

Information Doesn't Want

by Elin Whitney-Smith

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Currently, she is turning her dissertation into a book, tentatively titled Information Technologies and Wealth: Cybernetics, History and Culture.
—Howard Rheingold

The problem is:

"Information wants to be free" (S. Brand).

Information is invisible.

Information is obvious.

First of all, information doesn't want. People want. And the problem is:

These are never the people who are visible to economics or history. These are the ordinary people who don't seem to act on the grand stage of world dynamics. They are not the "oppressed" of Marxist literature, just the ordinary people, people who take the bus to work, who shop in K-mart, who eat at McDonald's. They want information to be free and they have changed history. They have determined which country will be dominant, not in a mystical sense of "national will," but in the ordinary sense of day-to-day decisions about what to buy, how to make a living. They want information to be free because like all of our kind they love information — songs, stories, games. We are the great juvenile species of ape. We never grow up. We keep needing to know more — more soap operas, more cartoons, more loud music, more junk. Even

important economic information is crass, commercial, materialistic, and in the West . . .

Information makes us rich.

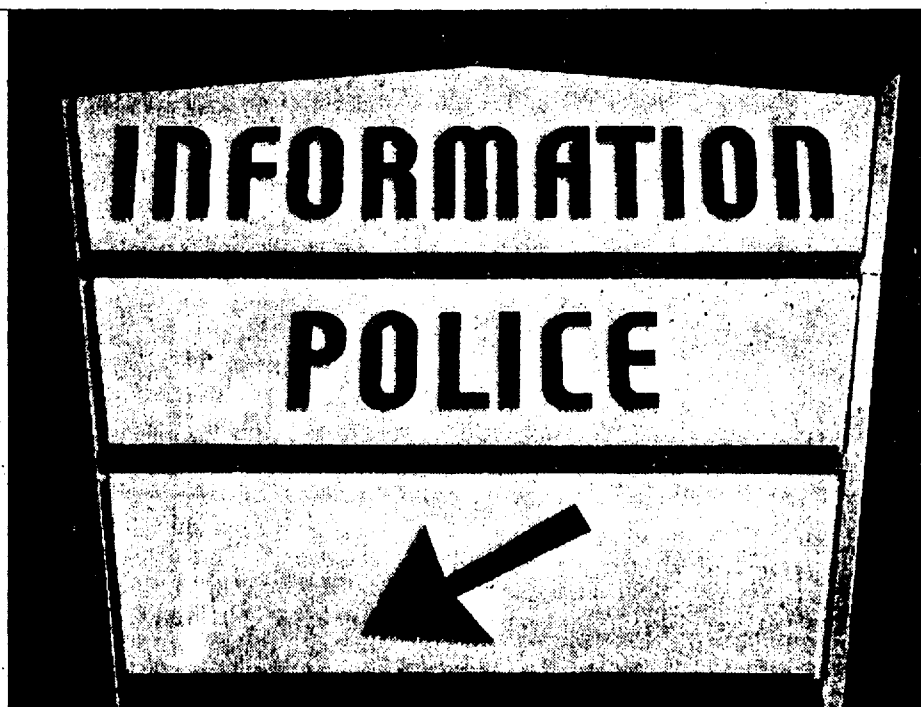
As evidence of this I can point out that in Spain, books were banned by the Inquisition, so the printers moved to the Protestant countries, and that is why Max Weber could claim that Protestantism leads to capitalism. It wasn't the religion, however, it was the *press*, printing broadsides, novels, playing cards, how-to books, pornography, ledgers, texts and trash — an avalanche of printed material.

Scholars say, "Tut, tut. Yes, the Inquisition — terrible, terrible. But after all, people who wanted books could get them, there was an active black market."

But only those who were already part of the literate upper classes used the black market. The ordinary tradesman in Spain didn't risk his neck for books.

And the scholar responds, "Yes, yes, the backwardness of the peas-

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of the fifteenth century, to the "dawning of the Age of Enlightenment." The fact that the printing press with moveable type was invented in 1450 didn't occur to him as an explanation. It didn't even occur to him to wonder why Luca Pacioli is considered the father of double-entry bookkeeping when he did not invent it (he only published a *printed* text in 1458). He also didn't ask why the Middle Ages were inherently backward, or what it means to

ant." Then when the economy of Spain collapses, the scholar quotes Gonzalez de Cellorigo writing at the beginning of the seventeenth century, ". . . There are rich who loll at ease or poor who beg and we [Spain] lack people of the middle sort."

I can offer the same explanation for the economic collapse of the USSR and Eastern Europe and people will say, "Yes, yes, a free press is important but look, right now, the people need practical solutions rather than the right to criticize the government." The problem is that:

The effect of information is obvious.

If there is an increase in information access in a society there will be a corresponding increase in innovation. Of that innovation, a certain amount will be successful and will lead to economic growth. No one will object to that statement and no one will be particularly

interested. But when I say all economic development and cultural change can be accounted for in relationship to information access, I will be dismissed as a crackpot. And this is because:

The effect of information is invisible.

We can pinpoint the introduction of a new idea and believe economic development is associated with this idea. That is what Weber tried with his argument that Protestantism leads to capitalism. Sombart also took this tack when he suggested that people could think more rationally about business once they learned double-entry bookkeeping. His problem was explaining why capitalism didn't develop in the eleventh century when rationalized bookkeeping was invented by Leonardo Fibonacci. He attributed this failure to an inherent backwardness of the Middle Ages and then attributed the rapid spread of bookkeeping and the habits of mind which go with it, after the middle

say "the dawning of the Age of Enlightenment."

We also do not see the importance of the press implied in the fact that our country is called America, after the man whose name was on the printed maps, not Columbia after the discoverer. What we don't see is that a fact becomes real and effective only when it becomes part of the day-to-day life of ordinary people . . . and this is the role and effect of information technologies. The technologies, in and of themselves, do not create development. The technologies increase access to information to such a point that it is impossible to control.

The interesting thing about control and information is:

Information technologies are always related to an increase in control.

Speech allowed our ancestors to emerge as the dominant animal, who for the first time controlled the world rather than being controlled



Writing was an elitist technology. In present-day terms, writing was like a big mainframe computer used by the existing elite to control war and the economy, and manipulated by high priests who knew the secrets of its use. The press made information access "free" in the same way that PCs are making computing access "free."

by it. The invention of drawn symbols allowed us to teach and learn without the necessity of firsthand experience. The invention of writing accompanied the rise of hierarchical city-states, and those who controlled information controlled everything.

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The telegraph was elitist, and was used to control the vast railroad empires and to communicate in war. Like a mainframe, it needed specialists to manipulate it with a specialized language. The telephone, like the press and the PC, is a mass technology which allowed many smaller empires (called rationalized business organizations) to be created. In the 1920s it shifted world economic dominance from England to the United States. It was in the twenties that the 'phone became common in the U.S. The English attitude was expressed by the head of the postal and telegraph service, "No one is more familiar with the telephone than I . . . but if I want to send a message I use a boy."

What information technology always does is:

Allow people who use it to innovate in how they run things. They increase their control of production processes. People standardize things, parts, processes, relationships (contracts, credit). They create new forms of political, social, and business structure. Invariably they change education and increase professionalization. What allows these innovations to work is an increase in communications and communication channels.

Information-based innovations in social, business and political structure increase redundancy in the system. This makes the system more stable. When the system is stable it is able to grow. If there is a lot of information access then there will be a lot of growth. If there is restricted information access there will only be growth where there is access. In China in the twelfth century, in Spain in the seventeenth century, and in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, only the top layer had information access and only the top layer grew; in Holland, England and the United States, where there was free access to information and information technology, there was innovation throughout the whole society and the whole society grew. A simple numeric relationship.

The problem is:

The Information Police are real and profitable.

If a person is in a position to control information access it is in his or her interest to do so. In the short term the Emperor of China, the grandees of Spain, the Communist Party elite, the heads of businesses, benefit from exclusive access to information: they get rich. If we are not to become the grandees of the coming century we have to use information capabilities to increase redundancy. This will allow us to:

Increase control of the processes of production and business, and decrease our control of information and information technology.

Because:

The economic health of any single group is ultimately tied to the health of the economy as a whole.

The long term is getting shorter all the time, and . . .

The group with the free-est information wins. ■

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