

GETTING OUT OF 20TH CENTURY COMMUNICATION REALITIES AND 21ST CENTURY COMMUNICATION PROBABILITIES

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Taking a critical view of the future of Communication, this article argues that what is needed is for the new communication and information technologies to create communicative spaces of equal partnership for not yet so virtual people.

When in 1882 Pantelija Panta Mihajlovic attempted to introduce the telephone in Serbia, the predominant response he received was one of astonishment and surprise: "Why, on earth, would we need such a thing, when we can easily send boys (servants, apprentices, soldiers) to exchange messages." "What we need are better roads", one potential customer said. The new technology, of course, won, but the same attitude followed, and is sometimes still follows many other technological inventions. However, what we have learned from the past is that technological advancement can rarely be stopped, especially if someone, somewhere, sees its quick implications in the near future and with it, the possibility for profit. Although today, most people anxiously wait for new technical and technological wonders that can make our lives more comfortable, the most important dimension of communication processes remain neglected. The speed of changes in human relations has been extremely slow and superficial.

Today we are mostly concerned with "competition and cooperation among fibre optics, cellular radio, and satellites in meeting communication and transportation needs" for the 21st century.ⁱ Technoptimists believe that "whatever the future holds for communication, it will hold for all the world communities", as "we can be sure that society will ultimately benefit, as it always has."ⁱⁱⁱ But this may not be so true in the world in which globalisation actually means Americanisation, where patriarchy resembles a hybrid made of hydra and chameleon, where racism and nationalism never really disappeared from history, and where the gap between the materially rich and poor is widening all the time.

We can confidentially say that the future of the communication will be one with a new generation of PC's where we will be able to download tonnes of megabytes in a nanoseconds; it will be a future in which we will routinely use virtual reality to gather knowledge or experience

from far away countries and events. We will be able to control computers with our voices, movements and even thoughts, or reach everyone everywhere through personalised phone link. The movement of people will be revolutionised with the development of new means of transport, which will be more economical, faster and safer, and possibly even less ecologically pollutant. The variety and enormity of technological inventions will find their implications in the entertainment industry and media, changing the way we work or shop today, and revolutionising basically everything, from space research to everyday life, such as how we cook and bathe. But the future of social implications of these new technologies and means of communication might not be so linear, so easily predictable.

Some of the **positive aspects of communicating** in the "information era" are obvious. Technology has provided space for creating a necessary link between the many diverse civilisations, nations, groups of people and individuals. It enables individuals to find their "soul mates" on other continents. It promotes business, helps ideas spread, and has the power or potential for the creation of global civil society. As there is no real censorship in the cyberspace, totalitarian societies can stand less chance of controlling information. It is a new medium, and thus in the hands of more creative, ambitious, usually younger members of society. While traditional means of communication were mostly dominated and controlled by those with political power, cyberspace looks much more free, and has provided support for rebellious social groups, like, for example, in the case of Yugoslavia (the 1996 student demonstrations that allowed the opposition power to retain their electoral victories) or Mexico (the Zapatistas, which have begun a world internet campaign to press their land demands). Today we get news from all over the globe fairly quickly and that could enable a world community to act promptly and prevent millions of deaths due to natural or social catastrophes. Although this does not solve the problem of the ideological nature of the news, as conflicts in Somalia and Yugoslavia have taught us.

Still most conflicts can be resolved through adequate communication: learning about and understanding others (through personal contacts made easier and cheaper through the new means of transport but also through TV or the Net is one and probably the most necessary requirement. New technologies provide the means for resolving many of the world's problems: today we can globally produce more food than ever, better prevent and cure certain illnesses, and more quickly transfer and provide for the victims of natural catastrophes and social

conflicts. New technologies have helped create conditions in which the world can see itself, can imagine itself, as one global community (which, of course, we all are).

In the future, new technologies might fulfil their promise: give us more time for leisure and free us from repetitive boring tasks, whether in the office or at home. Maybe they can even help reverse the crazy race (our time scarcity) in which most people are trapped today and enable children, or our "future generations", to be better taken care of by members of all society. But this will largely depend on the extent of social change as so far technology has mostly created more work, less creativity and again more alienation between members of their immediate community - not to mention dramatically reducing job security, making more and more humans redundant.

As we are still communicating mostly through weapons, new technologies have also helped create worse (political, ecological or economical) conditions for large groups of the world's population. What was fought and destroyed locally has become a global phenomena thus making the 20th century the most bloody (given the number of wars and human victims) century ever. Globalisation is not merely more goods and services for everyone, it is also increases access to violent death.

Some of the **negative aspects of communication** in this century are also very obvious: children porn videos or the pornography on the net might be one of the most striking examples. In these cases, new communication technologies help not only immortalise what is the product of a distorted view of sexuality within patriarchal societies, they also help predators find new victims, creating a reverse civil society, a community of the predatory violent. Rapists or paedophiles can connect with their like-minded friends and together they can create virtual world in which the "abnormal" becomes "normal", and the most secret ideas become common property encouraging people "on the edge" to proceed with what they might have considered problematic before. The introduction of the "right to own a PC" in the 21st century might even enhance this type of behaviour. Introducing computer literacy in schools, and having more and more information for everyone, both in developed and undeveloped world is a beautiful idea but cannot solve these types of social problems, yet alone all the world problems as some "technophiliacs" would want us to believe.

The Controversial Nature of the 21st Century Communication

Communication in the future is thus problematic. Language on the Net is the language the world is speaking today. It is the language of the most powerful nation but also the language of the dominant form of knowledge: technical rationality. While it helps connect so many people and supplies so much information it also represents a specific form of cultural violence. It creates a global community of equals: age, looks, race, (dis)ability, class or gender becoming invisible or irrelevant. At the same time through promoting, enhancing and cementing current ways of communicating it silences billions of people.

Nature

Nature is also silenced. The way people "communicate" with nature is still communication through domination: the need to suppress and conquer. Greed for higher production and profit has created global ecological crises. New technologies and old ideologies have aided and abated this process. And language reflects (and again perpetuates) this type of thinking. We use words like "dinosaurs have "ruled" the earth for millions of years" (not lived on), as if the Earth has to be ruled upon. We learn human history as the history of political and military leaders and rulers. We try to make our species immortal by destroying the very conditions, which have helped our species survive. The most recent "developments" in medical science, such is, for example, cloning, are done within a scientific paradigm which includes control, domination and experimentation with nature, and which results in millions of animals tortured and slaughtered, hundreds of thousands (or maybe more) fertilised cells and embryos destroyed, and all that with only one ethical question raised: shall we clone humans too? Thus there is a justified concern among many feminist and women's groups (often accused of suffering from "technophobia") regarding new reproductive technologies. The creation of new future generations should not be done in what Gena Corea calls "reproductive brothels" where scientists can play little gods by creating or destroying embryos whenever they feel like it, and where they can use for reproduction bodies of dead women or those not ever born, or where they can genetically manipulate eggs and sperm in order to create a perfect superhuman. Of course, society should help infertile couples or single women gain their so much wanted child but as medical sciences are so much dominated by secular, scientific and the patriarchal "lobby" the say of those so far excluded (e.g. women) is crucial in creating a different direction for science.

The fear is that with the creation of artificial womb, which is perhaps just the question of timeⁱⁱⁱ, women's role in reproduction and our say about meanings and consequences of current medical research will probably be decreased even more.

Media

Most news agencies represent to people a virtual world. It is a slice of reality made mostly of political intrigues, sliced throats and mutilated bodies, objectified women, and ridiculed others (nations, races, countries, ideological enemies). Papers of the world usually offer us the choice between "democratic" publishing with tonnes of advertising material or state controlled press where anything is possible. For example, in mainstream Serbian papers these days we read that all intelligent people in Europe wish for radicals (ultra-nationalists whose elite squads were one of the most brutal imported Serbian units in the Bosnian war) to win the forthcoming elections; that Slobodan Milosevic is the most influential Balkan politician - the guarantor of peace, stability and prosperity in this region - the person who has always pleaded for a peaceful solution to the national conflict and who laid the foundation for democracy and market economy in Serbia, while at the same time saving Serbian unity and Serbia from war. His wife, the leader of leftist (communist) party JUL, Mirjana Markovic, firmly believes that the leaders of the opposition are all traitors, waiting in a queue in front of foreign embassies to acquire "their own" opinion. The President of Montenegro has no doubts that Yugoslavia awaits a shining and prosperous future. We are also informed that the rate of production growth in Yugoslavia is the highest in Europe and that the forthcoming elections are going to be democratic and fair. We are also reminded that Serbia and Montenegro are never going to be anyone's servants. What we see as reality creates news and then in turn news help create a new reality. Can the news in the 21st century be any different if our societies stay the same?

Exclusion

As previously mentioned billions of the world's people today cannot have their voices heard. Some of the excluded are non-English speaking nations, "irrelevant" nations and peoples, national, religious and ideological minorities, poor in poor countries and poor in rich countries, the majority of women, most old and disabled, and almost all children. In the 21st century most of the world's population will still be silenced. The reality will still be the reality of the strongest and most powerful. The new communication technologies will further enhance differences

between poor and rich, between women and men and between the world and its narrow part defined as "the West". And once poor, if the world and women catch up with the dominating forces, it will be on their terms and it will be in their language.

Language

The dominant English language is the one, which creates certain forms of thinking, and suppress other ones. It cannot possibly replace words and phrases coming from other cultures, which have incorporated centuries of meaning behind it. "To pass next to me like next to a Turkish graveyard" (ignore someone's presence, "give someone cold shoulder" or "cut someone dead") means little to those people outside Balkan borders. But it brings back 500 years of Turkish colonisation and oppression in Serbian minds, evoking much stronger sentiments than what these mere words appear to mean.

The language on the Net is even more limited: it is a language of technical rationality, which prevents all other forms of knowing and experiencing this world. There is little space for communicative poetry, for feeling what is unsaid, for reading other signs, for weaving with another's energy. The language on the Net is also beautiful as it will give us much required information and enable us to contact people we would otherwise never meet. Thus as individuals we are becoming richer and richer everyday while as a world we are becoming poorer and poorer. Will this culturally rich individuals be able to automatically create a future world consisted of many cultures, many meanings, and with better abilities to understand? Will there be some "invisible hand" which can help create all this? Or will we all become "neuromancers", alienated in one way or another?

Global Conversations

Before crying for our lost battle, we (women, non-English speaking people, not so technically oriented individuals) can start thinking in terms of what exactly is silenced, and what can we do about it. How can we engage in a global conversation while not losing our own identities, our own understanding of reality, our ways of speaking, or our own language?

Women have proved they can speak the language of their "enemy". After all that is what we learn in schools, gather from books and from all the other print media: someone else's history, someone else's perspective and someone else's knowledge. Most feminists agree that in

order to achieve this, women had to either become bilingual or to abandon our own traditional language. While it is not so clear what this traditional language might be, obvious differences between women's and men's ways of speaking are found to exist. Research, in general, show that women ask questions while men make statements, that women talk about people and feelings while men talk about things, that women use more adjectives, more modal forms such as "perhaps", "sort of", "maybe", and more tag questions and attention beginners.^{iv}

It is often stressed that language not only reflects but also perpetuates and contributes to gender inequality, and that through language hierarchy between genders is "routinely established and maintained".^v Feminist researchers found that the men are more likely than women to control conversation while women do "support work" being some sort of "co-operative conversationalists" who express frequent concern for other participants in talk.^{vi} The main solution for the transformation of current conversational division of labour between sexes cannot be only in the area of language because even the most "neutral" terms can always be appropriated by the dominant culture (like the meaning of the word "no" can be at time constructed to mean "maybe" or "wait a while").^{vii} Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King write: "Because linguistic meaning are, to a large extent, determined by the dominant culture's social values and attitudes, terms initially introduced to be non-sexist and neutral may lose their neutrality in the "mouths" of a sexist speech community and/or culture".^{viii} The organisation of words and ideas into knowledge was similarly done in a context of masculine power where women were made invisible, their existence either denied or distorted and their ways of knowing and issues of interest labelled irrelevant. While many feminist linguists are attempting to reinvent language and support women's emancipation through linguistic interventions, it is clear that this has to be done simultaneously with political, economic and cultural transformations in the areas of knowledge, language and the written word.

If the conclusions of research on different conversational styles between women and men are correct than women are much better equipped for the forthcoming world. They are better equipped and trained to listen. The slow switch from ordering others to listening has to be made as we can only survive as a species on this planet if we re-learn to listen to nature, to the other, and to the spiritual sides of ourselves. While it is obvious that women can and do use the most dominant language, it is also claimed that we would rather use some "softer", more intuitive and face-to-face approach. Apparently, in society controlled by women, oral tradition, body language, sounds, dreams, intuitive and psychic ways of communicating would be equal

with the written text, or at least not so much suppressed. Maybe, in such a society where women would participate at all levels and in all spheres it wouldn't be necessary to introduce "dressing Barbie" video game in order to make girls more interested in new computer technologies. Maybe new software would be more interactive and more user (women) friendly and maybe new communication technologies would look completely different. Maybe they would not be so individualised, and maybe, netweaving would be done in a context of community or friendly groups and not in a context of alienated individuals. Priorities would probably be somewhere else, where quality of life of majority of people would have the highest value.

Getting out

Together with women's ways of knowing, worldly power supported by enlightenment ideology suppressed all other knowledge, which could not be measured and explained by reason. Empiricism and rationalism have had great role in human development but their promotion of only relevant ways of knowing prevents the solving of what seems to be a permanent crisis of our societies. A social system based on power and greed, and individuals concerned only about their own being and thus only about very near future have been a crucial contributing factor in this crisis.

Our sense of time needs to be expanded to include a wider historical dimension in which individuals are seen as part of a longer chain and not the small centres of the universe. The language (and thinking) of most traditional cultures has included many other ways of speaking and communication: with ancestors, totems, mythical creatures, God, or nature. While this "other" world is scientifically labelled as non-existing, non-visible, wish-fulfilling or fear-revealing, still today billions of people are in communication with forces beyond scientific reach, and if nothing else this type of communication makes them alive. What is important is that any type of practice which enables people to transcend their egos, be it in a form of social conditioning of women to think about and listen to the others, or in a form of altruistic social, religious or spiritual movement, is a first step forward in providing "sustenance, security and happiness" for the majority of people. If we start educating future generations with their future children's future in mind they might reform the system of "take and run" in which we live today. As for communication, like in the case of half-truths or half-information, impartial communications we have today is becoming more and more dangerous for the humanity's well-being, given the power of "the toys for the boys", the weapons. Certain scientists predict that

new information technologies will be able to replace God by knowing it all about everything. Others are hoping to make us immortal in 20 years by developing programs through which they would be able to reproduce human "souls" or "minds" in a form of million gigabytes and then sending them in the Universe in which those millions of gigabytes will continue to multiply. Theoretically and hypothetically we would be able then to inhabit every galactic square meter. The conquest of the nature would reach its climax or maybe come to an end. One day, maybe after the disappearance and reappearance of the cosmos, such virtual human intelligence genetic code might be able to retrieve all forms of (virtual?) life that have ever lived on the planet Earth. But what is much more important at the present is for new communication and information technologies to create "communicative spaces of equal partnership" for not yet so "virtual" people.

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- i. George Thomas Kurian and Graham T.T. Molitor, *Encyclopedia of the Future*. Two Volumes. New York, Macmillan Library Reference, 1996, page 124.
 - ii. Ibid., page, 124.
 - iii. Staff, "Womb tank may save lives," *New Zealand Herald*, July 19, 1997, page A16.
 - iv. Pamela M. Fishman, "Interaction: The Work Women Do", in Joyce McCarl Nielsen, ed., *Feminist Research Methods*, Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press, 1990.
 - v. Ibid., page, 225.
 - vi. Deborah Cameron, Fiona McAlinden and Kathy O'Leary, "Lakoff in Context: the social and linguistic functions of tag questions", in Stevi Jackson, *Women's Studies: Essential Readings*, New York, New York University Press, 1993, page, 424.
 - vii. Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King, "Gender-based Language Reform and the Social Construction of Meaning", in Stevi Jackson, *Women's Studies: Essential Readings*, page. 410-411.
 - viii. Ibid., page, 411.