

Cyberspace and the Changing Landscape of the Self

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If you want to see the future, or at least catch a glimpse of where the human animal is headed, you will need to turn your gaze toward the edges of society. Don't look to popular-prepackage-consumerized culture. Don't look to those who rule, those who lead, those who are elected or anointed. Don't look to the centre of our modern empires, for all you will see is the conservation of power, the institutionalized denial of the second law of thermodynamics, the inertia that comes with bloated conspicuous consumption.

If You Want To See The Future

If you want to see the future of culture and consciousness, look to the edges of human experience. Find the cracks where the boundaries of experience are extended. Cultural change begins like a crack in the wall of our ordered and highly structured existence. Sometimes the change is successful and survives long enough to generate a viable foundation for community. Sometimes a crack in our social existence grows into a force strong enough to drag all of reality through itself and on into an altogether different paradigm.

For over fifteen years now, the Internet, and the larger world of cyberspace itself (the totality of non-spatial and non-temporal electronic culture), have existed on the edge of dominate culture. Until as recently as last year, the Internet has remained invisible and beyond both the experience and scrutiny of the majority. Today, the Internet has permanently entrenched itself within the landscape of alternative culture, and has a steadily growing presence in the larger, more prevalent world of mundane reality. The Internet is, I believe, a cultural phenomenon that is destined to be the seedbed of a new form of consciousness and a new type of self -- the uncensored self. Bear with me as I explain why this is as certain as tomorrow.

Geography and Consciousness

The Internet will have a dramatic effect on the cultures and individuals that interface with it due to the relationship between geography and consciousness. Both communities and individuals, cultures and psyches, are defined, to varying degrees, by the physical geography of their community and the physical shape of their bodies. The principal is simple : change the geography of existence and you change the nature of the self.

Now it is not every day that we see a massive shift in the foundation of our existence. This is simply because the majority of individuals live within a relatively stable and narrowly defined social geography. Excluding, for the moment, nomadic societies, it can be said that the further you go back in time, the more physical (and social) mobility decreased. As a result, cultural paradigm shifts were rare. In pre-industrial society, and for the vast bulk of the record of human civilization, the geography of existence was defined by a day's walk from one's village. This radius was the scope of the peasants life. All else outside this familiar landscape was myth and danger.

Immigrants in Cyberspace

Six years away from the dawn of a new millennium, we are faced with nothing less than massive global immigration into cyberspace. One million new electronic citizens are initiated into its mysteries each and every

month. By the year 2000, there may well be half a billion homesteaders on the virtual frontier. Cyberspace immigrants enter into a global, multicultural social context. A virtual, but nonetheless real, community where time and space are of little help in mapping presence and relationships.

The Geography of Cyberspace

What, then, are the characteristics of the geography of the Internet ? Can we map the social landscape of cyberspace ? Or at the very least, can we identify a prominent and stable point of reference from which a grid may be drawn ? If so, then we will have gained a glimpse into the future state of the human animal -- a state I have named the uncensored self.

It is the unique nature of Internet communication that provides us with a point of reference within the landscape of cyberspace. Internet-facilitated communication is an altogether new form of human behavior : uncensored and accessible (at least to the middle class), bi-directional, mass communication. The *technology* of the Internet has enabled an entirely new *technique* of existence -- mass participation in bi-directional, uncensored, mass communication.

This is critically significant when we realize that community is fundamentally based upon communication, and in cyberspace we have an entirely new form of communication. On this new form of communication a new culture is emerging. This new culture will be the birthing grounds of a new manifestation of the self. Communication, culture, and the self all hang in the same web. Any innovation within one element will have a direct and inevitable effect on the other elements of existence.

The Democratization of Mass Communication

Consider that throughout history, mass communication has always been tightly controlled. In pre-industrial society, a crowd was always perceived of as a threat by the elite. In post-industrial society, the ruling elite have maintained almost total control over all vehicles of mass communication. As a result of the rise of cyber-communication, the controlling institutions of society have, for the first time in history, lost control over mass communication. From this point onward, every one wired to the Internet owns a printing press (and soon enough, a radio and TV station). The means of mass communication has been democratized. The state has lost control over the means of production and distribution of knowledge at the very point in time when we have entered into the digital Information Age.

The Resurrection of the Word

If you want to see the future, look toward the edge of the Information Age, look into cyberspace. When you have arrived there, listen to the multiplicity of voices. Watch for the appearance of those who become empowered through bypassing the gatekeepers of mass communication. Recall how the Gutenberg Press empowered a few critical thinkers to change the course of nations with their writings. How much time will pass before we stand witness to cyberspace writers who reengage the one constant historical force -- the power of uncensored communication, the authority of the compelling voice ? The new technology of communication, the new geography of consciousness, the new technique of existence combine to form a linchpin on which the whole world is about to turn.