

Robert Beckett

Communication ethics and the internet: intercultural and localising influencers

Abstract:

In the information-technology powered twenty first century a general demand for more effective communication is driving people to question the present, examine the past and to prognosticate the future. The 'unique global media-information system' - the Internet- is the central fact of a vast new complexity of communication (mediated and unmediated) that is driving social-economic-political-religious- technological change (see <http://www.5systems.net>) at a rate never experienced before. The premise of this paper is that the Internet can be better understood as the first complex global media with both democratic and authoritarian possibilities, the full extent of which are still emergent. In respect of the symposium question, this paper suggests that Internet embedded communication theory can be used progressively as part of a widening and deepening approach to intercultural conversation, dialogue and debate. In theory, the localising nature of the Internet can be read as part of a greater movement towards communitarian and community centred self-governance, local democracy and social self-sufficiency. There is considerable scope for a new theory of society founded in localised 'in-community communication' practice supported by international human rights and effectively responsive to the asymmetric global information environment and congruent with newly democratised local structures of self-governance.

Agenda

The Internet

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Conclusion

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The Internet

This paper seeks to outline a theory of communication founded in the human ability to communicate and international human rights. The 'community of communication' (K.O.Apel 1972) offers an identity for all human being, communication being the most significant skill humans each possess and the essential fact of human collectivity (McQuail 2000.) The elision of the key human skill with the world's most powerful communication technology is more than significant; it is defining of a new global civilization, potentially linking all people through the Internet. Total estimated population of world wide internet users is presently 400m; source Nortel Networks 2000. This new global-virtual community at once links numerous and emerging 'communities of interest', while also identifying old communities of 'self interest'. The 'digital divide' is the counterpoint to this reality, with the democratic rights to communicate efficiently, electronically and globally of nearly 90% of humanity limited by the unavailability of Internet technology. However, the digital divides also offers a benchmark from which a renewed commitment to local and international democracy can be judged.

The 'Age of Information' can be traced to the invention of the computer in 1946 but it is also connected to the end of the industrial age, brought about by an illegitimate philosophy of domination and imperialism captured in the events of two World Wars and the subsequent rejection of industrial-modernist values by leading thinkers (Foucault 1966, Habermas 1990, Ormorod 1994). 1946 incidentally is the year of the appointment of the first Chair in communication; Wilbur Schramm, Professor of Communication at the University of Illinois (USA). In the subsequent sixty year move towards 'informationalism', great shibboleths of the past have been successfully challenged or even overturned. From the certainty of science, to the consumption model of economics, from the inequality of race and gender to their equality, from basic human rights to inclusion of diversity as a centre plank for legislation. As Henry Boisot makes clear;

"The second half of the twentieth century will be remembered as the period in which information came to replace energy as the central fact of life in post industrial societies." (1995:9)

In the teaching model(s) below, some of critiques of modernism are laid out, which due to space, are not pursued in description or analysis. The 5systems model allows for a systematic structuring of information to enable the elaboration of complex arguments, sometimes at the expense of detailed conceptual development in the present.

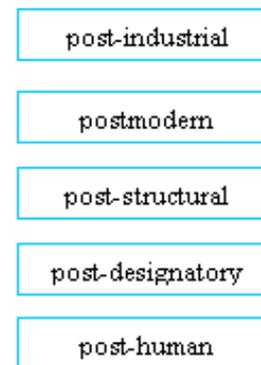


Figure 1 Information age concept analysis © ICE 2003

New ideas, however, challenge authoritarian structures that solidify 'information control' and 'ideological orthodoxy' built and secured in another era (Habermas 1990). The information age, it is argued, cannot be subject to the partisanship and exploitation that troubled the previous industrial era, or face potential meltdown of a new global society, limited in potential through group and self interest. Terry Bynum and Simon Rogerson (1996) have identified computing as the key technology for which a new information theory is required. According to Bynum and Rogerson, such a theory should recognise the fundamental impact of technology on people's lives;

"We are entering a generation marked by globalisation and ubiquitous computing. The second generation of computer ethics, therefore, must be an era of 'global information ethics'. The stakes are much higher and consequently considerations and applications of information ethics must be broader, more profound and above all effective in helping to realise a democratic and empowering technology rather than an enslaving or debilitating one."

The powers of control held by authorities, institutions and corporations, it can be argued (Kennedy 2004) have been exponentially increased by convergent communication technologies, even while citizens have greater access and communication power through the 'interlinked

media'. Still, the imbalance in the favour of institutional power is significant, even while citizen

power is the unique centre for democratic legitimacy in the information age.

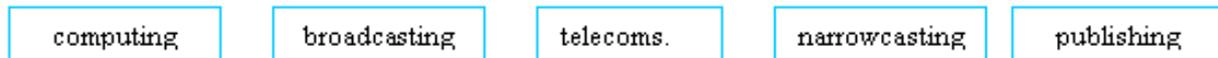


Figure 2 Internet enabled convergent communication technologies © ICE 2002

The importance of history to the analysis of local uses of the internet should not be reduced. Political, economic and personal self interest have often predominated in the design, development and use of communication technologies (Winston 1986). Misused, these technologies are central to various forms of undemocratic and uncivil exploitation. In this respect the Internet is liable to become part of an 'apparatus of control' rather than a 'liberating democratic technology', unless that is, the human rights to communicate are protected and upheld against powerful self, group and class interests.

In the UK, the extension of security and police powers (Terrorism Act 2000 and the 2001, Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act) covers the use of personal records and the interception of electronic media. According to Liberty, the UK's leading Human Rights organisation, in the 2000 Act:

"The polices and security services are now authorised to go through personal information held by public authorities (such as medical records, bank statements, school records, tax returns or inland revenue) even though no crime has been committed. Disclosure is allowed "for the purpose of any criminal investigation whatever" "

The BBC's (British Broadcasting Corporation) rather dry analysis of the implications of the 2001 legislation also cause concern for civil rights:



Figure 3 Geo-continental groupings linked to internet © ICE 2002

For instance, the newly legitimised 'security state' appears to be a central commitment by western some governments, which has serious implications for cultural and local democracy. It is the erosion of civil rights in the name of 'free states' that appears both paradoxical and a crunching low point in the struggle for emancipation by free citizens, founded in human rights. Allowing that liberal governments have given themselves powers to monitor, intercept and employ electronic means to routinely subjugate

"The UK is the only European nation to have suspended article five of the European Convention on Human Rights which prevents arbitrary detention without trial."

It is a grand paradox that in the name of freedom, the 'Mother of Parliaments' has given itself such powers as to so reduce a key principle of its formation. The right to protection from the State is one of the founding principles of all democratic societies (Kennedy 2004). In the information age, power, for so long concentrated in the hands of a few, is becoming more concentrated, due not only to powerful interests using information-communication technologies themselves, but because these same interests are also able to control the debate to achieve their goals.. If extrapolated over the global dimensions of the Internet, the size of the issue becomes clear. Which of the Geo-Continental groupings does most to protect not only existing rights, but new rights founded in new technologies? And which have tendencies to concentrate power though institutions possibly founded in an earlier age and unable or unwilling to reflect new information age democratic realities? At present, the questions of inter-cultural perspectives at the level of global Internet issues are to say the least academic, at least until common international law protects all citizens against unilateral harm by national states.

their citizens, the question occurs, what hope for the local the cultural and the personal realms? Everything in the public realm, using 'ubiquitous information technology' is or will apparently become state governed, state controlled or, more disconcertingly, controlled by those interests close to the state, i.e. private corporations?

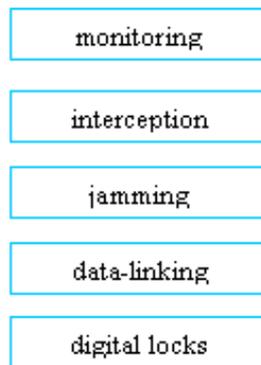


Figure 4 Features of the security state © ICE 2004

The Postmodern Information State is therefore in danger of de-stabilising the deepest principles of democracy, not because it is right in the sense of just (ice), but because the agglomeration of power through technology enables the State to achieve outcomes commensurate with its own ideology of power, resource control and class interest.

In the thoughtful words of Antonio Pasquali (1997);

"We live an age of communication devoid of a morality of communicating." (1997:32)

To offset this deeply troubling trajectory, requires all citizens to remonstrate and demonstrate to protect their fundamental human rights, through action, through speech and through continued critique of the powers that operate across our interlinked electronic lives.

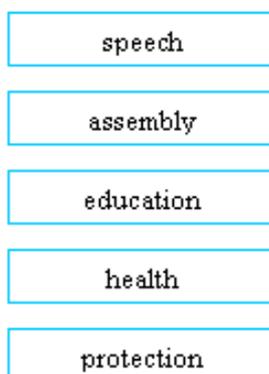


Figure 5 Summary of fundamental rights © ICE 2004

In the discipline of communication ethics, it is recognised that only through inter-human communication, can such fundamental claims as human rights, be addressed and resolved.

"Only those norms and normative institutional arrangements are valid, it is claimed, which individuals can or would freely consent to as a result of engaging in certain argumentative practices," Benhabib 1992:24

To meet this condition, citizens require empowerment through democratic-argumentative processes, used either with technology or in unmediated environments, i.e. through face-to-face dialogue. The potential problem here is that for such activity to be legitimised and effective enough to be democratically justifiable and thereby to encourage genuine participation by citizens, it requires some support though institutional or legal mandate. This sets up a second troubling paradox. Can the forces of authority, control and power cede to 'democratic assemblies of citizens' their own decision making power and resource authority? Clearly, for localising and cultural issues there is a significant tension. If the localising and cultural factors are to be protected and allowed to emerge, the global-national and even regional dimensions of government will have to be proactive in this move, a shift which recent history suggests is unlikely to occur without certain restrictive caveats on the rights of communities to self-expression. This fundamental dilemma focuses the present debate on inter-cultural and localising influence of the internet. Can free citizens use the internet as part of a wider communication process that liberates them from powers and authority that seek to undermine and restrict fundamental rights, while they are also engaging in communicative communities that support and grow new cultural understanding and diversity founded in these same principles?

Localising and cultural influencers

The implication of a 'non governable distributed media' that no single organisation or authority can control, or own, is liberating, although ideal, as argued above. Giving local communities, marginalised groups, and most importantly individual citizens, the power of assembly and free speech through an interactive global media should be a great democratic achievement. However, a tension exists between the powers that operate and the formation of new local powers that might emerge through the electronic networks. Only local communities and assemblies can respond to these 'strata of control'. In the information age, only the level of local democracy is sensitive enough to the wishes of citizens to be in a regular and socially founded theory of rights. National politics founded

on five yearly cycles in age of 24/7 information, now appears outdated and unlikely to reflect the increasing democratic demands of educated citizens living in millions of independent communities. Clearly the nation state has a role in connecting

agendas to the regional and sub-regional strata of 'democratic demarcation (in the model below) but no longer can it hold to itself such enormous power, thereby restricting the rights of citizens to govern themselves.



Figure 6 Demarcation and flow of power in the information age © ICE 2002

The widespread use of the internet by 'cyber-citizens' implies and enables a new level of self-education that should support communities wishing to cede the principle of self-governance back to themselves, ensuring self control through self governance within a framework of universal human rights.

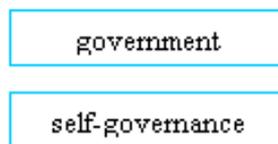


Figure 7 Old and new principles of democratic participation © ICE 2003

This paper argues that only by allowing all citizens to govern themselves, can 'cultural and localising influencers' be established, protected and retrieved. Understanding that civil and human rights encode citizen participation in the key dimensions of the informational age (see model below) in effect communities can provide their own solutions to all sorts of democratic debates, thereby re-empowering cultural diversity and local integrity. For instance, in the domain of education, why should individual schools participate in national education frameworks, unless it is in the interest of local citizens to do so? Why cannot local curricula be developed to enhance local community activity, i.e. in trade and industry or cultural pursuits, or in the teaching of language which may have significant implication for local people due to geography for instance?

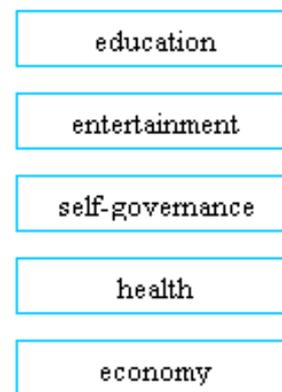


Figure 8 Community rights in the information age © 2002

From self-governance we can extrapolate, self-education, local welfare, local health solutions and even local entertainment – something that many in the western world particularly, may see as a positive aspect of 're-culturalising community' and a rebalancing of local culture in response to the perceived dominance of 'global capitalist culture'. Clearly, there are aspects of culture that support local tradition, history and economic circumstance, all of which can be linked to global-regional or national strata within the ICE model of the 'electronic society'. In actuality, there need be no loss to local communities by being 'out of touch' or through becoming isolated. Strengthening local democracy should additionally lead to more focussed activity at the national and regional levels, offering support to local community diffusion and cultural diversity as well as international exchange and trade.

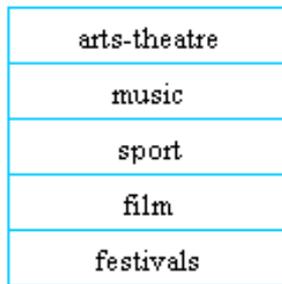


Figure 9 Culture as tension between global-local © ICE 2004

A critical question might be framed, how can the local dimensions of culture to enriched through he internet and its informational possibilities? In answer, it may be useful to identify different groups within local communities who can benefit from use of the internet and then to postulate what benefits they may each derive. The model below identifies a number of local groupings, including the fundamental social unit, the family. It is possible to suggest different uses for the internet, by each group and thereby to identify new and valuable cultural developments. For instance, self-help for families in health or self-education can surely improve family life and well-being. Sports clubs can and do administer themselves more efficiently through the Internet, aiding one of the fastest growing dimensions of cultural activity, the locally founded but internationally financed sports industry. And so on.

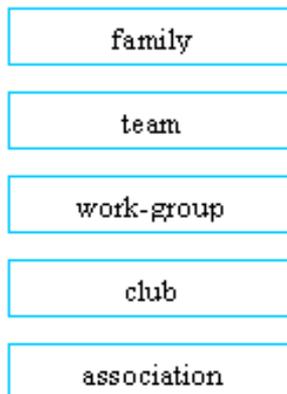


Figure 10 Community groups © ICE 2002

In considering cultural diversity, it might also be worth considering the economic value of culture which has for many years been exploited by international capitalism, but which the Internet should encourage as a form of local economic development. The complementary aspect of this argument, is that post modern capitalism

increasingly understands value in terms of intangible assets, which culture embodies in many ways (Beck 1992). The local recipe for the Lincolnshire sausage is now, not merely a protected economic asset of the people and area of Lincolnshire, it is a cultural-economic artefact around which to build trade, tourism and local community pride.



Figure 11 Intellectual property as cultural influencer © ICE 2004

The internet also offers new capabilities to many groups, capabilities that increase cultural and social activity by improving their efficiency in several ways | (see model below).



Figure 12 Enhanced capabilities for internet communities © ICE 2004

There is much hope for the strengthening of local communities through economic activity, enabled via the internet, that build economic value for communities that have otherwise been marginalised, out of favour, or geographically isolated. The Internet holds out value for the integration of numerous old and new communities into a formal structure of locally based governance and local economic-cultural prosperity, without either the weight of national government, or the limits

imposed by geographic locality. The Internet can and should enable both strong localism and links to international networks that support local diversity.

Conclusion

The internet is a unique media, sharing qualities and values that are essential to a UNIVERSAL-RELATIVE democratic future founded in the debate on human rights. Potentially, all people can be included in democratic discourse and self-governance using a media which is interactive and dialogic – offering at once the means to communicate and to resolve informational complexity through its unique ability to construct meaning in communicative process. Think of the difference between television and the Internet, the former being single minded and monological, the latter being many-minded and dialogic, i.e. capable of refining meaning through interaction in the process of communication. The

Internet's ability to achieve immediate or instantaneous response also indicates a future where cultural diversity is respected because the great systems of media can respond to individual-local initiatives and to changing local circumstances. Such responsiveness can also support an egalitarianism that the Internet promotes, while identifying areas of inequality where there exists a lack of communication and a reduced information environment.

The Nation State is the central political reality of a previous era and is slow to diminish its own role in the face of new distributed information realities, because it is tightly bound in with an older reality of 'domination by elites' rather than principles of self-governance. However the new reality is citizen power, where the internet can and should offer a new means of self-governance and self-democracy that are the bedrocks of cultural diversity and diffusion.

global	not limited by geography.
interactive	allowing human and machine to interact with relative ease.
dialogic	able to embody real communication between people.
instantaneous	almost immediate wherever participants are based
egalitarian	a low cost of individual operation and no status barriers to entry the internet is the most egalitarian mass media of all.

Figure 13 The key benefits of the internet (proposed) © ICE 2004

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