

Are We More or Less Connected?

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Lately I have been thinking about what effect the Internet-being informed and having better access to information-has had in our lives.

The promise of a networked world was, and still is, that one can access and send information from anywhere in the world almost instantly: it is a promise of connectedness. The unspoken belief is that more connection will lead us to a "global village" [1] where we know more about our neighbors, although our neighborhood is the world. Better access to information is supposed to bring along more action and participation and is thus equated with 'good', something from which we can profit as a society, and thus should be extended to everyone. The creation of task forces on the digital divide is an example of this belief.

Better access to information is not a product of "new" information technologies. Old media, such as the telegraph and later the telephone and television were already a big step in this direction. However, the Internet clearly radicalized this process. Now everyone can be a producer, everyone can post his or her idiosyncratic view of the world, and, in principle [2], everyone else can access it.

The rise and popularity of the ecologist movement has also moved us closer to this 'unified', 'connected' direction. Increasingly, there seems to be a clear sense that the world is one single unit, and that we must think about it globally rather than locally [3]. We gradually come to terms with the understanding that our actions, on one side of the world, will affect the other (at least environmentally speaking).

The other day, while doing a web search on personal technologies I found out that a journal dealing with this subject is actually the "Journal of Personal Technologies and Ubiquitous Computing". This signals, that even in academia, well known for its difficulty to keep pace with the events of the 'outside' world, there seems to be an awareness that the distinction between an individual and his/her surroundings is blurring.

All this seems to indicate that we are indeed becoming more connected to others and to the environment.

Now, I wonder if this makes a difference. Do we feel more responsible for what happens far away as well to what happens close to home now that we know (or at least can potentially have access to) almost everything that happens in the world? [4] Are we empowered by these information networks?

Unfortunately, I don't think so. Despite the hopes for a more open and less hierarchical society, with more chances for personal involvement and democratic participation (which I believe is in great part constituted by accountability and responsibility) we have not seen great changes.

More than a new space, cyberspace has become a reflection of the inequities of the world. There is a preponderance of Western content on the Internet, big media conglomerates are still the largest distributors of information and the minorities still suffer from lack of representation.

Now, if this is true it has great implications for all of us and especially for social activists. Should we continue fighting for 'access for all'? Is this enough or is access a mere first step?

If we agree with McLuhan that "media are extensions of the senses" and "electronic media are extensions of the nervous system" then it's clear that we are, in fact, changing and adapting to this new environment. If this change does not translate into more openness, reflection and accountability, what does it mean?

I guess it can be argued that the anti-capitalist movements are, in part, a good representation of what it means. I agree. But, if there is one criticism that can be applied to these movements is that they are born and fueled in predominantly 1st world countries. [5]

A look at the newspaper gives me the dismal feeling that we are also increasingly able to live with the contradictions of an ever divided world, where the poor are becoming more and more worthless, and where senselessness rules.

If we are indeed extending our senses with the new technologies, it seems that we are also numbing them down, that we become ever more insensitive to things, both far and near.

Now, I am not implying that all is bad or lost. In fact, I think that dismissing the Internet as being lost to corporate interests is as foolish as hailing it as the new democratic 'Revolution'. What we need is to find ways of humanizing what is still mainly seen as a technological space.

Some headlines from Aug. 29, 2001 'Globe and Mail' (Canada):

1. Boat with 400 Afghans asylum seekers is stranded between Australia and Indonesia after both countries refuse accepting them.
2. Afghanistan is one of the worst countries to live in today's world.
3. A Californian couple who sponsored the surrogate pregnancy of a British woman says that want out of the deal because the woman is pregnant of twins. They ordered one child, not two.
4. A Michigan citizen refuses to accept the delivery of a child (of surrogate mother) because the child is unhealthy.
5. 18 months ago some armed men diverted an Afghan plane and forced it to fly to

Britain. The passengers applied en masse for asylum and the Afghans at home envied their good fortune at being hijacked.

6. MIT unveils plans to cut suicides after 6 of its students committed suicide since 1998.

NOTES:

[1] De Kerckhove, Derrick. (1995). *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality*. Toronto, Ontario: Somerville.

[2] I say in principle because as it has become obvious the Internet can be controlled and access to information can be restricted.

[3] This feeling is obviously not shared by G. W. Bush, the U.S. president, who has recently rejected the Kyoto accord.

[4] Although this text was written before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon they serve as a good example of the argument I am making here. The commotion created by these events had much more to do with the power of the U.S. than with the tragedy of the attacks.

[5] see for example Sarah Ferguson's article on the Village Voice
<<http://www.villagevoice.com/0129/shtm>>