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Chapter XX

Virtual Communities, Real Struggles: Seeking Alternatives for Democratic Networking

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Introduction

There is a technology that was said to have the "power to disband armies, to cashier presidents, to create a whole new democratic world — democratic in ways never before imagined, even in America" (From Daniel Boorstin's *The Republic of Technology*, cited in Winner, 1996, p.20). This technology was none other than television, whose potential for low-density mental reformatting is today more widely recognised than its affinity with democracy — in America as elsewhere. In fact, "Dreams of instant liberation from centralised social control have accompanied virtually every important new technological system introduced during the past century and a half" (Winner, 1986, pp.95-96). Collective memory is short, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now on the leading float of the technophile carnival. For many, the new technological artefacts promise to end the alienation of labour and industrial apocalypse, to leapfrog the so-called Third World into post-industrial *informationalism*, and to cast the foundations of slave-less, gender-balanced Athenian democracy (see notably Cairncross, 1997; Burton, 1997; Negroponte, 1995; Bissio, 1996; Annis, 1991; Lipnack and Stamps, 1986).

Yet, beyond the hype of the so-called *Information Revolution*, ICTs are having other implications, more tuned to neo-liberal substance than classical utopia. Those implications call for a critical political economic analysis and precocious system planning and deployment. On the one hand, this chapter compares the overall political impact of the technology in relation to the immediate advantages it is said to confer. On the other hand, the analysis shows that the development and implementation of ICTs, far from serving democracy, does in fact consolidate social injustice through ideological homogenisation, restrictive controls, and an enhanced capacity

for surveillance. In search of alternatives, the last section of the chapter focuses on the technological conditions and political strategies through which information systems could be more relevant to progressive social forces and grassroots emancipation.[2] A matrix of relevant political issues is proposed in an effort to construct strategies of progressive community networking.

New Technologies, Old Tricks

The Agenda Setting

Optimistic perspectives on technologies pay little attention to the processes that lead to the formation of characteristics inherent to technologies. As a result, those views are often incapable of understanding the interests that sustain these characteristics in the first place. Technologies never occur fortuitously, they are always created and implemented through funding, research and development (R&D), production, improvements, commercialisation, and support, with purposes that become integral part of what they are, and can or cannot do. Not surprisingly then, dominant social sectors, those who control both investment and most technological development, have the opportunity to select options that are best suited to their own interest—not to a broader, vaguely defined, social progress (Stewart 1978, pp. 110-111; Noble, 1984, p. 195).

It cannot therefore be taken for granted that ICTs are necessarily beneficial either to a society as a whole nor, in particular, to groups already exploited and oppressed within a society. Analyses ought to shed light on the hidden agenda of such an alleged technological determinism, unmasking how social structures and relations come into play to develop and maintain a technology, fostering specific interests in the process. In order to understand all social implications of technologies, and ICTs among them, it is therefore necessary to understand multidimensional processes, with ICTs being affected and shaping social relations throughout their development and deployment (Stewart, 1978; Noble, 1977, 1984; Sussman, 1983; Feenberg, 1991).

From their very inception, information and communication technologies have indeed benefited most those sectors that invest in their development. Computer networking was born of United States military funding to serve related academic research.[3] Not far behind were corporate investors that recognised, long before the advent of the public cyberspace, the paramount importance of data flows for their industrial, commercial, and financial activities. Data flows permit them to improve research and development, facilitate design and manufacturing, adjust to markets, reduce stocks, transfer funds, trade commodities and control the workforce. Networking also increases the global mobility of corporations, further consolidating their power in relation to states and civil societies over taxation (Cairncross, 1997, pp. 266-270), labour rights, environmental regulations, and other conditions of investment. Most crucially, financial operations have been greatly improved by information systems, "unifying capital, markets, and leading to 24-hour 'follow the sun' trading" (Cowie, 1989, p. 24; see also Hills, 1990, p. 76). In fact, financial institutions are responsible for about 80% of global data communication (Sussman, 1997, p. 38).

Communication, Structural Links, and Conflict in Three Inter-Organizational Virtual Collaborations

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