



Making Sense Of the Information Age

By Kenan Doyle Branam - Copyright 1995

Information Is About Relationship

The Information Age is suddenly upon me. Now there is so much information distributed through the broadcast, cable, and now the Internet that I certainly experience “information overload,” (a computer metaphor, by the way). It isn’t as if I didn’t see it coming. Marshall McLuhan prophesied the information age in his 1960’s book, Understanding Media. He suggested that to understand technology, we should look at it in a different way.

Briefly, McLuhan’s theory addresses the process of projection. As human beings, we “project” aspects of ourselves into our creations whether art, technology, social organizations, spiritual paradigms, in effect, the way we see the world. Through the mirror of our world, we know who we are. Our industrial age machines and things, production design, business procedures, and what we choose to bless as worthwhile social values are a projection of our preoccupation with our physical body’s bones, muscles, actions, reactions, and desires.

Now, during the information age, our creations, our technologies, our social structure, and our values become a reflection of our preoccupation with, not only our physical nervous system, but with our cognitive processes. This includes analysis, reflection, awareness, feelings, consciousness and other mysterious “things” of human experience that “mechanistic” psychologists try to “nail down” with stick-pins on the walls of their industrial psychology factories.

Shifting Perception

In order to handle the information age conceptually, it is not enough to simply change our perspective from mechanistic to processional, from thing orientation to human orientation. What is required is a shift in consciousness about who we are as human beings and, therefore, every aspect of our lives. This is the magnitude of the paradigm shift that we will experience in the Information Age.

Any written exploration of this consciousness shift would require a thesis on cognition. In this series, I will deal with issues concerning the communications profession. I hope that we can get a picture of the whole by looking at some of the parts of the whole. These parts will be sub-process examples of the greater cognitive process required to make sense of the whole.

Making sense is about having an integrated experience: seeing, hearing, touching, and other senses. Understanding requires an interactive experience, a relationship, with someone, something, some event, or some concept.

The cognitive process is multidimensional, perhaps beyond the four dimensions of time and space. There is no single first step or linear path for our logical mind to follow but a complex of

many connections and relationships. The multidimensional nature of cognition is also the reason interactive programs are more effective for education, training, or motivation. Involvement process, as well as data, enhances memory retention and understanding.

Let's look at a portion of the cognition process specific to our perspective on "information." Information specialists are now considering information as a *process* rather than a "thing." Data is not information. Information must have meaning. Human consciousness gives meaning to data. We take data and organize it into a form that is useful to humans. That usefulness may be for understanding, work performance, or recreation. The form and order we put data into may have several connecting paths that are linear, a productivity workflow in a training video or as a story line in a movie. Nevertheless, the paths eventually must describe a multidimensional whole, a context that enables the human mind to reason for meaning and purpose.

The task of the creative person in the communications professions is to provide the form of the communication with all the context of meaning, purpose, inter-activity, and relatedness. Some of the elements are composition, action, story line, continuity, rhythm, mood, tone, and color. The form constructed by these elements' relationships establishes meaning. The creation is a reflection of the creator's conscious and unconscious cognitive processes. That is to say, "If you ain't got rhythm, you can't dance."

Information is Power

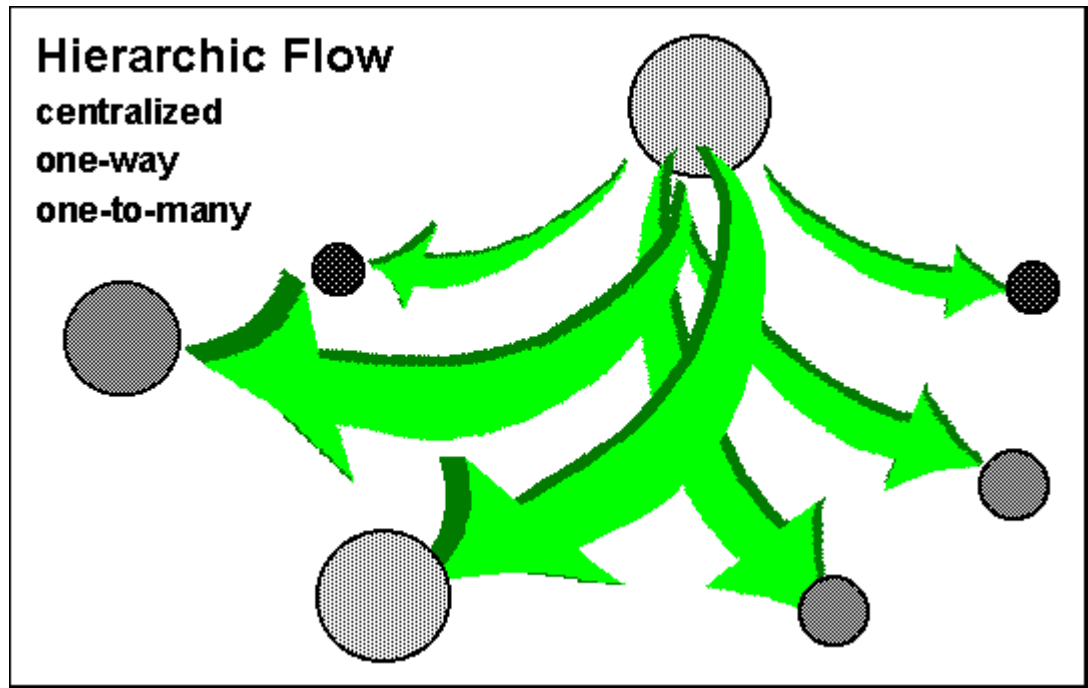
Looking at information from a cognitive, human point of view is just one perspective of "The" paradigm shift! Let's shift perspective and look at the social-political context of the Information Age.

Communication requires an exchange of relevant and organized data from person(s)-to-person(s). The traditional industrial age mind-set would see data moving from point A to point B in a linear process. This mind-set is based on political, social, and historical paradigms that are in the process of transformation.

One Way Dictatorship

In an industrial age society, information is centralized with controlled distribution - a hierarchical distribution (Figure #1). Communication is a top-down, one way, one-to-many process just like the social and political structure. In traditional industrial companies or corporations, information is transferred from the boss to the workers in the form of dictatorial orders. The "need to know" rules inter-company and intra-company control of communication. In the typical case, information is filtered and even distorted on its way down the chain of command. As we all know from experience, the "chain of command" is not the only channel of information. The "grape vine" provides a functional anarchy, whether it is mouth-to-mouth, phone-to-phone, or client-to-client (computer talk).

Figure #1

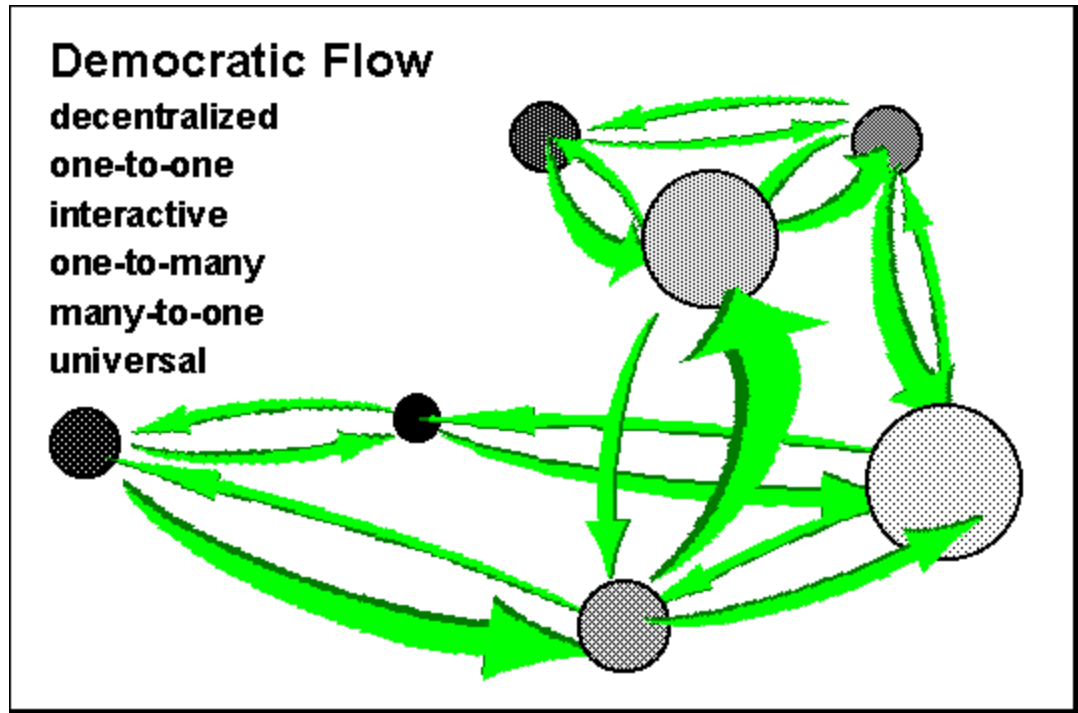


Another example of hierarchical distribution is broadcast media. Television and radio broadcasts from networks, cable, and direct satellite are also one-way, one-to-many. In our democratic culture, we at least have multiple hierarchical broadcast systems, but it is important to notice that they are, nonetheless, hierarchical. Although broadcast is near *universal* in our culture, we really do have limited choices in what news and entertainment we receive. More choices cost more money. Cable television customers are still in the minority.

Interactive Freedom

Our telephone system has always been democratic (Figure #2) and, in recent years, universal. That is, almost everyone in the U.S. has a telephone. (Universal is defined by our Federal legislature as approximately 90%). The telephone allows one-to-one and interactive (two-way) communication. You can call and talk to Mom and she can respond to you. Conference calls (many-to-many) are possible but are used mainly in the corporate world. Anyone can call anyone else in the U.S. or overseas without asking permission or having his or her conversation monitored (legally).

Figure #2



The telephone and the automobile changed our society and our daily lives because both were universally accessible. Despite the high purchasing cost for an individual and despite government regulations of the highways and airways, these technologies have increased our freedom to move, communicate, and make a living. Barring a return to some form of dictatorial society or a general economic depression, there is no reason to predict that the merging of digital technologies into the Internet will have a reverse affect.

Global Connectivity

The Internet is ordered (or chaotic, depending on your control philosophy) in an interactive network of one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-one. This “digital soup” is very democratic (or anarchical). The legislative battle over de-regulation and monopoly control of the telecommunications industry is about how *free* and *universal* Internet access will be.

Like the telephone system, the Internet is one-to-one and interactive. Unlike the telephone, the instruments of the Internet allow for broadcasting, one-to-many. If you merge the television broadcast metaphor with the telephone metaphor, you get an idea of the possible connections. Marshall McLuhan said that if you merge two technologies into a hybrid, you would create a major transformation in society. This merging creates not just the results of $1 + 1 = 2$ but is like a marriage: $1 + 1 = 3$ (a child or other results of the creative act). Actually, more than two technologies are merging into this digital soup: television, radio, telephone, faxing, cellular phones, beepers, networked computers, portable computers, wireless phones and computers, and satellite transmissions.

When a hybrid technology forms from multiple technologies, new processes are created. The concept of “many-to-one” is one of these processes that may have very significant effects in the future. For example, there is a software metaphor called an “agent.” An agent is like a robot that is able to travel self-directed all over the Internet. It gathers references and data that is relevant or customized to the customer (you, maybe) then reports to the customer on some schedule. Therefore,

in effect, *many* sources of information travel to *one*. Many-to-one. It is kind of a mirror image of broadcasting and more specifically than narrow casting

Holographic Flow

The form of the Internet has evolved into a wholistic or holographic process. Every part is connected to the whole (one-to-many) and the whole is connected to every part (many-to-one). In database management terminology, this is a “many-to-many” relationship and is only possible with “relational” database structure involving a third element that defines the “relationship” between the two other. Because of this technical structure, any individual can create a network of connections somewhat similar to the way a neuron in our brain “grows” connections as we grow from experience and knowledge. The Internet can be considered a living entity made up from many living entities.

The Internet is not only emulating the current psychophysical model of human mind/brain (Reference Dr. Karl Pribram’s Holographic Brain theory), it is beginning to emulate social consciousness. As we approached the Presidential elections of 1996, political parties and lobby groups were rushing to the Internet to establish home page presence, newsgroups, and chat groups focused on political issues and candidates. We may discover that the Internet media will be just as significant to the outcome of elections as the broadcast media has in the past. Through the Internet, we will all get more than the “pulse” of the public. We’ll actually get the public’s “piece of mind.” The whole political process could transform drastically!

As digital technology expands throughout the world, information access will become more difficult to control. The forces of traditional hierarchical control and the evolution of a truer democratic model of access will be at odds. The Federal government and monopolistic businesses cling to secrecy while grassroots individualists demand freedom of information. These forces *will* test the Internet culture’s truism, “information, by definition, is free.”

Advertising Must Provide Information

“Get Outta My Face!”

As we said before “information is about relationships.” Advertising is also about relationships, symptomatic of our cultural paradigms. Our concept of relationship is based on a 5,000 year-old model that is undergoing transformation.

I want to begin with a disclaimer. I don’t intend to bash the media or genders. Our history may some times seem sinful and in need of redemption. However, blame and shame are serious limitations to progress. Personally, I see our process as evolutionary from human to more humane.

Sleeping Beauty

Advertisers and consumers have had a relationship like men and women in our culture. The male (advertiser) was expected to do the courting and the woman (consumer) was expected to act like Sleeping Beauty (couch potato) and wait for someone interesting to come along. A customer with any discrimination could die in passivity while waiting for someone to offer something of value.

Well, it’s now Sadie Hawkins Day in the media world. The customer is learning a little self-respect and is aggressively shopping for what she wants rather than what’s offered up by the suitor. Consequently, she is snubbing uninvited, loud-mouthed, clowns who haven’t a clue.

Excuse me, is it a gender thing? Look at the early days of advertising—let’s say, post-World

War II. Before technology provided a path into the suburban home (a woman's domain despite the male castle fantasy), door-to-door salesmen (and they were all men) would knock on the suburban door and the housewife would actually welcome the visitation, perhaps expecting flowers. Who can blame her for wanting the outside world to enter her cloistered tower? At least, in those days, salesmen were gentlemen with manners. Then, when the telephone, radio, and TV became a path to reach her (the consumer), she began to expect the world to come to her with bright lights, colors, and music to woo her attention and flatter her unashamedly.

Times change. Who really knows why a growing number of "Sleeping Beauty" consumers are waking up? Is it because the consumer (as well as women) are becoming conscious of their basic human rights not to be seduced, manipulated, controlled, attacked, and raped by distasteful, intrusive, uninvited, abusive advertising?

Dominator vs. Partnership Relationship

I hope you get the message and I can now drop this gender metaphor and include us men in this story. It's not about gender, really. It's about passive, addictive consumers enabling a hierarchical, aggressive, competitive, dominator political and economic society.

The Armchair Quarterback is a Sleeping Beauty, too. Boy-toy manufacturers do know how to woo the male ego. Wake up! You're not in control. Even with your remote TV control and virtual reality technology, it's just a Dream Team!

Maybe part of the evolution in consciousness has to do with technology empowering the individual with self-determining information and entertainment acquisition. Nevertheless, the larger context is about control.

Our passive consumer market is changing into a truly consumer driven market. Nowadays, we, both men and women working in the world, have more need for privacy, seclusion, and safety at home and in our growing awareness of "personal space." Still, tele-marketers ring the phone at dinner time, the fax machine beeps, and 150 plus TV channels plug into our private space with varying social etiquette, if any manners at all. In self-defense, we have to wake up and take control of our homes and our lives. Therefore, we take the option for Caller ID and answer machines. We schedule our kitchen and bathroom trips for commercial breaks or we sometimes turn the TV off to read a book or surf the Internet on our home computer.

We are becoming more self-determined in choosing what information we need and we are more willing to make the effort to find it. Technology helps. We insist that information, when it gets into our face, be relevant to our individual needs. We want to define the value, too. Marketers, be aware! In addition, be sensitive. We are not objects for your conquest! We will be equal and respected!

I really don't have the print space or your patience to write about the statistics of the mass consciousness: how many people watch the commercials on TV versus how many are discriminating enough to turn it off, or how many "sleeping beauties" are waking up from victim consciousness. "It's blowing in the wind," as Bob Dylan said.

Somebody is buying the new technology, because deals are being made and empires are being fought over in the world of telecommunications and information management. Corporate giants in all industries and even political parties are buying territory along the information highway; some thinking, with unchanged paradigms, that business will be as usual. If they're still expecting to invade our homes with dominator style, rape, and plunder marketing strategies, they're in for a rude awakening themselves. Won't they be surprised when Cyber Beauty slaps their face and sues for harassment as she says, "Get outta my face!" It's my life and I'll surf who I want to."

Partnering for Information Intercourse

“Can we talk?”

Basic etiquette cannot be designed or enforced by formal social laws. Enforcement comes from peer pressure and social consensus. Perhaps, in our present society, we do what we can “get away with.” Actually, our ethics come from our deepest values and our values come from our deepest concept of how we feel about ourselves in our immediate social context.

In our recent history, it seems to me that we’ve been living by a perversion of The Golden Rule, “Do unto others before they do unto you.” On the other hand, in advertising, “Do the consumers before the competitors do them.” The Golden Psychological Secret is “We do to others what we do to ourselves.” No matter the nature of the medium, productive communication depends on the self-concept of both partners of the interchange.

Our values are not changing because of technology but because of a larger social transformational context. The nature of the American Life was made possible by the evolution of a democratic society in which equality became an achievable goal. The ideal that an individual has inalienable rights is just a glimpse of the change in how we treat each other.

The controversial question opens the possibilities for change. Human rights continue to be re-defined in our culture and all over the world. Abuse is now defined on a psychological level as well as physical. Race, religion, and gender are no longer conditional qualifiers of individual justice.

Yes, technology has become a major factor in this change. Certainly, universal and equal access to information and intellectual exchange increases the potential for social transformation. It does not predetermine the results. It calls the question.

Equality

Ideally, the sender/receiver and the receiver/sender must both be human and have a real time connection. Both must have respect for the ability and right of the other to contribute goods, information, knowledge, and wisdom. A dominator/victim attitude on either side contaminates the interchange. Demographic stereotypes, sexual, racial or social status conceptually limits the identity of the participants and set up the relationship for manipulation, competitiveness, and a win/lose results. Without a win/win process, the communication becomes unproductive.

Universality

Technology has made it difficult to “preach to” a captive audience. A free market continues to erode monopolies in products, service, information, and ideology. Each of us, as consumers has an expanding resource of options. As technology and commerce expands across national boundaries, citizens of the world will have more choices in what, where, when, and from whom they “buy” necessities of life, be they material or conceptual.

Partnering

Equality and universality are paradigm shifts that have dramatically influenced one-to-one, personal relationships in the context of marriage and family. Recently, concepts of intimacy are being introduced in business, corporate culture, social, and political groups, now referred to as “communities.” One of the concepts is *partnering*. This is a relationship that requires personal values or character ethics such as interdependence, win/win attitude, honesty, disclosure,

vulnerability, and compassion, just to mention a few. People today are just tired of being treated generically, like statistics, in personal relationships, or in business. The context of advertising and other commercial exchanges is no exception for the individual, enlightened consumer. We demand that people we have contact with, face-to-face or through technology, acknowledge and respect our privacy, our freedom of choice, our unique needs and desires, and our tradable goods: money, job productivity, skills, talents, experience, and wisdom. We also want to be acknowledged as whole persons - body, mind, and spirit.

Lets look at two examples where these concepts are factors.

Training and Education

The dominator/victim paradigm assumes that one side of the communication has control of all the resources (product, information, experience, and wisdom) and the other side is passive and has nothing to contribute. This is not true even if the trainee or student has no direct experience with the information at issue. As we are changing how we see others, and ourselves we realize that all humans bring their life experience and creativity to the situation and have much value to contribute. No matter how much expertise we have previously invested in our information or process, it is open to innovation from the people who participate in its implementation in the real world.

Commercial Exchange

When the dominator attitude of one side defines their product or service as an inevitable choice of the other side, they are vulnerable to surprise. The customer has choices or will soon have choices from competitive products. The customer may not need the product at all. The customer may even become a producer of that same product. If the seller devalues the contribution of the consumer's money or resource, the exchange becomes a win/lose situation. A win/lose exchange is a temporary relationship. It can't last over the long haul. It will end when the loser runs out of resource for exchange or decides to buy somewhere else.

Finally, let's look at this relationship from the loser perspective. A "victim" attitude results from a self-concept that is unconscious of intrinsic individual value. This attitude is very powerful and supports a loser role. When the victim devalues their own human rights, intelligence, creativity, money, or product of exchange, they inevitably define the exchange as a failure. Monopoly, the game, and real world commercial intercourse is over when either side loses! Dictatorships fall when the oppressed have nothing left to lose.

The Industrial Revolution provided the have-nots with more *things* for a higher standard of living. The Information Revolution promises to put more information in the hands of the now have-nots. I believe that the have-nots will continue to be empowered with a flourishing self-esteem and, consequently, an appreciation of all living beings.

Whether the relationship context is producer/consumer, employer/employee, or male/female, new ethics of social interaction are being defined and refined. The game is changing! The new game will be more productive and will last longer because everybody wins!

Originally published in the Houston Chapter ITVA Newsletter.

This article is also available on the Web at <http://www.branam.com/makingsense>.