

ecolonomics

Paul Mobbs' newsletter of thoughts, ideas and observations on energy, economics and human ecology

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“I'm not keen on blogging, but...”

The inaugural post for my low-spec./low-tech. message board cum newsletter

Thursday 13th August, 2009 – Carno, mid-Wales

Firstly, my apologies to those wanting the everyday 'blog-o-sphere'-type brief, digested or vacuous information constructs within these pages; I don't tweet, I don't do sound bites, and I don't insult my own or my reader's intelligence by spouting views in isolation from the ideas that define them. My medium is the word, the argument and the reference, and in these pages I'm going to push that medium as far as I can. If that's "not you", or you strongly object to reading lengthy passages of text, please [click here](#).

There are a lot of good blogs around, but all too often blogs are a link followed by a short commentary on someone else's point of view – an endless recycling of present/other people's ideas, or at worse an iterative recycling, without any effort of extensibility to new themes or ways of thinking.

My biggest problem with blogs are the technological trends behind their use, and in particular the way that the general expansion of database-driven content on-line (usually termed “dynamic content”, or “[Web 2.0](#)”) is exaggerating the consumption and ecological impacts of the Internet generally. It's not just that modern information systems – the telecommunications networks and the servers that drive them – are now emitting as much carbon as air transport and that the footprint of the “virtual” world continues to [grow inexorably](#)¹; digital electronics and the current conception of “consumer electronics” are fundamentally unsustainable, in both ecological and physical terms. Technology, rather than the liberating forms of human-created mechanisms conceived by the [Futurists](#)² in the early 20th Century, has become just another form of commercial exploitation and fashion-driven consumption.

Whilst the carbon footprint of information technologies can be solved with new low carbon energy sources, the shortage of the essential raw materials,

and the scale of energy use involved in their production, cannot. In the longer-term: the energy impact of the production of semiconductors, on which the computers and network switching centres are based, is on a weight-for-weight basis greater than steel – that's problematic in a world that will shortly experience a [prolonged energy crisis](#)³; the mass expansion of semiconductor technology has been enabled by the availability of cheap (predominantly oil- and gas-based) fossil fuels and so the peak of oil and gas production is likely to curtail the future development of [cheap consumer electronics generally](#)⁴; as most semiconductor systems are dependent upon a number of materials which have a [limited future supply](#)⁵, such as hafnium or germanium, this could have a significant cost and performance impact upon this supposedly “democratising” technology, restricting their use even more narrowly to the world's richest citizens rather than liberating the masses as was originally conceived by the evangelists of ICTREF.

If we look deeper into the present fashion for on-line systems amongst not just governments but also campaign groups, we can see that the intellectual and ecological flaws in these technologies do not make the Internet a transformative tool but an extremely flimsy, and perhaps short-lived one – albeit a system that's presently cheap to run because the economic costs of its impacts are [externalised](#) or ignored altogether. We are creating a [brittle system](#)⁶ of human knowledge and interchange that, far from being generally superior to previous forms of communication, merely augments older forms of intercourse through its greater geographical range and automated indexing of content. In contrast, so long as you can read, a book is always accessible provided there's enough light to read the text, but once we transcribe knowledge to digital media then we will always require an external, technological mediator in order to access and use that

information; that's the power of these technologies, but it's also their [principal flaw](#)⁷. Perhaps more importantly, the trend for physical disassociation that the Internet and on-line communication tools create means that whilst we may network over a geographically larger area, we no longer practise the skills to organise communication face-to-face to the same extent with those around us – and ultimately, with the brittleness of modern technology, and its ability to enable greater interpersonal alienation, society will end up the [worse-off for this](#)⁸. I do not write these views as a condemnation of digital technologies, but rather as a call for a more general understanding of what they represent in order to achieve a greater balance and resilience in the way we augment human knowledge and interchange through their use.

Please don't misunderstand where I'm coming from on this issue; I routinely use and am very familiar with the [operation of information systems](#)⁹ and [digital technology](#), but this depth of understanding also allows me to compare the limitations of these systems with the more traditional alternatives. We can make significant improvements on our old ways of working with information technologies (I still remember my early campaigns using a manual typewriter and a [mimeograph machine](#)!) but that should not mean that we abandon these old technologies altogether – that point of view is driven purely by the mass marketing of products that seek to create obsolescence in our lives in order to [drive new consumption](#)¹⁰.

Whilst it's easy to attack the Internet from a 'technophobic' viewpoint, if we evaluate networked communications against other options then very quickly the limitations of on-line exchange begin to show up. Arguably of all the new technologies that have developed over the last half century it is the photocopier (or latterly the laser printer), not the Internet, that is a far more powerful tool for mass communication and decentralised democratic liberation; over history, it's also arguable that the printing press has still had a greater role in the development of knowledge and democracy than the computer. For example, with a photocopier it's far harder for government controls to enforce prohibitions on the content and use of information. Today the Internet and electronic communications are being used as a [mechanism for mass surveillance](#)¹¹, as is common in most states now, or for the censorship of discussion and the repression of information exchange, as is the case with Internet or mobile phone use in more repressive states such as China or Iran. With the recent introduction of systems such as digital rights management, which create the ability for remote actors to [control what data you can hold on your computer](#)¹², the Internet is rapidly becoming not the open landscape of human interchange envisioned by its founders but just another vehicle for commercial

and state control of human activity.

For many years my discursive media of choice has been email. My expressive medium is the word; as [Gloria Steinem](#) stated, "Writing is the only thing that, when I do it, I don't feel I should be doing something else". To the pleasure, and often pain, of people on a number of the email lists that I am a member of even the slightest provocation can result in a 2,000 to 5,000 word riposte – including references. Sometimes, in the techno-fetishism and group conflict/mutual grooming of the code-mediated Internet, we lose the concept of the "web of knowledge" that people have woven over the history of the written word. The Internet might give you access to masses of information, but how often do bloggers knit that valuable resource together into a more panoramic set of ideas that expresses their deeper motivations rather than just their immediate ire? More importantly, for me at least, how often do the authors of on-line content try and knit ideas together in a way that allows people to expand their own ability to think or act rather than merely using words as a form of propaganda or control?

Words are symbols; they contain within them relative links to ideas, concepts, values and experiences, but their symbolic significance is given meaning by the individual, not the word. A person's own knowledge and experience plays a large part in the symbolic comprehension of a word, and so the value that one person might attach to a word is not always the same as another. In terms of the general response, the way we interpret words and other symbols has much to do with the way society attaches meaning to them through our culture; and so in a more general way our reactions are often framed not so much by a measured summation of our present understanding, but rather by the political and economic dogma of the last two or three centuries that enforces the conventional wisdom on a particular issue. In that sense, if used consciously to achieve certain ends, the Internet can be used just as easily for pointed criticism and attack rather than for amicable discourse. For good or ill, divorced from the essential visual and non-verbal communication cues of direct human interaction, the raw power of words can be used to play upon an individual's or group's views in order to trigger a certain response – "the word as weapon" rather than "the weapon of the word".

The power of human culture rests with our ability to communicate our thoughts to one another using words as the index key to a range of intellectual constructs; in a very literal sense, words are the medium by which I take the electrical impulses in my brain and replicate them in yours. It is by reading, learning, talking and experiencing life that we imbue ourselves with a broad range of these cultural constructs, and thus the more we develop this web of experiential, intellectual knowledge the greater that our ability to

impart and receive ideas through the medium of the word becomes. In that sense the Internet is an extension of direct human communication, but without the geographic boundaries that have traditionally hampered free association. However, as mass consumption simplifies culture to a series of standardised and stylised cues – from the [hyper-reality](#) of branding and marketing, to the manufactured themes of modern music and the similarly stylised and recycled dilemmas of TV drama, to the compressed and meaningless statements of political sound-bites (recently given a new lease of life in systems such as mobile [SMS](#) and [Twitter](#)) – the intellectual purposes for which we use these new communications tools is in fact diminishing; *we're using more to say less*, either through repetition (e.g. 24 hour rolling news) or the recycling of the same content across other media (e.g. [blogs](#)). Therefore it's legitimate to raise the question as to whether these technologies have enabled a new dawn of inter-personal expression, or whether they merely ape the themes of the highly engineered mass consumer culture, and so in the process miss the more fundamental aspect of communication – *thought*.

Which brings me back once again to the reason why I've put this new board together... As noted above, for many years I've been emailing my thoughts around the globe. Whilst recently I've often been pressed to compile my efforts into the form of a blog I've resisted this step because of my problems with both the technological and cultural forms that the blog represents. What I would prefer is the simpler, more technically lightweight approach of the early [bulletin board systems](#) (BBSs) that I used to communicate from the late 1980s. But, as with much of modern technology, what is the given technology today is usually, from file formats to hardware, not [backwardly compatible](#) with previous forms of technologically mediated exchange. So, having found the time, I've put together my own! It's a system where the program generates static web pages rather than the dynamically generated content of blogging systems; it produces, like the design scheme for the rest of the [FRAW web site](#), a very lightweight and simple hypertext mark-up format; and in keeping with this general theme, the visual design of the pages also emphasises [simplicity in design](#).

OK, so now I have the means to now compose my own lightweight, simple posts – but what do I do? How can I encompass what I write in a narrow term that can be used to describe the purposes of these posts? Fundamentally, my interest is *the future*. From the mid-80s I worked as an environmentalist, first voluntarily and then professionally; I covered planning, pollution control, radiation and health, toxicology, waste and other such issues, from one end of the country to the other and sometimes beyond. But the more I engaged with these disparate problems the more I came to see that they were part of

the same problem – *energy*. Around 2001 I started work on energy specifically, and in particular the [issue of peak oil](#)¹³. But again, the more I engaged with the energy issue the more I found that all routes of investigation led to one common route – *human ecology*. But as I looked at the problems within human ecology I found that the common way of looking at all these issues, *economics*, stood in opposition to the solutions that can be described from the basis of human ecology.

It isn't that the [ecological](#) and [economic](#) viewpoints are directly opposed – in fact they often describing the same issue in very similar ways. The principal reason that the ecological and economic viewpoints of the human system result in such a divergence of views is that modern economics represents a radical simplification of the human system in a way that is skewed to meet certain ideological (predominantly the affluent Western) viewpoints; in contrast studies of human ecology seek to objectively identify and tackle the complexity inherent in the operation of both the human system, and the interaction of the human ecological system with the natural ecology of the biosphere.

If you take an ecological viewpoint of this relationship (often encompassed by the term '[deep ecology](#)'), what you find is that the problems we perceive today, from resource depletion and climate change through to the quality of the natural environment, are the result of the failure to see human ecology as a distinct subset of the natural biosphere. In contrast economics views the biosphere as something separate and subservient to the human system. More importantly the failure of our economic, and thus our political, understanding of the relationship between humans and their environment mean that often we exacerbate problems through our ignorance of the importance of the biosphere, and the finite nature of non-biological (e.g. mineral) resources of the planet, to the human ecological system. Thus the problem with our conceptualisation of human and ecological problems isn't so much the phenomena that which we're looking at, but rather the skewed nature of the observations themselves... *well, that's meat enough for any feast of convivial virtual verbiage!*

So, how to encompass this idea within in a name that can describe this endeavour? The issue at hand is human ecology, or perhaps just 'ecology', and the problems with the way 'economics' interprets these issues. '[Ecological economics](#)' already has a defined set of ideas that would restrict the range and discussion of ideas a little, so let's contract thing a little further... ***ecolonomics!*** A nicely vague term that allows plenty of room to define new ideas, and make connections within the web of knowledge, to find new ways of looking at old problems.

The only problem I perceive with this approach is that it's going to annoy a lot of people – and this possibly includes some old friends from the environment movement. Personally I believe that such responses are the problems of others, not my own, since I can see no validity in the basis from which many criticisms of my recent work are made. As [John Seymour](#) discusses in his book, *The Ultimate Heresy*, if you take a more objective view of the human system – that it is an essential part of nature rather than being separate and distinct from it – then many of the traditional ways of looking at old problems cease to apply. By implication, taking a new and more expansive viewpoint must also result in a change in the way we describe and understand the things that we see.

The difficulty is that for many people such a change in viewpoint is scary – precisely because it necessitates a change in patterns of living which, from their present position, are very desirable and comfortable. But what if those patterns of living are not just unsustainable in the long-term, but are in fact wholly unrealistic given the trends that are visible today? This is the debate that we face over issues such as climate change, where the effects will be felt in the future but the solutions must be exercised today, or energy and resource depletion, where the trends that describe our present use of energy are likely to be rendered inviable by shortages in the near future. Acting on these problems requires foresight, but the ideas that such foresight creates directly threaten the mainstream political and economic conception of how our world should operate today, and in turn this restricts how we might resolve these problems. I also perceive that, over the next few years, this difference in viewpoints will plague the mainstream environmental and conservation movements as they seek to reconcile the worsening human ecological crisis with the economic delusions perpetuated within mainstream politics.

From the present paradigm, where the [political-economy](#) dictates certain realities and excludes others, I don't expect the content of my posts to be popular (again, not my problem). The difficulty is that, within a system that declares itself to act reasonably on the basis of evidence, that same system must perjure itself through disregarding or ignoring the increasing body of evidence that invalidates the philosophical basis of that same system; this contradiction within itself sows the seeds of much greater problems – both social, political and economic – in the future. As [J.K. Galbraith](#) states in *The Affluent Society*¹⁴, such “[conventional wisdom](#)” cannot be easily overturned, and often it is not overturned by the weight of evidence but when the existing system can no longer credibly control events. However, in those last convulsions before one paradigm is overturned in favour of another, the mainstream of opinion is often vehemently hostile to those pointing out the flaws in their thinking. Today the mainstream of

the environmental movement plays along with the views of the political and economic cognoscenti because they believe that this is what's required to achieve change. In my view this is wrong, and ignores the history of how pressure groups have created fundamental change in the past. But for groups who are dependent on both a positive public profile and public subscriptions for their existence, such a compromise is necessary for them to exist in their present form.

To bend the words of [Archbishop Hélder Câmara](#) a little, “*When I rescue the animals they call me a conservationist, but when I ask why the animals are endangered they call me an environmentalist*”. Perhaps in parallel to the issue of economics and human ecology that I describe here, in his book, *Spiral of Violence*¹⁵, Archbishop Câmara also characterises the way in which the West's panic to address the ideological conflict between market capitalism and communism resulted in those states carrying out activities that were wholly in opposition to the principles they claimed to represent (and thirty years later we see similar debate is taking place today, in relation to terrorism, over issues such as torture, rendition, and the detention of individuals for suspicion of activities that could not ordinarily be prosecuted as a crime). We can extend this idea to the delusions inherent within the failing economic paradigm, and the absurd ways in which it is justified by politicians, and the compromise (between reality and action) that this forces upon the mainstream environmental groups, by appending to the above, “*...And when I say that the human economic system is the cause of the problem they call me an anarchist | a Luddite | a hair-shirted hippie | an idiot | a radical**” (*delete as applicable!)

What matters in the debate over the future of humanity is not saying what is acceptable, but saying that which we feel and which we can factually demonstrate is right. The tendency in modern industrial society is for people to conform to the action of the dominant economic culture, but if we believe those actions to be in error how can we follow them? Following on from the words of [Edmund Burke](#), if we perceive that there is a fundamental injustice operating within our present state, but we do not speak out to address it, then it is we who also fail not just those who are in charge (I'm not just thinking of his more well known quote in relation to this, “Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little”, but also the less well known, “The people never give up their liberties, but under some delusion”). If we follow present trends to their ultimate conclusion then, at some point, there must be a reckoning for the way modern society operates today; in the case of Burke and other philosophers that reckoning was often with the Creator, but what we can perceive today is that

this reckoning will be with the existence (that is, the human conception of it) of 'creation' itself. If we endanger the biosphere, we endanger ourselves. The process by which we resolve these truths – within our own mind, in our relations with those around us, and in our relations with wider society –

must be inextricably linked with the solutions to what these truths tell us; for if we cannot stand up for and act out these solutions in our own lives, how can we possibly expect others to act upon these problems as well?

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