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The Virtual World: a tension between global reach and local sensitivity

Abstract:

Society, its citizens and its organisations are becoming more dependent upon technology and its global application as the means of providing information and obtaining services in a virtual world. This paper considers some of issues surrounding a virtual world of global reach yet still having to be locally sensitive. It challenges current thinking and concepts on the basis that we have a new dimension to our person through our Internet existence. Strategic guidance is suggested in an attempt to realise the potential of the technology whilst supporting cultural tolerance.

Agenda

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Introduction

Computers can be shaped to any activity that can be described in terms of inputs, transforming processes and outputs. It is the nearest thing to a universal tool (Moor, 1985). This has become increasingly so with the growing convergence of computing, telecommunications and mass media. Consequently, society, its citizens and its organisations are becoming more dependent upon this technology and its global application as the means of providing information and obtaining services. There is an increasingly wider access to and application of this powerful resource. Many herald these advances as the arrival of the global village mapped out by the Internet. It is a village where every place is only a push-button away. Indeed Moor (2004) explains that "The prospects of a global village in which everyone on the planet is connected to everyone else with regard to computing power and communication is breathtaking. What is difficult to comprehend is what impact this will have on human life. Surely some of the effects will be quite positive and others quite negative."

The world has changed. Once people had to go to a particular place in order to communicate. This is no longer the case with the advent of pagers, mobile phones and laptop computers with communication cards; communication now comes to people. Indeed, the development of communication devices such as the fax, the mobile phone and the Internet has permanently changed the way people live, work and socialise. This paper considers some of issues surrounding a virtual world of global reach yet still having to be locally sensitive.

Digital divide

Wealth and power flow to the information rich, those who create and use ICT successfully. They are primarily well-educated citizens of industrialised nations. The information poor, both in industrialised countries and in the developing world, are falling further and further behind.

Local implementation issues can dramatically affect the potential of the virtual world, restricting access and thus creating or exacerbating social exclusion. Pinto et al (2004) suggest there are three issues that need to be addressed; investment in ICT infrastructure which enables universal access, investing in flexible and adaptive use interfaces which enable users to communicate as they please, developing systems with embedded intelligence in order to process information sent and ensure its timely and qualitative receipt. These social exclusion issues can be particularly problematic in rural areas and yet often go unheeded (Fiander, 2004). The three point strategy would go a long way to addressing this rural deprivation.

The dominance of the developed world, particularly the USA, can negatively affect the Internet. It has been the prime reason why the majority of accessible and catalogued online content is in English. It is vital that more localised content is funded (Murphy and Scharl, 2004).This would promote cultural identity and improve access for the less able social excluded who for example are unlikely to speak and read English as a second language.

Culture

There is increasingly a homogenisation of culture in the virtual world, yet individuals still come from distinctive cultures. The expectations of individual participants in the information society thus can differ significantly (Fairweather and Rogerson, 2003). These differences threaten the potential benefits of the virtual world. This can be countered by focusing on core values that we all share such as life, happiness, ability, freedom, knowledge, resources and protection (Moor, 2004). However, developing systems for the virtual world based on only core values can be problematic in that such systems might clash with the deeply held convictions of a culture or community. It is for this reason that the virtual world must also be tolerant of the global moral pluralism (Vedder, 2001).

The Internet-based community crosses traditional geographical and political boundaries and as such comprises individuals from many different cultures. Nance and Strohmaier (1994) suggest there are two important dimensions to consider regarding cultural variability. The first dimension is the continuum from individualism to collectivism. Individualism emphasises self-interest and promotes the self-realisation of talent and potential. Its demands are universal. Collectivism emphasises pursuit of common interests and belonging to a set of hierarchical groups where, for example, the family group might be placed above the job group. The demands on group members are different to those on non-group members. The second dimension concerns cultural differences in communication referred to as low context communication and high

context communication. In the former the majority of the information resides in the message itself whilst in the latter the communication is implicit. Nance and Strohmaier (1994) suggest that the USA utilises low context communication whilst Japan uses high context.

> *"So while there is cultural homogenisation, the variability that remains makes it very difficult to provide information or conduct a debate in a way that is acceptable to all. This is especially problematic because to a significant extent the processes of globalisation are now unstoppable." (Fairweather and Rogerson,2003)*

This is certainly one of the great challenges presented by the Internet. It involves establishing a set of common behavioural standards whilst ensuring that there is no dominant participant. The current offerings of Internet are a long distance from this position.

Information

Information providers have taken on a significantly important role in the virtual world. For example, Time Warner AOL is the producer and distributor of much of the information in a various forms that we consume. The emergence of such organisations raises many issues. In many ways they are uncontrollable by governments because of their global reach and operation. They wield great power and influence through deciding information content and format. Not that long ago it was reported that Time Warner AOL had a debt which amounted to the GNP of a sizeable nation. Society as a whole is extremely vulnerable if information moguls such as this should they get into financial difficulty. The pressure is on to support and to protect these information providers.

Information moguls are commercially oriented seeking to maximise profit. Costs are minimised through a policy of homogeneous information offering devoid of cultural context. This seems unacceptable and inappropriate. Yet given the power these moguls wiled in the global village it is very difficult to influence them to move to a more heterogeneous offering.

Freedom and assembly

Access to information as well as the generation and dissemination of information relate to the fundamental concept of freedom in the virtual world. Consider two articles of the UN declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 states that, " Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Whilst Article 5 states that, "No one shall be subjected_to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." The application of these articles to the new context of the digital universe raises some important issues.

In the name of protecting some civil or human rights, some governments appear to reduce the value and freedom of other rights. For example, "Human Rights Watch reported that Chinese authorities have issued more than sixty sets of regulations to govern Internet content since the government began permitting commercial Internet accounts in 1995. ... describes recent Chinese efforts to police Internet cafes ... cases of several people put on trial or sentenced to prison for downloading or posting politically sensitive material on the web" Human Rights News (2001).

Blocking, filtering, and labelling techniques can restrict freedom of expression and limit access to information. Government-mandated use of such systems violates rights regarding freedom of speech. Global rating or labelling systems reduce significantly the free flow of information. Efforts to force all Internet speech to be labelled or rated according to a single classification system distort the fundamental cultural diversity of the Internet and potentially lead to domination of one set of political or moral viewpoints. It does not seem right to employ such techniques in a universal manner.

Article 20, clause 1 of the UN declaration of Human Rights states that, "Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association." This right has a new twist in the context of the virtual world. Assemblies are an example of the two-way many-to-many communication on which the Internet is based. Bulletin boards, discussion groups, email lists are all examples of new forms of assembly within the virtual world. Therefore an individual under Article 20 has a right to participate in such assemblies assuming they are peaceful. This brings into question the regulation and restriction put on such activities by governments and private organisations. There is a need to revisit this issue from the perspective of assembly. As it stands it is a conceptual muddle and policy vacuum as described by Moor (1985).

Data and self

Conceptual muddles abound in the virtual world. Consider the relationship between data and self. Society has long recognised that taking or using property without permission is wrong. This extends not only to physical property but also to intangibles such as ideas and data these being collectively recognised as intellectual property. The concept of ownership is culturally sensitive. Whilst there is reasonable agreement in countries of the West that individuals or groups of individuals have intellectual property rights (IPR), interpretations in other countries and situations are sometimes different (Spinello 1995). For example, IPR safeguards in countries of the Far East are minimal mainly due to a different philosophy that tends to treat intellectual property as communal or social property. In the poorer developing countries the view often taken is that the right to livelihood takes precedence over other claims on which IPR are based. It is only when prosperity increases that there is shift from a social well-being interpretation of IPR to one with more emphasis on the individual. Regardless of whether the emphasis is on individual ownership or community ownership, there is a big problem which the fundamental concept of data ownership when considering the virtual world of the Internet.

In order to live and prosper in the virtual world an individual must be visible, credible and creditable. As we each develop electronic persona across a range of digital media and through digital icons such as digital signatures, electronic curriculum vitae, electronic patient records and electronic purses, we come to exist electronically and our needs are addressed through having these digital icons. Without them we cannot function and become invisible. It is how these dilemmas are resolved across national and international legislation and regulation that will establish clear rights of citizens in the virtual world. However, our digital persona is not simply characterised by our digital icons. The sense of self is completed through the relationships with others (Prosser and Ward, 2001). These are represented in the virtual world by such things as emails and chat room dialogues. It can be seen that the electronic persona comprises a complex array of digital data.

In the virtual world it is a fundamental right of every person to have control over his or her electronic persona. However this right challenges the traditional views of data ownership because data is the virtual manifestation of self. It is the electronic persona. It is clear therefore that we need to redefine the meaning of self to account for our virtual world existence. We must acknowledge that much of the data relating to an individual cannot be owned by a third party for if we do not we are subscribing to electronic slavery.

One further issue relating to data and self is that of identity. There has been much speculation that people can play with their identities on the Internet and present different electronic persona. Such speculation is characterised in the famous cartoon entitled “In cyberspace nobody knows you’re a dog” (Steiner, 1993). This might be possible in the short term but such mimicry is likely to be spotted in the long term as identity is more than simply learning and applying rules, it is about learning within a context and reacting intuitively to different situations as they arise (Whitley, 1997). In the Information Society, the impact of physical characteristics of those communicating has been minimised. This is potentially beneficial as removing the visual cues about gender, age, ethnicity and social status allow different lines of communication to open up that might have been avoided in the physical world (Whitley, 1997).

Conversation

In any community conversation is essential. There has been concern by psychologists that computers are having a detrimental effect on society in that the “social glue” of casual conversation is being eroded (Mihill, 1997). The increasing use of email at work, the elimination of bank tellers and shop assistants, and the use of telephones and laptops to telecommute from the home illustrate how the opportunity for small talk is decreasing. This phenomenon is thought to be one reason why shyness is increasing in the population. There is of course a counter argument in that by utilising computer based communication tools such as the Internet those who are naturally shy become more outgoing since the psychological pressure of face-to-face contact is removed.

However conversation is culturally founded and this influences the way technology is used. Consider the example of mobile phone take-up in Africa. In December 2001 there were 21 million mobile phones in Africa. This increased to 35 million in 2002 and again to 52 million in December 2003. This amazing growth should be tempered by the fact that only half of sub-Sahara Africa is covered by a mobile signal, many Africans are too poor to buy a mobile and only half of all Africans have ever made

a phone call. However, this technology has proved to be fit for purpose socially, culturally and economically. The right consumer proposition has been adopted through offering pay-as-you-go phones, which account for over 80% of phones in Africa. Most African countries permit competition in mobile networks which has kept costs down and evidence shows this is beneficial to all. The socio-economic benefit of improved communication has increased business activity and economic wellbeing. However the remarkable story relates to culture. Africans are great talkers. They entertain through conversation. Mobile phones simply reinforce these oral traditions. It has become a device for socialisation. For example, Africa has seen the rise of the single-owner multi-user. Friends become a communication centre for a community and enjoy a new social status. The clear message from mobile phones in Africa is that here is an adaptation of both the technology and its implementation which not only is sensitive of local culture but promotes and enriches it. It is fit for purpose.

Fit for purpose technology

The virtual world must be built upon fit for purpose technology. Technology should fit users' needs rather than users fit technology's needs. Technological communication networks should align with human rights. Systems on the Internet should be culturally sensitive. Systems should be designed to minimise complexity and opaqueness thus promoting trust in the virtual world. Bucy (2000) argues that these systems are, in their current form, too complicated for the many people to use and derive benefit. They require a certain level of cognitive ability to navigate successfully. For this reason he argues that, "there is reason to believe that the digital divide will not be completely remedied through universal physical access to computer technology alone." The need to simplify systems radically should form a major design principle for the virtual world.

Law, regulation and ethics

The networks of the virtual world offer exceptional possibilities in communication for exchanging information and acquiring knowledge, and provide new opportunities for growth and job creation. However, at the same time, they conceal risks to human rights and alter the infrastructure of traditional public and private operations. Johnson (1997) explains that the potential benefit of the Internet is being devalued by antisocial behaviour including unauthorised access, theft of electronic property, launching of viruses, racism and harassment. These have raised new ethical, cultural, economic and legal questions which have led many to consider the feasibility and desirability of regulation in this area. Similarly, it is questionable whether technological counter measures will be very effective either. The absence of effective formal legal or technological controls presents grave dangers to society.

The international aspect of the Internet, the transient nature of the content and the rapid evolution of the techniques and strategies raise specific difficulties for the application of penal and commercial law. It is extremely difficult to determine which laws apply, who is responsible, and what proof is required in the event of a transgression. It is probably unattainable to create international law that can provide legal guarantees for this global community. This would require agreement on universal rights and wrongs which may well be possible for obvious cases such as the dissemination of child pornography but is very difficult for debatable issues such as individual privacy and intellectual property. Where once very few people had substantial enough impacts on the lives of distant people to have significant moral obligations to people tens of miles (or kilometres) away, now for many of us they are routine. As increasingly we interact on a global basis, we find that we do have responsibility for each other regardless of location, yet the moral standards to be upheld are often unclear (Fairweather and Rogerson, 2003). Johnson (1997) suggests that there are three general ethical principles that promote acceptable behaviour in the virtual world:

- know the rules of the on-line forums being used and adhere to them;
- respect the privacy and property rights of others and if in doubt assume both are expected; and
- do not deceive, defame or harass others.

The outcome of not subscribing to such principles is likely to result in chaos overwhelming democratic dialogue, absolute freedom overwhelming responsibility and accountability, and emotions triumphing over reason (Badaracco and Useem, 1997).

Work transformation and social responsibility

Psychologists working on-line serve as a good illustration of how such themes are relevant for those working within a modern organisation in the Information Society. King and Poulous (1999) explain that, "Psychologists 'apply and make public their knowledge of psychology in order to contribute to human welfare' (APA, 1992). On-line psychologists who maintain a website advertising their services often include a wealth of information about psychological disorders and their treatment. This psycho-educational service is available to the public 24 hr. a day, can be accessed to the advantage of anyone, not necessarily a client, and is generally provided free of charge. In situations where a recipient of services is in a geographically remote location, on-line therapy may be the only psychological therapy available to them." In this situation the psychologist's traditional approach has been transcended with the advent of the Internet. In this new situation, public welfare, distributed benefit and equality of access are all promoted through exploiting the temporal and geographic independence of the on-line world. It is a good example of socially responsible transformation based on fit for purpose technology.

- This type of transformation is common across many types of work. To assist in promoting social responsibility within the virtual world such transformation should follow a set of strategic pointers as follows (Rogerson, 2004):
- Develop a socially responsible culture within the organisation which nurtures moral individual action
- Consider and support the wellbeing of all stakeholders
- Account for global common values and local cultural differences
- Recognise social responsibility is beyond legal compliance and effective fiscal management
- Ensure all business processes are considered from a social responsibility perspective
- Be proactive rather than reactive

Conclusion

In the virtual world, individuals are subjected to e.junkmail, e.money, e.commerce, e.library, e.identity, e.education to mention but a few. Whether these are beneficial depends on a number of factors some of which have been discussed here. However, what is certain is that individuals deserve empowerment and social benefit, inclusion rather than exclusion, and the right to choose between the electronic and the non-electronic.

Inequitable access to and communication of the priceless resource of information is at best unfair and at worst disastrous for society as a whole. An Information Society that empowers the disabled and less fortunate members of society and sustains equality of opportunity regardless of race, colour or creed is achievable. Governments, policy makers, developers and service providers of the Information Society have the wherewithal to create this panacea which balances global common values and local cultural differences. They must have the commitment as well else apocalypse beckons.

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