

Mosco, V. (2000). Introduction: Myth-ing links: Power and community on the information highway. In M. Moll and L.R. Shade (Eds.), *E-commerce vs. e-commons: communications in the public interest*, Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

## INTRODUCTION

### **Myth-ing Links: Power and Community on the Information Highway<sup>1</sup>**

*Vincent Mosco*

The news media, popular culture, and government policy debates are increasingly filled with some variation on the theme that society and culture are in the process of a great transformation brought about by the introduction of computers and communication technology. Supporters of this view typically maintain that we are going through a period that rivals in significance the development of agriculture, which, about 10,000 years ago, took us out of a nomadic hunting and gathering way of life, and the development of industry, which, starting 300 years ago, made manufacturing products more central than farming for modern economic and social life.

This view maintains that today computer communication is bringing about an Information Revolution which links people and places around the world in instantaneous communication and makes the production of information and entertainment a central economic and political force. Yes, it is agreed that not all societies are at the same level of informational development—the revolution is well-entrenched in the richest and only beginning in the poorest. But, insist supporters, no society can resist the powerful impact of the computer, particularly when linked to advanced telecommunications and video systems. In fact, information technology is widely perceived to be a key to economic and social development. Indeed, the computer, the telephone, television, radio, and associated devices like the facsimile, photocopier, printer and video camera are making information and entertainment defining characteristics of life at the dawn of the millennium.

This paper argues that one cannot understand the place of computer communication technology without taking account of some of the central myths about the rise of global computer communication systems, particularly those identified with the Internet, cyberspace, or the so-called information highway. It maintains that myths are important both for what they reveal, in this case a genuine desire for community and democracy, and for what they conceal, here the growing concentration of communication power in a handful of transnational media businesses.

A simple, but also quite limited way to understand a myth is to see it as a falsehood, a promise not fulfilled or simply unfulfillable. I like the way my mentor Daniel Bell put this view, in characteristic curmudgeonly fashion: "One hears that new adventures in technology—mixed media, computer-generated images, radical juxtapositions of materials, virtual reality—will open up new horizons. It reminds one of the radical agitator who proclaimed that Communism was on the horizon, until he was told that the horizon is an imaginary line that recedes as you approach it.<sup>2</sup> Could the promised land that Bill Gates trumpets in his book *The Road Ahead* turn out to be a mirage?"

Much has been written about the history of technology from this conception of mythology. We look with amusement, if also with some condescension (what the historian Edward Thompson called the "massive condescension of posterity"), at 19th century predictions that the railroad would bring peace to Europe, that steam power would eliminate the need for manual labour, and that electricity would bounce messages off the clouds (though turn of the century references to "celestial advertising" contain a modern ring). But we certainly have contemporary variations on this theme. After all, in the 1950s supporters of nuclear power boasted that the "Mighty Atom" would soon bring us heat and electricity "too cheap to meter" and, when applied to treating the oceans, would deliver a near limitless supply of drinking water to the world.<sup>3</sup>

These are all myths in the sense of seductive but false tales containing promises unfulfilled or unfulfillable. As myths, they promote what historian David Nye has called a vision of the "technological sublime," a literal eruption of feeling that briefly overwhelms reason only to be recontained by it. Or, better still, as his mentor Leo Marx put it, "the rhetoric of the technological sublime" involves hymns to progress that rise "like froth on a tide of exuberant self-regard sweeping over all misgivings, problems, and contradictions."<sup>4</sup>

Such a vision may have succeeded in winning popular support for the railroad, steam, electricity, and nuclear power. And, particularly in the case of the first three, many would say that on balance they generated more good than harm. Nevertheless, society has also paid an enormous price for their false promises—in lives and resources sacrificed to realize impossible dreams.

Some would argue that we are giving in to similar false promises about the new computer communication technologies. Guarantees of instantaneous communication throughout the world, of a genuine global village, are, in essence, pledges of a new sense of community and of widespread popular empowerment. They offer a world in which people meet directly across borders without the intervening filters and censors set by watchful governments and profit-conscious businesses.

But, critics contend, these promises are no less mythological than boundless cheap energy or water.<sup>5</sup> Yes, they concede, many people are making use of relatively inexpensive computers to trade messages with people around the world. But the number doing so is relatively small in a world most of whose people have yet to use a telephone. In fact, a parallel can be drawn between the people who regularly travel down the information highway and the early users of radio.

In the 1920s, amateur enthusiasts and educators pioneered in the new wireless technology, communicating over vast distances without political or economic controls. Emboldened by their new invention, many of these people also felt the allure of virtual community and popular power. How could any material force get in the way of invisible messages travelling through the ether? But, the critics remind us, a lot got in the way of their dreams of democratic community. Once businesses figured out that they could make money by selling the ether or, more specifically, by selling radio audiences to advertisers (giving new meaning to T. S. Elliot's "patient etherized upon a table"), they pressured governments to open radio to commerce. These same governments quickly recognized the power of the new technology and either took complete control or shared it with business, leaving the amateurs, educators and other pioneers with little. By the 1930s in North America and Europe, radio was no longer the stuff of democratic visions.<sup>6</sup>

Today, governments worried about the loss of control and businesses eyeing cyberspace as a new marketplace—as a source of new commodities and a means to repackage old ones —lead critics to conclude that history is in the process of repeating itself. Part of the process of preventing another lost opportunity is to unmask the myth that today's information highway is inevitably leading us to a new sense of community and to democratic communication.

Notwithstanding its value, debunking these myths reflects a limited view, one restricted to the idea that myth simply falsifies reality. But myths are more than fabrications of the truth. As the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss tells us, myths are stories that help people deal with contradictions in social life that can never be fully resolved.<sup>7</sup> They are one response to the inevitable failure of our minds to overcome their own cognitive or categorical limits to understanding the world. One such contradiction is the desire to retain our individuality and yet participate fully in a collective community. Another is the wish to control our circumstances, even as we also desire to give up some control to bring about democracy. The inability to figure out how to "have our cake and eat it too" leads people to embrace myths that help them to deal with the irreconcilable.

In this respect, as the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre concludes, myths are neither true nor false, but living or dead.<sup>8</sup> A myth is alive if it continues to give meaning to human life, if it continues to represent some important part of the collective mentality of a given age, and if it continues to render socially and intellectually tolerable what would otherwise be experienced as incoherence. To understand a myth involves more than proving it to be false. It means figuring out why the myth exists, why it is so important to people, what it means, and what it tells us about people's hopes and dreams. Put simply, myth is congealed common sense, with common sense understood as being what Antonio Gramsci meant when he said "Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of common sense: that is the document of its historical effectiveness. Common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself, enriching itself with scientific ideas and with philosophical opinions which have entered ordinary life. Common sense creates the folklore of the future, that is, a relatively rigid phase of popular knowledge at a given place and time."<sup>9</sup>

This conception of myth as living, meaningful story is particularly powerful because it suggests why people embrace it even in the face of otherwise compelling contrary evidence. Myth does not just embody a truth; it shelters truth by giving it a natural, taken-for-granted quality. According to the literary critic Roland Barthes, myths naturally conjure up a desired end, rather than suggest how to deflect or critique it. In this respect, myths transform the messy complexities of history into the pristine gloss of nature. As he puts it in his *Mythologies*, "Myth does not deny things; on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact."<sup>10</sup>

Myth provides a "euphoric clarity" by eliminating complexities and contradictions. In essence, myth is depoliticized speech—with "political" understood broadly to mean the totality of social relations in their concrete activities and in their power to make the world. More positively, following Thomas Hine, myths are "an attempt to invest our lives with a meaning and a drama that transcend the inevitable decay and death of the individual. We want our stories to lead us somewhere and come to a satisfying conclusion, even though not all do so."<sup>11</sup>

The information highway is a powerful myth because it goes a long way to satisfying these characteristics. It is a story about how ever smaller, faster, cheaper, and better computer and communication technologies help to realize, with little effort, those seemingly impossible dreams of democracy and community, with practically no pressure on the natural environment. According to this view, the information highway empowers people largely by realizing the perennial dream of philosophers and librarians: to make possible instant access to the world's store of information without requiring the time, energy and money to physically go where the information is stored.

Moreover, the story continues, computer networks like the Internet provide relatively inexpensive access, making possible a primary feature of democracy—that the tools necessary for empowerment are equally available to all. Furthermore, this vision of the information highway fosters community because it enables people to communicate with one another in any part of the world. As a result, existing communities of people are strengthened and whole new "virtual" communities arise from the creation of networks of people who share interests, commitments, and values.

All of this is accomplished safely, because violent crime does not invade virtual communities, and with generally sound environmental consequences. Energy use is more than counterbalanced by savings in travel. In essence, by transcending time, space and resource constraints, (approximating what Marx called in the *Grundrisse*, "the annihilation of space with time"), the information highway provides the literal and figurative missing links that bring genuine, sustainable democracy and community to a world in desperate need of both.

Versions of the myth come in various shapes and sizes. It is increasingly common to have it presented with what Barthes called in his *Mythologies* "inoculation." This is the admission of a little evil into the mythic universe in order to protect against a more substantial attack. Yes, these more sophisticated versions admit, there are potholes in the information highway. Not everyone has access to the network, nor does every virtual community feel like a neighbourhood. Not all information is available, and some of it is too expensive for many people. Breaches of privacy take place and some people log on to the net with mischief on the mind. Such admissions serve to protect the myth by granting that there are flaws in cyberspace. But the flaws, it is concluded, are well outweighed by the unique potential to overcome time and space with communication.

Inoculation is particularly strong when combined with another protective covering that Barthes found in most major mythologies: the tendency for myth to transcend history. Here the myth says ignore history because the information highway is genuinely something new, indeed, the product of a rupture in history: the Information Age. Until now, information was scarce; it is now abundant. Until now, communication technology was limited; it is now universally available at prices that are rapidly declining. Until now, people had to work primarily with their hands making things; they now work primarily with their heads, creating knowledge and providing services. Until now, your choice of community was limited mainly by accident of birth; today it is entirely open to choice and subject to constant renewal and change. There is no need nor genuine value in placing the Information Age in historical context, because everything that came before is pre-history, of little value save to account for the extent of the contemporary rupture. Like the division between Old and New Testaments in the Christian Bible, the Information Age and what came before are fundamentally different worlds.

Nicholas Negroponte, the director of M.I.T.'s world-renowned Media Lab, provides one of the more extreme versions of this radical break-with-history viewpoint. In *Being Digital*, Negroponte argues for the benefits of digits (what computer communication produces and distributes) over atoms (us and the material world), and contends that the new digital technologies are creating a fundamentally new world that we must accommodate. In matter-of-fact prose, he offers a modern-day prophet's call to say good-bye to the world of atoms, with its coarse, confining materiality, and welcome the digital world, with its infinitely malleable electrons able to transcend spatial, temporal and material constraints. The world of atoms is ending; we must learn to be digital.<sup>12</sup>

In the world of mythology, Negroponte would be considered a bricoleur, someone who, following Levi-Strauss's usage, pulls together the bits and pieces of technology's narratives, to fashion a mobilizing story for our time—what Nerone has called the heroic narrative with didactic effect.<sup>13</sup> Negroponte and others like him (Bill Gates in *The Road Ahead* does likewise) are fashionable rag and bones men, in the sense that William Butler Yeats gave the expression when he said that myths are forged "in the foul rag and bones shop of the heart."

The denial of history is central to understanding myth as depoliticized speech, because to deny history is to remove from discussion active human agency, the constraints of social structure, and the real world of politics. According to myth, the Information Age transcends politics because it makes power available to everyone and in great abundance. The defining characteristic of politics, the struggle over the scarce resource of power, is eliminated. History has a new beginning with the end of traditional politics.

This compelling vision is increasingly the subject of critical accounts that debunk the mythology. According to these, the information highway is increasingly in the hands of corporate giants whose base in television, telephony, Hollywood, publishing, computer hardware and software, gives them the resources to control pricing and product on the highway.<sup>14</sup> Yes, information and power are intimately connected, but only insofar as computers deepen and extend the power of Time-Warner, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., Hachette, Disney, Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest, Microsoft, Matsushita, and other information conglomerates.

Yes, amateurs, educators, and computer hackers, the contemporary version of the mythological trickster, continue to ride the highway at little or no cost, creating furrowed brows in the executive suites. But it is just a matter of time, critics contend, before a handful of transnational companies take near-complete control of the highway and its product. The early warning signs, such as Internet advertising, shopping, banking, access fees, tightening security controls, and the explosion of "firewall-protected" intranets point to the inevitable victory of the market over democratic communication.

Inoculated against this powerful criticism, myth-makers and their believers hold onto the faith. But, the critics insist, if they were to look closely at the powerful forces mobilizing to make the information highway just another profit centre, they would have to admit that, far from a rupture with history, computer communication is little more than business as usual. A world of information haves and have-nots is far more likely than a global village or a world of virtual communities. Furthermore, the computer enthusiast, alone in front of the screen, is less the new model of human participation in community and more its sad caricature. Community, they insist, requires social interaction, a genuine

coming together of people in physical contact to exchange ideas and feelings, to debate and plan, to make use of all of the senses with all of their nuances.

At best, community in cyberspace is one small tool, one extension of the senses to build social networks.<sup>15</sup> Critics maintain that the energy invested in mastering the technology and in simply dealing with its demands would be better spent in building direct connections with people. For people skeptical of virtual community, computer communication reflects little more than the extent of human alienation. The claim that the technology provides the literal missing link between power and community is little more than myth.

Another approach to critical reflection on computer communication requires a slight shift in the meaning of mythology. If myths are viewed not so much as true or false but as living or dead, then we need to do more than determine how well the myth stacks up against reality and address what the myths mean for the people who profess them. What do they tell us about what matters to people today? Why such a strong response to the promise of power and community? Why do the myths work in spite of the evidence suggesting that cyberspace is seriously flawed?

The myths of cyberspace work in part because people genuinely want power and community. They provide strong evidence that people desperately want to control their lives and also want to be part of a larger social totality that provides emotional and intellectual support. And they are potent evidence of just how difficult it is for people to accomplish this today. The rise of transnational businesses whose power rivals that of national governments and the decline of public institutions which, however flawed, once offered a buffer to organized power, makes it difficult to envision how people can regain control over their lives and create viable communities. Critics conclude that it will take a substantial force to overturn what appears to be the inexorable concentration of power in the hands of corporate giants and the decline of community and neighbourhood.

At this point, a detour in this narrative is tempting. For is not the yearning for community and neighbourhood itself the response to a myth of a golden age when neighbours mattered and communities were distinctive places where people chose to build a public life? As the University of Toronto's Barry Wellman has recently shown, following a long tradition of community research in sociology, the neighbourhood was also a place of exclusion—not particularly golden for racial minorities or gays, nor for many women who experienced place as where they were kept. There were good reasons why the song "We've gotta get out of this place" resonated with a generation!

And yet, we need to be cautious about overreacting, about falling prey to the tendency to see all communities as, in the title of Benedict Anderson's delightful but overcooked book, *Imagined Communities*.<sup>16</sup> It is important to resist the tendency to adopt a variant of E. P. Thompson's "massive condescension of posterity" which, while rejecting the inevitability of progress, nevertheless refuses to see decline or to admit to the possibility that the past may have offered a superior social form, such as the sense of physical, social, and spiritual place embodied in historic communities.

Nevertheless, whether the longing is for a real or imagined community, the longing is real, and for many people computer communication—and specifically the information highway—offer a near magical means to overcome it. Faced with the enormous challenge, and understandably discouraged that the traditional ways of organizing people to bring about social change can possibly work, people

turn to technology for the answers. The technology offers a seductive deal. In return for learning how to navigate the information highway, you can increase your power and your sense of community without having to leave your home or office. The promise of overcoming age-old constraints on mobilizing people for social transformation is at hand. Everything from the banality of dealing with people one face at a time, to the resources it takes to get from place to place and to maintain solidarity, are solvable from the keyboard.

The magic wand of computer communication is undeniably seductive. It is also undeniable that much of the allure is manufactured by the very companies that stand to benefit from the sale of computer technology, software, and access to the information highway. Indeed, we are in the midst of a worldwide effort, organized by many different companies and governments in many different ways, to make computer communication a transcendent spectacle.

the latest iteration in Nye's "technological sublime."<sup>17</sup> Everything from advertising to trade shows, from demonstration projects to conferences, speaks of a campaign to market the magic, to surround computer communication with power, speed, and the promise of freedom.

There is nothing new here. Students of the history of technology will recall similar attempts to make electricity a spectacle by lighting up streets and buildings in the downtowns of many cities and towns, turning them into miniature versions of New York's Great White Way. Moreover, one can argue that such spectacles as the Internet's Electronic World's Fair, a cyberspace version of the great exhibitions that touted earlier technologies, are valuable in overcoming people's natural reluctance to try something new. But in doing so they make it easier for people to turn to the technology for solutions to problems better addressed through the admittedly old, admittedly banal, forms of social mobilization. However one feels about their politics, last year's Million Man March in the United States and the recent mass protest in Toronto demonstrated that traditional forms of social mobilization and opposition can still speak louder than messages transmitted in electronic space.

When we begin to understand computer communication as a mythology that speaks to genuine unmet needs and aspirations, we can understand its seductive power, why it is that people are so taken (and taken in) by it. We can also begin to comprehend why a critical minority dismisses making use of the technology as just another form of co-optation.<sup>18</sup> Again, there is nothing entirely new here. In the 1920s and '30s, trade unionists debated the value of using commercial radio to get out labour's message.<sup>19</sup> The key to a useful response to computer communication, as it was for radio, is to recognize that it is less than its enthusiasts make it out to be and more than rejectionists maintain.

Computer communication is not a transcendent, magical force that marks a break with history, let alone a shift from a world dominated by atoms to one controlled by digits. Computer communication by itself does not bring about social change and is no less banal than any other technology. Nevertheless, like other technologies, including newspapers, radio and television, computer communication can be used effectively as one among a wide range of instruments to mobilize people, foster communication, produce, process and use information. This must be done carefully because the terms of access and use are increasingly set by corporate giants who have little sympathy for movements that might challenge their own hegemony. Nevertheless, the development of networks to connect peace, environmental, feminist and labour organizations provide models of alternative use.

So too do the admittedly embattled community computing networks or freenets that serve as a resource for cities and towns.

It is important to nurture these networks, not to complete Marx's annihilation of space with time but to enrich space, particularly those neighbourhood spaces that include our homes, schools, playgrounds and shops. The test of sustainable computing is not how fast it moves or how far it travels, but how well it deepens ties in our neighbourhoods and cities, and how meaningful are its messages. Computer communication does not signal a digital Utopia, but can, along with other equally banal organizing tools, serve as an instrument for democratic social change.

## Notes

1. Annual Davidson Dunton Lecture, Carleton University. November 1996
2. Bell, Daniel. (1992). "Into the 21st Century, Bleakly," *The New York Times*. Sunday, July 26. p. E 17
3. Nye, David. (1990). *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990; Nye, David. (1994). *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
4. Marx, Leo. (1965). *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
5. Stoll, Clifford. (1995). *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway*. New York: Doubleday.
6. Barnouw, Erik. (1990). *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television (2nd rev. ed.)*. New York: Oxford University Press.; McChesney, Robert, W. (1993). *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for Control of U.S. Broadcasting*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
7. Levi-Strauss, Claude. (1978). *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*. Toronto, Ont.: University of Toronto Press; Levi-Strauss, Claude. (1987). *Anthropology and Myth: Lectures, 1951-1982*. Oxford: Blackwell.
8. MacIntyre, Alisdair. (1970). *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*. New York: Macmillan.
9. Gramsci, Antonio. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Trans.). London: Lawrence and Wishart.
10. Barthes, Roland. (1972 (orig. 1957)). *Mythologies* (Trans. by Annette Lavers). New York: The Noonday Press. p.143
11. Hine, Thomas. (1991). *Facing Tomorrow: What the Future Has Been, What the Future Can Be*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
12. Negroponte, Nicholas. (1995). *Being Digital*. New York: Knopf.
13. Nerone, John. (1987). "The mythology of the penny press." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4. p. 376-404.
14. Schiller, Herbert. (1996). *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America*. New York: Routledge; Mosco, Vincent. (1996). *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal*. London: Sage.
15. Stoll. (1995).



16. Anderson, Benedict. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Rev. 2nd ed.) London, Verso.
17. Nye. (1994).
18. Postman, Neil. (1996). *The End of Education*. New York: Knopf.
19. McChesney. (1993).