

Critical Analysis of Futures Research

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[Comment: The task was to critique a piece of futures research so I grabbed an article from the World Future Society's magazine, which is reliably full of articles not worth reading. So you're missing nothing in being unable to read it here. Fish. Barrel.]

In 'The Pied Piper Goes Electronic,' an article taken from the February 1999 issue of *The Futurist*, Deborah C. Sawyer sketches a future in which we are led astray by an Internet swamped with unreliable information and an inability to determine what is true. Much of this is based on her images of Internet use as it stands now, with very little evidence other than her own anecdotes. I will take her main points in turn and examine them using Dr. Peter Bishop's method of critical analysis.

Sawyer's first "catalyst of chaos" is **increased access to information**, and the complaint that "no one wants to entertain the suggestions that information may be private." As evidence goes, this is less than solid and without an expansion of this I can merely counter that I've yet to hear of anyone suggesting *all* information should be free.

Coupled with the first point is a **decrease in sharing**, stating that people share less information than they used to. This idea is backed up with the claim that fewer people take part in surveys than they used to, assuming the reason for this is a conscious choice by possible respondents to avoid sharing information. Conversely, I would say that people are avoiding surveys for the more immediate desire not to spend their time on a survey for which they see no immediate benefit.

Third and fourth on Sawyer's list are two more points about information, coupled as an **increase in quantity** and **decrease in quality** of information. Her concern here is that information on the Internet is mostly useless due to its potential inaccuracy. This is because there is "little copy editing or fact checking" and "anything and everything gets circulated." Here she makes the mistake of comparing the Internet to the kind of magazines and newspapers you might immediately associate with copy editing and fact checking. Leaving aside the question of whether you can completely trust everything you read in these edited and checked periodicals, the correct Internet comparison is with all forms of print; not just professional journals but, for example, pamphlets you might be handed in the street, political materials, or self-published fanzines. Sawyer is right in claiming there is an awful lot of disinformation on the Internet, but she should not avoid the fact there may be an equivalent proportion out in the "real world" of print. Just as we learn to judge what to trust in the real world, so we must learn to judge what we read online.

Her fifth claim is that the Internet, despite its ease of communication, causes an **increase in barriers** between people, relying for her evidence on the claim that companies use the Internet to avoid giving people information person to person. This is demonstrated, she says, by the fact that if you "phone up an association or a government department ... you are more than likely to be told to consult the Web site." Agreed, this is not the most friendly response, but it makes the assumption that the organization concerned would have shared the information with one before they constructed a Web site. Perhaps some companies do fob callers off with a suggestion of looking online, but would these same companies really have offered access to any information you could wish for had you called five years ago?

Next, Sawyer claims that communication via the Internet is resulting in a **decrease in courtesy**, just as it has also "become acceptable to not return phone calls or respond to messages." Leaving aside the question of whether failing to return calls is acceptable, what of her belief that the occurrence of rude behaviour is increasing with the rise of email? Firstly, she is assuming that people are perfectly polite to each other while communicating using other media. Secondly, the rise of rude behaviour is only to be expected in a medium

whose use is growing exponentially; I expect her article detailing the parallel increase in the occurrence of polite behaviour any month now.

Perhaps the least supported of her ill-supported arguments is the **increase in dishonesty**, and that “the Information Age is rife with cheating and plagiarism.” Without even anecdotal evidence to support this point (save the fact that some people download essays from the Internet, just as people have copied essays by hand since time immemorial), it’s hard to undermine. I’ve little doubt that there are dishonest deeds occurring right now on the Internet, but then I don’t think Sawyer herself would deny the presence of cheating and plagiarism in the real world.

Finally, she brings all her points together in the eighth and final “catalyst of chaos,” the **decrease in skills**, summed up by “the ability to access information ... does not create an ability to evaluate it.” Sawyer expands on this point further than the previous seven, beginning with the claim that young people have been brought up without solid skills in reading and mathematics, but believing anything they see on the computer. The other side of the coin is that these same children have been brought up in an age surrounded by computers and ever-expanding media and have far more experience of interacting with this multitude of influences than previous generations.

All this has been pointing the way towards Sawyer’s view of the future dangers of the Internet, which she illustrates with her scenario of a foreign power conquering the United States by “posting information on the Internet and bamboozling the people.” As she gives no suggestion as to what sort of time frame she pictures this danger happening in, we must assume it’s an imminent problem. While it would be entirely possible for foreign hackers to change information on some US Web sites, the chances of them managing convincingly to alter the vast multitude of information sources Sawyer has spent the rest of the article worrying about seem slim. She illustrates this frightening future scenario with an event from the past, the 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, which many listeners assumed was an authentic news broadcast. However, this is not a helpful comparison for the world today (or the future) as anyone concerned about a Web story of alien invasion would only have to look at other Web sites, switch on CNN or in fact listen to the radio to confirm its veracity.

Her final example of the Internet’s dangers is that of the urban myth, a false but just about believable tale spreading like wildfire via (in this case) email. Although the Internet is only accelerating an existing phenomenon, this could indeed be a concern and does illustrate the need for people to be able to tell fact from fiction, a task that is all the more difficult when the ambiguous text arrives in an email from one’s friend. However, the medium is yet young in mass media terms, and we can hope that people are learning to judge the authenticity of material on the Internet. Everyone is burned once by virus warnings, cookie recipes and requests for business cards from a boy with cancer, but these are all part of the learning experience.