Post Internet Journalism and the Assumption that Energy is Unlimited

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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It is true that the Internet has challenged the newspaper business like nothing else. The Internet has also changed social networking and activist organizing. But we must also see beyond the Internet, a system that banks on the notion of unlimited non-renewable resources for computers, power generation, and shipping through petroleum. The Internet also operates on anonymity or the potential for it, as little face-to-face communication is required. Is that really the future?

From the comfort of an ivory observation tower, an Internet pundit for corporate America and ostensibly the public reflects on recent revolutionary changes in publishing:

"When people demand to know how we are going to replace newspapers, they are really demanding to be told that we are not living though a revolution. They are demanding to be told that old systems won't break before new systems are in place. They are demanding to be told that ancient social bargains aren't in peril, that core institutions will be spared, that new methods of spreading information will improve previous practice rather than upending it. They are demanding to be lied to." -- Clay Shirky, Utne Reader July-Aug. 2009

This excellent logic can be transferred to other areas such as the technofix: people are demanding energy to use freely, and they believe that they've gone far enough by accepting the idea that oil or fossil fuels will be phased out voluntarily or otherwise. But they have a ground rule: continued energy is the only way. To disagree is to deny science -- or that's their implied accusation.

Meanwhile, researchers have estimated that one Internet search generates around 7 grams of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere, due to the energy demands of Internet computers. One can defend this by pointing out that transportation and other major energy uses are many times the amount of computers' use of energy, but the armchair energy analyst does not appreciate that the energy industries cannot be reshaped into mini-versions of themselves for drastically reduced, special uses. In other words, the ongoing energy and materials usage for the Internet is part of the hard-wired petroleum infrastructure and cannot be teased out for sustainable operation -- certainly not like the printing press's five hundred years of far lower energy requirement. Low technology and smaller populations also meant low volume consumption of trees or other plants for paper. Additionally, today people are oblivious to the huge demand for water posed by silicon chip production -- and fresh water in large quantity usually means massive energy requirements.

A new way of thinking about energy is overdue. Back when people made do with available resources in their own locales for thousands of years, there was no "energy issue." While energy was part of everything they did, especially when burning a log for the campfire or hearth, the essentials of life were obtained without concern over energy sources per se. After all, the log was part of the forest and could be used for materials for shelter or tools. Nowadays, when the inherent energy in local water supplies, local wood and the sun shining down on us is deemed to be insufficient, we have made the choice to believe we are deprived of the means to live "normally." We want a lot of power and fuel to alter our environment and manipulate our universe. Because this has been the way things have been done, increasingly so in the last several decades, most of us have assumed it can and should continue. Certainly the Powers That Be tell us we simply must have vast energy supplies to keep "our" economy afloat. These assumptions can suddenly be cancelled by the reality of petrocollapse or climate extinction.

Intertwined in the desire for continued energy profligacy is the notion of technological progress. In fact, energy from wood-burning is devalued compared to some plastic/metal gizmo that converts one form of energy to another through entropy (unavoidable waste). While many modern users of energy are happy enough to have wood for their stoves and solar energy panels for their "essential" electrical gadgets, it is the sophisticated communications of electronic publishing and images that are deemed to be the most essential to "our way of life" that we wish upon all humans so that they may participate. But what about the fact that many of them may not have their own machines and power supply? If the machine and power must be shared, this becomes a community tool that is opposed to isolated consuming and informing one's self for hours per day. One ignored consequence of this, besides energy pollution, is the physical pain or injury from excessive sitting and repetitive motion. Yet some people need some isolation while doing intense research reading and writing to produce articles and actions that help enlighten millions of people to transform into sustainable lifestyles. Tradeoffs are necessary, especially during the climate disruption and resource depletion emergency.

These issues bring up the matters of human communication, health, environmental care, and the place of future publishing and journalism. Why should communication and massive indulgence in unlimited information be considered an untouchable right? We can readily agree that knowing about global threats such as radiation-release accidents and the imminent approach of a hurricane can only be good. But for everyone to know the direction of the stock market, or the latest propaganda from governments, is questionable. In any case, we will soon be forced to do without this command over information and news.

As social change is indeed a volatile and essential component of modern life, as we collectively lurch toward a sustainable society, we can appreciate the helpful power of a cell-phone transmission of text or video. The Iranian uprising against dictatorship is a case in point. This is a time when activism's communications capability is appreciated greatly, and we cheer the Internet's role. Culture Change published an account from a professor on the streets of Tehran a few days ago, which would have been well nigh impossible a short number of years ago. The Iranian revolution of 1978 was more slowly shared with world audiences.

Culture Change began in 1988 with the usual tools of organizing and publishing. We used the national media to announce our presence, disseminate our ideas and calls for action, and we got in return some great contributions on the intellectual, emotional and financial levels. This pattern continued until the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Then the drop in foundations' Wall Street portfolios meant our grants and donations dried up considerably. We ceased printing the Culture Change magazine (formerly Auto-Free Times), and we relied on the Internet to keep in touch with our audience. This happened so fast, and without much financial resources, that we were unable to reach all our print readers to inform them of our changes. We therefore adopted a new core audience of Internet users, and hoped that our print readers remembered that we had been cultivating an Internet presence. Our activism and the tone of our message changed with the technology at hand. There was something lost to the world without our magazines to hold in one's hands. Now we were competing for a little bit of attention on a reader's computer-screen whose pages changed as fast as possible, if a user wanted to get through his or her day and have time to eat, shower, walk, etc.

Culture Change therefore experienced what the newspaper-business casualties experienced: changing or perishing. As activists rather than simply journalists, we were comfortable with the change. But we found that writers of books were increasingly taking advantage of the demise of activist magazines and journals by marketing something the Internet could not replace: a book in the hand or for the shelf to decorate a coffee table or shelf. As the years went by, some of our old magazine readers as well as our Internet readers were able to publish books that served to provide a longer view than Internet publishing. Books may always be with us, even after a total socioeconomic crash. But will the Internet?

Electronic communications are the epitome of modern isolation, alienation, pollution and frivolity. The millions of computers, cell phones, DVDs made of bisphenol-A, and video games, as well as peripheral units such as modems, routers, printers, etc., are an ecological disaster. As to their sustainability, their ability to let an individual be off the grid is more an elitist indulgence than a major trend. For the bulk of energy use and machine-gadgets manufactured are for the centralized fossil/nuclear power systems as well as corporate world trade. When the economy's dependence on cheap and abundant energy becomes too great for the dwindling supply, or when the breakdown in distribution of energy and goods hits hard enough, almost all of us will be without our usual means of communication, travel, food, etc.

In the same issue of the above-referenced Utne Reader article, "The Revolution Will Not be Published," was an editorial by the founder of the magazine, Eric Utne. In describing the hunter-gatherers known as the Hadza in Africa, he exalted their traditional ways of communication that respect elders: "exchanged stories and songs around the night fire" as well as their playful, bawdy, flirtatious humor. Eric Utne put his report in the context of survivalism for today's world economic crisis. He asked, "How on earth are we going to survive?" He said he didn't know the answer, but his portrayal of the Hadza was meant to have us hit upon it ourselves "if humans are around in 500 years."

It is unfortunate that for the next 240,000 years, humans are saddled with the horrible responsibility of containing and tracking deadly radioactive nuclear waste, which will take some amount of human commitment, energy, science and

technology.

What we must question is the idea that the Internet and profligate use of energy will go on much longer, such that, through our highly entropic attempt, we close off the possibility of being around another half millennium.

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Two internet searches can result in the CO2-release equivalent of boiling a kettle which produces about 15 grams of CO2:

infoniac.com

Corporate Water Footprinting Water Fight: corporate bottom line versus foes of privatization:

culturechange.org