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Electronic Stepping Stones: a mosaic metaphor for the production and re-distribution of communicative skill in an electronic mode

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Abstract:

Our purpose in this short paper is to draw attention to the creative flexibility provided by the new technical forms of communication. Our use of the metaphor of mosaic is governed by the wish to draw attention to the relevance of each and every unit of creativity or patterning – the tile – available through the world wide web. Each web author places their ‘tile’ in a space the dimensions of which are beyond their control. ‘Tiles’ lying adjacent to one another on a search engine at one point in time are open to a fundamental separation from one another at a different point in time. Space, and informational adjacencies, are subject to constant revisions of the kaleidoscope. And yet, constant alertness and fine tuning can bring these segregating patterns into adjacency again: shadowing the action of others and shaping own ‘tiles’ to achieve adjacencies to the desired target are also a pattern repeatedly found in the use of the web by progressive social movements. The shape of the new knowledge mosaic is constantly shifting but the mosaic provides electronic stepping stones which continue to ensure the importance of ‘strategy’ in communication.

1. Introduction: Communicative skill in a globalised discourse.

We come to this paper with a discussion of distributed or globalised discourse and with an inquiry and interrogation of the place of communicative skill within that discourse. This paper examines the role of information and communication technologies in enabling the close management of distributed resources and distributed action: real time global monitoring of distributed activity transforms traditional principal/agent relationships. The remote is directly monitorable: this real time remote control of distributed resources is a new institutional competence.

Similarly the remote is able to monitor the centre: the traditional panopticon relationship is reversed. The remote is not simply able to shadow and monitor the centre and the leadership which has historically been situated there – power is locational – but also to globalize its record of leadership’s activity and its interactivity with the remote. Historically, discourse was situated in local relations of power and such local relations of power necessarily distorted voice and record (Habermas, 1987): the advent of a global discourse form which is situated outside local relations of power invites a revisiting of old theories.

2. Redressing remoteness: re-tiling reality

The advent of distributed information communication technologies (Holmes et al, 2002) has transformed the visibility of remote locations. Historically, the struggle of Vincent Lingiari¹, the leader of a remote Aboriginal community who led a boycott of the British owned cattle station which occupied aboriginal land, went unreported for many months – a situation which was common for ‘marginal’ news before the arrival of the world wide web. The Central Land Council (<http://www.clc.org.au/>), the representative body for the Aboriginal communities in that same area now has its own web presence (Freire, 1972), as does ATSIC (<http://www.atsic.gov.au/>) - the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. The Lingiari struggle is immortalised in song (<http://www.crixa.com/muse/unionsong/u036.html>), and in continuing on-line activity (<http://www.lingiari.startyourweb.com/pages/91.html>). The Tanami network (<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/mediarpt/mstories/mr200696.htm>) has harnessed state-of-the-art satellite technology in support of traditional social practice, while the Outback Digital Network (<http://www.odn.net.au/>) aims for sustainable communication infrastructure within remote communities (Morrison, 2000).

The ability of small communities to author and globalize their own news changes the shape of the historical mosaic of communication. This competence is founded in the electronic stepping stones which miniaturized technology and

¹ And now has a constituency of the Australian Federal Parliament named after him.

reduced the cost of the technology for transmission and reception – and most importantly interactivity – to the level of a household budget (Little, 2004).

Now the visibility of location achieved by the Gurindji of Australia over months and years can be achieved by activists in a much shorter time-frame. For example, accounts of a police attack upon women workers occupying Brukman, an Argentinian clothing factory, has been rapidly disseminated as the Brukman Battle (<http://www.geocities.com/seumasach/Digital14.html>), the Columbia Report (<http://www.colombiareport.org/index.htm>) web site gives global visibility to events in both government and guerrilla controlled remote locations while the Mexican Zapatista Movement's astute use of web technology (<http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Homepages/Faculty/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html>) remains the defining example of grass-roots globalised discourse. In both developed and developing economies, unions (<http://www.geocities.com/unionsonline/>) have adopted the electronic form, individually and collectively (<http://www.labournet.net/default.asp>) (Greene and Hogan, 2003), and broader electronic political movements have been described by Holmes and Grieco (2001).

Diasporic communities have been quick to seize the potential of electronic enabling technologies. Both the Baltic Republics (<http://www.ee/www/welcome.html>) and the West Indies furnish examples of the use of internet technologies by groups and individuals (<http://www.geocities.com/FashionAvenue/4440/>) to develop and conserve identity at a distance and to modify the standard tourist view (<http://www.virtualtourist.com/vt/aa3/?o=3>). Producer associations (eg. SEWA <http://www.sewa.org/> - the Self Employed Women's Association) have appropriated these technologies, whether at the point of entry of the mobile phone (<http://www.grameenphone.com/>), financed by organisations such as the Grameen bank (<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/ent/papers/grameen.htm>), or at the direct level of web-site based electronic exchange (<http://webusers.anet-chi.com/~midwest/>). The diaspora is reintegrated through electronic adjacencies no matter how frequently search engine adjustments to the knowledge base and knowledge adjacencies take place. The disappearance of one site and the emergence of another offering the same functional set of cultural goods, idioms and practices is a repeating feature of the electronic integration of the diaspora: what is certain is that the full range of cultural domains are ever present and readily accessible.

3. Social movements and the shadowing skill: big pharma and beyond.

The internet has become a strong communication home for social movements who use this space to communicate with memberships both permanent and fleeting – ‘open source memberships’ which mirror open source software - and to shadow strong societal interests with weak ethical values such as ‘big pharma’

This diffusion of skills and sensibilities along with the necessary access to infrastructure has allowed a reverse panopticon to be created, in which each “shadow” location can shadow the developments at the “centre” and can develop a tile of the mosaic with a character and capability set of its own that can be electronically inserted into the broader pattern.

In order to ground this analysis we offer here examples of electronic shadowing strategies of a set of social movements and distributed organisations.

Trade Wars: the struggle between Big Pharma and social movements of the infected and affected.

Big Pharma presents its own industry view (<http://www.biospace.com/index.cfm>) on-line, but this is shadowed by campaign activists. Act Up (<http://www.actupny.org/>) represents the U.S. AIDS activists who demonstrated physically against pharmaceutical companies in the 1980s, and continues to monitor events there. Archiving the struggle (<http://www.actupny.org/reports/milano.html>) becomes possible, as does voicing debates from within the affected regions of Africa (http://www.afrol.com/Categories/Health/he_msindex.htm). An African Aids portal (<http://www.afroaidsinfo.org/DesktopServlet>) has been established with the sponsorship of the South African Government. The South African Treatment Action Campaign (<http://www.tac.org.za/>) in turn targets government policies. Both rape crisis intervention (<http://www.speakout.org.za/medical/main.html>) and the responsibilities of employers (<http://www.treat-your-workers.org/endorsements.html>) for the well-being of their employees are the target of other on-line campaigns.

The Consumer Unity & Trust Society (<http://cuts.org/about.htm> - CUTS), established in India in 1983 provides an analysis of the impact of forthcoming TRIPS agreements (<http://cuts.org/1997-8.htm>) on the price and availability of drugs.

The issue of the availability and cost of generic drugs is also represented by the BUKO pharma campaign (<http://www.bukopharma.de/>) based in Germany. A major concession was won in April 2001, when pharmaceutical companies withdrew a court bid to stop South Africa from importing and producing cheap versions of patented AIDS drugs.

On 13 October 2002 a television broadcast on the anti-depressant Seroxat (<http://www.socialaudit.org.uk/5111-006.htm>) used the BBC web site to elicit responses to the programme from users of the drug. These are now incorporated into an article in the *International Journal of Risk and Safety in Medicine* available on-line in pdf format (<http://www.socialaudit.org.uk/IJRSM-161-169.pdf>). A follow-up programme "Seroxat: e-mails from the edge", broadcast on 11 May 2003 was promoted by the Seroxat Users Group web site. By the second

broadcast the British Medical Journal (<http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/325/7369/910>) web site was carrying an article attempting to broaden the issue to selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs) in general as a class of drugs whose problems are outweighed by their benefits. The U.S. based Alliance for Human Research Protection (<http://www.researchprotection.org/infomail/1002/11.html>) takes a different view of patient experience.

War on Cancer: the global monitoring of the medical establishment by cancer campaigners.

Globally available information resources on cancer are now substantially developed. Different flavours of on-line cancer education and support are provided by government (<http://www.cancerpage.com/>) and through corporate sponsorship (<http://www.cervicalcancercampaign.org/home.htm>), in this case from a company developing gene based (<http://www.digene.com/about.html>) cancer testing systems. Widely distributed resources are collated at the Life with Cancer (<http://www.lifewithcancer.org/Links2.htm>) site.

The U.S. corporate style is evident in the support site for pancreatic cancer and an empowerment approach in that for breast and ovarian cancer (<http://www.facingourrisk.org/>).

SARS: global tracking of the infected; global scrutiny of governance response.

The coordination of global response to disease is nowhere more evident than the highly distributed discourse around SARS. The CDC Atlanta (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/sars/>) and the World Health Organisation (<http://www.who.int/csr/sars/en/>) provide information on the progress of SARS, along with a German language (<http://www.pneumokokken.info/index.htm?/sars.htm>) site.

An overview of the threat and progress can be seen at the Globalchange (<http://www.globalchange.com/sars.htm>) site. Both the US Department of Defense Global emerging infections surveillance and response system (<http://www.geis.ha.osd.mil/>) and APEC (<http://depts.washington.edu/apecein/> - Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) web sites provide monitoring. A world SARS map is available from maptell.com (<http://www.maptell.com/maps/webmap/world/worldsars.htm>) and the measures in place in Singapore (<http://www.gov.sg/>), India (<http://www.icmr.nic.in/home.htm>), Taiwan (<http://www.gov.tw/ENGLISH/>) and Australia (<http://www.health.gov.au/sars/index.htm>), for example, can be compared with those in your own country. The space, organization and management of the disease's treatment and containment can be monitored from any point.

Grid computing (<http://www.wired.com/news/medtech/0,1286,58678,00.html>) is being utilised, as with the SETI at Home (<http://setiathome.ssl.berkeley.edu/>) distributed screen saver, to harness the spare capacity of networked PCs in the analysis of SARS data. On the negative side, SARS has already been used as cover for an internet worm (http://www.linuxsecurity.com/articles/security_sources_article-7162.html):

A new computer worm, known as Coronex, takes advantage of public panic about the real life virus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. The mass-mailing Windows worm aims to persuade people to open an attachment offering details on the current SARS epidemic. If opened the worm forwards itself to all contacts in the Outlook address book.

The rapid increase in the demand for body scanning technology to detect SARS at airports and in other key locations has resulted in a manufacturer deluged with enquiries about their infra-red scanning equipment for this purpose inserting an information box on the technology on their web site (<http://www.programmerwerks.com/>).

Although this section has focused upon the shadowing of organizations and institutions by social movements and the unwilling capture of identity that this web based process now permits, this unwilling capture of identity also takes place at the level of the individual and private social group.

4. Rearranged relationships: creative flexibility.

The advent of SARS – the disease – and the public search for information on that disease from all perspectives and all locations has a consequence for the communication strategies of those organizations which simply share the same initials. No doubt the South African Revenue Service and the U.K. Safety and Reliability Society are seeing an increase of internet hits on their sites and will have to develop and adjust their web appearance in order to reduce the unwanted traffic. Even in this simple, if tragic example, we see the importance of creative flexibility for the rearrangement of adjacencies and knowledge relationships in a world of rapidly globalised events and processes.

The directness of communication and the randomness of much of the new communication adjacencies remove the historical buffers – the loose couplings – which permitted a tighter control over the management of self-presentation. The determination of image and identity is now more widely spread in its authorship: the resources of the traditional press are no longer the critical elements in the shaping of public form and face but are matched and often overtaken by the interactivity and ‘mass’ gossip of the world wide web. Creative flexibility is required in the rebutting and re-shaping of negative images by those who stand to lose on the public display screen. Text and images and video clips are harnessed in the recontextualisation (Metz, 1996) of the damaging: similarly,

those communities who have historically been negatively portrayed harness the technology en masse to recontextualise their own histories and space in place, organization and management. History is rewritten, past steps are recalled and distributed archives form new territory on the globalised kaleidoscope.

5. Conclusion: Keeping pace - a challenge to communicative skill.

Perhaps the clearest example of the need to keep pace with a changing mosaic and a global constituency of skilled communicators is to be found in the war on terrorism. Post 9/11 the self declared opponents of American ascendancy have used the full range of new information communication technologies to lay a distinct and deliberate challenge at the door of America's ability to suppress alternative identity and alternative hegemonies.

The War on Terrorism is, at base, a war of information tracking, control and metagovernance and, indeed, the most high profile information tracking, control and metagovernance arrangements are found in the War on Terrorism. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks on the United States (<http://www.9-11commission.gov/archive/index.htm>) maintains a web site and both the CIA view (<http://www.cia.gov/terrorism/>) and the FBI view (<http://www.fbi.gov/terrorinfo/terrorism.htm>) are readily available. However, these are countered by expressions of concern over the widening of definitions of "terrorism" (<http://sf.indymedia.org/news/2002/01/114450.php>). The emergence of the al Jazeera news network has led to the provision of an English language version of their web site which provides a contrast to the perspective provided by Western media. Elsewhere a software solution to the problem of compliance with government surveillance requirements around the Patriot Act is on offer.

The Dangerous Citizen (<http://www.dangerouscitizen.com/>) web site quotes Section 107 (<http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.html>) of the US Copyright Law in support of the use of copyright material in a not for profit context. The Global Policy Forum (<http://www.globalpolicy.org/>) and the Institute for Public Accuracy (<http://www.accuracy.org/>) attempt to redress the mainstream media's treatment of government assertions. George Washington University offers an on-line archive (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>) of government documents obtained under Freedom of Information legislation.

Our awareness of the need to keep pace has emerged out of our own on line ontologies which are repeatedly and consistently transformed in the kaleidoscope by the action of others – the taking down and putting up of new web sites and links daily transforms our own positions in the new academy of knowledge. The routine of web site housekeeping has become as strong a discipline as ever the rules of a particular journal constituted. Space, organization and management are no longer simply in the shadows.

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