



Informated Identities and The Spread of the Word Virus

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abstract

This paper will focus on changes in the way people see themselves and the different practices emerging for constituting their subjectivity. These practices of subject formation will be examined through a number of different concepts. These concepts revolve around the ways in which our everyday practices and self conceptions are mediated by the new communications technologies. There is a utopian theme running through much that is written about the information revolution and its social and economic implications which begins with the work of McLuhan. This paper will attempt to expose the holes in this utopianism, with particular reference to the concept of identity. Castells' idea of 'project identities' that have arisen in protest against globalization will provide the starting point for the argument. From this point of departure other influences upon identity constitution within the information society will be explored including the concepts of informated identities, the incitement to discourse, the effects of the word virus, the rise of interactive docility and the champions of electronic utopias.

It has been claimed that psychoanalysis does not resolve problems but merely displaces them... We might say the same of technical and industrial progress. (Virilio, 2000: 37)

Compared with music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common. (Nietzsche, 1968: 428)

Global Identities

Perhaps the information age could be said to have commenced with the following declaration from Joseph Goebbels: "He who knows everything fears nothing" (Virilio, 2000: 62). Over the last few decades a lot has been made of the transition from industrial society to a post-industrial information society. The first great treatise on this movement was Marshal McLuhan's *Understanding the Media*, where he predicted that, "Under electric technology the entire business of man becomes learning and knowing" (1964: 69). But it has taken three decades for this message to be properly received in organization theory and management studies. The effect of electronic communications on the way we see ourselves and others is of a profoundly different kind from previous technological revolutions. McLuhan located this difference in the fact that previous technologies tended to serve as extensions of the human body whereas the electronic

revolution was more like an extension of the central nervous system. Today there is a diverse range of cybernetic technologies which operate in this way including the Internet, mobile phones, CCTV, as well as more mundane business applications such as Electronic Point of Sale systems and SAP. The Economist Intelligence Unit forecasts that the Internet will radically transform the way businesses operate over the coming years, and much of its research is devoted to these changes (www.eiu.com). These changes are not simply confined to commerce but are being experienced in all sorts of social arenas. Castells (1997) believes that we are at the dawn of a new network society, and the RAND corporation is even talking of a revolution in warfare called 'information warfare' (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1997).

Castells (1997) has proposed that the way people's identities are shaped are changing as a result of globalization and what he has termed 'informationalization'. He suggests that civil society serves less as a basis for identity construction because of the weakening powers of traditional social structures in an increasingly globalized world. For example, the institutions of the labour process and political process were very much a product of the first media age under modernity, but we are now undergoing changes in the post-industrial societies, with reduced union activity and falling numbers of voter during the electoral process. Instead, he suggests that old 'legitimizing identities' that formed the basis of civil society under modernity will be replaced by emerging 'project identities' which may form a new civil society under the new logic of globalization and the ever extending information networks. New cultural communes have been gaining popularity, which have developed hand in hand with globalization and have attempted to resist the power of globalization and uncontrolled informationalization (1997: 361). Amongst these he suggests are ecologists, feminists, religious fundamentalists, nationalists and localists. Ecological and feminist movements both provide opportunities for transforming the ways in which we see ourselves and the practices through which our identities are constructed. With the demise of patriarchal forms of organization, feminism may offer alternatives forms of familial relations and sexual identity. According to Castells, ecological movements are developing the idea that the world's peoples have a "new identity as a species" (1997: 127), which unites the species as under threat from ecological disaster. Castells' favourite group is probably the Zapatistas which he calls "the first informational guerrilla movement" (1997: 79). He likes this group not only for its support for some of the poorest most oppressed groups in Mexico, but for the way they harnessed the Internet itself to resist the effects of an oppressive global movement, NAFTA¹.

The Zapatistas are particularly interesting since this movement shows that the distinction between economic war and information war is now far from clear. An insightful discussion of the relation between information war and economic war can be found in Desmond's (1997) analysis of the function of marketing. He shows clearly how a masculine and militaristic discourse is involved in marketing, and suggests that

1 This form of warfare has proven particularly successful in Mexico where the Zapatista's leadership was able to address Mexico's parliament directly for the first time in March this year (*The Guardian*, March 29th 2001).

feminist theory may be particularly suitable for highlighting this tendency. However, he also warns that some recent developments in marketing which appear in feminine guise, such as relationship marketing, are really just a form of information warfare being waged against radically other feminist identities. For Desmond, marketing is a form of warfare, where “the mind of the consumer forms the territory on which the battle is waged” (1997: 344). Paul Virilio has argued that each new war is fought with the latest technologies available, which today are the new information technologies. What is unusual about these technologies is that they are already a fundamental part of the economic infrastructure of the big Western powers. Virilio cites the Multilateral European Agreement on Investment as part of an overall movement by the World Trade Organization to deregulate national sovereignties, where the deregulation of markets goes hand in hand with the deregulation of strategic information. So information war and economic war merge together, “since each involves the same hegemonic ambition of making commercial and military exchanges interactive” (Virilio, 2000: 144).

Informed Identities

One of the first theorists to write about how information was transforming modern society was Theodore Adorno writing about the cultural shifts which lead to World War II. Adorno’s understanding of the mass media was very much influenced by how the media operated to mobilize attitudes during the War, particularly in Germany. He stated that, “mass culture is an organized mania for connecting everything with everything else, a totality of public secrets. Everyone who is informed has his share in the secret, just as under National Socialism the privilege of esoteric blood-brotherhood was actually offered to everyone” (1991: 72). This mania for connecting everything to everything else has been taken to a new degree of intensity with the development of the Internet and the World Wide Web. And the shared secret has become a serious problem for governments who no longer have control over the public secrets and the nature of the groups to which one might belong. Governments express concern over the appearance of hate groups and criminal organizations on the web, but they are also rather keen on monitoring each and every citizen, by means such as the clipper chip and surveillance technologies installed within Internet Service Providers. This attitude is not just an expression of a centralized power but is clear in recent proposed legislation allowing employers to monitor employee emails. In this sense the power relations developing in the network society may be less centralized than in the more apparent hierarchical structures, but they still exist in more subtle and abstract forms (Munro, 2000).

One might say that in the information age we are becoming a society of informers and stool pigeons. This is exactly what Paul Virilio believes when he says that the information revolution is really a “revolution of generalized snooping” (2000: 62). William Burroughs says that in the age of information, informers are farmed like dairy cows, so swollen with information they have to be milked regularly (Burroughs, 1995). There is a strong economic argument for this, which has been stated over and over again in the management literature by the high priests of the knowledge society like Peter Drucker, and the gurus of knowledge management like Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

Now that knowledge has become such a valuable commodity we must not waste a drop of it, and if possible it should be stored up in huge vats for later use (cybernetic networks of people and computers). Several decades before the dawn of this information age Adorno offered this advice as both an observation and a warning, "Those who have been thoroughly informed lend themselves to thorough utilization" (1991: 72). Today, of course, this is not seen as a warning but has become a mantra for the information age. It is likely that we will not have a clear idea of what the truly informed individual will look like until the nascent revolution in biotechnology is fully underway.

'The Incitement to Discourse'

In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1981) pointed out that rather than repressing discourse, power may also offer an 'incitement to discourse'. Power can be repressive, it may operate through censorship, but before this it is also productive. The example he examines in his book is the confessional, a model which appears in a number of different social relationships, such as between priest and sinner, judge and criminal, parent and child, doctor and patient. However, this incitement to discourse may also be in other forms, and has taken on a very specific form with this new age of communication technologies. Perhaps it is best summed up in British Telecom's old advertizing slogan: 'It's good to talk.' Here talking has become a good in itself, the categorical imperative for the information society. Even back in the 60s McLuhan noted this increasing power of the language of the marketplace in the electronic media, "Marketing and consumption tend to become one with learning, enlightenment and the intake of information" (1964: 373). It is also clearly in operation in the Internet, much of which is becoming sponsored by advertizing. Communication and commerce are becoming ever more tightly bound together².

One of the most interesting ideas to appear on the Internet in the year 2000 was the notion of the 'ideavirus' developed by marketing executive Seth Godin. Godin argues that crazes for products mirror the behaviour of diseases, especially venereal disease in the ways that they are spread by a promiscuous and energetic few. Once the ideavirus has taken hold in a small population it can then grow exponentially. To demonstrate his point, Godin released his book, *Unleashing the Ideavirus*, free on the Web, and within a few months of appearing in August 2000 it had been downloaded by over a million people (*The Observer*, 26 November 2000). Godin believes that traditional advertizing will disappear as the new media takes over and that word-of-mouth recommendations through the new media will replace this. Examples of this kind of marketing can already be seen in websites devoted entirely to reviewer's comments and Amazon which ranks its reviewers as well as its products. The ideavirus is really just a technological variation

2 Perelman (1998) has also cited an abundance of evidence to show that advertizers frequently exert influence over newspaper editors with regard to the stories being run by their paper. This especially concerns the censorship of stories that might reflect negatively on the corporation's activities.

of traditional word-of-mouth marketing, but this is greatly amplified by the power of new communications networks. In this new kind of marketing it will be important to identify the 'sneezers' who spread the word virus, and fertile places for the spread of contagion, such as schools or student unions (mirroring real viruses). Of course, Godin's approach is market orientated clap trap, but it is a significant innovation in the commodification of communication.

The Word Virus

"The word is a virus", said Burroughs (1986) and now it has found new means of spreading. According to Burroughs the word shares the same identifying feature of the virus, "it is an organism with no internal function other than to replicate itself" (1986: 47). Historically, there has always been a close relationship between disease and language, the ancient cultures of what is now Latin America were destroyed as much by the alien language which infected their culture as by the alien viruses the Conquistadors brought across the Atlantic with them. Burroughs claimed that, "The word itself may be a virus that has achieved a permanent status with the host" (1979: 141). Words are not merely interpreted by us, but have a direct physiological impact on us ('What do you think you're doing Iain?', 'Do what you're told Iain', 'You failed to qualify Iain', 'You passed Iain', 'Fuck you Iain', 'You're fired Iain', 'I love you Iain'...). They can make us sick, and weaken our immune systems. They are also contagious, the use of slogans being an obvious example, which has for many years been common knowledge amongst politicians and advertizing executives.

Nietzsche's (1994) genealogical studies of language are remarkably close to Burroughs on this point. Nietzsche attempted to show that there is a necessary relationship between training the body and the production of knowledge, the body must be made passive and sickly before it will be receptive to the absorption of knowledge. Even the self exists partly as a linguistic convention, 'I', and partly as a physical inscription through punishment³. It is the body that gets punished and made sick on behalf of the grammatical 'I'. So the host body must be made passive and sickly before the parasitic 'I' can thrive within it and further propagate itself.

Modern information technology has intensified the power of the word virus, it is spreading like never before, particularly the US English variant. A paradigmatic demonstration of this power was the spread of the 'I love you virus' last year. This virus was probably the most effective and damaging virus to infect the Internet since its inception. It has been estimated that it destroyed data on about 45 million computers worldwide, causing computer downtime the total cost of which is incalculable but may

3 It is true that the grammatical 'I' functions on a purely indexical level as simply the subject of an action or statement. However, the material reality to which this refers has no fixed or necessary content. Nietzsche's studies expose the historical practices which have lead to certain contemporary moralistic and legalistic understandings of identity.

have run into the \$100 millions (Stateman, 2000). This virus was particularly successful, not only because of its code, but because of the mechanism by which it spread, 'I love you'. This kind of virus, known as a 'worm', has many variants which depend largely upon the power of their name for their effect. Common names include, 'I LOVE YOU', 'Joke', 'Mothers Day Order Confirmation', 'Dangerous Virus Warning', 'Virus Alert', 'Important! Read carefully!' Dressed as good ideas, they know how to market themselves. They literally command you to open them and thereby become contaminated⁴.

Interactive Docility

Mark Poster believes that the new technologies provide new opportunities for self development because of the increased levels of interactivity they allow. In his words: "Subject constitution in the second media age occurs through the mechanism of interactivity" (1995: 88). One might add that interactivity is an essential feature of subject constitution in any era, but that the nature of this interactivity changes. The first media age concerned one-way broadcasts such as newspapers, radio and television (the telephone was exceptional as a 2-way channel), whereas the second media age has led to a proliferation of lateral communications. However, one of the most striking features of the information revolution is its effect of massively amplifying mundane experiences. Anyone who doubts this need only sit for an hour on a train, and listen to the number of times such phrases as 'I'm on the train now' are spoken, a phrase rarely to be heard in the pre-mobile phone era. Perhaps it is the effect of all that battery radiation on the brain, though I suspect it is a feature of what Nietzsche termed the herd mentality. The absolute quintessence of this vacuity is to be found in an advert for a well known kind of beer, where a group of friends get in touch with each other by mobile calling to each other 'wassupp?' extended *ad nauseam*, rather than engaging in any real conversation. What such examples highlight is the nature of interaction that is encouraged by modern information technologies, which might best be termed 'interactive docility'. McLuhan observed this phenomena at the very beginning of the information revolution, stating that "electromagnetic technology requires utter human docility and quiescence of mediation such as benefits an organism that now wears its brain outside its skull and its nerves outside its hide. Man must serve his electric technology" (1964: 68). McLuhan's understanding of technology was heavily inspired by Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, which conceived of mankind quite literally as the reproductive organs for machines.

The nature of this kind of interactive docility is to cut off creative activity. Indeed, this is a driving force behind the current cybernetic revolution. Cybernetics is a revolution in

4 Some years ago, before the Internet took off, Roland Barthes wrote a book of 'image repertoires' on the effect of the lover's discourse, and it could be argued that the virus would make a powerful new addition to this repertoire. In *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes writes about the informer who furnishes the amorous subject with information about the loved being, he passes on these messages "like a disease" (1979: 139).

feedback and adaptation, at the expense of experiment and creation. Paul Virilio describes the consequences of the communications revolution in the following terms: “every time we introduce a higher speed we discredit the value of an action, alienating our power to act for the sake of our power to react, which is another, less elevated name for what we currently term ‘interaction’” (2000: 123). The most obvious example is that we have reduced the need for movement or travel which is, of course, the whole point of information technology. Recent examples where instant reactivity has been introduced into society include technologies such as Just In Time (JIT) management and Enterprise Resources Planning (ERP) software. One might also consider the management of consumers whereby loyalty cards and store cards integrate consumers more closely into the organization (they supply demand, as it were). Credit cards also provide this service with the mediation of banks and it is quite possible that it will not be long before cash completely disappears in favour of the more cybernetically adaptive credit cards. McLuhan was prescient yet again when he predicted the threat of the new technology to our concept of money (1964: 150), but whereas he foresaw a Star Trek like Utopia where money is no longer necessary, what has happened is an increasing cybernetic integration of money into our way of life.

The Electronic Babel

Poster has emphasized the emancipatory potential of new information technologies like the Internet. He believes that, “the Internet seems to encourage the proliferation of stories, local narratives without any totalizing gestures and it places senders and addressees in symmetrical relations” (1995: 92). This may be true to a limited extent, but it appears to ignore the wider processes of globalization and standardization which make it possible. McLuhan had made a similar claim for the emancipatory potential of the new technology stating that computers should allow instant translation between different codes or languages and that, “The computer, in short, promises by technology a Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity” (1964: 90). McLuhan envisaged a new era of collective harmony and peace arising naturally from these technological developments. But, what we know now with the emergence of the Internet is that things are not translated from any language into any other, but from any language into US English. In fact, they are often not even translated by computer at all since US English has become the language of globalization, commerce and the Internet. Last year English was spoken for the first time by more people as a second language than by native English speakers.

A report on globalization by British Telecom is very revealing in this respect. This report shows how languages are fast disappearing, being replaced instead by the language of commerce. This is also another sign of increasing standardization, or as Nietzsche wrote, “words making the uncommon common” (1968: 428). BT is clearly concerned about the effects of globalization as suggested by research posted on its own website: “...up to half of the (approximately) 6,500 languages now spoken are already endangered or on the brink of extinction, and linguists estimate that a language dies somewhere in the world every two weeks. Much of the remaining linguistic diversity is carried by small communities of indigenous and minority people. In fact, some predict

that we may lose over 90 per cent of the world's languages during the next century. Already, more than a quarter of the world's population – 1.7 billion people – now speak English” (www.bt.com/world/sus_dev/).

This section of BT's report concludes by stating somewhat blandly that, “The negative aspects of cultural imperialism and intolerance could be replaced with an understanding of our world-wide impacts and intrinsic inter-linkages, which are underpinned by our own cultural uniqueness.” Everything in this conclusion seems to rest on the word ‘could’, which perhaps *could* have been put in bold typeface given its highly speculative nature. It also shows that although concerned, BT believes that the benefits outweigh the costs, with little need to do anything further about the matter. One might be tempted to suggest that this perspective is a little coloured by the nature of its business. The English word virus triumphs, contaminating more hosts than any other variant. It's good to talk - in English.

This thesis may be seen as an updated argument of what George Orwell (1949) termed ‘Newspeak’, a fictional form of the English language in which certain words were changed or removed to facilitate thought control. In this book the citizens of the totalitarian state of Ingsoc were given an impoverished vocabulary with which to speak and were bombarded instead with slogans such as, “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength”. But whereas Orwell's Newspeak was imposed by a centralized socialist government, the spread of US English is a function of both the success of US information technology and the marketing methods of the huge capitalist enterprises which sell and use these technologies. Whereas the fictional Newspeak reduced the richness of language for expressly political purposes, the actual spread of US English and the subsequent disappearance of cultural diversity is being rationalized in economic terms, where ‘freedom is the free market’.

E-topia: Electronic Utopias

There is a strong Utopian theme underlying much of what is written about the information age which is present in works as diverse as Drucker, Zuboff, Poster and McLuhan⁵. McLuhan is probably the clearest in outlining this utopian message and it is in this work that the problems of this message are most apparent. Back in the early 1960s McLuhan believed that the new electronic media presented a serious challenge to the traditional hierarchies present in our societies. He stated that, “In an electric structure there are, so far as the time and space of this planet are concerned, no margins.

5 It may be interesting to note that one of the founding fathers of modern cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, was somewhat ambiguous as to the uses of his theories. When writing about the second industrial revolution in electronic communication back in 1949 he stated the following problem: “In the long run, the deadly uninteresting nature of the repetitive task may make this [revolution] a good thing, and the source of the leisure which is necessary for the full cultural development of man on all sides. It may also produce cultural results as trivial and wasteful as the greater part of those so far obtained from the radio and the movies” (1950: 188).

There can, therefore, be dialogue only among centres and among equals” (1964: 291). McLuhan noted that the development of the telephone was the most powerful technology which challenged existing hierarchical structures at the workplace. The power of such lateral communication technologies lauded by McLuhan has recently been greatly intensified with the development of mobile phones and email. This argument is especially interesting when considering recent discussions of panoptic control in sociological books and journals, since McLuhan is suggesting that there is already a movement away from hierarchical observation and control which was such a dominant feature of the panoptic technologies in the Nineteenth Century. The fact is, however, that McLuhan was wildly utopian in his desire to see a technological liberation of mankind. This is attested to by recent legislation in the UK which will make it legal for employers to monitor their employees’ emails (The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Bill). Anyone who has been given a mobile phone by their company or has worked in a call centre will know that the hierarchies have reasserted their power quite successfully by appropriating these new technologies. In fact, hierarchies may be seen in even the most horizontal and democratic communications. Elias Canetti (1973), for example, points out that in any dialogue there is an interrogator who requires a reply from the person being interrogated, which is a hierarchical relation even if it is mutually consensual. Hierarchies re-establish themselves within networks through issues of access, the use of passwords and concerns over security and encryption.

There may be a sense in which knowledge work has done away with the old division of labour and leaves man free to develop his full potential. This argument has been made quite forcefully by both McLuhan and, more recently, Zuboff. Zuboff has argued that in the informed organization, “Earlier distinctions between white and blue “collars” collapse” (1988: 393). The new type of work “requires more extensive participation of the human personality” (1988: 401), which takes more account of a person’s emotions. Despite highlighting such positive aspects of the informed organization Zuboff does not build an entirely utopian picture of the future and suggests that management might attempt to reassert their hierarchical controls. McLuhan was far less bashful in this respect, announcing nothing less than the total spiritual transformation of humanity (1964: 72). McLuhan argued that, “Where the whole man is involved there is no work. Work begins with the division of labour and the specialization of functions and tasks... In the electric age the ‘job of work’ yields to dedication and commitment, as in the tribe” (1964: 149). The information age, therefore, heralds a new era of communal living reminiscent of pre-industrial tribal societies.

What these accounts fail to grasp, however, is the true nature of the division of labour and the alienation of the worker. Even in the information society the worker labours in order to get money so that s/he may meet his or her needs (though these be socially produced). The value of his or her labour is not equivalent to the value of the product of this labour since the latter is largely made up of surplus value which is absorbed by the capitalist. Note also that under the commodity relation the worker is alienated from the product of his or her labour (Marx, 1976: 716). Therefore s/he confronts the product of his or her labour as a commodity, as exchange value for a given quantity of congealed labour time, where the qualitative experience of this relationship is that of alienation. The commodity is something useful to them only to exchange, “For the owner, his

commodity posses no direct use value. Otherwise he would not bring it to market” (Marx, 1976: 179). Zuboff explicitly states this in her discussion of knowledge: “The informed organization is a learning institution, and one of its principal purposes is the expansion of knowledge- not knowledge for its own sake (as in academic pursuit), but knowledge that comes to reside at the core of what it means to be productive” (1988, 395). A few pages later she is more forthcoming about exactly what she means by productive and value-adding knowledge: “cost, efficiency, quality, product development, customer service” (1988: 398). Here knowledge is defined purely in terms of useful, commodified knowledge, and productivity is defined purely in terms of the production of commodities, or exchange values. What Zuboff is describing when she discusses the new worker is nothing less the totally alienated worker, alienated even from his or her own thought and knowledge.

The concept of the commodity and that of information share many important similarities. For example, neither information nor the commodity can be defined simply in terms of being physical objects. Information may be defined as being abstracted from the physical world as a pattern underlying the order of that world (Wiener, 1950). Likewise, the commodity cannot be explained in terms of the material dimension of a product but in terms of a fetish, the crystallisation of so much labour power (Marx, 1976: 187). The commodity and information both lack a certain physical or corporeal quality, as Marx explained, “as soon as it [an object] emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness” (1976: 163). Another important commonality between information and the commodity is that both serve as a focal point of exchange. Wiener understands information in terms of energetic exchange when he adapts the second law of thermodynamics to say that information is actually exchanged with our environment as part of a process of entropic decay (1950: 22). Marx, on the other hand, defines the commodity as the basis for all economic exchange under capitalism when he states that the commodity is characterized by the amount of labour power (human energy) crystallised within it.

Despite these similarities Wiener believed that information was not a suitable basis for a commodity since, like entropy, information is not conserved when it is transmitted (1950: 129). Information differentiates itself as a commodity in that it has a certain nomadic quality, whereby it can move very rapidly between parties and when it is exchanged both parties may then possess it (this implies increasing entropy, as Wiener noted). Many of the problems surrounding the information society concern the attempts to domesticate information and knowledge, by means of security, passwords and access codes, encryption, intellectual property rights and so on. This is precisely the purpose of current management fads such as Knowledge Management, which pursues the domestication of hidden tacit knowledge. Certain contradictions are inherent within information economies most notable of which is the proliferation of barriers to the sharing of information (Perelman, 1998). Information is not a scarce resource in the usual economic sense because when exchanged, it need not leave the possession of the original owner. To compensate for this, an increased level of secrecy and the deployment of intellectual copyrights are being used to create an artificial scarcity in the market for information. Is it not ironic that the information age has witnessed such a sharp rise in the prices of academic journals? These trends are in stark contrast to McLuhan’s early hopes for the information age where, “Men are suddenly nomadic

gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before..." (1964: 381). In fact, the informed man has been domesticated like never before, although knowledge itself may be becoming nomadic like never before, hence the great efforts being made to make it visible, immobile and easily stored.

The Multiplication of Channels: the Information War Machine

This paper has shown how communication today tends to be seen as a good in itself, and has attempted to take issue with this view, particularly in terms of the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity and the increasing power of the market over our communication channels. This process of cultural homogenization and knowledge management can be summarized in terms of the different themes that were discussed above:

- The emergence of *project identities* to resist certain features of globalization.
- The increasing development of *informed identities*, which lend themselves fully to utilization as part of the forces of production in the more intensive information societies.
- The *incitement to discourse*, where communication is seen as a good in itself, and the medium of communication is increasingly subject to commodification.
- The *word virus*, especially the US English variant which, as the language of commerce, dominates the Internet to say nothing of international relations.
- *Interactive docility*, whereby human interaction is increasingly mediated by information technologies which integrate such interactions more fully within a cybernetic network of instant feedback and purely reactive adaptation.
- *Electronic Utopias*, which are peddled by the ideologues of the information age such as McLuhan, Drucker, Zuboff, and Nonaka and Takeuchi. These ideologues tend to hail the disappearance of hierarchies and expound the rise of the network organization, with scant thought given to the appearance of new more intrusive hierarchies (eg. the information rich, versus the information poor), and the reassertion of the divisions of labour in new forms (eg. call centres).

In all these cases, however, there is also the possibility for resistance to power and novel means of identity constitution. The technologies which have led to the commodification of communication have also seen the rise of new forms of resistance to such commodification. Take, for instance, Linux and the development of GNU copyleft for this software. This new form of copyright ensures that any programme under such a copyright must be passed on free of charge to its users and that any further modifications to such software are also subject to this form of copyright. The discussion of Castells' work at the beginning of this paper also mentioned a number of 'project identities' such as the Zapatista rebels in Mexico and the world wide ecological movement which emerged in response to some of the excesses of globalization. A

myriad of groups are emerging that use the new media to orchestrate their movements, including groups as diverse as fuel protestors in the UK, the Slow Food Society in Italy (www.slowfood.com), Greenpeace International (www.greenpeace.org), Adbusters (www.adbusters.org) and so on. The extent to which these movements are effective vehicles for resistance in the face of global capitalism is contentious and will continue to be a matter for debate, what is undeniable however, is their effect in mobilizing previously untapped energies and creating novel identities as they do so.

Our identity is not given to us fully formed, but evolves through techniques of mnemonics, the mastery of language and our relationships with other people (Nietzsche, 1994). With each relationship there is an opportunity to develop a different aspect of the self, and in this sense the self is an ongoing project and very much a kind of virtual phenomenon. Stone has noted that the idea of a virtual self is not so alien as might be supposed since, "...we all change personae all the time to suit the social occasion, although with online personae the act is more powerful" (1992: 612). Nietzsche called man a "many souled animal" (1990: 47). The unconscious is comprised of various forces and passions, some dominating and others dominated, some active and creative and others reactive and turned in on themselves. The great genius of the human animal has been as an inventor of masks, where there is no true mask lying deep down orchestrating the others. Belief in one mask is merely dogma and idleness, cutting off the creative powers of the body ('one' being composed of many, but speaking as one or 'I'). It is no longer enough to be sincere (*sine cera* – without a mask). In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the foolish Polonius condemns his own son to a bloody death with the advice "This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the day the night, Thou canst not then be false to any man." But it need not follow and the logic of his advice leads to his own undoing and later the death of his obedient son. The wily Odysseus provides a better model. When the blinded Cyclopes asks who wounded him so viciously, Odysseus hides behind the anonymity of his name calling after him "nobody did it" (the word for 'nobody' is almost identical to the name 'Odysseus' in the Greek)⁶. The use of masks and the development of virtual personae can be seen in terms of an aesthetic, but this is not the same project that is driving the evolution of the Internet and other communication technologies.

So how can one avoid the worst of cultural homogenization and the dangers of what Nick Land (1995) has termed 'cyber psychosis'? There has been a limited recognition of the problem of protecting a person's identity on an institutional level, as manifested in concerns for the privacy of the individual and the formulation of data protection policies by both corporations and governments (Arge, 1999). Deleuze (1995) has suggested that resistance in the information age will likely take the form of gaps in the networks of communication, the ability to remain hidden and unrecorded. Of course, this can have severe penalties associated with being cut off from the consumer culture and the privileges of the information society. The pleasures offered to us by modern technology form habits which are very difficult to break. This is the price paid by

6 A contemporary example of such an anonymous hero might be Subcommandante Marcos, the spokesperson for the Zapatista rebels in Mexico.

nomads, being weak they must drop what they are doing and run with what they can carry, with luck their aggressors will perish in the act of pursuit.

The closing passage of Foucault's first book on sexuality show us that the idea of a liberated identity is extremely problematic (Foucault, 1981). The practices through which the individual emerged historically did not have liberation as their end. There is, however, the possibility that the self can become an aesthetic project independent from other normalizing influences involved in the construction of identity. As a question of technology Foucault said what is needed is "a differentiation of communication networks" in order to overcome the unifying and normalizing powers of our institutions (1988: 328). It could be argued that the proliferation of lateral communications does promote such differentiation, but this paper has attempted to highlight the possibility that such identity constitution has been increasingly domesticated by such technological commodification. To continue the viral metaphor proposed by Burroughs, perhaps it is a matter of cultivating your own local variants of the word virus, and developing methods of inoculation against infection from other more global strains.

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