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Flaming Intimacy: Information and Identity

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Perhaps every generation imagines itself to be experiencing accelerated social change. In fact change in technology, or for that matter in society at large, tends to proceed in fits and starts according to the speed at which new ideas can be diffused. The palaeontologist, Stephen Jay Gould, has described the history of evolution and the evolution of history in this way,

“The history of life, as I read it, is a series of stable states, punctuated at rare intervals, by major events that occur with great rapidity that help to establish the next stable era”.

And also in every generation, with every wave of change, the feeling grows that ours will be the generation that ends the tyranny of time and space. The jet aeroplane generation thought they could do it. The telephone generation thought they had cracked the code. And we think that the internet is our big breakthrough. The idea of globalisation has as its ultimate objective the ending of space and time. You cannot abolish space and time, but we are, by general consent, living in what the Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells has described as

“an interval which began in the late 1970s characterised by the transformation of our material culture by the works of a new technological paradigm organised around information technologies.”

I am here talking about the convergence of microelectronics, computing (hard and software), telecommunications, broadcasting and optoelectronics. To that list can be added the highly contested area of genetic engineering. Furthermore the technological transformation proceeds exponentially by means of the digital storage and instantaneous transfer of information. All of this, along with the 1970s crisis of capitalist productivity and the two world recessions of the 1980s has brought forth a new organisational form, or to put it more precisely, a new network of organisational forms. Here is Castells again,

“the main shift can be characterised as the shift from vertical bureaucracies to horizontal corporations.”

In Britain, public sector organisations, such as schools, health service providers, local authorities, the police face even greater pressure to learn and respond to changing needs, demands and circumstances than the private sector. The economy may be growing – we are more than ever an affluent society – but the welfare state is shrinking and the ‘grateful generation’ of the 1950s and early 1960s are being replaced by far choosier ‘customers’. Again, hierarchical structures impervious to rising social expectations are marked out for extinction. Nor is this pressure confined to the public sector.

Voluntary organisations and the not for profit sector are facing equally challenging times. Some attempt to shoulder the burden of former public services and then, horror-struck, start to manifest many of the bureaucratic, inflexible, uncreative behaviour of the very organisations they took over from. Isomorphism is the ugly term given to this increasingly evident phenomenon. New organisations spring up in response to new needs almost daily. Faced with overwhelming demands for their services, competition for funds becomes more intense all the time and fundraising becomes more professional. Funding is skewed towards those with the strongest brand, not necessarily to those with the greatest needs.

At the formal end of the spectrum we have seen this in the engagement of large, complex, international NGOs such as Oxfam or Medecins Sans Frontieres, in hand to hand discourse and contest with international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. And these connections are taking place in the very machinery of the institutions. The NGOs are not knocking on the door. They are inside and dealing in the conference rooms and on the computer screens, always retaining the not merely idle threat of returning to the campaigning streets and even, in the case of Greenpeace, campaigning on the high seas.

At the more informal, amorphous, chaotic end of the spectrum, we are seeing a dawning radicalism, not just in political action, but also in ways of living. People have been willing to take to living in trees, not just as a method of protest, as we saw in Genoa and the battle for Seattle, but also as a way of life. Italo Calvino foresaw a little of this in his great novel, *the Baron in the Trees*. Of course, this is a minority pursuit. In the majority, we are seeing the opposite - a flight away from the alternative attitudes of the 1960s and 1970s and towards greater conventionality, as I shall discuss later.

The internet has fundamentally redrawn the organisation of protest. Formal leadership and institutional structures by trade unions or political parties is no longer needed to organise a protest. Nor does it have to be planned so long in advance, and a great deal can be done in secret by a very small number of people. The alliances can coalesce in an evanescent way - environmentalists with anti-capitalists is one of the more logical alliances, but there will be less logical ones. And of course at the outer extreme are the practitioners of violence, sometimes anarchic and sometimes well organised, and, we now see, sometimes small groups of very efficient people organise themselves as terrorists.

But it is in business that the impact of information and communication technologies has been most heralded, but also contested. It was a Nobel prize-winning economist who observed,

“I see the computer revolution everywhere I go, except in the productivity figures”

Notwithstanding the collapse of the dot.com boom, we probably are beginning to see the impact of the new information and communication technologies in productivity figures, certainly in the US. And certain sectors - such as travel and some types of retailing - are using the internet as a new delivery channel and a way of re-engineering their cost base. Other sectors, such as retail banking, have encountered unexpected customer resistance.

So, despite all the predictions by business, both confident predictions and doom-laden ones, we are left with the feeling that the first and perhaps largest impact of ICT will be in the public realm - in the storage and dissemination of public information. But of course the key change brought about by technology is that information is made interactive. This changes the ways it is received, but also the reaction to it. As far as the influence of information on public policy formation goes, interactivity overturns the old methodology.

Let me explain what I mean: The current method by which public policy is made that political parties elected to Government set out priorities and directions. Civil servants are then told to analyse data and make recommendations. Nowadays they are likely to be influenced in that process by think tanks and university departments. Once policy is formed, action is determined and resources are allocated.

If one were to be cynical, one might comment that the response of practitioners who have to implement these grand strategies is often a tired yawn, and a feeling that policy initiatives are like number 38 buses. It doesn't matter if you miss one, they say, there'll be another one along soon. So all too often nothing happens; minimal effort; minimal impact.

Or worse still lots of effort and still no impact. The policy does not change the reality on the ground at all. Nothing happens; crime continues to rise; businesses continue to go bust; and so on. But there is one even worse possibility. Not only is there a little positive impact; there may be unintended negative consequences. Perverse incentives are created. In Britain and in most of continental Europe, for example, Governments are struggling to create welfare systems that make people better off if they go to work rather than staying at home.

Of course people working on the ground are not just sceptical because they are lazy: they know that some of these unintended consequences will occur, so it is best not to do as you're told; or to do something other than what you have been told to do - but don't tell anyone what you are doing. Large public organisations, including for example, the British Council are beset by people doing the right thing by stealth.

So will interactivity change all this? It is already doing so is the answer. It creates the possibility that people on the ground, across a large range of organisations and sectors can react instantly at the point that the problem is identified, even before the policy is conceived. And then at the point of initiation of new approaches or new resources, and then again at the point of delivery. Policy and implementation become interwoven in a real time double helix. And that changes everything. The reason I know this is true is that we are doing it.

In Britain racist attacks have for decades been what a previous Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, called:

"The most disfiguring and dispiriting aspect of race relations in Britain."

Numerous initiatives have been announced and implemented, most recently in the aftermath of the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager murdered by white boys at a bus stop in South East London in 1993. But none of these initiatives appear to have diminished the number or intensity of the attacks.

So, with Government help, Lemos&Crane have brought together the 1200 or so organisations responsible for dealing with this problem in an on-line network and we are developing not one or two simplistic policy initiatives, but a large number of practitioner-based initiatives which, taken together, will create an emergent system with a new and different set of objectives, priorities, processes and outcomes. Instead of

policy into practice, we shall be going from practice to policy. We shall be going from top down to bottom up.

And we can go further than this, much further. We are developing similar on line action networks across a range of the most intractable social problems. Eventually we hope to join all these networks together into a larger emergent system, which will be a kind of on-line model of society's responses to its darkest side - a sort of social artificial intelligence. Steve Johnson in his book *Emergence* has set out some key principles for making these encounters and networks effective:

"If you're building a system designed to learn from the ground level, a system where macrointelligence and adaptability derive from local knowledge, there are five fundamental principles you need to follow:

- *More is different*
- *Ignorance is useful*
- *Encourage random encounters*
- *Look for patterns in the signs*
- *Pay attention to your neighbours*

And those are good principles for the management of information generally. We are here seeing and using information as an input into, and a product of, semi-complex and complex systems. In *Pandemonium: A paradigm for learning*, Selfridge noted:

"We are proposing here a model of a process which we claim can adaptively improve itself to handle certain pattern-recognition problems which cannot be adequately specified in advance."

Policy responses to longstanding and intractable social problems are exactly the sort of thing "which cannot be specified in advance."

So my argument in a nutshell is that in business, ICT is a new form of value creation, not a revolution. In the public realm, information managed in this new way heralds a revolution for Government and civil society, which brings enormous potential to do good if people like you can help us to manage information in real time, across the whole system and in a way that is practitioner-focused, not solely for the benefit of theoreticians.

Flaming Intimacy

I recently heard Doris Lessing say that, the 1990s generation has lost the memory of war and so, as she put it, 'the stream has run clear...we are living in a kind of golden age.' All of that sounds optimistic, creating a dynamic of positive social change. But there appears to be some downsides. There is no doubt that the impact of new knowledge-centred ways of working are having unequal and exclusionary consequences. This is how Castells put it in an interview with the British weekly journal, the *New Statesman*:

This network society I describe has an extraordinary dynamism. At the same time, by combing the globe ceaselessly for things of value, it excludes everything and everyone not of value. And those excluded are not just those in third world countries; they are in the South Bronx or in Tower Hamlets or Naples. It has the potential to become the most exclusionary system in history, while also possessing the potential to be the most productive system in history.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from those worse off in the digital divide, one of the ways that people seem to react to greater turbulence in economic and labour markets is to put a higher premium on conventionality - because you have to stay in the mainstream not to be tipped out of the game. These new conformists also set great store on consumption for instant gratification, bars, restaurants, ever more ephemeral fashions in almost everything - you'd best get as much as you can while you can - for tomorrow we might lose our job, if not lose everything. This is producing a certain anomie - a sense of prosperous, but anxious, lethargy. Galbraith called it the 'culture of contentment.' More damningly Richard Sennett has described it as the 'corrosion of character'.

The great librarian, Jorge Luis Borges created the extreme version of this consciousness in his character *Funes the Memorious*. This was the man afflicted by injury with the burden of intense perception and no understanding. It is as if he had a glut of e-mails and text messages and was overwhelmed by them

For nineteen years he had lived as one in a dream: he looked without seeing, listened without hearing, forgetting everything, almost everything. When he fell, he became unconscious; when he came to, the present was almost intolerable in its richness and sharpness, as were his most distant and trivial memories. Somewhat later he learned he was paralysed. The fact scarcely interested him....His immobility was a minimum price to pay. Now his perception and his memory were infallible.

We could call this the paralysis of information. And Tolstoy points us to where we may end if we are paralysed by information without wisdom. These are the cautioning thoughts of the dying Ivan Illich

"Those scarcely detected inclinations of his to fight against what the most highly placed people regarded as good, those scarcely noticed impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing and all the rest false. And his professional duties, and his ordering of his life, and his family and all his social and official interests might all have been false"

I have already said that civil society is using the new technologies to re-group in new ways and think out new ways of being and living. They are following Samuel Beckett's advice to move from *'the boredom of living to the suffering of being.'*

But we must all search for answers to these more fundamental questions. In order to find them we shall have to turn not to social scientists, historians or IT specialists. Instead we shall, as we always have, turn to story tellers and artists. Seamus Heaney, comments in his lectures on "The redress of poetry",

"whatever the possibility of achieving political harmony at an institutional level, I want to affirm that within our individual selves we can reconcile two orders of knowledge which we might call the practical and the poetic; to affirm also that each form of knowledge addresses the other and that the frontier between them is there for the crossing."

But AE Housman takes a rather bleaker view:

If the cravings of thirst and hunger are denied satisfaction, if a man is kept from food and drink, the man starves to death and there is an end to him...But if the craving for knowledge is denied satisfaction, the result which follows is not so striking to the eye. The man, worse luck, does not starve to death...And yet though the man does not die altogether, part of him starves to death: as Plato says he never attains completeness and health, but walks lame to the end of his life and returns imperfect and good for nothing to the world below."

So we are thrown back to the oldest source of knowledge and information - intimate emotion, and more specifically love. Despite all the fears expressed around the world about how the internet might eventually assert the primacy of English as a global language, it may be visual images that are the true, new global language. It is in visual images, not just in poets but in paintings too, we might see the flaming intimacy of my title.

The greatest living British painter, Lucian Freud, put it in the simpler language that painters and musicians often command more readily than writers.

"Painters who use life itself as their subject matter, working with the objects in front of them, or constantly in mind, do so in order to translate life into art almost literally, as it were... The painters make real to others his innermost feelings about all that he cares for."

Maybe we shall soon receive and send poems and painting by text message. Then the technology would be beginning to catch up with our true feelings and catch up with us.

Flaming Intimacy is a misquote from Robert Lowell's wonderful poem, *The Old Flame*

*Poor ghost, old love, speak
With your old voice
Of flaming insight
That kept us awake all night.
In one bed and apart*

Like an old flame, knowledge, the begetter of wisdom, is the thing we can't forget that for all the good reasons keeps us awake all night.

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