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## **Cyberspace: The Network Frontier**

by Doug Phillips

He who is one, without any colour, by the manifold exercise of his power distributes many colours in his hidden purpose and into who in the beginning and at the end the universe is gathered, may He endow us with a clear understanding. -Svetasvatara Upanishad

I have been increasingly struck by the manner in which electronic and digital technologies are effectuating a convergence of consciousness. Communication technologies allow the human race to interact with one another at light speeds across the globe. The complex networks of social meaning and collective creation are transforming business, both local and national politics, entertainment, and perhaps most importantly, the spiritual enterprise of the human spirit. We are on the brink of experiencing heightened levels of psychological union with our fellow members of the global village. The realms of cyberspace present rather fascinating possibilities coupled with grave dangers.

Our identities as autonomous individuals is gradually beginning to shift. As Jeremy Rifkin points out in his provocative book entitled *The Age of Access* (2000):

"In this postmodern world made up of networks and commodified relationships where boundaries are blurred and activity is increasingly connected, the old self-contained, autonomous consciousness is slowly becoming an anachronism. In its stead is a new person who is more like a node operating in a myriad of relationships."

The very notion of the human person is radically transformed in this reorientation. Rather than being consumed with ego projects in the formation of a solid 'I', our networked selves are increasingly becoming conscious of the fluid interdependence of personhood. Our freedom lies less in who we are and become as individuals and more entwined in the fabric of our relationships. Perhaps this insight is succinctly echoed in the Upanisads and spiritual writings of ages past, but in the modern world, the emphasis appeared to focus on self-development of the individual rather than the collective social reality. The lines are beginning to blur indeed.

As we more and more begin to identify with our networked self in and out of cyberspace, the notion of an entirely separate and autonomous self starts to gradually fade. Yet, such an insight is far from new. This year, we celebrate the 300th anniversay of Emerson's birth who said,

"We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meanwhile within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE."

Are we beginning to see our fundamental unity more clearly in a networked world where we venture to and fro across waves of global transmission? Where is the self actually located nowadays? In the computer, satellite, fiber optic cable? Where in time and space are we? Our physical bodies most definitely house our wet-ware brains, but our potential and actual social relationships extend virtually everywhere. Any adequate account of the self must take these factors into consideration. Rifkin (2000) rephrases Descartes dictum from "I think therefore I am" to "I am connected therefore I exist." The nature of our very existence is predicated upon the network of shared communication. Questions pertaining to immortality ultimately rest upon the extent to which we are consciously connected to one another.

Although the notion of our connectivity has been articulated by our intellectual forerunners, we must ask ourselves whether modern technology is bringing about a novel state of affairs. Peter Russell (2000) suggests that, "at the present time evolution seems to have reached another twilight zone, the one between individual consciousness and global consciousness." Is the world beginning to think and act as an integrated whole? Or is cyberspace and the internet simply allowing a greater diversity of voices to be heard? What happens if international media conglomerates begin to wield too much control? Are all of our thoughts getting equal 'air time'? Should they?

According to Steven Miller in Civilizing Cyberspace, 65% of the world's population has never made a single telephone call and 40% do not have electricity. Add to these staggering statistics that barely 3% of the world's population of more than 6 billion have access to the internet, we must ask ourselves whether a truly global brain is in fact emerging when so few members of the human race are connected. While levels of access continues to grow guite rapidly in certain regions of the world like Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and India; other locales such as Africa and South Asia are experiencing much slower rates of digital connectivity (Rifkin, 2000). Meanwhile, a handful of global media and technology companies located primarily in the United States exercise enormous power in the internet domains. Disney, AOL Time Warner, Viacom, Sony, General Electric, Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, PolyGram, and Seagram account for an overwhelming percentage (my estimate is that these companies manage approximately 80%) of the world's online and offline information channels including television, movies, newspapers, books, and internet media. Four companies in particular have emerged as electronic superpowers, namely, Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, and AOL Time Warner. I might also include in this list eBay, but as an online marketplace and banking system rather than a media giant. If so few companies are dictating the contours of cyberspace, who is ultimately to gain and which voices will shape the future? Is this characterized accurately, as Marshall McCluhan did, as a "global village"?

While such digital powerhouses as the aforementioned undoubtedly command widespread appeal and attention as indicated by number of daily visitors, total hits, email addresses, and web searches in their shared domains, I have noticed an interesting trend also occuring among individual entrepreneurs. The internet has unleashed the entrepreneurial spirit for many individuals throughout the world. While the global economy continues to experience rather significant shifts and as many large corporations lay off their employees in masses, there appears to be at the same time a rather pronounced increase in small businesses of one kind or another. Writers, artists, musicians, engineers, hobbyists, craft makers, computer programmers, real estate agents, and a host of others in a varied array of

entrepreneurship are continuing to populate the web in ways undreamt of even only a few years ago. A bit of a polarity seems to be forming between the goliath sized media giants and small businesses run by a few individuals, or in many cases, a single person. Remarkably, these small outfits are giving the goliaths a run for their money. Decisions in small enterprises can be made quickly and efficiently which is critical in the modern business environment. The potential emergence of a global brain appears, at least in part, dependent upon this network polarity between international media conglomerates and individual entrepreneurs.

What then might be the character of the emerging global brain? In a conversation with Jeff Zaleski (1997), the co-creator of VRML (virtual reality modelling language) Mark Pesce speculates on the deeper significance of cyberspace:

"Okay. Here's my operating theory. It's a theory and I'm doing my best to put it to the test. The Yogis talk about the chakras. My own theory is that the planet has chakras, as well as human beings, and that the planetary body is actualizing these chakras. I am pretty sure that the World Wide Web is the physical manifestation, the activation, of Ajna chakra. The third eye."

A fascinating theory and hypothesis, but can it be true? The third eye of the chakra system often represents the level at which a form of telepathy between minds is actualized. The third eye allows the yogi to mentally traverse vast distances in space and time. As the third eye opens wider, the mind is able to converse not only with fellow humans, but with the consciousness of the planet and all of her beautiful life forms. While cyberspace may not exactly connect us closer to nature (some critics might suggest that in fact we are distancing ourselves further from nature with the use of computer technology), to what extent is the internet and related communication technologies allowing us to mentally engage one another in ways never seen before in history?

Perhaps one of the most penetrating insights illuminated by the third eye is the unbroken continuity of existence. Physical and mental life forms a continuum in which all manifested particulars of the universe play an integral part. Reminiscent of Carl Jung's 'collective unconscious', the integrated whole of existence is largely out of focus in everyday perception of the workings of the world, but exists as a causal factor nevertheless. As Willis Harman (1988), the former president of the Institute of Noetic Sciences remarks, "whether or not one chooses to think in terms of 'extrasensory communication,' there is a kind of experience known to everyone in which individual consciousness communicates at a deep level with the consciousness of others. We refer to this experience with words like 'rapport' and 'love'. If the network is successful at activating the Ajna chakra, and perhaps ultimately the crown chakra, then cyberspace must become a field of consciousness whereby minds are able to communicate with one another at the highest levels of mental interaction. Multimedia and interactive digital environments might just hold the key to this new frontier.

However, let's be honest with ourselves. We are not on the whole using the internet and communication technologies to their fullest potentials. Instead, many of us seek pornography, stories about the rich and famous, mindless chatter, and daily gossip. We are barraged with spam, jokes and political commentary. The internet has largely become just another consumer sphere where we are bombarded with offers to buy anything and everything. We may indeed be sharing the contents of our minds with

others across the globe, but much of what we seem to be communicating to one another is vacuous, largely irrelevant, and grossly superficial. The nature and mode of our consciousness is largely on display for all to see. Are we happy with our projections of ourselves?

The web is quickly becoming the repository and database of our greatest achievements and our basest desires. The quality of the content that we create and distribute becomes as essential as the information streaming into our brains. Perhaps what we observe on the internet today is not much different from the spurious occupations enjoyed by humankind for centuries. Now, we are just witnessing these mental phenomena on a global scale. Nevertheless, we seem to be more and more peering into one another's mental panorama. While servers are collecting the data of our mutual enterprises, each and every day millions of minds are connected simultaneously in a collective mind-space. The day may not be too far away when billions of minds are connected at some point during the typical day to the global information network. As Peter Russell (2000) points out, once we reach the threshold of 10 billion human minds on the planet, we may enter a new stage of evolution altogether.

A quite fascinating phenomena of chameleon identity role-playing is currently taking place on the digital stage. We are becoming digital actors in our hypertext mediums. The internet is increasingly evolving into a playfield and digital game. We assume various roles in chat romes, online marketplaces, educational discussion forums, and on our video cams. We are soothsayers, game players, and wizards. Our digital identities morph each and every day as they become as important as our physical orientations of self. Who we are now is more about what we compute and communicate. We are becoming nodes in the matrix. We are increasingly either schizophrenic or fluidly dynamic in our personalities.

In cyberspace, there is certainly the potential for psychological harm to be done, but we do not feel physically threatened. Consequently, many of us feel liberated to say whatever is on our mind even if it is in disguise. The bully on the block will not come and beat us up. At least not yet. The day is quickly approaching when digital wars will be more significant culturally and politically than physical battles with stones, axes, bombs, and tanks. Digital geography and property is becoming much more valuable than material objects. Whereas in the '80's and '90's Madonna's mantra rang out load and clear "we live in a material world and I am a material girl," now we are beginning to chant, "we live in a digital world and we are a connected network." Times are changing at broadband speeds.

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