



Is the world really becoming smaller?

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It is a platitude that the world is growing smaller. Whether reading through Frances Cairncross's "The Death of Distance" or Thomas Friedman's "The World is Flat," one gets the impression that the growth of new technologies which link us together reduces distance between us and makes the world smaller, more connected. Although it is hard to imagine how seven billion people could ever be a single group, a global village, there will be few objections if I say that "technology is making the world smaller" at a cocktail party.

But that assumption is not necessarily true. Let me make two different, related points.

First, although you can easily travel from Delhi to Seoul, from Johannesburg to Berlin, physical movement is not the equivalent of communication and deep exchange. Increasingly individuals travel around the world with great ease, but stay at remarkably uniform hotels and eat in quite similar restaurants where ever their travels take them. When it comes to deep conversations and close personal relations, although the amount may be increasing, it is not obvious that greater global travel makes for close personal ties. There is a global class who move everywhere, but they are increasingly more related to each other than to the countries in which they live. As I wrote in "[The Frankenstein Alliance](#)," Washington D.C. and Beijing have more in common with each other than with rural regions of their own respective countries.

In fact I would argue, as I have previously, that one of the great challenges we face is the growing gap between the rate at which the world is integrated in terms of logistics and trade, the exchange of natural resources, or the circulation of money and the rate at which individuals in the various nations of the world establish relations, or build global institutions, to parallel those physical steps towards integration.

If we look at East Asia one hundred years ago, we see that travel was difficult and such conveniences as phones did not exist. Yet the depth of intellectual exchange between certain scholars and policy makers was quite impressive, perhaps one might even say “deeper” than just about any discussion going on today. There is clearly a loss.

The other serious issue is whether the growth of computer power is pulling us together, or fragmenting us further, reducing the distance between us, or creating even greater distance between us. The jury is still out, and I would suggest that perhaps both phenomena are taking place simultaneously.

Let me put it another way: the distance between Washington D.C. in terms of travel time has been reduced, and SKYPE has made it irrelevant. At the same time the actual distance between one office in the Pentagon and another office has so increased, in a bureaucratic sense, as to be measured in light years. We find individuals in such global organizations to be linked together through enormous mazes of supercomputers that create distance and complexity. Such supercomputers, if we can imagine them as organisms, have no incentive to simplify the situation and every reason to want to make it more complex, more convoluted. Bureaucracy is in a sense traditionally a product of technology. The technology surrounding the storage and transfer of the written word. Today, however, supercomputers, that dark mass out there that impacts every aspect of our daily life but is almost beyond our awareness, have created their own “hyper-bureaucracy” that complicates just about everything, slowing down the process by which decisions for most things are made and speeding up just certain tasks that are required for a computer’s global agenda.

We could also say that the essential problem is an excess of information. That the supply of information generated by computers, rather than simply tasks, can make them more difficult. There is some validity in that argument. The most inspired and trenchant author, Neil Postman, wrote at length about the problem of information in his most thoughtful book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage Books, 1993). Postman suggests that we are entering an age in which technology itself dominates all levels of discourse, and even the manner in which men try to think, creating enormous blindness, and great risk. Although I think that Postman ultimately overstates the case, he has grasped something essential.

Postman writes,

“The relationship between information and the mechanisms for its control is fairly simple to describe: Technology increases the available supply of information. As the supply is increased, control mechanisms are strained. Additional control mechanisms are needed to cope with the new information. When additional control mechanisms are themselves technical, they in turn further increase the supply of information. When the supply of information is no longer controllable, a general breakdown in psychic tranquility and social purpose occurs. Without defenses, people have no way of finding meaning in their experiences, lose their capacity to remember, and have difficulty imagining reasonable futures.”

This state at which the supply of information is no longer controlled, and individuals can no longer judge what information is relevant, what is meaningful, is becoming increasingly common. It is quite dangerous in part because the value of the information that the individual receives seems debased. We are subject to, as I commented in my paper on "[Non-Traditional Security Threats](#)" a Gresham's Law of information. The original Gresham's Law states that debased currency will replace pure currency. If you circulate coins that are 90% gold and coins that are 10% gold, in short time you will have a situation in which only coins that are 10% gold are in circulation.

It is not simply that bad information is circulated, although that does happen too, but rather that so much information is circulated that the value of any piece of information, no matter how important, is reduced as a result. I am reminded of Andy Warhol's series of prints "Car Crash." Warhol took a gruesome photograph of a fatal automobile accident and made a collage in which the photo is repeated many times. The effect is that the horror of the image is much reduced and it becomes little more than a pattern for the observer.

Postman returns to describe his dystopia "Technopoly" as a flood of uncontrolled information:

"One way of defining Technopoly, then, is to say it is what happens to society when the defenses against information glut have broken down. It is what happens when institutional life becomes inadequate to cope with too much information. It is what happens when a culture, overcome by information generated by technology, tried to employ technology itself as a means of providing clear direction and humane purpose. The effort is mostly doomed to failure. Though it is sometimes possible to use a disease as a cure for itself, this occurs only when we are fully aware of the processes by which disease is normally held in check. My purpose here is to describe the defenses that in principle are available and to suggest how they have become dysfunctional." (Technopoly, 72)

It is a frightening prospect. I am not convinced that Postman's assessment is entirely correct. There are certainly parts of his book that are overstated and overly gloomy. But I would suggest that we run a very serious risk of misunderstanding the nature of the threats we face. We may imagine this threat out there in Iran or Pakistan, but in fact that threat out there is part of this greater structure in which we are embedded, a structure that continues to expand.

One quote that I particularly enjoyed from Postman's book was this one:

"Whether or not it draws on new scientific research, technology is a branch of moral philosophy, not of science" (Paul Goodman, New Reformation).

The implication of the quote is that how we use technology has a moral component to it. Therefore, to confuse technology with science is to lose track of the true significance of one's actions.