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Becoming Borg

Sitting within the World Heritage site at the Greenwich Maritime, at the centre of what was once the military hub of an Empire founded on naval power and the trade in anything imaginable - including people - I am struck by how this model might help us understand the World, as it is at this moment in 2009, in 350 years from now, or later. Within the often violent and grim context of the late 17th Century Christopher Wren conceived of the Royal Naval College as the symbolic and operative heart of British power. An architectural marvel, it is an expression of rationalist idealism, the Enlightenment and human (née, British) dominion over the world; political, economic, social and natural.

Some argue that we live in a new colonial age; an age marked by the globalised incorporation of property and power, where anything imaginable is tradable - including people. This culture is seen to function through the progressive instrumentalisation of human activity, including individual and collective creativity, a condition sometimes called "playbour" (Kucklich 2005). Our capacity to revel in the senseless joy of play has also been reduced to its capacity to generate excess value. Every human on Earth, whether they like it or not, whether they are aware of it or not, is in the process of becoming part of this cultural economy.

As soon as we learn to communicate, to exchange value between ourselves, we are subsumed into the dynamics of social discourse. Historically the content and form of such discourse was held to remain the property of the individual citizen (although slaves, women and children were rarely allowed such property rights). Today we live in a world where we are all subsumed into what has been referred to as the 'attention economy' (Davenport & Beck 2001), whether as active participants and producers, within the 'cultural industries', or as consumers. Most of the time we function in both these roles and thus we doubly are instrumentalised within the dominant globalised economic model. The mass deception is complete (Horkheimer & Adorno 1976).

N. Katherine Hayles (Hayles 1999) wrote of the post-human as the transformational mediation of ourselves by technology. Hayles' post-humans are part human and part cyborg, mediated by the machines and communication systems that are the technological architectures of globalisation. However, there is another aspect to this. As we have created the current integrated global network, the internet, our existence as social beings has been extended and diffused into that network. As humans we have become network-mediated and thus articulated as rhizomes of diffused being throughout that network.

Whereas we once had to maintain our own memories and the indices that allowed us to access them, or otherwise turn to the laborious process of looking things up in books, today's Google search engine means not only is the answer to our question available at the instant of our query but we have also come to rely upon this search architecture to manage our relationship with what is effectively our collective memory.

Recently the Chief Economist at Google, Hal Varian, was quoted as saying that in 2020 Google would exist as an implanted chip within the fabric of the human body (Millikan 2010). In such a futurist vision our connectivity with the web and its power to augment human mental performance will be internalised within our biological systems, directly integrating our personal neural circuits with the internet and with everyone else connected to it. That connection would, by definition, be a two way connection. We would be capable of sending and receiving information directly from our minds to anybody and everybody.

That is Varian's vision of the future. But direct connectivity aside, we are today virtually there. When once we existed in and of our particular communities, knowing what we knew through our direct relations with one another, our objects, the books we read and the films we watched, today, now, we are, like the apparatus that envelops us, always everywhere and nowhere, promiscuously connected to everything and yet isolated, rendered virtually senseless in the ensuing cacophony. Google is not an augmentation of the book or the index, it is an augmentation of our mind. Varian's vision has already come to pass, even if the direct neural connectivity is not yet implemented. Our social fabric, augmented by social technologies, is as much a part of our mind as neural tissue and thus we are already interconnected at the deepest of levels.

This appears to be a step beyond what Hayles proposed in her thesis and takes us into what might be new ontological territory. As socially instantiated beings perhaps we have always been cyborgs, for the social can be seen as, if not a technology itself, something that might only be fully realised when mediated by technology, language being the foundation of this process. Today we are fully networked cyborgs and in this form we are assimilated into and are a functioning part of the global apparatus.

We are no longer cyborgs. We are becoming Borg.

Simon Biggs
November 2010

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