowledge is being mirrored before us, and this information bonanza will be provided by, but will also almost exclusively be accessible through, new communication technologies. Spatial/vehicular metaphors about "information super-highways", "virtual town-halls", "digital cities", "tele-working", "on-line publications", "web-vertisements" and other activities and artifacts set in "Cyberspace" abound. Browsing through influential magazines like "Mediamatic" or "Wired", which are promptly relayed by mass-circulation media, one can be forgiven for thinking that "Cyberspace", i.e. the virtual environment induced by global computer links, is poised to supersede the real world before soon (2). "The Net" looks dangerously like the place to be...or not to be.

Welcome to a wired world! Or are we?

At the moment, two visions of this electronic future co-exist. The optimistic one envisages a world of "networked" cosmopolites, empowered by new technologies, availing of ever expanding knowledge while enjoying a new quality of life. The pessimistic view is more about masses of passive people, manipulated as citizens, abused as consumers, or simply excluded altogether from the realm which has no longer any purpose for them. We think that both viewpoints have something to speak for them, and that one should adopt a critical stance towards the former in order not to become a hapless victim of the latter. The most important question is: were does such a "wired" existence (3) leave the world we are accustomed to, and more important still, will continue to actually live in? Indeed there is a remarkable, and disturbing tendency, within the belief in the Information Age, to disregard and to depart from reality - yet never have the problems in the real world been so concrete and so pressing as they are now. Who could pretend that the fate of millions of refugees, the horrors of civil wars, the abject and enduring poverty and ill-health of unfathomable multitudes of human beings, could be alleviated by electronic means, not to speak of the countless instances of liberty, dignity and opportunity denied. But the avant-garde of the "electronic revolution" seems hardly interested to address these matters, either out of naivety about the new technologies' potential, or because it disingenuously wishes them away while promoting a machine-systems ruled world of their own design. (and cynically accepting social disruption on a grand scale in the process, witness most of the "cyberpunk" literature).

Vital Information for Social Survival.

Individuals, collectives, even whole societies, are subjected, in the "advanced" North as well as in the allegedly less advanced South, to a massive, if insidious, pressure to join in the networks, to get, as they say, "wired" - or to loose out and be left behind...in reality (4). The majority of the people - call them realists -, are, however, likely to prefer to live a worthwhile and meaningful existence, whether they are connected to the networks or not. Social survival in an ecologically sustainable environment has to take precedence over

the deployment of an ever increasing and ultimately all-encompassing net. Total connectivity, and the - not quite desinterested - inclination to encompass the whole of human experience in the new media must be resisted: you cannot give birth and raise children in the net, nor care for one's family or the old folks. Yet they can be of assistance in these tasks, though not in some kind of miraculous way. They should neither be viewed as fairies, nor as monsters, and above all, they should remain our servants and not our masters if we do not want to eke out a living in a world that may be increasingly wired but decreasingly ours. This in its turn, asks for a new economy of information.

The sad truth about the Information Age is that we are drowning in, rather than availing of, a sea of information. Many of us who have been living in the so-called information society (5) for twenty years now, are baffled, and feel even less cognizant than they were before. This is due to the progressive alteration information has undergone as it is passing through increasingly brisk communication channels: as a number of philosophers have noticed, a substantial loss of quality ensue from the media's ongoing victories against space and time (6). We have access to more information than ever, but it is devoid of context, lacking in human quality, carrying no commitment and unable to vehicle any in return. Because it partakes the virtual character of its carriers, it is information that is not physical, that has no deep sense to it. Hence the widespread feeling that we may be increasingly networked, but are less and less related.

The advantage is that we do no longer need to be shamans to be part of the "collective brain": modern communication techniques make the contact no longer a matter of spiritual enablement and skill, but has reduced it to a question of affordability. If you can pay your way, television, telephone and intercontinental airlines keep you in touch. (But over half of humankind, in 1995, has never dialed a phone number, nor has it ever seen a plane from the inside). The disadvantage, however, is the loss of knowledge that has been concomitant with the tremendous increase in the volume of information. Information is a matter of life and death for all organisms, but most of the information we are fed with nowadays do not support the complexity of experience that makes our life sustainable. We do continue to go about in a coherent manner that make sense within our private life and that of our immediate social surroundings, but the embodied knowledge that is represented by these activities tend to be ignored by the new media. This raises vexing questions about our future ability to sustain the historic accumulation of knowledge. Doubt is mounting already in the matter of the educational value of "net-info": too volatile, too superficial, too imponderous to impress and produce experience. Networked information hardly any longer gives a faithful representation of our existence, yet it tends to invade it, and even threatens it sometimes (7).

Amidst a plenty of data, we suffer an increasing dearth of vital information. Vital information that is essential to someone's existence within the context of her or his existence, and that is also defined by that existence. Vital information is dynamic, sustaining, uncensored, complex. It enhances and secures our fundamental rights. It is also thrilling, full of beauty, entertaining, or sobering, or to put it simply: true to life. (8) Hence, the first element of vital information is the recognition of context. It is determined by "me/us", "here" and "now". Networks and the information conveyed therein - whether this is carried by old or new media - are only at our service as long as it is we who do the steering. They enable us to weave and nurture those threads between people which form the foundation of our social survival. Good ideas, social initiatives, and popular movements generally see the light in many places at the same time. Electronic networks makes it now possible to get acquainted with them from the beginning. But the pace of propagation also accelerates to such an extent as to make the ripening of ideas and the development of a sense of solidarity and commitment very difficult. And taken by themselves, networks are flat and contentless because they are void of endurance and actual emotions.

Ubiquitous screens, omnipresent networks.

"Desert Shield", and then "Desert Storm" were the stage-names of the Gulf War, the first totally tele-guided war in history (when mainly by one side). But its true name, according to the French philosopher Paul Virilio, should have been "Desert Screen". We may indeed wonder how, and why the screen has become so omnipresent in our work and in our lives. And yet there is no life in it. While the instantaneity of communication has killed time, the (computer-) screen itself is swallowing all functions of space (Geert Lovink). It does so as the demultiplied locus - in so many offices, at so many homes - of the feverishly fast expanding interconnection of millions of ever more powerful, ever more versatile machines. To complicate matters further, this "cyberspace" lies also at the convergence of very powerful moneyed interests: information, that in the hackers' lore wants to be free, does not long remain so, and it won't come cheap

either! Seen in this light, the much-vaunted multimedia (8) revolution takes a alarmingly uniform, not to say monomaniac, hue - as befit its role as the principal servant of the one-idea-system. And then, just forget about the dire consequences foretold to those who do not want to join in the Information Revolution, that is to end up on the wrong side of a world divided between information haves and information have-nots. After such a revolution, there will be only information have-nots left.

An optimistic agenda for the future.

The denizens of Calcutta are rumored to uphold the principle that "life is struggle". They are not the only ones. In the realm of information and networks, just as in the more traditional aspects of social life, our autonomy and freedom will be of our own making, and it will not be (re)gained without effort. The problems we are facing are daunting but not insurmountable. "Sto Dyalatsh?" - Lenin's dictum (or was it perplexity?) - spring in mind. Yet coming to terms with these difficulties might well mainly be a question of right attitude. Not to be overwhelmed by technology, neither going for its hype, nor rejecting out of hand its very real advantages (10). But first and foremost, to retain the human dimension: to be creative, concerned, critical, and solidary. To go for true, personal links between and real commitment in favor of the people. In a sense that makes networking more about work, and less about nets. And as far as our ubiquitous computers are concerned, it is always good to remember "that the intelligence sits in front of the keyboard, and not behind the screen" (Stefen Wernery).

Chitrabani has embodied precisely these ideals for the past quarter of a century: we wish it all the strength, but also the pleasure, of serving on for many more years to come.

(Notes)

1. Editorial, Le Monde Diplomatique, January 1995. (French title: "La pensee unique")
2. The acronym IRW, "In the Real World" is, not surprisingly, a favorite expression among the "digerati" to describe the world...outside. "Reality is for the people without an Internet connection" (Derneval da Cunha, Brazilian "net personality")
3. The video artist David Garcia has rightly noted about the "wired culture" and its accessory "desire to be wired" that this particular metaphor is about electricity, not information.
4. ...where life apparently should remain, as of old, wretched, brutish and short (Eric Hobsbawm).
5. Successive conventions of hackers worldwide have repeatedly stressed that the "information society" is everything but the same as an informed society. And the latest "Ars Electronica" conference in Linz (Austria) carried the ominous (sub)title "The Myth of Information".
6. A phenomenon rather disingenuously denominated "real time".
7. Examples are provided by some current televised (American)"live-shows", or the newest installments of the "horror Science Fiction" genre. But to have no, or haphazard, exposure can be lethal as well, e.g. the plight of - or Somalia.
8. And one may add: true to death. That familiar phantom of the will to eternity is very much alive in cyberspace...
9. A more precise term may be "the media alliance system" (Mediaverbundsystem), as analyzed by Friedrich Kittler.
10. The Chiappas revolt in Mexico is a very traditional, rural based, resistance movement against the disruption and injustice caused by the "globalization" and the "free market". But the "Zappatistas" are heavily "on-line" and have gained total superiority over their mighty foes (Governments, World Bank, etc.) on the Internet - the "mother of all electronic networks".

about the authors:

Caroline Nevejan is cultural organizer and director of the Society for Old and New Media in Amsterdam (the Netherlands). Patrice Riemens is human geographer and "cultural activist".