

Over the RGB Rainbow

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A polemic review of *Virtuality Check: Power Relations and Alternative Strategies in the Information Society*, Francois Fortier (Verso, 2001).

Virtuality Check by Francois Fortier, a political economist, quite appropriately arrived the year the economically deflated, and then theoretically inflated, dot-com bubble burst. Perhaps due to marginally missing out on all the gloating soothsaying of told-you-so that followed, the book actually offers a thoughtfully balanced and useful view of how Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) interface on the electronic frontier in the new economy. Taking as his starting point(s) the two extremes of, on one hand, cyberspace as the postmodern enfranchisement that will rid the world of its alienating tribulations and lead to liberation through an Athenian-styled democracy, and, on the other, the turn to techno slavery under corporate and state control, Fortier successfully lays the groundwork for a justifiably reserved but still hopeful negotiation of the opposing outlooks. He explicitly sets out to clean out many of the lingering fantasies, mysticisms and scarecrows that prevent a focused assessment of exactly what roles and functions ICTs perform, with an emphasis on the relations they realize, and are equally the realizations of, today. As such, he avoids much of the futuristic prophesizing that turns every otherwise competent and clear-headed theorist into a 1-800 number clairvoyant. Gone almost entirely, and very thankfully, is the jack in and tune out talk spilling over from the binary mist of technotopia; a science fiction-inspired porthole of strangely familiar narratives that barely notices what has been and rarely, and then only in hyperbole passing, what is. *Virtuality Check* is, as its name playfully implies, grounded in examples and documented trends that lend a perspective where virtuality is inseparable from reality. At roughly 100 undersized, hardcover pages (not counting the notes and bibliography sections), it packs a lot of powerful punches without embarking on the usual rounds of shadowboxing with the default figures encountered in cyber literature. Anyone still running the green data shower from the *Matrix* as a screen saver however, will find the checklist a rude awakening from sleep; it is

not an algorithmic manual for dodging real bullets in a backstroke swimming-lesson facilitated by the virtual.

The saving grace of Fortier's method, as every method is by merit of its application alone problematic, is that he does not perceive of favored ICT catch phrases for node connection, such as the "Internet" and the "network," as fully formed substantive nouns or proper names, whose "identity" is then at stake, but looks at the relations between society and technology in general and then ICTs in particular. He states: "My purpose is to locate disparate discourses in comparative perspective, and to highlight their divergent representation of socio-technological processes." (3) Although he arguably enters another quagmire of partial definitions and the troublesome debunking of myths here, the comparative look, which follows, at processes of production — what he subsumes in production and trade (of valued goods and services) — and reproduction — implying the role media and politics play in maintaining the social order and its production processes — lends considerable insight into the political and economical objectives of ICTs. Using the term political economy from a historical materialist perspective, which in turn leads to an analysis of the roots, mechanisms and purposes of power relations, Fortier succinctly and clearly, as he does throughout the book, sums up how this choice affects the reasoning and outcomes of his analysis: "In other words, political economy refuses to view social relations in terms of their presumed functional utility to society; instead it questions that relative utility for all social groups involved in a relation. It thus analyses power in terms of its implications for exploitation (the extraction of one group's labour or resources for another), resistance (the refusal of that extraction) and oppression (the reaction against that refusal)." (10) Given that he then firmly abandons the search for a unitary technopolis with seventh heaven and cloud nine aspirations, the discussion usefully returns to considering how ICT influences the power relations between *different* social groups, abandoning as mentioned technology's utility as uniform or unique, and subsequently its potential for democratic alternatives within the relations thus mediated and negotiated.

In a section entitled *Perspectives*, Fortier outlines four established methods whereby the relations between society and technology can and have been analyzed: 1) *Functional neutrality*: This approach treats technology as independent from social dynamics; it is understood on its own technical terms and thus functional to an undifferentiated group. Fortier concludes: "Even worse, by desocializing technology this analysis denies the plurality of technological alternatives, turning agency into object and development into destiny." (14) 2) *Instrumentalism*: This method recognizes what it announces; that technology is for better or worse (or both) implemented through social relations. Again Fortier finds it lacking: "No attention is paid to the criteria by which technology is said to be valuable, for what purpose and for whom. This obfuscates the agenda of

dominant interests that actually determines each and every step of technological life cycles.” (15) 3) *Ahistorical inherence*: This line of attack or defense, depending on one’s outlook, realizes that technologies have political implications both through their use and their characteristics. However, it ends up seeing technology as a determinant of society, rather than looking at the underlying forces also beneath and behind it, which also indicate the reverse relations. Furthermore, it belatedly introduces the potential for alternatives, in that critique is leveled at the outcomes rather than the processes. 4) *Historical inherence*: Arriving, finally, at the perspective of choice, this approach attempts to see technologies in their multidimensional relationships to social processes, as inherently political in development and not by nature. Building on the foundations that ICTs are fields of social struggle, Fortier concludes: “This perspective on ICTs underlines the point that information is power, but not in and of itself. It is power only to the extent that it is grounded in material reality — that it has consequences for how people act, and thus for how societies produce value and reproduce relations of order and change.” (24)

The ensuing chapters are a succinct tour de force on the impact ICT has on society, covering in particular the advantage it gains over labor and the effect it has on contesting movements in civil society. Starting off his treatise with a chapter asking *Information Society or Control Society?*, with the first subtitle adding another question mark in *Subsuming Labour: Cybernetic Productivity?*, Fortier very persuasively derails the claim that technology’s paved road *as* progress is indeed an inevitable drive en route to increased productivity and, in parallel, a horizontal leveling of the very means of production. Using the influential thesis provided by Manuel Castells, which posits freedom as an essential ingredient of information technology to ensure the productivity of its flows, as his counterexample, Fortier points out that growth and development does in no way need democracy, beyond a certain serviceable charade. Instead, it relies consistently upon mechanisms of oppression and exploitation to extract surpluses. As he concisely puts it to inform the naivety of much tech talk: “So it is theoretically problematic to argue that, through the information revolution, capital would barter democratization for productivity.” (28) Following from this base realization, there is however the countermove of open information sharing, collaboration and cooperation, exemplified by open source software and large public (arguably infused with private interests) projects like the Human Genome Project, that appeal to a gift rather than a profit economy. Although the latter models and exchanges have gained some currency (Richard Stallman is, of course, busy these days distancing himself from the corporate cooptation of “open source,” as distinctly separate from *libre*), the vast majority of networks are obsessed with obtaining valuation above connectivity, and this is arrived at through security and firewalls, copyright and patent protection, secrecy and filtering, and so on. When removed from those seductive diagrams of wishful

thinking, one cursory browsing through the reality of the networks that comprise information technology indicates that they resonate with corporate interests that do *not* trade democracy for productivity, unless the balance of benefits tilts by doing so. In fact, even when the core issue of technology in the workforce is considered against the basic benefit of automation, it is revealed that productivity is not necessarily, or only, linked to an increased output per person, but the ability to utilize and control the *processes* of production through the enhanced flexibility and coercion of labor. Since productivity when implemented through ICT thus fundamentally seeks to change the relations of labor, it is always resisted (by the Luddites, for example), and Fortier argues that motivations associated with ICT developments and introductions cannot be linked, as logical and inevitable next steps, to claims for efficiency, prosperity and progress. They must also be considered in view of a desire to control the relations of production in cybernetic systems of supervision, surveillance and control. In his summary, Fortier explains: “The argument made above thus proposes that far from revolutionizing the way capitalist societies produce, ICTs actually contribute to the realignment of the *distribution* of that production among various social groups.” (41).

With this he turns to the Internet, under the subheading *Trapping Consumers: No Free Cyber-Lunch*, and effectively describes that gathering concept of nodes as a panoply of easily recognizable interests and struggles, from the corporate-owned pipelines to the standards and protocols of organizations like IETF, IESG, ICANN and the W3C, to name just a few, that ensures and secures its operative parameters. Harking back to the ideals outlined by Adam Smith, this vast realm, blissfully subsumed in a noun only second to the Universe, aspires to recall the friction-free capitalism of open trade and markets that empower rational consumers to pursue their economic interest at a remove from all restrictions and obstacles. To cut a longer and well-told story short here, this was obviously never the case, as both the wealth behind the above Internet acronyms and the dot-com boom attests to. The reason venture capital went crazy for Internet stocks (when it was not running its laddering schemes on Wall Street to back them) had of course nothing to do with the consumer’s emancipation, but quite the opposite; a belief that a few major brands would prevail online, like they had offline, and steal markets from other merchants. Throw in unprecedented measures of profiled marketing, so called narrow casting, along with the new data mining capabilities, and the freedom linked to supply and demand chains start to appear more like a push technology slavery, with increased monopolization on transactions and trade. Indeed, this marketing pattern has arguably been a major force in shaping the Internet, and large conglomerates now effectively control and maintain network pockets of intranets, like AOL, that attract millions upon millions of monitored users, unlikely to venture far beyond their branded portal — to nowhere it turns out. Such

manufactured behaviors are further confirmed in Internet traffic patterns, where a few domains absorb most of the bandwidth, and Fortier concludes this section, with its initial promises of free flow capitalism and the complimentary cyber lunch, thus: “Yet ICTs, in their current form of development, enable the fragmentation of consumers through profiled marketing and unprecedented levels of supply-driven manipulation of wants, further accelerating the current restructuring and monopolization of trade. This has the consequence of reducing consumer choice over brands, shops, and the purchasing process, while threatening the imposition of monopolistic prices — all for the endowment of traders, not for consumers, in a form of *friction-free corporatism*.” (58)

The remaining two sections of this chapter then, in logical turn, deal with the manufacturing of consent and the panoptical aspects of cybernetic technologies. While acknowledging that the interactive and collaborative properties of ICTs, seen in mailing lists for example, offer an antidote to the deafening bullhorn of television and radio, Fortier argues that if various groups and interests had not early on driven the technical innovation in this direction (BBS, Usenet, etc.), the technology would already have followed in the beaten path of its, now in the flow of the mainstream, media predecessors. Without this lingering upstart enthusiasm, which has filtered into a marketed supply, the word alternative may already have become the relative oxymoron currently seen on cable television. But who actually benefits most from ICT in this respect? Fortier somewhat controversially but convincingly claims that activists who mobilize through increased ease of communication do nothing to improve on the overall balance of power through this adaptation. It does not matter what one sector does in one set of circumstances; one must look at the general picture of ICT and the relations it, as a whole, supports. Seattle has come to stand as the crowning glory of this activist perspective on ICT, spawning the birth of the Indymedia network, but it may help to recognize that the Millennium Round of the WTO, as *the* effigy of globalization, would probably not have taken place, at all, without the evolution of ICTs that enable and direct this process. Likewise, one must acknowledge that the freely distributed and open sourced Indymedia software runs on corporate backbones within a technological superstructure defined by corporate interest groups. What is generally lacking in activist perspectives is an understanding of what information does and how it does it; how information mediates in relations of power. The heralded “educated ability” to act, so popular in the margins aspiring to occupy the center, rarely takes into account the typical hierarchical demographic that has developed further through and certainly due to ICTs. But one could say that Indymedia’s, to stay with the same example, effort to institute a global broadcast system around the local, with a branded overall identity, does in effect return to use this pyramid model in a way that may, in some wayward way, challenge its stuffing — without moaning too loudly about the impracticable task of flattening it first. Hardcore netizens who still believe that the uneven

signal to noise ratio promoted and realized by ICTs is overcome by the netiquette of universal connectivity are most welcome to turn off their spam filters and then reply personally to the next greeting and plea for help from the Spanish prisoner in Nigeria.

Such developments are further solidified by the firewalls and corporate intranets (Reuters, for example, runs a parallel network to the Internet for its financial services) that channel information. By restricting the flow this way, network packets that were supposed to overturn hierarchies and deplete rank and status have become susceptible to have their content examined and originators punished if it constricts the “freedoms” thus accessed. With specters like Total Information Awareness looming large, the current installations of censorware, ensuring legitimacy upon delivery, and packetshapers, directing bandwidth to ports (and, rightfully perhaps, used by most universities to steer students away from wasteful P2P), are only rough beta versions of what is to come under TCPA. But all this is very old news, although Fortier elaborates eloquently at length, and has been among the litany of dystopian complaints since Howard Rheingold surfed the Internet and came upon the same troublesome passwords. However, trends have continued relentlessly in this direction, and this is where the neo-liberal logic of an inherent democracy to the network is so damaging to its egalitarian prospects, precisely because ICT technology is *not*, in any way, developing toward this potential. In other words, nostalgic subjugation to the future prospects of a past promise only leads to a passive contemplation of the *screen* of globalization, not an alternative appropriation that requires a different, far more acute and long term, investment. Those still hovering in cyberspace to fight for justice are firmly anchored by Fortier’s concluding observations: “Already, a market driven and price-tagged pay-toll information highway is materializing, serving those with the highest purchasing power and reinforcing the current structures of domination. Meanwhile, state and corporate apparatuses are closely monitoring network activity for intelligence and propaganda purposes, controlling both content and medium where necessary. For all the early enthusiasm, computer networking, in its current forms, is definitely not an almighty weapon of political resistance and counter-formation.” (82)

In a penultimate chapter, Fortier outlines alternative strategies for the deployment of ICT for various purposes within different social groups, paying particular attention to the implementation of technology in the Third World, where it frequently arrives in the guise of charitable aid that often sees the actual benefits return to suppliers and development agencies. Since these all rely heavily upon identifying the particular circumstances of those sectors, it may be equally useful to leave it alone, for here and now, and instead refer interested parties to obtain a copy of the book, or preferably embark on their own innovation

based on specific needs for alternatives. It seems important to stress, once more, that *Virtuality Check* does not attempt to assign one out of two value judgments to ICTs, as in good or bad, but rather try to analyze how different groups within society form and appropriate ICT (in relations and mediations of power). The point is to recognize that while the growth of ICT has justifiably been cast as rather bleak, there is always a remedial power and solution, a use and an application, that escapes the logic of intention and relocates, or misappropriates, these tools for other purposes. (Of course, such potential does not belong to one track alone.) And furthermore, by its emphasis on development and relations, *Virtuality Check* continuously stresses multiple avenues of influence to avoid technological determinism. By approaching ICT from a political economical perspective, then, and infusing it with historical inherence, Fortier has persuasively shown that it *primarily* serves and intensifies the processes and purposes of a corporate globalization through “virtual” capitalism with “real” consequences. Returning to the core relations of production and reproduction and their proposed trade in empowerment and democracy, Fortier delivers a final blow to cyberspace creed: “The forms and balances of those relations have varied, but not their nature: the roles of workers, capitalists, managers, bureaucrats, merchants, peasants, women, men, youth, ethnic groups, or castes have remained basically unchanged, while ICTs mostly serve the intensification of exploitative and oppressive relations between those social sectors.” (104) It could even be argued that technology has further disenfranchised those that, for various reasons, fall outside the oligopolies of the struggling new economy.

If we suspend, in the adjacent background, the political economical analysis at this juncture and return to the networked ideals of cyberspace, it should be clear that much of the ongoing dialogue with its penchant for gift economies and netocracies, with its claims that a virtual world is indeed possible and forthcoming in some sort of binary rapture, belongs to pipedreams without useful inclinations toward infrastructure. It's overdue time to leave William Gibson's fanciful flight through data structures spinning in the airport book carousel. And, likewise, perhaps Donna Haraway should have included a legally binding contract with premises and conditions before donating her cause and body to the cyborg prospective. And maybe Lev Manovich should have added a P2P friendly MP3 (or OGG) on oral traditions, a more complex social weave of historical vocalizations, when outlining the language of new media in algorithmic speech commands. And Geert Lovink should possibly have enlightened his subcontinental dark fiber with an eternally copyright free appendix on the heart of darkness. This is not to diminish these contributions and their exchange value, but they collectively fail to grasp that we have, in the virtual actuality, come a long way along some distinctly un-hip routes like the information superhighway since the Memex and Xanadu. The revolutionary outreach of the network is not a pie in the sky anymore. It is a political and economical behemoth with some very

down to earth fallout. So instead of crying out in feigned disbelief and outrage when ISPs shut down our Halloween monsters, like *The Thing*, and rat on our Robin Hood pirates, who download 600 songs in a day, we must come to terms with the fact that corporate and government apparatuses can, when desired, turn out the lights on our daring virtual oppositions and “free” digital lifestyles with the click of a switch or a mouse. A virtuality check, then, does not imply that we abandon the imagination in search for alternatives, that we take leave of our monsters and pirates, our digital multitudes and creative commons. It rather seeks to eventually empower them by first pointing out that both current and developing ICTs do not lend themselves to be hired for shared speculation on democracy without steep interests attached and monthly payments in cold, hard cash. This is an obvious connect-the-dots scenario that seems to escape most node-connection analysts. There is surely a persistent irony in consistently building whimsical meta-technologies for metaphysics to define cybernetic networks, and we can’t always start at the end of the cyberspace rainbow to make some real headway in the virtual present.