Zeitschrift: Comtec : Informations- und Telekommunikationstechnologie = information and telecommunication technology

Herausgeber: Swisscom

Band: 81 (2003)

Heft: 12

Artikel: The internet and its influence on society

Autor: Attali, Jacques

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-876716

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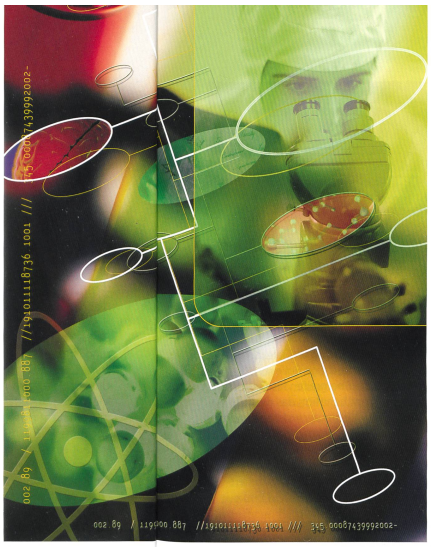
Visions

The Internet and its Influence on Society

Predicting the future is always a risky business. If, in the middle of the 15th century, we had asked intellectuals and visionaries about the potential of the printing press, we would have probably heard a cautious warning.

JACQUES ATTALI

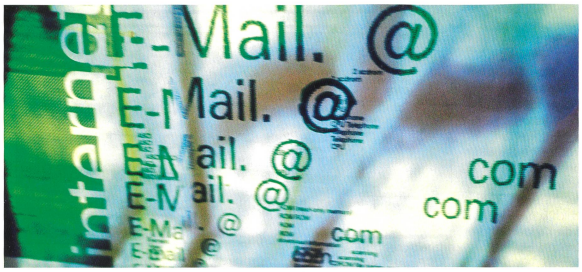
All would have agreed that the printing press was a formidable invention, but with the caveat that it was equally dangerous because of two inevitable consequences. One is that the power of the Catholic Church would be strengthened and would probably gain a dominant position in the world with the fast and low-cost production and dissemination of the Bible. The other is that all other languages would have vanished from the surface of the Earth because the printing press would have accelerated the dissemination of books produced in Latin. But nothing could have been more erroneous, as history shows that it is precisely the contrary that happened. The large-scale distribution of the Bible and other books gave rise to different interpretations of the knowledge priests of the time were spreading. This led to greater freedom of thought and to a more critical mindset that came to characterise Protestantism and other movements. True, many of the first books were printed in Latin. But soon, books printed in Spanish or Italian met with such success that they quickly made Latin a thing of the past.



The Internet will democratise information by giving the ability to everyone to receive and transmit.

Another Revolution

What can we conclude from this? That new and powerful technologies do not necessarily strengthen the powers that be. They almost always create profound changes in the balance of power, with the advantage of spreading this power across society. Examples abound. Take the invention of the telephone. One of the major consequences predicted by the inventor of the telephone himself was that there was not much future for it other than keeping factory managers out of the production floor to avoid being held hostage when workers downed their tools. The same is true of the gramophone which had been seen as a potential substitute for orchestras and, therefore, as an incentive against possible strikes of musicians in theatres. These two examples illustrate that innovation was perceived in an intellectual paradigm without questioning its more profound impact on the balance of power and on society.



Today we witness the death of distance and the free exchange of information.

What about information and communication technologies (ICT)? There will be a similar revolution in the influence of ICTs on society:

- A much greater distribution of power within society can be expected.
- The rapid dissemination of information on a global scale could well mark the end of the domination of the English language, just like Latin in the mid-15th century. Already, English is no longer the most widely used language on the Internet.

The challenge is not to predict the future of technology but, rather, its usage by the various players. Will they make use of it constructively or harmfully?

The free Exchange of Information

What we see today is a sharp decrease in the cost of producing and transporting information with very simple, yet wide-ranging consequences: the death of distance and the free exchange of information. This fosters interdependence – a critical factor in the emergence of globalisation, but also a greater interdependence of problems and of stakes. This "butterfly" effect where something that happens in one location rapidly becomes a global problem, also brings into sharp focus the fact that while markets are becoming global, their regulation is no longer possible because there is no regulatory force in play. It is not that the profound changes brought about by ICTs lead to an information-based economy. Rather, the information becomes pervasive and affects all spheres of our economies. It is most likely that ICTs lead to an entirely new fabric of society characterised by greater flexibility and mobility, but also more precariousness – a society more prone to change. Companies that will not have realmed that these essential features of the new society are in the making are doomed to fail.

The information society creates the feeling of a world with one common destiny, yet, at the same time, the transparency it brings with it creates a feeling of increased frustration because disparities become more readily apparent. These are seen in the "divide" between the information-rich and information-poor, between those who create information, those who simply use it and those who neither create nor receive it.

There are four main challenges in the creation of the information society:

An adequate legal Framework needs to be put in Place and the Border between public and private Goods defined.

Just like safety, the right to work and individual freedom, information is a public good. As such, it must be free. At the same time, the control and private ownership of information must be carefully managed through a clear and transparent legal framework. But it will become more and more difficult to clearly delineate what is public and what is private. Music offers a good example. Through the Internet, one can offer music to a friend as a present. Offering a present is no doubt a fundamental right. But if one uses ICT to offer this present to a few million people, then one creates a challenge to the industry. Is it in the way the music is made available which determines whether we face a private or commercial undertaking or is it in the way it is being used by those who access it? What is true for music today will be commonplace for the moving picture business tomorrow. This raises the issue of monitoring and with it, that of freedom.

A financial System is needed to ensure that the poorest Countries benefit by receiving and producing Information.

A key challenge is whether we will all be dependent upon a handful of media or whether we will have access to a wider source of information. I believe firmly that the future is headed towards a diversification and multiplication of information sources, and that the Internet will democratize information by giving the ability to everyone to receive and transmit.

Classification of Information is needed or the Internet will become a Waste Paper Bin.

There is a need to establish a responsible group to classify information and so create some hierarchy that will avoid the Internet becoming a waste paper bin. Information is not interchangeable nor does it all have the same value. The question is to determine who will have the right and authority to classify information: the political power or universities and press agencies? How can we ensure that the regulatory authority remains free, independent and guarantees diversity?

ICTs must be used effectively to reduce Poverty.

Organisations with the mission to combat poverty, for example micro-credit institutions, should be given the means to have access to ICTs. I do not think that we are moving towards a big brother system. On the contrary, I think we are moving towards general chaos, which will ultimately result in the desire for authority and order. It will lead towards the need for a world government that can bring coherence to information, its efficient use and its availability for sustainable development and poverty reduction. This can only result either in a true democracy or, if we are not vigilant, in a totalitarian regime. It is still time to influence our future towards democracy.

Source: ITU

Jacques Attali, *Chairman of PlaNet Finance, is a renowned writer on the Internet and its influence on society.*