

# COMMENTARY

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## Red alert in cyberspace!

**Paul Virilio**

One of the major problems now facing political as well as military strategists is the phenomenon of immediacy, of instantaneity. For 'real time' now takes precedence over real space, now dominates the planet. The primacy of real time, of immediacy, over space is an accomplished fact, and it is an inaugural one. A recent advert for cell phones expressed it well enough: 'The earth has never been so small.' This development has the gravest consequences for our relation to the world, and for our vision of it.

There are three barriers: sound, heat and light. We have already crossed the first two – the sound barrier with supersonic and hypersonic aircraft, the heat barrier with rockets which can lift a man out of the earth's atmosphere and land him on the moon. We do not cross the third barrier, the light barrier; we collide with it. And it is this barrier of time that history now faces. The fact of having reached the light barrier, the speed of light, is a historic event, one which disorients history and also disorients the relation of human beings to the world. If that point is not stressed, then people are being disinformed, they are being lied to. For it has enormous importance. It poses a threat to geopolitics and geostrategy. It also poses a very clear threat to democracy, because democracy was tied to cities, to *places*.

Having attained this absolute speed, we face the prospect in the twenty-first century of the invention of a perspective based on real time, replacing the spatial perspective, the perspective based on real space, discovered by Italian artists of the quattrocento. Perhaps we forget how much the cities, politics, wars and economies of the medieval world were transformed by the invention of perspective.

Cyberspace is a new form of perspective. It is not simply the visual and auditory perspective that we know. It is a new perspective without a single precedent or reference: a *tactile perspective*. Seeing at a distance, hearing at a distance – such was the basis of visual and acoustic perspective. But touching at a distance, feeling at a distance, this shifts perspective into a field where it had never before applied: contact, electronic contact, tele-contact.

The development of information superhighways confronts us with a new phenomenon: disorientation. A fundamental disorientation which completes and perfects the social and financial deregulation whose baleful consequences we already know. Perceived reality is being split into the real and the virtual, and we are getting a kind of stereo-reality, in which existence loses its reference points. To be is to be *in situ*, here and now, *hic et nunc*. But cyberspace and instantaneous, globalized information are throwing all that into total confusion.

What is now underway is a disturbance of the perception of the real: a trauma. And we need to concentrate on this. Because no technology has ever been developed that has not had to struggle against its own specific negativity. The specific negativity of information superhighways is precisely this disorientation of alterity, of our relation to the other and to the world. It is quite clear that this disorientation, this 'de-situation', will bring about a profound disturbance with consequences for society and, in turn, for democracy.

The tyranny of absolute speed will conflict with representative democracy. When pundits celebrate 'cyber-democracy' and 'virtual democracy', and when others tell us that the

'democracy of opinions' will replace the democracy of political parties, what they are really championing is that disorientation of politics of which Silvio Berlusconi's media coup d'état of March 1994 gave us a foretaste, Italian-style. The rise to power of ratings and opinion polls can only be encouraged by the spread of information technology.

The very term 'globalization' is a delusion. For there is no globalization, there is only virtualization. What is 'globalized' by instantaneity is time. Everything is played out within this real-time perspective, within a time that is, henceforth, the only time.

For the first time, history will unfold in a single time-frame: world time. Until now, history moved in local times, local spaces, regions, nations. Now, in a sense, globalization and virtualization are introducing a world time which anticipates a new type of tyranny. If history is rich, it is because it is local, because there were local times which took precedence over something which existed only in astronomy – universal time. But in future our history will be played out in the universal time of instantaneity.

On the one hand, real time dominates real space; eliminating distances and extension and replacing them with duration, an infinitesimal duration. On the other, the global time of multimedia, of cyberspace, overrides the local times of the living activities of particular cities, particular places. To such an extent that it has been proposed that the term 'global' be replaced by 'glocal', contracting together the global and the local. The local is considered to be necessarily global, the global necessarily local. Relationships between citizens will hardly remain untouched by such a deconstruction of relations to the world.

### **A generalised accident**

There are no gains without losses. The acquisition of information technology and telematics will inevitably entail a loss. And if we do not evaluate this loss, the gain can have no value. This was something that could be seen during the development of transport technologies. If it became possible to produce high-speed trains, this was because nineteenth-century railway engineers had invented the block system – a form of traffic engineering, traffic control which allowed trains to go faster and faster while preventing disastrous collisions. There is no traffic control system for today's information technology.

There is one more important element: information cannot exist without disinformation. And a new type of disinformation now seems possible, one which has nothing to do with voluntary censorship. It is a kind of suffocation of meaning, a loss of control of reason. Introduced by computer technology and multimedia networks, it represents another major danger for humanity.

It is what Albert Einstein foretold in the 1950s when he spoke of a 'second bomb' – the information bomb which would follow the atomic one. A bomb in which interactivity in real time would be to information what radioactivity is to energy. Disintegration would no longer only apply to particles of matter; it would spread to the individuals who make up our societies. We can see something of this at work in structural unemployment, in electronic home-working and in all the relocation and diffusion of economic activity.

One can predict that just as the appearance of the atom bomb quickly required the establishment of military deterrence to avoid nuclear catastrophe, so in the twenty-first century the information bomb will necessitate a new social deterrence to ward off the destructive effects of the explosion of generalized information. This will be the great accident of the future, following on from the specific accidents which preceded it, one by one, in the industrial era and before (with the invention of the ship, the train, the aeroplane, the nuclear power station, we simultaneously invented the shipwreck, the derailment, the plane crash and Chernobyl . . . )

With the globalization of telecommunications, we can expect to see a generalised accident, an unprecedented accident, as extraordinary as that unprecedented time, global time. A generalized accident that would be a little like Epicurus's 'accident of accidents'. The stock-market crash was merely a small taste of things to come. The generalized accident is still

unknown. But when people talk of 'financial meltdown', the metaphor is well chosen. . .

When we speculate about the dangers of accidents on the information superhighways, the issue is not the information but the absolute speed of its processing by computer technology: it is interactivity. And indeed it is not so much information technology itself which creates the problem but the network of computerized information flows as a whole, as a totality: telematics, the Net. In the United States, the Pentagon, creator of the Internet, can already talk in terms of 'a revolution in military affairs', and even of a 'war of knowledge' which would replace the war of movement, just as the latter replaced the siege warfare of which Sarajevo represents a tragic vestige.

On leaving the White House in 1961, General Eisenhower declared that the military-industrial complex was 'a threat to democracy'. He knew what he was talking about, having set it up in the first place. In 1995, with the establishment of a real informational-industrial complex, and as various US politicians, notably Ross Perot and Newt Gingrich, talk of 'virtual democracy' in a tone which echoes fundamentalist mysticism, how can we miss the warnings? How can we fail to see the danger of a real cybernetics of the socio-political sphere?

Virtual technologies possess an incomparable power of suggestion. Side by side with the narco-capitalism of the drug trade – a destabilising element in the world economy – we can see the beginnings of a narco-capitalism of computerisation and electronics. It might even be asked if the developed world is not introducing virtual technologies as a kind of challenge to, and a block on, those underdeveloped countries, particularly in Latin America, which live – or scrape their survival – from the drug trade. When we see to what extent work on the most advanced electronic technologies is focused on the 'ludic' (video games, virtual reality games, etc.), how can we ignore this capacity to create instant dependency using techniques whose historical precedents should be all too obvious?

We are faced with something which is coming to look very like a 'cybercult'. The fact is that the new electronic technologies will only contribute to the perfecting of democracy if we struggle, first and foremost, against the caricature of world society being created by the multinationals as they are thrown, with fatally reckless speed, into the construction of information superhighways.

**Translated by Malcolm Imrie  
from *Le Monde diplomatique*, August 1995**



Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy

## Strangers & Others

**A Symposium 23 - 24 November 1995**

Recent work in social philosophy has repeatedly returned to the idea of community as a foundation of ethical and political responsibility. At the same time, however, there has been a growing awareness of both the exclusivity and the internal differentiation and 'multi-ethnicity' of actual communities. This has given rise to a series of debates about the constitution of identities through relations with others. This symposium will address these questions from the standpoints of a variety of traditions: from communitarianism to discourse ethics; negative dialectics to Deleuze's nomadology and Nancy's 'being-in-common'.

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