

Cyberecology in “The Age of Access”

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Abstract

Cyberecology is the newly coined term combining “cyber” of cyberspace and “ecology.”

Cyberspace of the internet is unimaginably huge and invisible. Moreover it might be anarchistic for a while as many critics indicate. But we should simply ask who controls it. In January 2000 the merger of AOL with Time Warner was announced. Jeremy Rifkin commented “the age of access” had begun and the merger of two giants means just the icon of the age.

Today deregulation has become the touchstone of the openness to globalization, namely connectedness. Connectedness assures access to cultural experiences just as purchasing tickets to enter movie theaters or amusement parks.

Commercial relations are unable to sustain themselves without the live environment of the culture. Yet less time and space are left for the rooted cultural experiences.

Ironically, the success leads to the complete failure. For, if this newest stage of capitalism succeeds, its very success makes the cause for its destruction. Therefore a balanced ecology becomes the important assignment in the coming age.

1 Invisible Environment

A great communication tool will not necessarily improve our communication. Technology creates a new communication environment, which provides ordinary people an easy-to-use medium resulting in a daily life convenience and economic benefit in some cases. Yet at the same time it causes a dangerous pitfall, where a self-image of virtually enriched individual is growing up day by day.

Today tens of millions of people use email systems to exchange their messages together, which has been caused by connecting microcomputers and mobile phones with the internet. Young people are busy creating email messages moving their thumbs up and down in the train. Even an elderly lady or gentleman sends her or his mail on the street. But how many people are aware of the fact that every email is monitored and copied by email server computers? Worse, imprudent words often hurt others, which will finally boomerang on senders themselves.

Web services have been also evolving into the popularized stage, including banking service, net shopping, investment service, and even net gambling are available. The most important for us is distance learning on the web, which enables many people beyond the geological gap to have a chance to learn the subjects of a variety of academic and practical fields. It seems to be a good thing anyway. But some data show the reality is that generally in case of distance learning the tuition is more expensive and higher discipline is needed than in “real” learning. A person of high

income and high discipline will get more higher income on the net environment. This is just the reality of the digital age, which is called "digital divide."

Technology makes a new environment. At the early stage of development maniac people enjoy it technically, but now at the matured stage ordinary people enjoy it and begins to find some new comfort in a new medium. Yet it might be a difficult task to become a master of the new environment when he or she feels comfortable in it. Worse, what if such environment is under the control of new social power? The real meaning of the new environment might be hidden from the eyes of the ordinary users.

When we think about the meaning of the environment, its scale and vision is important. Cyberspace of the internet is unimaginably huge and invisible. Moreover it might be anarchistic for a while, as many critics indicate. But we should simply ask who controls it. In January 2000 the merger of AOL with Time Warner was announced. Jeremy Rifkin commented "the age of access" had begun and the merger of two giants means just the icon of the age.¹ In the age of access, Rifkin says, "access has become the ticket to advancement and personal fulfillment and as powerful as the democratic vision was to earlier generations."²

It will become more and more difficult to maintain a smart interaction between human users and such an elusive environment as cyberspace. The point is that we often forget why and how to interact with the real, not virtual, environment while the virtual environment is going to be assumed as more real than ever. Cyberspace of the internet is both cause and effect of the new age. The merger of AOL with Time Warner was a visible icon of the new age as the giant access providing companies are just key players in the new age. Yet again the scale and vision of the environment is crucial in order to understand its meaning. Rifkin's analysis helps us to conceive such a huge and profound entity.

2 Forced Connectedness

Access is the very key word of the new age. Rifkin summarizes as follows:

*Access is, after all, about distinctions and divisions, about who is to be included and who is to be excluded. Access is becoming a potent conceptual tool for rethinking our world view as well as our economic view, making it the single most powerful metaphor of the coming age.*³

Then how do we make access? In the early internet period, when the 2400 bps modems were used to access to the service provider's host computers, it was a naive pleasure to find the message "successfully connected!" after several failures. The truth might be simple. Yes, "connectedness" characterizes the new economy or new capitalism period. Technically dial-up access will disappear sooner or later, for broadband connection is rapidly going to become popular through fiber optic. But a more important fact is that our economy has been globally connected and networked, likes it or not, for more than decades, which is accelerated and finally completed by cyberspace

measures.

Rifkin indicates, "The essential of commercial business in cyberspace is connectedness. Electronic networks, by their very nature, break down boundaries and walls."⁴ Global business networks extend beyond the country borders and political walls. Then culture industry is the prototype of those in the new capitalist industries. The relationship between producers and consumers simulates those the culture industries have made with audiences for many years. He concludes, "we are entering a more cerebral period of capitalism whose product is access to time and mind."⁵ In the cerebral period of capitalism, the selling and buying of human experiences is going on. Rifkin's analogy of the movie industry is suggestive.

*The movie industry is the front-runner in a new era in which each consumer's life experience will be commodified and transformed into an unending series of theatrical moments, dramatic events, and personal transformations.*⁶

Commodifying human experiences is extending to the whole areas of the economy. In the new network economy, Rifkin argues, just ideas and images are real commodities. Nike is the typical case of the new business powerhouse of this kind, while outsourcing is access to outer resources on an on-demand basis. This is the "networked" society. Nike sells only concepts, images, designs and finally brand loyalty. But it has a dangerous pitfall inside.

*Unfortunately, the deplorable working conditions in outsourcing plants often are never detected because the corporate supply networks are closely guarded and kept hidden from the public.*⁷

This is just the truth of the networked society, which hide the reality from the public. As a matter of fact "connectedness" means "unconnectedness" from the reality. Connectedness can not be chosen, but it is just the forced one.

If everything is networked, then Rifkin suggests, "network forces pull all remaining free time into the commercial orbit, making each institution and individual a captive of an all-pervasive "commerciality"."⁸ We understand why selling something is a wrong idea in the new networked capitalism. The market must be redefined in order to commodify the consumer's free time, namely consumer's life itself.

*While property dealt with the narrow material question of what's mine and thine, access deals with the broader cultural question of who controls lived experience itself.*⁹

Cultural capitalism is defined by Rifkin, "Cultural production represents the final stage of the capitalist way of life, whose essential mission has always been to bring more and more human activity into the commercial arena."¹⁰ Technology becomes practically effective only when the proper legislation is established.

The transformation to cultural capitalism was helped along in 1996 with the passage of the Telecommunications Act, a landmark piece of legislation that opened the media field to new competitors, including the large regional telephone companies and cable companies.¹¹

Not property but access is the key concept in the connected market, where the digital technology has made a new communication environment as cyberspace. Computers, mobile phones, cable TV, videogame consoles, palm-top PDAs (personal digital assistants), electronic publishing including web pages and other enormous kinds of communication tools merge together to give global businesses a mighty weapon to organize human experiences.

Globalization allows businesses to organize human experiences. Globalization has never been a natural process in the world economy. It has been intentionally arranged by the global business architects. It is domestic regulations that prevent global businesses to extend to the international stage.

In 1997, however, officials from sixty countries signed an accord, through the auspices of the World Trade Organization, to end state monopolies and open up the \$600 billion global telecommunications market to free competition and foreign investment in domestic markets.¹²

Today deregulation has become the touchstone of the openness to globalization, namely connectedness. Connectedness assures access to cultural experiences just as purchasing tickets to enter movie theaters or amusement parks. Rifkin argues, "In an era in which the affluent fifth of the population is leaving property behind in search of cultural experiences and personal transformation, the remaining four-fifths have meager belongings and still wish to be propertied."¹³ In the age of access, accessibility to the culture becomes the indicator of richness.

3 Imbalanced Culture

What is access? Where does it come from and to where does it go? The answer is not simple, but we know what precedes commerce which commodifies our cultural experiences. Rifkin focuses on the distinction between social contracts and commercial ones.

The former has a longer temporal horizon and is bounded by custom, on one end, and deliverance, on the other. Social contracts are steeped in the notion of indebtedness to ancestors, unborn generations, the earth and its creatures, and a benevolent God. Membership in traditional communities brings with it restraints on personal action. Obligations to others take precedence over personal whims, and security flows from being embedded in a larger social organism.¹⁴

True, social contracts precede commercial ones. "Owing to others and other things beyond time and space" is an important concept. Then we have to go to other contracts.

*Commercial contracts, on the other hand, are generally of short duration. They are bound by neither history nor legacy but rather performance and results. The obligations between the parties are explicit, generally quantifiable, and spelled out in legal terms in the contractual agreement.*¹⁵

Commercial relations seem to be floating leaves on the surface of the deep sea of social organism, the very root of lived cultural experiences. Though Rifkin does not say that, the back side of commercial relations might be democracy, but today democracy is generally of "short duration." It is bounded by "neither history nor legacy" but by "performance and results." Democracy generally aims to the satisfaction of the present people in the present social context, namely in the present capitalist system. Democracy needs the never ending reflection on its rooted soil.

Commercial relations are unable to sustain its entity without the live environment of the culture. Yet less time and space are left for the rooted cultural experience. For, Rifkin argues, "cyberspace colonizing more and more of the shared culture in the form of cultural production and cultural commodities, less time and space are available for the expression of traditional relationships and the nurturance of conventional communities."¹⁶

The equilibrating relation between two kinds of access, social and commercial, is essential to lived cultural experiences to survive the crisis.

4 Ecology to Revive

John Kenneth Galbraith, the author of "The New Industrial State," taught us that we should not rely on theories that neglect the weakness of human beings. When we do not like to face a hard reality, we pretend to think that there exists no such reality ever. Cultural industries give us comfort in cyberspace on a daily basis, but what if such comfort paves a way for collapsing of the very root of culture itself?

*If the capitalist system continues to absorb large parts of the cultural realm into its sphere in the form of commodified cultural products, productions, and experiences, the risk is very real that the culture will atrophy to the point where it can no longer produce enough social capital and thus support an economy. The delicate balance between culture and commerce will have been shattered because social capital, which is produced exclusively by the culture but which serves as the lubricant for commercial operations, will have dried up.*¹⁷

Ironically, the success leads to the complete failure. For, "If this newest stage of capitalism succeeds, its very success could sow the seeds for its destruction."¹⁸ Therefore a balanced ecology becomes the important assignment in the coming age.

The emphasis ought to be on dividing human time and attention more equitably between the cultural and commercial spheres in order to find a middle ground between two

*complementary but often conflicting ways of organizing human activity and relationships.*¹⁹

Here is an example. In order to accomplish a balanced ecology, David Shenk, the author of "DATA SMOG Surviving the information glut," proposes the very practical "Be your own filter" rules as follows.

- *Turn the television off*
- *Avoid news-nuggets.*
- *Leave the pager and cell-phone behind.*
- *Limit your e-mail.*
- *Resist advertising.*
- *Resist upgrade mania.*
- *Be your own "smart agent."*
- *Cleanse your system with "data-fasts."*²⁰

The first rule is simple and essential. Applications are "turn the computer off," "turn the internet off," or "turn the game console off." Shenk explains the last rule, "As your own smart agent, you are also your own data dietitian. Take some time to examine your daily intake and consider whether or not your info diet needs some fine-tuning."²¹ The last rule sounds like a very technical one. Yet this rule is philosophically true. Its application has an enormous possibility.

Rifkin warns about the emerging power of the fourth sector, in order to maintain the delicate balance between culture and commerce. The first sector is the market, the second one is the government, and the third one is the culture. The third is important, for "The cultural institutions of a society ---its churches, secular institutions, civic associations, fraternal organizations, sports clubs, art groups, and nongovernmental organizations---are the wellspring of social trust."²² It is a strong community that produces social trust. The fourth sector is "made up of the informal economy, the black market, and the criminal culture."²³

*In the coming years, the real race in every geographic region of the world will be between the institutions of the third sector and those of the fourth sector for control over local geography in the wake of partial abandonment by government and business.*²⁴

This is a real image of the coming age as the challenge forced by the global commerce, which will be just the starting point of "cyberecology."

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 Ipppei Wakabayashi, "Internet Road: The Road to the unknown Century, No.14 / AOL bought Time Warner: Access leads a new century," *TRAFFIC & BUSINESS, the quarterly Journal of Highway Industry Development Organization*, WINTER 2000 No.58, pp20-21 (in Japanese).
- 2 Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access : The New Culture of Hypercapitalism, Where All of Life Is a Paid-for Experience* (New York, NY : Jeremy P. Tarcher / Putnam, 2000), p.15.
- 3 Ibid., p.15.
- 4 Ibid., p.18.
- 5 Ibid., p.29.
"Cerebral period of capitalism" was predicted by Sadao Umesao in *Bunmei no Seitashikan* (original in Japanese), Tokyo : Chuokoronsha, 1967. Umesao is the author of *An Ecological View of History : Japanese Civilization in the World Context*,
- 6 Ibid., p.29.
- 7 Ibid., p.48.
- 8 Ibid., p.97.
- 9 Ibid., p.218.
- 10 Ibid., p.220.
- 11 Ibid., p.220.
- 12 Ibid., p.221.
- 13 Ibid., p.229. In Japan it seems that most of the people believe much propertied, not accessibility to the culture, means real richness for a while,
- 14 Ibid., pp.241-242.
- 15 Ibid., p.242.
- 16 Ibid., p.242.
- 17 Ibid., p.245.
- 18 Ibid., p.247.
- 19 Ibid., p.252.
- 20 David Shenk, *DATA SMOG : Surviving the Information Glut* (New York, NY : HarperEdge, 1997), pp.185-189.
- 21 Ibid., p.189.
- 22 *The Age of Access*, p.243.
- 23 Ibid., p.256.
- 24 Ibid., p.256.