Internet and displacement

The included and the excluded

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TROUBLESOME DIVISIONS, THE RICH AND THE POOR, the included and the excluded, apply as much to the new internet technologies as they have to nearly every social organization the world has created and known. They speak deeply to our moral sensibilities. From Cain and Abel, they are the ground from which the call for justice has been made, from the poor whom we will always have with us to the slave on the plantation and the refugee at the gates. We are not all seated at the same table. Our human relationships and our spiritualities are conditioned and affected by these seemingly inevitable divisions. We are torn in spirit and yet our culture enthusiastically generates new information technologies which take to a new degree the meaning of 'to have' and 'to have not'. This essay will attempt to explore the implications of the creation of new communities through access to and use of the internet.

'Haves' and 'Have-nots' – facts and figures

In treating this topic of the 'Haves' and the 'Have-nots' of the computer and internet world, two main topics are important: access and the form of community. And these topics should be considered in the light of some of the facts we have about computer and internet development and use. Home-size computers have been common for about twenty years, more or less, and the internet for about seventeen, although it existed in its development stage for a few years before that. J. C. R. Licklider at MIT in August 1962 perhaps made the first transmissions with ARPANET. In 1979 there were three networks involved but in 1996 there were 50,000. The most significant growth has been in the last five years and it is continuing. This year there are about 350 million users of the internet worldwide. We are talking about a very recent phenomenon. Many of today's 'Haves' were 'Have-nots' only five years ago. And some of today's 'Have-nots' will in five years' time become 'Haves'. But first we must look at the structures and the patterns of the growth, and make some projections about the more permanent divisions which are being created.

Reliable statistics on the internet population are difficult to ascertain. There are many available on the internet itself, but this counting seems to be an inexact science and certainly many of the projections that are made about future growth, often provided by companies who wish to sell advertising space to prospective clients, are glowing and over-optimistic. Some take what is factual about the last five years, that the population has grown from 40 million English-speaking users in 1995 to 130 million in 1999, and project it mathematically onto the future with a disregard for other factual considerations. It is like putting the proverbial grain of sand on one square of a chess board and doubling it on the second and so forth to find that when you get to the sixty-fourth square, half the volume of the moon would be required to contain the grains. So, the statistics I use in the following paragraphs should be taken with the other proverbial grain, of salt.

Despite the unreliable projections, it is clear that there has been an extremely rapid growth over the past five years. This growth has taken place in the home, in business, in government and other public institutions, and in educational institutions at every level. In 1999 the worldwide total of internet users was 171.25 million, of which 92 million are in North America and 50 million in Europe. The third largest population is in the Asia/Pacific Rim, including Australia, with 27 million. South America has 5.3 million users and Africa 1.72 million. Finally, the Middle East has 880,000 users. These proportions already give us some indication of the 'Haves' and 'Have-nots' of internet development and use. Use is clearly linked to electronically and industrially developed societies which have extensive telephone or fibre-cable networks, not to overlook disposable income enough to buy a sufficiently advanced computer. In 1998 there were more than 550 million computers in the world. But within each society the acquisition and use of these begins with the economically most advantaged.

When we consider on-line communities we might better consider a classification by language rather than country, since people tend to use their maternal language, and perhaps a second language, no matter what country they live in. We can see by following links on the world wide web that it does not matter much where those sites are physically based. Again it is difficult to get accurate statistics about these language communities, partly because they overlap. A person who uses English as their main language may access something in French or Italian from time to time. But the general profile does tell us something. Last year the percentage of the on-line population who use English was 57 per cent and non-English 43 per cent. But it is projected within this present

year that the non-English use will overtake the English because they are the faster-growing group. In the non-English category 64 per cent are European languages and 36 per cent are Asian languages. The breakdown is as follows: Japanese 20 per cent; German 14 per cent; Spanish 12 per cent; French 10 per cent; Chinese 10 per cent; Italian 5.7 per cent; Dutch 5.5 per cent, with smaller percentages being shared by Korean, Portuguese and Swedish.

When we take into account the special international role the English language is increasingly playing, we can still see that the language area of growth in the internet will probably be in non-English languages like Spanish and Chinese. And we might remember that, when we are considering the statistics by country and by language group, in large multicultural countries such as Canada and the United States, a good proportion of the population will be overlapping. For example, French, Spanish or Chinese users also at times use English. It is another way of saying that they live in two communities, or one main community and another sub-community. Perhaps ironically, this new global technology is gathering disparate members of linguistic communities which have been separated by continental distances. If these virtual communities have substance, they are being created along linguistic lines. This is another form of inclusion and exclusion which is developing among the users.

Changes and the technologies which communicate

Let me outline some of the implications of these facts and figures which accompany the introduction of new technology. From one limited perspective each of the major changes in world civilizations has been accompanied by a significant change in technology, and probably vice versa. I do not mean to be too materialistic here because significant shifts in human consciousness or morality are not dependent on changes in technology, but these technical changes often accompany the important shifts. From what we know about it, human speech developed slowly, including the instrumentalization of our voice and breathing to organize sounds. The new technology in this case was an adaptation of the human body to new uses. Sometimes, however, the significant change in technology is the impetus of a series of other changes. Such it was when simple agricultural tools made settled farming possible and the nomadic-gatherer era came to an end. Such it was when money, first as spices and then as coins, replaced barter economies. There are multiple examples to reflect upon, from the

manuscript to movable type, from horse transport to the automobile, from the pony express to the telegraph. Each of these inventions, each with the latest scientific understanding behind it, each often in concert with other technological inventions, contributes to the complex social interactions we call an era of civilization: the Bronze Age, the age of the printing press, the Industrial Revolution, the information age.

So when we consider the computer age and its implication for 'cyberspirituality', whatever that means, we have precedents in all of these historical examples of major changes of human life through technology. It is not a map for the future; no one has ever had that. But it is an extensive experience of technological change, some of which we have all lived through in our lifetimes. The technologies which we use for communication have particular implications for human community almost by definition. Much has been made, and rightly so, of the profound changes in human relations that were introduced with the printing press: the individual reader; the democratization of learning; the independence of interpretation; the public estate of the daily press; and the breakdown of intellectual authority. And so it was with the introduction of the telegraph, the photograph, the film, the telephone, the radio and the television.

Displacement of previous technologies

What are the lessons we have learned from this long history? First, there is always a displacement of the previous technologies, their owners and their users. People, for example, who were in the business of selling horses were marginalized when Henry Ford and others began mass-producing automobiles. Most of the twentieth century's production of wealth in one way or another had to do with the making of automobiles – use of steel, use of rubber, use of petroleum. Whoever invents yet a new form of personal transportation will displace the major players in the present economy. For communication technologies, several other displacements take place. The content of the new medium is often in the form of the old medium. Portrait and landscape photography replaced painting. The early films turned to the theatre or the novel for their content; they still do. At the same time, film has broken free and has created new and independent works of art. Film has become in part the content of television. And the internet needs advertising, graphics and a surprising return to text for its content. The old forms still live on in most cases, but their social function is radically

changed. E-mail displaces letter-writing; yet there is more writing than ever in the new medium.

The most fundamental displacement is the reorganization of space and time. All cultural forms and expressions use some organization of space and time, be it solemn liturgies or the news photograph. The internet has more dramatically than most tools changed our experience of space and time. Sending a note by e-mail halfway around the world in more or less an instant has made living on one continent rather than another seem less important. When I first started teaching in Rome in 1987, it took about three weeks to get a letter from Canada, where I usually live, and about another three weeks to send one back. That was a very slow conversation about my Canadian interests, which at that time were not treated in any regular way in the European press. I quickly felt very cut off. Yes, there was the telephone, which I used occasionally. But now I can write back and forth several times in the same day to my colleagues at the university where I work, and also look daily for ongoing news on the web site of all the major newspapers.

We can understand our commercial and our communication technologies in any era in terms of their modification of our cultural creation of time and space. In this sense the globe is shrinking. The Hubble telescope has brought outer space to us, and the pace of life and cultural change is accelerating. This has a number of crucial implications.

Displacing human sensibilities

The sensorium of the human body is changed. Human sensation, though grounded in anatomy, has always been culturally created. What I am implying is that people in other cultures and times did not even see with their eyes or hear with their ears in the same way as people do today. The acts of seeing and feeling and tasting are culturally construed and weighted with importance and power. At one level our senses are extended with communication technologies; we can see and hear over long distances. In Walter Ong's analysis we shift from a visual culture, reading texts in the late nineteenth century, to a renewed aural culture, hearing radio and television in the late twentieth century. And on, I suppose, to a new textuality in the electronics of the early twenty-first century.

As the communicative technologies change, our construction of our senses changes too. New competences are needed. Older skills are displaced. It is not just that children are better at playing video games,

they also learn differently than we who are old do. I can see this in my university-aged students, all of whom were brought up with television and most of whom have a significant amount of experience of using computers in their learning. They organize their writing quite differently, using a computer, than did their predecessors who used a pen or pencil, because they can edit, move and rearrange. Some of my students still have to use a pen in examinations, which they feel is a disadvantage. Re-weighting the sensorium of the human body has many implications for feeling, thinking and for the creation of meaningful social structures. It is one of the criteria of shifts in civilization.

Our identity in community and the social relationships which affirm that identity are also affected by these technological changes. Roman roads and Roman law made it possible to have an empire that would last a few hundred years. The growth of Christianity among different peoples was subsequent upon the organization of the Empire. The shift from clan to tribe, from tribe to dukedom, from region to nation in the nineteenth century (the unification of Italy or Germany), from nations to continental federations (the European Union), and now global commerce and continued concern about a truly global government, all embody a technological dimension. The shared information, values, money and transportation are constitutive of new forms of community, new forms of contact and meeting. Sometimes these new forms are not benign. Empires organize new forms of exploitation. These changing relationships have concerned churches, governments and business for a long time. What was under the authority of a national government – monetary policy or cultural policy – is now the shared domain of other participants in more distant places – Brussels, New York or Kuala Lumpur. New forms of community need new symbols of belonging. Old centres are displaced and some are excluded or have no influence by their own choice.

It is not hard to draw out the political implications of major technological change when considering communitarian and social displacement. Political parties created newspapers for themselves in the nineteenth century. F. D. Roosevelt used the radio for fireside chats in the 1930s and television has changed for good and for ill the nature of political disputations and campaigning since the Kennedy–Nixon debates of the 1960s. Access to information and the political process has not only become more possible technically, but the possibility of public participation in a variety of stages in the governmental process is increased.

Displacement of moral values

The most important implications of the introduction of new technologies for new purposes are in the realm of thinking and human values. The fundamental ideas which ground our lives communally also change. Here is where we experience shifts in the moral value of certain human vicissitudes. Let's look at the value shifts, for example, in the eighteenth century. Individual conscience and individual consciousness have become more valued since the Enlightenment. The sacredness of domestic life, partnership and parenting have become central commitments of modern life, difficult as they are for a lot of people to keep. In science, the assertions of hypotheses and the repeatability of experiments have become paramount in our search for truth and have put metaphysics and even artistic and humanistic activities in a defensive posture. I am not claiming that machines have caused this revolution of modernity. I am suggesting that the scientific invention and the technological innovation of the Industrial Revolution was the demonstration of the ideas and values of the Enlightenment. This is still what separates First World from Third World today.

Our concerns for community and for justice, locally or in larger ways, are inexorably tied in to the development of new technologies. In so far as the technology itself embodies applications of scientific understanding and some sense of social purpose, nothing is neutral, so these machines imply a morality in their use. This assertion is heightened when we focus on information technology, because its 'ontological form' is to invite specific human communicative interaction. This embodiment of social interaction certainly has a moral content, not only through the messages which are exchanged, but through the community who uses the network.

I suspect that the wider implications for human relations are and will continue to be parallel to the development of literacy worldwide. Education, at whatever level, requires hard work, opportunity and resources, and produces significant changes in those who undertake it. There exist sub-communities of people – the law, the business world or the Church – to which access usually depends on some form of accreditation. Use of and access to the internet is not of this level. It is more akin to watching a television and using a library. It requires an investment in the technology, either personally or through some public institution, and some investment of interest and intentionality. Public and research libraries have been available for more than a hundred years in most communities in the West, but they are used by people who

are motivated. They are neglected by most others. Communities of IT users, even these 'virtual' communities, will be formed among the motivated. I use the internet mainly in an educational context. But it also offers a commercial context and leisure and entertainment contexts. The level and locus of motivation will be different in each.

Generation gap and education

Like tastes in television viewing and pop music, the new information technologies expose and amplify the cultural distance between parents and their children. This is not to overlook all the areas of commonality which exist and need to be nourished, but it is to recognize that the communities and cultures that are formed in the electronic spaces are so diverse that small subcultures for special affinities and age groups are formed and encouraged commercially. Physically being together as a family builds experiences, memories and bonds; all our mediated technologies draw us apart, perhaps to be later re-formed as a community through our mediated interests.

The information technologies are important because they are reshaping our social and economic life and our access to them. There is therefore something more at stake here than preferring one author to another or one type of music over another. Computer literacy is one of the ways of counteracting the social stratification which already exists. Education has always performed this function, but imperfectly. The electronic technologies now have become a new tool for delivering education by both enhancing traditional teaching methods and enabling more efficient methods of learning.

At the university where I work we are being encouraged by computer technicians and pedagogical specialists to put our customers 'on line'. The secondary school where I am a member of the board of governors has a very ambitious three-year programme to have every student logging on both from home and in the school and to have most courses presented with supplementary materials, links and group exercises, on line.

What are the new pedagogical aims? Students have to be taught to move from facts to learn how to find facts, and to move from assembling information to thinking for themselves in a critical way. There is a staggering volume of information available, millions of pages, hundreds of thousands on a given topic. For education four important opportunities present themselves:

- as a repository of facts and information;

- as an occasion of on-line interaction and exchange;
- as a method of enhancing classroom instruction and presentation through on-line learning;
- as a practice field for entry into the information community.

However, we should exercise some caution. Similar claims were made about such benefits at the advent of educational television and not many were fulfilled. There is also the question of the suitability of the medium to certain topics. And it needs to be remembered that such formation is not just preparatory for e-commerce but for a wide range of humanistic and cultural occupations as well.

Nevertheless, education enhanced by the internet (I am not talking here about distance learning or self-directed learning – those are two different topics) encourages students to think differently, develop a question-and-research approach to learning, exercise a quality control on the volumes of information available and unlock further enthusiasm. There are so many positive points in the adventure of new ways of learning. University students have much more ready access to what they need to know than the tiring hours in the library could provide. They still get tired, but they have a freedom of exploration that is a hallmark of the spirit. And all the improvements, in distant medical diagnosis, for example, and in so many other areas of life, make it very hard not to be buoyant about the new technologies and their ongoing development.

On the one hand, then, we face new monopolies seeking to control the networks and the software products; we also face an ever-widening division between the industrial 'Haves' and 'Have-nots', the plugged in and the techno-poor. On the other, we have experienced an astonishing growth in access to cultural objects and information. Now nearly half of the households (the richer half) in the United States (compared with 38 per cent in Canada and 29 per cent in the United Kingdom) have access to the new technologies, and many of the new opportunities that come with them.

Religious and spiritual responsibilities

One of our major religious responsibilities is for the community we are a part of and in which we find our meaning and context of values. Joining or belonging to the Church has always implied this, from Jesus' call to Andrew and the other apostles to our ecumenical and multi-faith efforts. At one level this community is for us the Body of Christ, the diversified living entity with which we make the journey to God. We

must care for those with whom we are in community. We must strive to extend our community to embody what is God's, and we cannot live contentedly with divisions, particularly those which involve unequal opportunity, or worse, explicit exploitation. As we enter these new communities we should be responding ethically, seeking opportunities for ready access for others, be it through educational development, public libraries or UNICEF programmes which help provide in other countries what we already have.

One side of our Christian soul is culturally optimistic or grounded in hope. God made all things and he saw that they were good. The Spirit of God is at work in the world, finding expression in our contemporary cultures, just as we have affirmed the presence of the same Spirit in the different cultures of the past. Those past cultures had their horrors and oppressions, disunities and violent exclusions. Yet we can find the energy of God in history, and we should look for it critically in the coming information age. Further, there is something more global and decentralized about the internet that mirrors a participating community which the world has not known before, and which reflects the realities of our theological connectedness, as yet unexpressed. All forms of communication technology in the past have changed our current form of community and created new forms. Revelation, whether through the person of Christ or through the poetry of a psalm, has used the instruments of a communicational culture. And so let us explore the new culture in the same spirit.

Our economic realities should be close to our eucharistic life. We do not often think of these two concepts in the same sentence. All of these economic exclusions have eucharistic implications. The body of Christ we celebrate is divided and fragmented. During the previous decades we lived comfortably or with discomfort, knowing illiteracy, poverty and disease divided our world community. Realities cannot be rectified quickly, but our eucharistic task is to work towards communion.

I am back to the included and the excluded, which I have explored in a variety of ways. These are continuing troublesome divisions. They are more burdensome when we see them being created in new ways before our eyes, as it were. But do we not have a trinitarian theology which envisages all things being brought together in Christ, a human community which exists in our space and time, but which is yet to come, and is only foreshadowed at this moment in time? Through the process of becoming we continue our journey into God. Yes, much will be displaced and much will be left behind. But the journey is to be found in a world that was holy from the beginning. And we can work

for a world electronic community in which all or most can take their place. The vision is for all to sit at the one banquet table.

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