URSULA M. FRANKLIN

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The following discussion was originally a keynote speech given by the author at the "Community Access to the Information Highway" Conference, held in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada May 7-9, 1995.

Introduction

Computers and the application of computer technology is of course, something that we all have seen coming, that we have lived with. But in many ways, it is a technology of the young and I consider myself, to phrase it politely, chronologically challenged, so that I really don't know whether much of what I can say will be of any help to you.

Who are community groups?

I think the subject of the conference is very important. It is very serious. It is also very broad. I would like to narrow down my perspective in some way. So, when I speak of community groups, I will only speak about those voluntary organizations who come together to affect the lives of their community or country—people who deal with issues of environment, with issues of justice. I know them well because I have found much of my own community within these groups.

These community groups essentially are the extra-parliamentary opposition that we have had in this country for a good number of years. As communities, we took over this role when we saw that traditional parliamentary opposition more and more faded into obscurity, when we found that the moment somebody who was in opposition became government, there seemed to be a profound change in their outlook towards life.

In addition, many of the real issues seemed to get

nothing but very bland responses, if any from traditional parliamentary opposition. Of course they support human rights, of course they love nature, and so much for that. As a result, it is the extra parliamentary opposition that provides the building blocks of democracy.

Who and what is the new technology for?

It is these community groups that, again and again, try to cope with democracy in a technological society. Any time new technologies emerge, whether it is in the workplace, whether it relates to issues of war and peace or justice, or whether to that field we are discussing—information and structuring of a discourse, it is the community that has raised the questions: what can these new technologies do in our work of furthering democracy and the process, and what do these technologies prevent us from doing.

Community groups have done that in approaches to city planning, to environmental issues, and we very much have to look at it again. What does that new technology do, what does it prevent us from doing and what don't we do any more because the new technology is in place?

With these questions in mind, I am going to address that technology, specifically the electronic networks under discussion here, not so much in terms of how it has come about, but what it really signifies for me personally.

Vertical communication

What is actually going on? I find that question very difficult. It is like a film on top of a film, on top of a film. One doesn't always really see very clearly what is going

on. As community groups, we want to talk about constituency. Think of those constituencies as building blocks of democracy. Genuine democracy cannot and does not work if there are disenfranchised constituencies.

If you will, for a moment, allow me to give you a very simplistic picture. Imagine the world like a cake. Imagine that you slice it into the customary slices by vertical cuts. Each slice of that cake should signify for us, a constituency. Each is geographically located as one segment of the larger cake. Each slice is more influenced by its immediate neighbours than by what might be in the cake quite far away.

In many ways, our communities have organized themselves by history, by necessity, around those vertical slices of cake. These are our parliamentary constituencies. That is where the member from Kicking Horse Pass resides. One knows that is where our cities, our school boards and our larger communities are.

Historically, much of the communication in those vertical slices has been vertical communication—up and down between the bottom and the top, between those who were residing in the icing and those who were the small crumbs on the bottom. We refer to the "trickle down" effects; this comes from a vertical slice model. When we deal with our members of parliament, with our school boards, when we think of constituencies, however sophisticated we get, we work through that historical picture of a vertical cut.

The expansion of horizontal communication

Of course, technology is a means to mediate the relationship between space and time. What technology has done

in the world increasingly is to put horizontal cuts in that cake. You don't only talk up and down. Now you can talk across barriers horizontally. Now we see, and this is new, to what extent the world has become horizontally sliced and how horizontal communication begins to take preference over vertical communication.

Horizontal communication, not only of thoughts but of actual real movement, takes many different forms. In the past, while slow, the horizontal movement of people was reasonably prominent. Now, if any one of you works with refugees and immigrants, you will know that the horizontal movement of people is very difficult in spite of that great horizontal slicing that has given us air traffic.

On the other hand, the horizontal movement of money is incredibly easy. The stock markets between Tokyo and New York or Toronto play on the time difference. It takes less time for money to move from New York to Tokyo than it takes the clock to move the opening time. You can speculate on currency from your desk or from your computer always with that ease of moving money horizontally. It used to be awfully difficult to even take money from Canada to the U.K. Horizontal slicing now allows a great deal of movement, and it is very differentially specified as to who moves what.

Trade and travel is eased through horizontal slicing. You may wear a shirt or a pair of shoes that were made in China. On the other hand, you will also find that the wrapping of that pair of shoes that was made in China becomes your local garbage. Your taxes will have to pay to get rid of it.

So there is that peculiar intermixing between worlds that are both vertically and horizontally sliced. You will

see, as you reflect upon it, that the legislation, the restriction, the regulation that governs horizontal movements or things that have horizontal movement consequences is very loose, even though in many ways, these are the issues we face. If a nuclear reactor malfunctions somewhere in the world, the pollution is distributed horizontally. You face it in your drinking water, in your soil and have no recourse whatsoever in terms of mitigation, responsibility or accountability because it came to you from an unidentifiable or occasionally even identifiable, source through an uncontrollable, horizontal movement.

The Internet: access and advocacy

The difference between the vertical traffic and the horizontal traffic is one of the things that affects us very profoundly as we deal with community groups, with access and with advocacy. Here we have the Internet, one of those inventions that can work both vertically and horizontally. You can connect up with everybody. Wouldn't that be nice if we could gather the relevant information that we might want for our work through that horizontal slicing of our world and then use it vertically in our communities. If you are interested in clean energy, or early childhood education, you would think that there is an enormous amount of usefulness in that horizontal gathering of the best and the most profound insights on the subject. Then you could, in fact, utilize it vertically to go to those who deal with implementing either clean energy or early childhood education and say, "Look, that is the very best thing the world has to offer in terms of knowledge and insight. Let's go with it."

If I say that to you, you will say, "You must be dream-

ing. The world just doesn't work like that." Of course the world works very differently. There are two profound provisos to that dream of gathering knowledge or information horizontally, and applying it vertically. The one is, you aren't alone, there are the others who also run around horizontally and vertically. The second one is the place and nature of what we call information.

Knowledge versus action

I go back fifty years. Right now we are celebrating the end of the Second World War. At the end of that war, the liberation of the concentration camps was a tremendous and profound shock to the world. When that became evidence in the aftermath of the war, the Germans were asked, "And what was your responsibility?" In the Germany of my childhood, the standard response was, "We didn't know." We didn't know—sometimes it was true, sometimes not, but the response meant that, had we known, we would surely have done something about it. It was the "we didn't know" that the Germans used as their explanation and their excuse for consent to tyranny.

Now, fifty years later, I don't think that there is any possibility that people could say anymore with some credibility, as the Germans did, "we didn't know" about similar profound disaster, holocaust, or negation of human rights. Assuming of course that had they known, something would have been done about it.

The explanation or excuse of lack of knowledge may have had a part in the description in history of the holocaust. It has no more credibility in the world because all of us know a great many things that would require

from any person of conscience an immediate intervention. And whether it is environmental disasters, whether it is Rwanda, whether it is civil rights' violations in many countries, whether it is the increasing number of unemployed people in our own country, whether it is the homeless we see on our way to work, it isn't as though we don't know.

But there is that horrible realization that, while the knowledge of facts may be a necessary condition for action, and we talk about democracy in civic action, it is unfortunately not a sufficient one.

The mathematicians so nicely distinguish necessary and sufficient conditions. Although the knowledge of factual information is necessary for appropriate action, it isn't sufficient. What is needed for an effective mitigation and a revision of the conditions of which one has knowledge, are channels to power that are not blocked and a responsive agency of power that, in fact, can and will make the changes.

And as you deliberate about the information highway, about your access to information, be it factual information or be it the experience of like-minded people in other parts of the world, do please remember that while that knowledge may be a necessary condition, it may in fact be a less necessary condition than the one that makes that a sufficient condition, and that is access to power. In the end, knowledge as one of my colleagues once wrote, has something to do with power and survival and, he added to that, we are all in the business of both.

But one cannot rest with the knowledge that one might gain in terms of information if one doesn't have a realistic grasp as to what would and could modify the conditions that one addresses. And again, being chronologically

challenged, I have been in this game for too long, written too many briefs and been on too many delegations to Ottawa to address various committees to be sanguine about saying, "The poor dears need some more knowledge. If they only knew what I know, the world would be a better place to live." One begins most of these civic journeys with the idea that those in power are well-intentioned and ill-informed, and I am sorry to say, that many of us ended by saying that those in power are very well informed but ill-intentioned. They have no intention of doing what I might consider the right and appropriate thing.

When to take a "dim view"

One does then have to look at another source and another need for knowledge—that knowledge of "Why do things not get done that seem to be the appropriate, useful, honourable and decent thing to do?" As we, as community groups, gather that initial information, it is only the first act of a play and you might wish to discuss this. But the real problem for any community group is to answer the question, "What do you do after you have taken a dim view?" That is a particularly difficult question to answer in this area of access to the information highway. This is not about the gathering of knowledge but rather about questions of structure of power and responsibility.

Now from my own experience in this area, I should caution you about the misuse of information. I don't mean disinformation or wrong information. First of all, I would ask, "How much information do you really need before you take a dim view?"

I was once part of the small group of people in front of

the then president of our university, arguing that the university should divest itself from commercial investments in white South Africa. Our president said that one had to study the issue, that he always had to see the two sides of every problem. I got very angry and said to him, "could you please explain to me what is the other side of justice?"

That has some bearing on the pressure that is sometimes put on the community to study a question further. There may be a lot of things that have to be studied, but there is also what I call "occupational therapy for the opposition" that says, send them off to do some more pushups on the Internet. You need to be mindful that it is possible to use information, and the need for information, as a delay for the call for action.

Irrelevant information

The other area in terms of misuse of information I would call irrelevant information. There is an enormous amount of information that has nothing to do with anything. There is a sort of civic landfill and you ought not to go into the business of civic landfill. If your aim is to change conditions, then there is a certain amount of information needed, but not more. After that, one needs to address the questions, "Why does nothing happen? Why do some proposals that seem to be fairly reasonable, workable, and sensible never get beyond the lip service stage?" That requires a very different sort of knowledge. That is the knowledge of the structure of power.

When we were talking over lunch, I was saying I have for myself come to the point where I say that people or groups or governments make the decisions that make

sense to them, even if they look totally hair-brained to me. My task then is to figure out the constellation of forces, the pushes and pulls, that in fact *do* add up to that hair-brained decision-making. Then we can go into the next iteration and say, "What can we do about the balance of the push and the pull that seems to result in totally non-constructive decisions?"

Knowledge and wrong actions

That leaves us with the experience that some of us have had and continue to have—the experience of a breed of people and politicians who do make decisions that may be morally and even nationally wrong, in the full knowledge that these decisions are wrong. That is one of the most difficult tasks, not only to think of ways in which one could either counteract or clarify or document such decisions, but to meet up with intelligent people, who in the absolute clarity of their critical faculties, do what they know is wrong because of other narrow interests. This is one of the most disconcerting things that can happen to anyone. But don't gloss over it, don't hide it, don't excuse it. It's part of the landscape.

If you go with that sort of information into the Internet, you might very well find a lot of people who have other experiences with similar undertones in power. But you are also in a public medium, and you are flagged and visible. The Internet is not just your private multiple telephone system. It is one of the most infiltrated and infiltratable highways of this world.

It's in a way a very much more serious thing than what governments now do when they say, "We consult with community groups" and you go there and you give them

all your fine thoughts and then what you find is that they are mapping the terrain in order to find a strategy to get around all those lumps and hills that have been mapped. And of course they can then say they have consulted, as they have said frequently. But the purpose was primarily to avoid trouble rather than to do the right thing.

Recently, my attention was drawn to a quote from Peter Drucker who said, "If there isn't dissent, we would not know where the problems are." I said to my husband, "Look, if there isn't dissent, we wouldn't know *who* the problems are." I think one has to keep that in mind.

I recommend to you David Lyon's book, *The Electronic Eye*, dealing with that whole range of electronic technologies and their potential, their very great and constantly used potential for the surveillance, infiltration and containment of individual freedom.

Every tool shapes the task

You can say to me, "What should we do? We live in this world. There is that Internet and obviously it has great potential. How should an organization conduct itself?"

First of all, I think one has to remember every tool shapes the task. Whether it is a trivial tool in the kitchen, when somebody gives you a Cuisinart or one of those machines that slice and dice. Suddenly you find yourself slicing and dicing and not using your old recipes any more. When you get a new tool, it affects your task.

Is there anybody here who knows what an electronic microscope does to a research group? Everything suddenly has to be observed at two thousand magnifications because you have that expensive beast.

So, be mindful of how the tool shapes the task. And

that you only find this out when you really learn about the tool. Learn what is in this Internet. But then keep your head clear and go back to your goals. What in fact, in the best of all worlds, do you want to do? Do any of the activities with your new electronic microscope bring you closer to that? When do you have to go back to the traditional tools of talking to people face-to-face, meeting with a group of people, having a potluck? When is that moment where the intangibles of the potluck far outweigh the elegance of a message on the Internet? Because in the end, what we are all concerned about is people.

The notion of the common good

The things that I most fear about the current developments is not the infiltration of the Internet. I fear the restructuring of work that the electronic media technology brings. Because we should not forget how more and more people lost meaningful work and how difficult it is for young people to get any meaningful employment. That's my first and profound fear.

My second fear is that when the community and individuals begin to really get hooked on the Internet, using it and taking enjoyment out of the virtual communities that they can create, it gets us away from what is probably our most treasured possession, and that is the notion of the common good.

If you want to grow a cactus from seed, or have sightings of the Virgin Mary, you will find people who have grown cactus from seeds and who have sighted the Virgin Mary. That is nice, but that optimizing of the private creates a fragmentation that goes in parallel to the fiscal privatization that takes away from the public space.

Because if we think that cyberspace is a public space, then let's think of the oceans. They used to be as much of a world resource as anybody could think of but didn't belong to anybody. So everybody put their garbage into them. The potential of cyberspace as a global dump is quite substantial.

My central concern is "What has happened to the notion of the common good?" If we, as members of a community, really think in terms of a common good, then there is a limit to the interest of particular sectors. We cannot just let labour worry about structural unemployment. Labour needs to worry about the environment and environmentalists need to worry about unemployment. We all have to worry about justice.

Does that mean we have to read every piece of miscellaneous information we can find on the Internet? Or does that mean we have to really reassess and define our common agenda? What will assure a civilized life? From there on, people can grow cactus or see the Virgin Mary as much as they wish, but it cannot be done at the expense of the time and effort that it takes to have a society that essentially promotes justice both to people and to the environment.

Whether the information highway helps or hinders, I don't think any one of us knows at this point. But it's not a trivial issue.

Ursula M. Franklin is a Quaker and a feminist, and is particularly concerned about the social impact of technology as it affects issues of peace and justice. She holds a PhD in experimental physics and taught until her retirement in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Toronto. She is the author of *The Real World of Technology*, the CBC Massey Lecture Series, 1990 and numerous other lectures and scholarly papers. Dr. Franklin is currently a Senior Fellow at Massey College at the University of Toronto.

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