Saturday remarks for Radical Technology at 40

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Hello again, everyone. Despite being the last speaker in this session, it’s not my job to sum up – these people are completely clear with their messages and you lot are quite capable of taking what you need from what they say. So instead, here are a few thoughts on the book, and on *Undercurrents* more generally, as communications projects in 1976 and their importance today.

Thinking about this conference has been a pleasure for me, taking me back to the era when my beard was dense and dark, and when we had a prime minister who knew how to fix a referendum on remaining in the EU, and when people would be impressed by the sight of a pocket calculator.

OK: *Undercurrents* was started by Godfrey and allies in 1972. Some wit (various people claim the credit) have referred to this period as the Hangover of the 1960s, and this clever formulation points us perhaps towards the communications reference points for the magazine and for the book.

It looked in a number of directions: towards the alternative publishing scene of the 1960s; towards the straight press that we aimed to outflank (notably the *New Scientist*, then far more scholarly than the newsstand juggernaut of today, and of course the dear old *Guardian*, on the brink of catastrophe then as now); and towards a range of radical publications of the time. We always aimed to be more journalistic and less professorial than the likes of *Radical Science Journal* (now *Science as Culture*) and we were less interested in powers and principalities, and less oriented towards traditional political concerns, than such serious endeavours as *State Research* or *The Leveller*.

More to the point were several magazines with a broadly similar remit to our own: *The Ecologist*, doing what we did but from the right rather than from the left and with far more money; and *Resurgence*, with a more rural and spiritual approach than our harder-edged, urban one, but with a similar range of concerns. With the unique form of leadership provided by Satish Kumar, I am not surprised that *Resurgence* has had the most staying power, ultimately absorbing *Undercurrents* itself and now *The Ecologist* as well, turning gradually into the Google of the alternative society.

We were an open collective – anyone could come along – made up of a bunch of people largely educated in science and technology, largely in our 20s and 30s, and united if at all by the idea that a better world would need softer and better technology. Stewart Brand, the genius behind the Ur-publication of the alternative society, *The Whole Earth Catalog*, admitted that it was written by English majors who wanted to reinvent civilisation but didn’t know how a fridge worked or how to plant a seed, so we were one step ahead of them at the very least. And to take up a theme of Malcolm Gladwell, we had all got one thing right: we had chosen our dates of birth with skill, and we were lucky to be young and active at a fascinating point in history.

Who was reading what we wrote?

One important group were hippies born a few years too late. A likeable group, these, who always brought some fun with them. I hope they are now enjoying all those “Were the Hippies Right?” articles in the papers. Next came a rather unhappier group, people who just weren’t enjoying the 20th century, because of industrialisation, pollution, unwelcome social change and other bad things. Some thought that society was a few years away from total collapse. I’m an optimist and could never get on with this crowd. I bet they all voted Brexit in June.

Next, what I’d term mystics. By this I mean people who thought the ancients knew something interesting that we don’t. Given my own background, I got rather judgemental and grumpy about this crowd.

Next, many of our readers were people with an interest in building things, for example wind machines. We may not have served this crowd as well as we might have, despite Godfrey himself being a proper engineer and a big ally for this approach. Any conventional publisher would have had a detailed design for a project in every issue as a fixture that would sell lots of magazines, but that would never have been our way of doing things.

Finally, the biggest and to me the most sympathetic group of our readers were people wanting a better world in terms both of technology and of social structures, who didn’t think party politics, market forces or the big state was the way ahead, and who looked to us for some better thinking and ideas. (This was the era, by the way, as I said this morning, when people worried about the overweening power of the state, unlike today when we fuss about its becoming enfeebled and hollowed out.)

All in all, *Undercurrents* was a remarkable intervention in social and publishing terms. It was driven technologically by improvements in litho printing that made it a lot cheaper and more feasible to make a magazine. But we never did crack the more intractable question of getting it seen by the audience that might well have developed if we had had adequate distribution in place. We were among the founders of a special business, the Publications Distribution Cooperative, that was set up to crack this problem, but even that was not a complete solution. Obviously there would be new ways of thinking about this dilemma in the web era.

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OK, moving swiftly on.

In recent years I have done a lot of work with the UK government’s Foresight directorate, and with other futurologists. They sure as hell would not take on the task of predicting the technology of the future 40 years out, or of foretelling the social structure of Britain or the world that far in advance. They talk about risk, uncertainty, black swan events and the like. So perhaps we are being unfair to ourselves if we get too miserable about the accuracy of our thinking, especially since predicting the world of 2016 was never really in the remit anyway.

An example that relates to our theme here is the IT revolution. Tony here [Durham] later became the UK’s leading writer on future computer systems with the Over the Horizon column in *Computing* magazine. Even so, and in common with a lot of other people, we totally failed to grasp the growing availability of computing power, memory and connectivity, or everything that grew out of it such as the web, the internet, mobile telephony, social media or any of that. As I say, plenty of other clever people got this wrong too, failing to foresee all the good and evil that flow from the current deluge of digital media. If you look at the science fiction of Asimov or Clarke, it had been commonplace since the 1950s to think that computers would get smaller, cheaper, faster and far more common. But the idea that they’d all be joined up to make a planet-sized information machine had not been so obvious, and we’d probably have missed it even if the book had appeared a decade later than it did. This despite the fact, as I said this morning, that Moore’s Law was by now a decade old, having been described in Gordon Moore’s famous paper in *Electronics* magazine as early as 1965.

But most importantly, I’d like to reiterate that the major issue with our feeble predictive powers was social rather than technological.

The more cooperative, less individual and less money-obsessed society that we wished for does exist. It is represented here by people from a range of organisations to do with food, energy and other aspects of life. But it has failed to take root on anything like the scale we hoped. I have a solar array on my house: so far so good. But it was made by a commercial business in the US, put in place by a local UK business, and sells its output, such as we don’t use, to a third profit-making company, albeit one owned largely by the French taxpayer.

*Undercurrents* ceased to appear just about when Thatcherism was at its horrible height. Since then capitalism has been in rude good health. It has globalised, extended into new parts of the world, and expanded into new fields with trends such as the marketization of the UK health and education systems. The social movements that we anticipated at the time as antidotes to capital do exist, but they have nothing like the scale and influence we would have hoped for.

OK, let’s say something about communications and about the book.

As I said earlier when we discussed food, one aspect of the book that has held up well is its structure, built around human needs such as food, shelter and materials. All this for £3.25, underpriced even then. It’s striking that the communications section of the book is one of the smallest, and is next to last, ahead of a sin-bin section called “Other Perspectives.” In 2016, this part of the book would be bigger and more prominent.

But an interesting thing happened when I opened up the book to look at the communications section. It fell open at the spread before that section starts, at an interview with the Nobel peace prize winner Robert Jungk, carried out by Tony here. Jungk looked forward to technology becoming more capable of interacting with people, in ways that would allow work and leisure to be more filled with meaning and fulfilment. Today, I think, we’d regard this as a fundamental demand for communications systems and for related technology such as robots.

The introduction to the section itself, by Eric Lowbury, now outed as the same Tony Durham, begins by announcing that the global telecommunications network is at last complete (long before Skype, the internet, satellite TV, the web and all that) and goes on to reason that the real issue is not any shortage of information, but our lack of the right knowledge at the right time. As he says, a couple throw out a fridge without knowing that their next door neighbour needs a fridge. He looks forward to the amount of communication going on in the world being cut down massively, and to people having the awareness to work out what they need to know.

This is so unlike what has actually happened that it’s hard to know where to begin. It makes Barbara Kern’s and my introduction to the food section look positively prophetic.

Other people have looked at different aspects of the section and I won’t talk about it chapter by chapter. For me, the sections on community radio, ham radio and TV are in some ways the most prefigurative of what has in fact happened, albeit via the web rather than by the airwaves. They presage the local and global communities of interest that have sprung up online over the past decade or two.

Of course, it would be possible to criticise the section for being all about paper, analog tape, medium-wave radio, slow-scan TV, and the rest. But as I have said repeatedly, this book was intended to shape the future, not predict it.

The real case the section was making was for communications technology that enhances rather than deadens human sensitivity; that can be afforded; and that is able to reflect and enhance communities rather than impose opinion and fact on them.

Nowadays, people no longer have the worries we once did about the cost of communication. Indeed, the digital revolution is at its most intense in the South, where it is seen as the quickest and most affordable way of building and reinforcing communities and providing economic development.

And new communications technology certainly reinforces and creates communities locally and on a global scale. When the internet came along, it was said that email would make it easy for you to contact the doctor if you are ill. Yes, it does that. But it also makes it easy to find a worldwide community of your fellow-sufferers, and nobody saw that coming so clearly.

In the same way, the new generation of communications technology allows new political movements to get going at surprising speed, as we saw in recent years in Egypt, Tunisia and other Middle eastern nations. Maverick politicians such as Marine Le Pen or Donald Trump (and others we here might prefer, such as Bernie Sanders), regard them as key to making unpopular platforms visible. However, the experience of the colour revolutions in the Middle East, or of the Labour Party in its current state, shows that such movements often fall apart when confronted with old-fashioned political power. They are tolerated while they stay in cyberspace, but they occupy real space only uncertainly and often temporarily.

However, I do think that Eric Lowbury would be interested in another aspect of the modern information age, the way in which the digital river allows us all to drink at our own waterhole. We take in an amount of information these days that he’d find hard to believe, but we also have the power to select content that we are comfortable with and that reinforces the prejudices we already hold. That’s also true of newspapers and radio stations, but it gets a lot worse in cyberspace.

For me this reality confirms in a way the importance of boring old-fashioned media. I for one do take in a startling amount of crushed-tree media that Jonathan Zeitlyn would have found familiar. Media don’t go extinct just because new ones come along. People still go to concerts and the theatre, and they still listen to the radio, despite all the apparently glitzier alternatives that have come along. In the same way, there is still massive interest in high-quality printed publications. In 1976, we tended to regard the, er, straight media as the enemy, but now I think they are often on the side of reason.

As I say, the technological ideas we were pushing all that time ago are in many cases now mainstream. It’s the society we wanted to create that has not quite happened. This disparity is especially apparent in the world of communications. The digital revolution has created vast ponds of wealth for new, big and very profitable businesses, especially perhaps Google, and of course for their owners. They intend to use this money to change the world, and indeed other worlds as well - everything from abolishing the diseases of old age to looting the resources of the inner solar system for their further profit and pleasure. These capitalists are very different from the stodgy types we criticised all those years ago. They come with a definite idea of the reality they want to create and bequeath to the rest of us. They are happy to make big charitable donations, but that is not the same as having genuine social movements and social processes setting the pace for the way all this wealth is used.

What’s the way through all this for us?

First, I think that we as a group should value diversity in communication as in all things. Those people in Radical Technology who called for radical radio, TV and print were right.

Maybe we should be aware, too, of the power of big data sources such as Wikipedia. It’s what Jaron Lanier calls the Hive Mind. The way you find out about anything is to put the term into Google and ten seconds later, read the Wikipedia entry about it. Now, Wikipedia itself is a good thing, but I’d say that the cost of storing and linking data is now so small that it should be possible, to build a comparable nervous system for the alternative society of facts, opinions, arguments and other resources.

IN 2016, too, perhaps we’d aim to begin a movement rather than a publication, and technology makes this steadily more feasible. So we’d try to build support for the communities and technologies we want to see via online debate, and try to get these ideas to go viral rather than the hateful stuff that seems so attractive to the denizens of cyberspace. I’d be inclined to think about how one goes about publishing in the area once I had this interest in place and some idea that the support it deserved was out there, rather than as in the print era, launching a magazine and seeing if anyone wanted to read it.

Those are my few thoughts, thank you.

Tony?