The new communications geography and the politics of optimism

Kevin Robins

Is Bill Gates the future? Al Gore and New Labour seem to think so. Kevin Robins *thinks not.*

'We are going to a different world', said Candide, 'and I expect it is the one where all goes well; for I must admit that regrettable things happen in this world of ours, moral and physical acts that one cannot approve of.'

Voltaire, *Candide*

In his recent book, *The Road Ahead,* Bill Gates says that he is an optimist, and tells us why we, his readers, would do well to be optimistic like him. What drives his optimism, he tells us, is the prospect of a 'revolution in communications', associated with the Internet and its future transformation into a global information highway. 'We are watching something historic happen', Gates intones, 'and it will affect the world seismically, rocking us in the same way the discovery of the scientific method, the invention of printing, and the arrival of

the Industrial Age did.'[1] From this historic event, he believes, we have everything to expect. The network will draw us together, if that's what we choose, or let us scatter ourselves into a million mediated communities. Above all, and in countless new ways, the information highway will give us choices that can put us in touch with entertainment, information, and each other' (p274). Of course, a revolution of this kind must confront some difficulties (described as 'unanticipated glitches'), but 'despite the problems posed by the information highway', Gates concludes, 'my enthusiasm for it remains boundless' (p272). Such is the force of his optimism.

Nicholas Negroponte, who is the director of MIT's Media Lab, also happens to be a self-declared optimist, indeed he is 'optimistic by nature'. And his grounds for optimism are pretty much the same as those articulated by Bill Gates. In *Being Digital* - the cover blurb describes it as 'the bestselling road map for survival on the information superhighway' - Negroponte tells us of his firm conviction that 'in the digital world, previously impossible solutions become viable.'[2] 'More than anything,' he explains, 'my optimism comes from the empowering nature of being digital. The access, the mobility, and the ability to effect change are what will make the future so different from the present' (p231). With enthusiastic conviction, Negroponte declares that all social divisions will be overcome by 'the harmonising effect of being digital': 'Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony' (p230). Again, there is the tokenistic recognition that the yellow brick road might not always be an easy one. 'But being digital', concludes Negroponte, 'nevertheless, does give much cause for optimism. Like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped' (p229). Here, as is the case with Bill Gates too, optimism expresses itself in terms of the force of human destiny.

At this point, you might feel yourself being drawn to the summary conclusion that all of this is no more than a rhetorical smokescreen, obscuring the real motivation of Gates and Negroponte alike, which is to exploit the new communications technologies as a source of both corporate profits and personal gain. You might want to conclude that this techno-uptopianism is just the fancy marketing language of 'virtual capitalism' (or what Bill Gates terms 'friction-free capitalism').[3] But to remain

1. Bill Gates, The *Road Ahead,* Viking, 1995, p.273.
2. Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital,* Hodder and Stoughton, 1995, p.230.
3. The argument that Gates' motives are primarily economic and profiteering is made by Michael Dawson and John Bellamy Foster, 'Virtual capitalism: the political economy of the information highway', *Monthly Review,* 48:3, 1996.

content with such a quick judgement (whatever partial truth it may indeed contain), would, I suggest, be to ignore a great deal that *is* worth trying to understand in and about this discourse. I think that we have to accept the optimism and idealism of these writer entrepreneurs at face value. There seems no reason to doubt the sincerity and conviction of their belief that the new communications technologies will bring a better world into being. What moves them is, moreover, a vision that has considerable resonance beyond the world of enterprise; the project to develop the information highway has also become a central issue in the political agenda of the 1990s. And it must be taken seriously in so far as it has become perhaps the nearest thing we now have to a political vision for the future.

In the United States, both Newt Gingrich and Al Gore have made the new communications systems central to their political visions. The Democratic administration has taken steps towards the creation of a National Information Infrastructure (N1l), and exhibits an optimism to rival that of Gates or Negroponte. Gore envisages that it 'will help educate our children and allow us to exchange ideas within a community and among nations. It will be a means by which families and friends will transcend the barriers of time and distance.' The new technologies are presented as a panacea for all that is wrong in national and international affairs. The GII will not only be a metaphor for a functioning democracy', claims the Vice-President, 'it will in fact promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making. And it will greatly promote the ability of nations to cooperate with each other. I see a new Athenian democracy forged in the fora the GII will create'.[4] In the political domain too, then, extraordinary investments are being made in the redemptive potential of the 'communications revolution'.

And what is the case in the US is also true in British political culture. Here it is the Labour Party that has been most attentive to Gore's proclamations about 'virtual' town meetings and information democracy. The argument is put forward that 'new technologies give us the opportunity to extend our thinking about the form that democracy takes' - 'only a Luddite would ignore the possibilities that technological change offers for an extension of the

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4. Al Gore, 'Forging the new Athenian age of democracy', *Intermedia,* 22:2, 1994, p.4.

democratic process'.[5] The 'Blair revolution' has involved the development of a policy document on the Information Superhighway: 'We stand on the threshold' of a revolution as profound as that brought about by the invention of the printing press. 'New technologies which enable rapid communication to take place in a myriad of different ways across the globe, and permit information to be provided, sought, and received on a scale hitherto unimaginable, will bring fundamental change to all our lives.'[6] In his speech to the 1995 Labour Party conference, Tony Blair conveyed his own vision of an information Utopia, involving such visionary things as 'virtual reality tourism that allows you anywhere in the world', and 'computers that learn about a child as they teach them, shaping courses to their personal needs'. There is the confident sense of a technological and social revolution in the making. 'Blair is talking science fact', observed an approving Victor Keegan in the pages of the *Guardian;* this new 'digital socialism' is closer to the real spirit of 'socialism', he maintained, 'because it offers individual empowerment or equality of opportunity in knowledge'.[7] Through the new information and communications technologies, it is argued, political dreams can finally become everyday realities.

Now - as should already be apparent from my own rhetorical tone in presenting both the entrepreneurial and the political agendas -I find this common technocultural vision quite incredible. I personally cannot share this sense of anticipation and expectation, and I cannot be persuaded that, in this particular context, optimism is the appropriate attitude to adopt. As I listen to this discourse of revolutionary transformation, I find that nothing can convince me that these new technologies will change our lives in any meaningful way. So what, I am inclined to ask, is this investment in optimism all about? How is it possible that there are so many people who can (still) accept this narrative of progress, and can do so quite unproblematically (and we cannot doubt the integrity of their acceptance) ? And what do they actually find themselves believing in when they affirm its validity? These are questions I want to put in the way of the politics of optimism, which presents itself as such a good and well-meaning thing, beyond any possibility of criticism or objection.

First, there is the activation of a new ideal of community. From just a casual

5. Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle, *The Blair* Revolution, Faber and Faber, 1996, p.209.
6. Information *Superhighway,* Labour Party, 1995, p.l.
7. Victor Keegan, 'Labour on net'*, Guardian,* 5 October 1995.

acquaintance with the politics of the information highway, it might seem as if the road ahead involved an uncertain step into the unknown, and that being digital was about becoming excitingly different from the way we are now. One might be led to think that new kinds of social interaction were being inaugurated, and new forms of social experience made possible in virtual communities. In part, this possibility is indeed what is being suggested. A little more scrutiny soon reveals, however, that this is far from being the only aspiration. Indeed, what quickly becomes apparent is that the reality of the technocultural imagination may be quite the reverse: what may, in fact, be proposed is some

'What is this investment in optimism all about?'

kind of electronic reinstatement of a lost order, a lost way of life, and lost values and ideals (the communitarianism of Amitai Etzioni is a crucial reference point). The imagination of the virtual society is commonly associated with the recovery of familial and communitarian principles, inspired by a nostalgia for 'traditional' forms of interaction, associated with the village pump or the town square. The imagination of electronic *Gemeinschaft* evokes a world of shared meanings and values, a world in which social interaction has the transparent simplicity associated with face-to-face encounter. Virtual political life is conceived in terms of the Jeffersonian town hall meeting (or in terms of a communitarian vision of the Athenian *agora).* What is on ideological offer is something familiar and reassuring, and the appeal of techno-community surely derives, to a large extent, from this sense of comforting restoration.

Alongside this construction of an ideal of community, there is a complementary idealisation of communication. Is not enhanced communication the very essence of the information highway agenda.[7] 'The information highway makes all communication easier', says Bill Gates. 'Bulletin boards and other on-line forums allow people to be in touch one-to-one, or one-to-many, or many-to-many, in very efficient ways'.[8] 'Our goal', proclaims Al Gore, 'is a kind of global conversation in which everyone who wants can have his or her say'.[9] Now this may well be presented again in terms of new horizons and possibilities, but in fact it simply perpetuates a very old dream. As

8. *The Road Ahead, pill.*
9. Forging the *new Athenian age,* p6.

Armand Mattelart has demonstrated, this faith in the salutary efficiency of communication goes back to the Saint-Simonians, and has been reactivated with each successive technological 'revolution' since that time. What has been sustained over time has been 'the idea of communication as the regulatory principle counteracting the disequilibria of the social order'.[10] In certain respects, as Mattelart suggests, the ideology of progress has given way to the ideology (or perhaps religion?) of communication. Communication has always promised to bring people together (to put them 'in touch with each other; to join them in an extended 'conversation'). It has been associated with increased intelligibility, then with mutual comprehension, and thereby with social solidarity and integration. It has seemed as if it must bring coherence to the social order. Who could be opposed to communication?

These closely related ideals of community and communication are central to what I have called the new politics of optimism. What is being invoked is the (only) kind of social order that could contain the projections of the committed optimist. And, as such, it stands in striking contrast to the recalcitrant and disorderly nature of the real world. What is called into being is a new world like Candide's Eldorado: 'It is probably the country where all goes well; for there must obviously be some such place'." It is precisely a Utopian space (a space apart). All goes well here because it goes on in terms of a radically diminished form of society and of sociality. The transparent and ordered space of virtual interaction is perhaps the ideal medium in which to cultivate Etzioni's ideal of 'responsive community'. But even more significant, I want to argue here, is the aspiration to transcend our human condition of living and being in dimensional space. It seems as if things will go better when it is no longer necessary to move in and through the real world, negotiating its complex spaces and engaging in contact with the others, who also have their places there. Why, it is asked, should we involve ourselves in such difficult encounters when community can be wired directly to us now in our electronic homes? The present optimism is directly related to this desire to abolish space and place, which have hitherto been the very ground of embodied (enworlded) experience and meaning.

10. Armand Mattelart, *Mapping World Communication,* University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p.36. For an excellent historical analysis, see Armand Mattelart, *L'Invention de la Communication,* Paris, La Decouverte, 1994.
11. Voltaire, *Candide,* Penguin, 1947, p77.

We should reflect on this strange aspiration. An absolutely central preoccupation in projected scenarios for the information highway concerns the elimination or transcendence of distance - for is not distance that which keeps people apart, is not distance what prevents them from understanding each other? Thus, Bill Gates argues that 'the information highway makes geography less important', and suggests that this will make it easier for us 'to reach out to others with similar interests no matter where they are located'.[12] Nicholas Negroponte is an uninhibited visionary in this respect: 'the digital planet', he predicts, 'will look and feel like the head of pin', and 'the post-information age will remove the limitations of geography'.[13] Again what is invoked is the possibility of new kinds of social interaction: 'We will socialise in digital neighbourhoods in which physical space will be irrelevant... Digital living will include less and less dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time, and the transmission of place itself will start to become possible' (pp7, 165). The virtual condition is one in which it will be possible to transcend the parochial concerns of what we have until now called the real world:

> While the politicians struggle with the baggage of history, a new generation is emerging from the digital landscape free of many of the old prejudices. These kids are released from the limitation of geographic proximity as the sole basis of friendship, collaboration, play, and neighbourhood. Digital technology can be a natural force drawing people into greater world harmony (p230).

After geography, Negroponte wants to believe, there is the infinite possibility of a floating world - for 'the kids', at least - a world without gravity or friction.

In his recent book, *City of Bits,* William Mitchell - 'I am an electronic *flaneur,* he tells us, 'I hang out on the network' - pursues the same wishful theme. What he likes so much about the information highway is that it is 'profoundly antispatial', and makes possible the 'despatialisation of interaction'.[14] Again there is the pleasured observation that 'community has come increasingly unglued from geography'. Mitchell gives the example of a global teaching seminar he has himself conducted, one in which 'we scattered souls have become an electronically linked virtual community'. 'Bodily location is no longer an issue', he reports, 'for me, the

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12. *The Road Ahead,*pp181,263.
13. *Being Digital,* pp6, 165.
14. William Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place and the Infobahn,* MIT Press, 1995, pp8, 10.

students in Hong Kong are as much part of it as are those to be found within walking distance of my office (pi 66).' Elsewhere, Mitchell shares with us his vision of the virtual city of the future:

> This will be a city unrooted to any definite spot on the surface of the earth, shaped by connectivity and bandwidth constraints rather than by accessibility and land values, largely asynchronous in its operation, and inhabited by disembodied and fragmented subjects who exist as collections of aliases and agents. Its places will be constructed virtually by software instead of physically from stones and timbers, and they will be connected by logical linkages rather than by doors, passageways, and streets (p24).

What is being envisioned is 'a new urbanism freed from the constraints of physical space' (p115). What Mitchell, like Gates and Negroponte, wants to make clear to us is that the new communications geography is, in fact, a post-geography.

The politics of optimism wants to be rid of the burden of geography (and along with it the baggage of history), for it considers geographical determination and situation to have been fundamental sources of frustration and limitation in human and social life. As William Mitchell puts it, 'geography is destiny' (p10). To understand the affliction of geographical existence must, then, be to strive to overcome the historical constraints of space and place. And now this long-standing desire for transcendence seems to have found the new technology that will finally bring about its realisation. Now the tyranny of distance is being technologically abolished, and we may communicate with others wherever they might be, forming new kinds of electronic communities based on interest and affinity (rather than the accident of physical location). This is the age of tele-presence, interactivity, connectivity, and of 'being in touch'. The new communications media make it possible to achieve greater closeness to others (to others in the virtual network, that is); they have become associated with ideals of intimacy, and with new possibilities of social communion and bonding. Where geographical distance is presented as an obstacle to communication and community, the achievement of technological proximity may appear as the solution.

This ideal of bringing people together and promoting mutual understanding seems to be self-evidently a good thing. This is what Al Gore appears to believe, and Tony Blair too. The social rationale for the development of the information

highway is entirely predicated on such sentiments. I find it interesting - though in no way surprising - that this new virtual politics has such plausibility for, as I have clearly suggested in outlining the vision of Gates, Negroponte and Mitchell, it is a politics that is based on the most naive and superficial social analysis. Whatever the appeal of this futurological project - and clearly it does have very considerable social and political resonance now - it remains, nonetheless, a severely diminished and impoverished social imaginary. Those who are not so infatuated with technological futures, those who are concerned, rather, with the question of plural and democratic culture in actual societies, must surely find this vision and project deeply problematical. For what is involved is a fundamental disavowal - both intellectual and by technical means - of the real complexity and disorder of actual society and sociality. And thereby, I want to argue, what is entailed is a significant depletion and reduction of the resources of social and political culture. In so far as this is the case, the technocultural agenda that promises a new social order in fact constitutes a force of resistance to social and political transformation.

> Do you understand the sadness of geography?
> Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

Let me just say a little more, in conclusion, about what it is that I find so deeply problematical about this technocultural politics. I want to make clear what it is that is facile in this understanding of technology, and to explain what I think is regressive in the desire technologically to transcend space and place.

Here I can do no better than refer to Martin Heidegger's famous essay 'The thing', written nearly fifty years ago, which considers the shrinking of distances as a consequence of both new transportation systems and new media technologies (radio and television). Heidegger's lucid observations are worth quoting at length:

> Man puts the longest distances behind him in the shortest time. He puts the greatest distances behind himself and thus puts everything before himself at the shortest range.
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> Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness.

> What is nearness if it fails to come about despite the reduction of the longest distances to the shortest intervals? What is nearness if it is even repelled by the restless abolition of distances? What is nearness if, along with its failure to appear, remoteness also remains absent?
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> What is happening here when, as a result of the abolition of great distances, everything is equally far and equally near? What is this uniformity in which everything is neither far nor near - is, as it were, without distance?[15]

It seems to me that these observations have even greater pertinence with respect to the new communications technologies and ideologies. Heidegger works towards the deconstruction of banal and common sense beliefs about distance and the conquest of distance. What, he asks, is the problem about distance and remoteness? This is a question that is also pursued with considerable insight by Gabriel Josipovici, who reflects on the experiential possibilities of separation, and on what he calls the 'therapy of distance'. Sense and meaning must be made out of distance. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of aura ('the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be'), Josipovici suggests that, rather than seeking its abolition, we might actually be concerned to 'bring distance to life'.[16] What is also made clear in the Heideggerian formulation is that mere closeness or proximity must be distinguished from true nearness. The technological erosion of great distances brings with it only an illusory intimacy: technological mediation can in fact insulate us against being touched by the other. We become content to live in a world of 'uniform distanceless', that is, in an information space rather than a space of vivacity and experience.

In his recent book *Cybermonde,* Paul Virilio gives this philosophical stance a political spin, raising serious questions about the technological neutralisation of our existential and moral relation to the world. Virilio is concerned, too, with the collapse of geographical distance, for he considers this to have been fundamental to our human liberty. 'The scale of the world is our freedom', he argues, and 'one of the first freedoms was the freedom of movement'.[17] The diminution of distance associated with the so-called global village represents, then, a kind of intellectual and spiritual enclosure. It

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15. Martin Heidegger, 'The thing', in his *Poetry, Language, Thought,* Harper & Row, 1971, pp.165466.
16. Gabriel Josipovici, *Touch,* Yale University Press, 1996, pp.65, 10.
17. Paul Virilio, *Cybermonde, la Politique du Pire,* Textuel, 1996, pp.43, 57.

also has profoundly significant implications for the way we relate to others in the world. Virilio challenges the myth of electronic communion, casting into doubt the ideal of virtual interaction. This he sees in terms, rather, of 'the loss of the other, the decline of physical presence in favour of a phantom, immaterial presence' (p45). Embodied and situated existence is fundamental to our political being in the world. Virilio is sceptical about the now common belief that one can, and should aspire to, communicate with those at a distance as one does to physically proximate others. It is possible to seek out the distant other, he recognises, 'without being aware that one hates one's neighbour because he is present, because he stinks, because he makes a noise, because he disturbs you and because he summons you - unlike the one who is distant, whom you can zap' (p42). The pleasures of remote control may exceed the obligation to embodied and situated others.

So, where does this leave us, then, those of us who happen to find ourselves unmoved and unpersuaded by the politics of optimism? How should we respond in the face of the social and political investments that are now being made in the information highway? This is not an easy matter. The intensity of the investment in the technoculture makes the articulation of dissent extremely difficult. To express doubts about the technological restoration of community and democracy is to be regarded as a pessimist. And being pessimistic is now regarded as self-evidently a bad thing, as being an optimist seems a good one. Jeremiahs are not welcome in an 'age of optimism' (Negroponte).

What we first have to do, I believe, is to resist this simplistic denigration of pessimism. As Joe Bailey emphasises, pessimism does not constitute a psychological disposition or problem, nor should it be seen as expressing some kind of metaphysical taste or sensibility.[18] It is, rather, a form of social thought and social valuation, which may be grounded in historical experience, and for the expression of which there may be very substantial grounds. Thus, given our long experience of previous new communications technologies, each of which was in its time supposed to herald a brave new world order, how could we not be suspicious of what is now being claimed for the information highway? Wouldn't it be exceptional if this technology could deliver what no other new technology could before? I would argue that a certain scepticism or pessimism is quite in order. But it should aim to be an active and transformational response - recall Gramsci's neat formulation: pessimism of the

18. Joe Bailey, *Pessimism,* Routledge, 1988, pp.vii, 5.

intellect, optimism of the will - engaged in disturbing the complacency and conformism of the technoculture. It should scorn the kind of shallow optimism which would have us believe that new communications technologies could of themselves create a new and better world. Paul Virilio points the way: 'I work in the "resistance"', he says, 'because there are now too many "collaborators" once again telling us about salvation through progress, about emancipation, about man being freed from all constraints, and so on'.[19] Without such a resistance, there would only be technological conditioning and acquiescence in the technological order.

But more than this is needed. We have to move the debate beyond the new technology agenda (where it is sadly the case that the banalities of Gates and Negroponte pass as prescient social thinking). For what is really at issue is the more fundamental question of creating a more plural and democratic culture, and we must not let this be reduced to being simply a technological issue. We have to come to terms with the embodied and situated world in which we live, a world in which difference and antagonism are inescapable, and we have to find the political means to negotiate this inescapable reality. And in this context, I maintain, virtual dreams are an irrelevance. The utopia of virtual order is based on the denial or disavowal of real-world disorder. The new virtual politics, the information highway project for example, substitutes for a real social and political vision. 'Life in pre-cyborg places was a very different experience', quips William Mitchell. 'You really had to be there' (p44). Precisely. And it was being there that was crucial. And not being there represents an evacuation of the political scene. The real antithesis to the politics of optimism is not, in fact, a politics of pessimism. It is a grounded politics, and a politics of complexity.

19. *Cybermonde,* p78.

This is a political optimism quite different from that of contemporary globalization. discourses. Â Weinberger's appeal to "bring back geography", and to the rash optimism that accom-. panies it. Â building the new social, political and economic fabric of local and global places. The ICGG seeks to include theorists, researchers, and activists throughout the world. Â Whether writing about gentrification or nature, the production of space or the politics of scale, uneven development or public space, globalization or revolution, the geographer Neil Smith was nothing if not provocative. Neither Festschrift nor hagiography, this special issue of Antipode critically engages Smith's workâ€"not to unpick the rich tapestry, but to draw the threads out and spin them on in new directions.