

How Cyberculture Deletes Nature

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My friends argue that computers can be empowering by helping us organize against the corporate juggernaut. Computers, they say, bring real power back to the individual. The cybernet helps build new alliances between like-minded radicals sitting at their terminals, using email and Web pages to spread news and mobilize battles. By such analyses, computers clearly seem to be in service of progressive, democratizing, decentralizing tendencies.

But, if computers have eliminated the old political center and replaced it with a new Net-based Web politics that brings us an enhanced democracy run through cyberspace, someone forgot to tell the transnational corporations.

In Tokyo, New York, Brussels and Geneva, centralized corporate and political power is accelerating more rapidly than ever, and the computer has played a critical role in this. Today's giant financial institutions could not exist without computers. Computers are their global nervous systems - keeping them synchronized and moving in the same direction for central purposes.

Richard Sclove of the Loka Institute put it this way : multinational corporations are decentralizing operations and jobs around the world, but at the same time, they are intensifying their centralized control. So, for all the hype in the media about how the new technologies will enhance democracy, what we are getting is not individual empowerment, but a new empowerment for multinational corporations and banks.

Computers do nothing to alter the rapid global centralization of power; quite the opposite is true. Computer technology may be the single most important instrument ever invented for accelerating the growth of centralized power.

While we sit at our PCs editing our copy, sending our email and expressing our cyberfreedoms, the transnational corporations are using their global networks (fed by far greater resources) to achieve concrete results expressed in downed forests, massive infrastructural development, destruction of rural and farming societies, displacement of millions of people and domination of governments.

E. F. Schumacher told us that small is beautiful, but one could also make the case that slow is beautiful, especially in preserving the natural world. Computers speed up communications exchanges over long distances - a quality that is most advantageous to large centralized institutions. In our cyber-Walkman-airplane-fax-phone-satellite world, we are so enclosed within a high-speed technical reality that the values and concerns of nature tend to become opaque to our consciousness. To ensure the survival of nature, everything especially development and people - must slow down and synchronize with the more subtle and slower rhythms of the natural world.

Portland State University education Professor A. Bowers argues that our culture -- newly immersed in data-based forms of knowledge and limited to information transmissible in digital form -- is sacrificing the subtle, contextual and memory-based knowledge gleaned from living in a nature-based society nourished by interactive learning with other humans and an ecologically based value system. The more we use the computer and the more it is used globally, the stronger its culturally homogenizing effects and the greater likelihood that our new

globalized digital culture will be less concerned about the disappearance of nature.

The big trade agreements are an intrinsic part of the global technical structure; in fact, they are the "consciousness" of the megadevelopmental, megatechnological, monocultural model that encircles the globe and permeates our lives. Individual technologies have defined roles to play : television serves as the worldwide agent of imagery for the new global corporate vision; computers are the nervous system that facilitates the set-up of new global organizations; trade agreements wipe out resistance; telecommunications provide instant capital and resource transfer; and genetics and space technologies expand the world market into the new wilderness areas - from the internal cell structure of living creatures to the far reaches of untrammelled space. This new technosphere is anathema to democracy and diversity. In such a context, democracy faces a difficult future.