

RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT ON THE 2001 CANADA-UK COLLOQUIUM

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THE E-CONNECTED WORLD : ITS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

By Peter Preston

What is this “E-Connected World”? One, said Lord MacDonal, Britain’s Cabinet Office minister, in his opening message to participants, “where all those who want it have easy access to digital media; where they have the necessary skills and trust to exploit the technology and where governments offer their services through these new media.” That, in the broadest terms, formed the basic agenda of this colloquium - but, because the technology itself continues to evolve so fast in so many different directions, it was inevitable that the focus shifted unpredictably from time to time. It was also inevitable that few hard and fast conclusions emerged.

We began with an “overview” session. Dr Stephen Coleman declared that “all new technologies hover between public hopes and public fears”. So it was, too, with the Internet, which might be “the most socially reshaping technology since print”. The Net, in little more than a decade, had already gone through three distinct thinking stages. In the early nineties, it had seemed ephemeral, transient, just another phenomenon doomed to go away. How wrong could you get, with 513 million people connected worldwide today and a growth in the UK which outran the growth of access to television itself in the 1950s? There had - the second stage in the late nineties - been a phase of hyperbole and ambition vaulting far ahead of reality. But now there was a soberer recognition of how the Net could give us a weightless economy where the “knowledge economy” mattered just as much as the “physical” one. Already you could see a transformation in the nature of governments, a stress on “citizen involvement” without which legitimacy would be lost. What were the elements of this transformation? An abundance of information - shifting the emphasis to knowledge management - from “what people know to what they need to find out”. A reconfiguration of the political geography, moving towards a more globalised society and thus constructing some of the “missing architecture of democracy” which would be necessary for it. And a reinvention of representation which reversed the trend of taking democratic decision-making ever further away from the public - because the Net had a massive capacity to break into the closed world of legislatures and inform those on the inside about the relevant expertise on the outside which could guide their law-making. The Internet was not some Orwellian device: it was a vital means of two-way communication between the governors and the governed.

Coleman’s wide-ranging beginning defined many of the themes which followed - and Dr Richard Simpson addressed some of them with the hard edge of practical accomplishment behind him. So “basic access to knowledge and information was becoming a pre-requisite for economic, social and civic development at all levels”? So how could that access be delivered? Remember the haves and

the have nots of the information revolution - the Net had sixty times greater penetration in the US than it did in Africa. There were a whole series of digital divides, but he preferred, rather, to talk of digital opportunity and of making "Canada the most connected society in the world". Already 100 per cent of the country's schools, universities and public libraries offered online access. But there was so much more to do. Only 21 per cent of this access was high speed. Broadband was the next crucial frontier. This, for Canada, was nation building.

Thus we were launched on a sea of points and questions. Britain's broadband record was appalling and "you can't pay for democracy by the minute." (Perhaps time, not space, was that new frontier). Nor could you clot the language of communication with the legal jargon lawyers enforced on governments. You could chase the e-dimension, but governments weren't organised to make it comprehensible. Was this latest version of democracy about further enabling those with the strongest hi-tech interest or letting the silent majority in on the act? Most worrying of all, how did this brave vision of consultation and involvement fit with the reaction to September 11 where governments had decided that something needed to be done fast and had just gone ahead and done it, massive control of information without discussion? Was the Net such a friend of democracy after all? Hold hard, said the Net's apostles. Look at the mushroom development of the Internet in the Gulf States to sense its hidden power. Look at the way democracy and commerce on the Net went together. There might be questions without definitive answers: but the force of change was with us.

On, with logic and momentum, to session two and deeper brooding over that digital divide. Sian Davies provided the current facts and figures. UK Internet access at home: 28 per cent. Proportion of those connected in social grouping AB: 67 per cent. In D and E groups: 29 per cent. The old and the poor and the innumerate, disabled and unemployed lay outside the Net. There was also a chasm between that first, relatively small section of society - the early adaptors - which had embraced the Internet early on, the vast bulk of society which was gradually coming to terms and accepting it, and the laggards who trailed on without seeming hope. Was this inevitable? Actually no: it had changed. Twenty years ago, the DE home computer penetration was deeper than the AB because the hook for purchase was personal - games. It was the spread of computing to the workplace, and thus the realisation that computers were a work tool, which had driven the shift. Not inevitable at all: and was it immutable?

No, perhaps, possibly ... according to Professor Paul-Andre Comeau, who didn't much care for rigid categories. People, like civil servants, used the Net for all kinds of purposes. There were 39 web sites off limits to New Brunswick's civil service after it had been discovered they'd made 1,600 visits to gambling and sex sites in a 5-day period. More, 70 per cent of users never went anywhere near a government site in Canada. Scepticism definitely required. In the spring of 2002, twenty million students across Europe would have the chance of electing their own European Council via the Net. Could we please see how that affected participation in democracy before getting carried away?

One of the most animated discussions of the whole colloquium followed; though, not, typically, around any single theme. Where was the commercial thrust of the Net if you placed an order "but old world van drivers couldn't deliver?" Broadband had its enraptured advocates. You could even publish a book for one reader. But, equally, you can't couldn't sell the dream without trying to sell what was there for surfers now - and once you "took away email and pornography", that wasn't

very much. How could that silent majority of political apathetics really be enthused? “More people have a moose licence in Alberta than actually belong to a political party”. Parliamentarians complained about “the quill pen culture” which still endured in their own, fusty workplaces. Students of politics pointed out that 50 per cent of Korean education happens on the Net, but that didn’t seem to have revolutionised the quality of South Korean democracy. We were reminded that people over the age of 55 had more than 80 per cent of the disposable wealth in the UK. And that for all the wonders of e-communication, Canada had more living, breathing ambassadors abroad now than it did twenty years ago. Were there conclusions about the nature and reality of the divide? Only in the most general sense. Participants on the whole felt that there was a divide and that it needed to be addressed - but whether that could be done in a way which realised half of the ambitions expressed remained altogether more mystic. “Can anyone give me one good reason for being on the Net?” asked one distinguished (and mature) participant? She didn’t get an answer.

Professor Comeau, however, provided one good reason for not getting online. A lawyer colleague of his, much to her bewilderment, had been refused a mortgage by her bank because there were eleven cases pending appeal against a verdict she’d returned as a commissioner of taxes; and cases pending were enough to set bank computer alarms ringing. Sometimes the digital divides could be both arbitrary and ludicrously mistaken. How, though, did you bridge the canyon between users and non-users, the digitally aware and the digitally ignorant? By changing society’s perception from the ground up - or by building bridges from on high? Those were the questions intrinsically posed in Session Three; and answered first, in a bustle of activity, by Ann Steward. When governments like Britain’s got involved, they wanted results - and they wanted Britain to be the best place in the world for e-commerce. Ms Steward reeled off the e-ministers responsible for the project and its progress so far: one-third of the UK’s population used the internet, 24 per cent of business trading was conducted online, 42 per cent of Government services were electronically enabled. So much achieved, yet so far to go. It was not, though, just a technical process. Indeed, rather the reverse - a programme for attitudinal and cultural change. E-government was about managing change, not technology.

Professor Ron Deibert - more interested in e-citizens, e-NGOs and e-protest - brought complexities in abundance. Did the real or apparent diminution of global protest after September 11 signal a sea change? Had we seen the end of mass demonstrations - fuelled and co-ordinated on the Net - besieging world leaders in their conference halls? Don’t assume so. The Net remained a formidable mechanism for advertising alternative views and exerting pressure on public policy. “Hactivism” could still bring 3,000 people from fifteen different countries together in pursuit of world peace. Too much of the talk of digital division was really subtle marketing, a Pepsi-style pitch to develop our thirst for knowledge. In reality, the Internet was most formidable when it reached out to citizens, not consumers. But there were still great unsolved problems. Who should be included in the policy-making processes? And if NGOs demanded that inclusion as of right, how were we to choose between their varying legitimacies? Was it right to include Greenpeace, because it was big, and leave out some little local group merely because it was small?

One of the colloquium’s more fragmentary discussions followed. The participants wondered whether Osama bin Laden’s attack had signalled the return of big government and state power. They tried to define where the boundaries of legitimate protest lay. They asked if it was governments’ role to e-fund civil society groups. One of the parliamentarians looked at the actual

impact of the Net on the way the Canadian House did its business and concluded that it was “almost zero”. Perhaps the basic question at the end was more philosophical. Not who should be involved, but who should decide?

It was in many ways a relief, as the colloquium neared its half-way point, to find the topics more self-contained. At least “E-information and media concentration”, the subject of Session Four, seemed to have some natural boundaries. Professor Stephen Murgatroyd examined the challenge of access to information in the multi-channel, broadband society of the immediate future. Over the last decade the number of significant players providing the platforms on which information was carried and the sources of information themselves had shrunk hugely and monopolies loomed. How great was the threat?

Murgatroyd proved phlegmatic. The difficulty didn’t lie with the few dominant service providers left, or with the three operating systems. Concentration here produced a stability and high standard of provision. It was the quality of the information which could be accessed that mattered and the ways it could be transmuted into knowledge and wisdom. There were three key issues to consider: ease of access, the source of information, and its quality. Ease raised questions of privacy, equity, the skills needed, and the complexity and volume of information. Sources raised questions of origin, reliability and translation from one language to another. Quality meant veracity - including the ability to separate marketing hype from reality. (Were organic foods truly better for you? That was “bullshit”, Murgatroyd said).

So platform and service provider concentration weren’t a threat. Threats began with government interference, political correctness (otherwise known as euphemasia) and cost of access. Plus free speech itself. “Free speech is a threat to free speech”. How government got in the way came in direct evidence two minutes later from Trina McQueen.

Professor Murgatroyd had sought reliable information of quality. But how was that to be gathered and paid for? Bell Canada Enterprise had recently bought CTV, Canada’s largest private TV station, the Toronto Globe and Mail and Sympatico, the leading Internet portal. A “transformation” policy for this telephone utility company seeking to become “a half vast media empire”. But now it faced the toughest of competition from the almost equally well-resourced Canwest Global - with national and federal government posing the most daunting regulatory challenges. Was such a regulatory approach, however, fitted to the new digital age? BCE, naturally enough, had wanted to integrate its newspaper newsrooms with its web newsrooms to produce the most effective supply of news - but state governments had intervened to prevent any such integration. In the first instance they had tried to prevent any contact whatsoever between print and broadcast journalists and their web opposite numbers. Now, after a strenuous campaign, there could be contact: but there could not be any physical merger of the newsrooms. It was a tedious and costly situation in a world where, thus far, nobody had a clear strategy for making money from news on the Net. BCE believed in quality news, but it was having to pay an absurd regulatory price for the privilege of providing it, at a loss.

In the aftermath discussion, that question of quality and the ability to pay for quality weighed heavy on many minds. “The Net,” as Trina McQueen said, “was a place of contradictions and oxymorons”. It needed to sort itself out over time and grow up - like the kids in the garages doing

bright, cheap things. Yet none of this was easy or quick. It was bedevilled by out-dated fears. It lacked, for the moment, sensible ways of raising revenue. Not everybody thought the giant, established media companies were the best guardians of the new revolution. "Old tech companies squeeze the life out of the new", one mordant participant observed. Murgatroyd could be mordant, too: Henry Ford went bankrupt five times before he made his fortune, he observed.

So to the more straightforward issues of freedom - and, in Session Five, to the tug of digital war between free speech and regulation. Caspar Bowden was suitably grave, verging on apocalyptic. It was surveillance that worried him. The danger wasn't so much current British legislation, which still demanded a warrant before the Home Secretary could authorise specific interception of specific emails: it was the growth of something essentially beyond the reach of the law as it had been traditionally framed: traffic analysis. No warrants required - yet a licence to know who's talking to whom, or visiting a particular web site. All of this information was locked in the "black boxes" of Internet service providers. European law, under review almost as he spoke, sought some kind of "proportionality" to its use. But what was proportional in the investigation of a murder? The traffic record of five or 500 or 500,000 people? What was proportional after September 11? The National Crime Intelligence Service - in a document leaked to the Observer - wanted the email and telephone records of everyone in the country stored in a vast data base. The new Anti-Terrorism Bill - going through Parliament at the time - wanted ISPs to retain all traffic data for seven years on a "voluntary" basis, but with back-up powers if that didn't work. We had to be clear what all this "blanket data surveillance" involved. Everyone who used their computer would be logged. Who did they send messages to? Which sites did they surf their way to? Everyone who used the next generation of mobile phones could be tracked in their movements to within five or ten yards whenever the phone was switched on. The State would know where you are - in real space and cyber space.

And was this a necessary precaution against terrorism? It was not. Increasingly sophisticated encryption meant that particular messages could always remain secret; indeed, the possibility of their inclusion as details in photographs or pictures made it impossible to know whether they even existed in the first place. A terrorist could log on briefly in an Internet cafe and never go back there. A terrorist could steal a mobile phone, use it once, then throw it away. Terrorism, in short, was not the target here. Governments were going about far more routine business - tracking crime down to the lowest level of tax evasion by sweeping data into a giant net.

Did that seem gloomy? Stephanie Perrin said that "whenever we privacy addicts get together, we turn into a glum lot". We were talking about so many areas: copyright, hate messages, tax and gambling, consumer protection - as well as money laundering and terrorism; and it all had a baleful side. As we eroded privacy, we eroded many other values. A culture of surveillance was corrosive of democracy.

The discussion which followed didn't always seem to respond to the dimension of threat as described. Canada had a Freedom of Information commissioner and a Privacy Commissioner battling away. What did Britain have? One regulator doing both jobs. "A private life separate from government is not necessarily a secret life," said one Canadian parliamentarian, "it is just separate." Britain's data protection regulators might be trying to sound the alarm - "this is issue is one for all of us, because it's our information which is out there, too - but they had only handled 10,000

complaints in the previous year. Did that show mounting public alarm, or a problem which hadn't yet achieved full salience? Should the banks be "the meat in the sandwich", responsible for their own surveillance, tracking and customer protection? Perhaps: but who wanted to put their money in "the bank that likes to say 'You're Nicked'"? The danger, after September 11, was that more and more people would say: "I'm not willing to take responsibility for myself - I'm willing to have the agencies take care of me."

That made the most natural transition to Session Six on policing electronic crime; it also opened up some cavernous gaps between Orwellian theory and present practicality. And whilst public awareness of cyber crime was so low, then so was police emphasis on cracking it. Chief Inspector Don Harrington reported the simple truth as he saw it. Voters wanted cops on the beat, not sitting in front of some terminal out of sight. His force recruited about fifty new men and women a month: they weren't asked whether they had any IT skills, because that wasn't relevant to the immediate imperatives of policing. Nor was there the investment in hardware or software. He himself had only been able to send an email from his desk for the last 18 months - and to surf the Net on that same terminal for the last six months. Cash was desperately tight, just like the inevitable and natural priorities of his force. There were, at his level, no long-term plans or long-term commitments, just as there were no ways he could talk on-line to other forces or access information even within the building he worked in. But concentrate - not in anger, but in understanding - on the reasons why: there'd been 200,00 crimes reported in West Yorkshire in the year 2,000, and only five of them had been net crimes. That meant cybercrime wasn't on the police agenda. It also meant that IT talent, if ever recruited, would always find a better job in the private sector.

Ray Protti was that private sector. The only people these days left robbing banks physically were drug addicts, he said: but why bother cracking safes? Money flowed electronically around the globe in huge quantities. The Swift system handled \$5 trillion a day. Why not sit back in places like the Ukraine and try to hack your way to a fortune? Why not take advantage of police forces' national or local incapacity to respond to a world challenge? Why not take advantage of the fact that "a twentieth century legal system doesn't exist, let alone a twenty-first century one"? Half a million American citizens a year had their identities stolen - and the answer from authority was "Change your name". In Canada, when the banks wanted cyber theft investigated, they sometimes had to buy the police laptops to do their investigating on. We were (in the conversation that followed) into a world of e-vigilantes. We were confronting a situation where one wing of crime investigation had already been privatised, because only the banks had the expertise and resource to pursue the criminals. We were inhabiting "two different planets - the realistic one, and the other realistic one."

We ended - Session Seven - on a rather more hopeful and straightforwardly educational track. Professor Tom Calvert talked about the spread of e-learning throughout Canada and its potential for revolutionising the quality and reach of higher education. Dr Chris Yapp talked, more reflectively, about Britain's stuttering realisation, over ten drifting years, that e-learning was more than a passing fad. He also personalised these reflections. His father was 75, a light engineer all his life: he'd needed five days training to underpin that career. Dr Yapp's son was twelve. When he was born, the world wide web hadn't existed; when he went to primary school, it was still an undergraduate subject closeted in universities; today, by contrast, six-year-olds were building their own web sites. And this tremendous period of "transition and disruption" had barely begun yet. It had at least thirty more years of upheaval to go - and all of those years would be learning

experiences, renewed discovery that you couldn't bolt existing assumptions or methods onto the emerging shapes of the new. We were on our way on Britain at last. The basic IT infrastructure for schools, colleges and libraries was almost in place. During the next year, the UK would have 6,000 online centres open - and 40,000 computing places open for access. The basic skills were also becoming available. But we were still five years away from any transformation, and the challenges continued to pile up. Dr Yapp listed a few of them. Where were the connections between educational research and educational practice? Researchers could investigate the potential of IT until kingdom come, but the people at the sharp end - the teachers - had to be involved. What price a national curriculum when children could access other curriculums from other countries and discover, for instance, that John Logie Baird had Philo Farnsworth claiming his inventing glory? What price conventional university education itself when some of the great IT companies - like Motorola or Microsoft - provided far more educationally valuable qualifications? The Motorola University would be with us far faster than we knew, offering a completely different take on the private/public divide.

In conclusion:

Some meetings provide a natural set of conclusions, evolved through the ebb and flow of discussion. But some meetings provide no such opportunity - and any rapporteur does them a profound dis-service if he seeks to concoct some artificial unities. This colloquium fell squarely into the second category. Our three days were a stimulant and a tonic, but they found no consistencies from moment - more dislocations and questions. Was the web the finished article, or a shadow of the broadband wonders to come? Was it a sword of freedom for ordinary people, or a sinister tool of surveillance for big brother and his friends? Was it the new shape of learning, or a medium without standards, full of duff information and rapidly silting with dross? Did it stand at the cutting edge of crime or potter round in the pits with untrained, plodding policemen? There were no definitive answers to these, or many other, questions. But the questions were asked and answered as variously as the experience of those gathered in Wilton Park made possible. It was all rather like surfing the net on a very good day: instructive, fascinating and full of unexpected insights and facts to use again and again.