The re-connected individual

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The disconnected individual - an introduction

As mass media bring the world into the home, not only is human experience of the world reduced to convenient common denominators, but also personal space shrinks around the individual. At the same time, the mobile telephone puts people potentially on-call anywhere, anytime and network-based tele-activities bring hitherto outside pursuits into the home and private space. A new clause will have to be added to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guaranteeing the right to be disconnected from the network!

Curiously enough, in an age when hype would have us all joyously connected to universal networks, the dilemma of modern man and modern woman is that he or she is in fact fundamentally **disconnected** from the surrounding world.

Putting the concept of the «individual» into perspective will help understand this situation. It would also be an important step towards understanding what mutations are likely to affect the person and beyond him or her, society itself, with the advent of the so-called Information Society.

The current notion of «individual» is a recent invention. Yet its significance is so all embracing and self-evident, we can hardly conceive that in the past such a notion would have been unimaginable. It is not easy to talk about the subject as words tend to mislead us. They are so steeped in current meanings and current practices that it is difficult to use them to describe a different reality.

Society is now seen by the individual as something separate, extraneous, often hostile. Many changes over the years have contribute to this rift between the individual, society and the world around him or her. The split extends into the heart of personal activities and perceptions of self.

Part of our feeling that the individual is outside and separate from society springs from the heritage of our scientific forefathers. They set out to understand the mechanisms of the world and our relationship to it, by adopting the supposedly neutral position of an outside observer. In addition, only those phenomena were considered that could be reproduced in a laboratory, itself cut off from the rest of the world. Current scientific theories point to the vanity and misguidedness of such a choice.

Other influences on the place and role of the individual include:

• the impact of schooling on ways we learn

• our attitude to knowledge and the power of the expert

• the changing face of work

• the way decisions are taken in a yes/no society

• the institutionalisation of community solidarity

• ever growing mobility and the role of the local community

In the grips of «schooling»

Learning is a natural human process that goes on all the time. Yet under the double influence of scientific thinking and market logic, the idea of «schooling» has come to permeate all forms of learning and turn them into something that is inevitably organised, and that takes place in a specific location at a given time. What is to be learnt is necessarily divided up into convenient units and consequently cut off from other activities, resulting in the loss of the overall meaning of things in their context. The «schooling» paradigm also implicitly delivers the message that the individual is dependant on somebody else to learn.

In reality, it is not reading, writing or arithmetic that are taught at school, but rather three major lessons - all of which are false:

- learning can only satisfactorily take place in a rarefied atmosphere disconnected from the real world;
- learning can only satisfactorily take place with the help of an expert;
- quality is always convertible into quantity (this is a central lesson of marking systems in school).

The advent of the Information Society is apparently loosening the grips of school on learning. Rapid change, increasing complexity, the need to keep up-to-date and above all cut-throat competition, have forced those people responsible for education and training to introduce the concept of «life-long learning». The tools of the Information Society make it possible for the advocates of pre-packed, commodity-type learning to deliver their tailor-made wares, anywhere, anytime. This apparent ubiquity should not however be confused with the re-integration of learning as a meaning-ful activity amongst many others.

Exploring the network, for example, as a virtual mirror of many aspects of society and exchanging with people met there seems to produce an integrated learning-experience akin to what learning must have been like before school got a grip on us. Yet we should not forget that knowledge on the Net is itself an organised reality with pre-defined relationships between different facets of that knowledge. Maybe the answer to this dilemma lies in finding a balanced relationship between different co-existing planes of «reality». The future member of the Information Society will simul-taneously live in a local community and in distributed on-line communities. Both realities must feed each other and contribute to a global learning process.

The knowledge gap in the complex, expert-run society

Each time a group of people get together for in-depth discussion of an issue, whether formally or informally, they create a knowledge gap between themselves and others. Such a difference in levels of knowledge within society is to be expected. In such a complex world, it is absolutely impossible to know everything about everything. Our society has answered the challenge of ever increasing complexity by setting up a system based on a high degree of specialisation. In addition, current market logic treats knowledge like any other commodity: scarcity in the face of demand leads to a rise in value. So creating a «knowledge gap» is a source of power and commercial advantage.

Most professions go even further, attempting to reserve the exclusive right to develop and use their accumulated knowledge. In such an «expert-run society», the individual non-expert looses control over essential aspects of his or her own life (health, learning, shelter, transport, energy, government, ...). The result is a growing feeling of powerlessness and paralysing apathy. In a society based on wide-spread development and distribution of knowledge - as in the case of the Information Society - lack of participation and general apathy are serious brakes to flexibility, adaptability, on-going learning, participation, motivation, dynamism and well-being. Clearly a system based on making knowledge scarce is a serious handicap as it diminishes the ability to respond rapidly to a complex environment.

In the fast changing context of the Information Society, a balance has to be found between the stability of the status quo and the forces of change. Success will depend on the ability to develop and adopt appropriate, innovative ways of using the new tools available. Despite repeated attempts to impose new ways of working in a top-down fashion, it is clear that the user himself or herself is the best source of new ways of working. These are the fruit of trial and error and are developed and spread by informal exchange with colleagues and acquaintances. The tools of the Information Society make it possible to step up this process through widespread informal exchange between peers. At the same time, the stimulation brought by new points of view help overcome the inertia of the status quo.

We absolutely need to develop a new system that:

• Allows free flow of knowledge so that society can capitalise fully on it;

• Provide a satisfactory retribution (both in terms of revenue and social recognition) to those whose main activity is to create knowledge.

The first concrete step towards such a goal is for the individual to share his knowledge and experience widely with others both within his or her «home community» and within those on-line communities he or she is a part of. It is the only way to fight off the feeling of powerlessness and the paralysis of apathy that saps our energy.

At the same time, is this apparent complexity really an accurate reflection of our current situation? Are not things far simpler than we have come to believe? Is it not rather that our well-tried step-by-step logic from cause to effect is unable to grasp the interactions in a highly interconnected world? Is it not that our way of seeing all things as discrete, non-interacting objects - like so many stones placed on a shelf - can't comprehend the ebb and flow of a world in the throes of continuous processes.

The changing face of work

Over the years the various facets of human activity that contributed to make sense of the person's place and role in society have been progressively eroded away. This process is still going on today. Take work, for example. Using the word «work» implies an inherent separation between that activity and all other activities.

Although some people received financial rewards for their work, toil in the Middle Ages was not systematically equated with a wage. With the coming of the Industrial Revolution, work progressively become a means to earn a living. Work was done at specific times in specific places separate from other human activities. This conception of work spread from industry to other sectors. With the advent of Taylorism, worker satisfaction was rationalised out of work and the process of reducing work to an activity purely designed to earn money took another step forward. In the current so-called «economic crisis» a new shift has occurred in which not everybody is able to do work anyway. Work has become literally senseless for so many people that they'd probably be better off not doing it, if it weren't for the need to «earn a living» and the persistent image that you are good-for-nothing if you don't work (for a living).

It is interesting to note how some companies and organisations have tried to overcome general disinterest on the part of employees as epitomised by a lack of concern for quality. The ISO 9000 quality control standards are a bureaucratic solution that substitute a framework of controls for failing motivation and absent personal responsibility.

The advent of the Information Society, with its «tele-activities» such as telework or tele-learning, seemingly reintegrates these disconnected activities into the tissue of home and family life. Yet is this really so? Initially the time dedicated to an activity was dictated by clearly defined needs and customs. Nowadays, time spent on work is fixed by negotiation between workers and employers concerning the length of the working day. Without such an artificial limit, work may well flow out and into everything else. With the increasing flexibility demanded by employers, how will the future «independent» teleworker by able to protect himself or herself and his or her family from being overrun by work. At the same time, it is likely that many future teleworkers will trade in a part of their independence for a degree of security by establishing on-going privileged relationships with a limited number of specific «mandate givers».

Beyond the «yes/no» society

Abraham Maslow suggests that our needs fit into a hierarchy ranging from basic needs like food and shelter to ultimate self realisation. Only where lower needs are satisfied can the fulfilment of higher needs be undertaken. That we consider the person in terms of needs is in itself significant. The relative importance given to the satisfaction of individual rights and needs far outstrips any efforts made to encourage corresponding obligations to society. In modern Western society, however, we have gone one step further. The fulfilment of needs has largely been masked by the market-driven satisfaction of desires.

Mass production, rather like mass media, scatters its wares far and wide. The more it throws out, the less it knows of what people want. This is all the more so as profit margins in mass markets shrink leading to a drastic reduction in after-sales service thus cutting producers off from a valuable source of information about customers' reactions. Costly market research, in which individuals are reduced to numbers, serves primarily to reassure uncertain minds, to justify risky investments and to convince would-be advertisers. The only tangible feedback for manufacturers and broadcasters alike is the «on/off», the «yes/no» of the buyer-viewer. It is through such an undifferentiated binary choice that the individual is supposed to exert his or her ultimate power over the market place. Apparent freedom of choice is often pure illusion: how many people can afford to say «no!» to Microsoft even if their products are of debatable quality and the company's closed, monopolistic attitude is undesirable?

The advent of the networked society potentially changes this binary system, allowing companies to escape from the current «broadcasting» logic by making individual dialogue with customers possible. The major question is whether companies will be able to overcome internal inertia and adhere to a form of commerce based on sustained two-way relationships between them and their customers. The second major question is whether customers will accept to enter into this new form of relationship as described by the advocates of «virtual corporations» in which close ties and shared interests inexorably link customers and companies. Clearly, should such a change take place, a new form of «integration» will be underway in which the place of the individual in society will once again be redefined.

A similar situation occurs in our democratic systems that invest the individual citizen with the supreme right to choose by a «yes» or a «no», when a thousand other answers would have been more appropriate. The growing dissatisfaction with forms of democracy based on representation and the advent of the Information Society with the possibility for the individual to develop an informed opinion in dialogue with others raises the question of the increased participation of the individual in democratic processes. Practically speaking, apart from the need to overcome ambient apathy, a major challenge involves providing timely, understandable information to enable citizens to discuss and decide on key issues.

Institutionalisation of community solidarity

One of the characteristics of the liberal economy is to strive to be all-embracing. A similar pattern is to be seen with other tentacular organisations like school and health-care. Ivan Ilych has written much about this subject. As the number of available jobs diminishes, governments turn to hitherto unpaid activities related to community solidarity as a reservoir of potential employment. This mutation goes hand in hand with an ever growing tendency to professionalise and institutionalise care. Attempts to shift the onus for care for other members of the community from individual responsibility to payable, institutionalised relationships weakens even further the links between people without being able to satisfactorily replace human solidarity. The individual is dispossessed of his or her ability to partake in community solidarity and those in need are left at the mercy of institutionalised, commercialised care. At the same time, a quite different sort of solidarity has grown up on the network, in which people spontaneously help each other with ideas and information, their only «reward» being social recognition.

Mobility and the local community

Widely available individual transport has contributed to enormously increased mobility. Such progress has not only made it possible to voyage far-and-wide and discover unknown areas and countries, but also to live further away from essential facilities like shops and schools. This has led to the decline of the provision of these facilities in rural and poorer areas which in turn has increased their poverty. At the same time, people were able to move out of costly town centres and further away from work. The result has been a significant degradation of inner city life.

In many ways, «mobility» has come to mean the willingness of individuals (and their families) to move to where work is available. Although this mobility might have a positive side in leading to greater intercultural understanding, it certainly contributes to breaking local ties leaving the individual or family more isolated. At the same time it makes them potential customers for organised care and welfare.

At first sight, it would seem that tele-activities might reverse this tendency. The resulting reduced mobility would contribute to much-needed sustainable development. At the same time, it would allow the individual to remain rooted in his home culture without being penalised by the distance from essential facilities and work. Such a hypothesis supposes that work and other activities are not dependent on the context in which they take place. To what extent can the on-line context complete the local-based environment by providing in particular:

- outside stimulation;
- additional incentives to learning and personal improvement;
- facilities not available locally;
- satisfactory job opportunities?

At the same time, there is clearly a need to rediscover and reinforce the community spirit and the sense of identity that comes from belonging and taking part. Such action, although it does not involve networking, is absolutely essential if the networked society is to work satisfactorily.

The reverse side of such a change is that people world wide will be competing for the same work. Unlike the village of our ancestors, in the electronically enhanced local community your competitors are scattered world wide. Are those people going to remain unknown to each other or are they going to come together in guilds of common interests? This perspective introduces a new facet to the somewhat hackneyed idea of globalisation.