New Media Nemesis: Ivan Illich at the web age.
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In economy there is this basic assumption on which more or less everybody implicitly agree on: economical growth bring richness, and richness improves conditions of life. Developed countries are said to be developed because their richness allows people to fulfill their essential needs: access to medicine, healthcare, food, water, transportations, etc. Ideally, economy is meant at freeing people from their vital needs - once it is done, will be reached this “golden age” when people could only focus on more abstract “product” like information or culture.

In the 1970’s, due to the advance in molecular biology, has been observed what has been called the “pharmacological boom”: 250% increase on the market of medicine. In the mind of many people, this was the continuity of progress and economy: it reached the state which would significantly allow people to live longer, and better.

Ivan Illich, however, in the book he published in 1976 under the title “Medical Nemesis” put those assumptions seriously in question. First, looking at the evolution over decades, he remarked the 250% “boom” have not had any effect on the average death age - this one, considered as being as indicator of the wealth of a nation, just stand still. Worse, he noticed that the increase of demand on medicine had mainly been oriented over a similar kind of product: antianxiolitics, and more generally medicine acting the central nervous system, then aimed at reduced the stress people were confronted to. And what produced this general “anxiety”? The need for progress, economical growth and richness.

Illich then reached this paradoxical observation: market, instead of generating products to answer people’s need, created ones which were precisely answering needs it itself created. John Keynes said that to reduce the problem of unemployment, one just as to cut the number of unemployed people into two, to make one dig holes and the other filled them up. In medicine, the situation appeared fairly similar.

Illich thus introduced two main concepts: heteronomy, this externalization of needs to the market (as opposed to autonomy), and counterproductivity, when too much uncontrolled heteronomy lead to results which contradicts their initial goals. For instance, medicine would make people sicker than healthier, transport make people move slower, education people less cultured, etc.

It would be interesting to rethink those observation at the age of the boom of another kind of medicine: the web, and new media in general. Are they so beneficiary as they are supposed to? The Internet is praised for the barrier of communication it makes collapse: everybody is said to be more free, and its critical sense motivated since every piece of information accessible - from the blog of a random man to Al Jaazira or the New York Times. We are said to be closer to their friends, family, or others, just at the “distance” of a mail of an instant message. In other terms, the web is said to make everybody immediately close to everybody, aka the world. But does this come at the price of the destruction of something else? If what is destructed is more important than what new media bring, then it could be counterproductive.

Before beginning such a discussion, has to be introduced the notion of negative spaces, at the base of counterproductive effects. Heteronomization comes along with transforming what is not-measurable to what is measurable by the market. For instance, industry can come to improve the living conditions in a district, adding facilities, buildings, but will not take into account elements which maybe made as much the spirit of the district, and its human quality: people wandering in the street, chatting, or helping themselves. From a universe when somebody ask for the simple help of somebody else, and has the help being given back since people share and know (= universe of autonomy, and non-measurable elements), it will move to another one where to the same request for help, will be answered “there are services available for this”, or “check online” (= universe of heteronomy, and measurable elements, like the quantity of services). Industry, while adding elements, also have destructed other ones which can not be measured; thus, it has created negative spaces.
This is the same for transportation: cars or planes are supposed to open the space, to widen it. But at the same time, by making all those places accessible, it transformed the space in between as negative space. Buying a car, this is as much wanting to reach places as wanting the places in between to disappear, *i.e.* not to exist, *i.e.* become negative spaces. As Jean-Pierre Dupuy puts it, in his book *Order and Disorders:* “personal spaces are scattered into disjointed pieces, apart the one from the other: home, work place, some public spaces in the city, shops and the mythical “elsewhere” of leisures and evasion. In between those domains, deserts of meaning, deserts of estheticism, symbolical, and one aims at going through them the fastest possible using transports.” Transports then opens the world, but at the same time cuts it into pieces, making it from continuity to a world made of discrete points - and this is contradictory. Similarly, in the health domain, medicine makes disease heteronomous, externalizes it instead of considering it as part of the body: it considers stress as evil coming from the *outside* instead of as a *reaction* of the body to condition it is initially not adapted to or willing to adapt to. Then is negated the *autonomous* definition of health as “be able to face changing conditions, challenges of stress, or eventual to refuse to face them” and is replaced by “having a low blood pressure”, etc. The negative space is humans as imperfect machines, which are not for all of them, by nature, meant to follow certain rhythms, and is replaced by the one where everybody should be able to do what the others can do (if they can’t, they have to take medicine).

My point is that the web externalizes to the network many needs (it make them be heteronomous): finding directions, finding friends, retrieving friends, finding his/her soul mate, finding information, stock market prices, and fast, with efficient design, etc. This creates negative spaces. I will in this paper on take as an example chat and emails, and reserves the case of information and design for the following one.

The need of people to communicate is translated into the network. Chatting, sending an email, does not cost much and does not imply anything: it is easier for many to start a conversation online with an unknown person that in the street. Most of the people will say that it is less scary: “there is no answer - whatever”. I believe that this is a contrary: this the fact that it is “less” scary to talk on the network which increases the “scariness” of direct communication, its “unnatural” aspect. The web thus creates a negative space between people: the psychological state where people can physically access (by talking) the people around them is suppressed. Like on an highway, the space around is suppressed, here the psychological idea of having the others accessible is attenuated. Each person, instead of being in a continuous space with everybody, is progressively constrained to a discrete element, a point, with negative space between him/her and the people he does not know around him. The positive space, the link between people, is then rejected to the heteronomous network.

The counterproductive loop is then the following: the web puts people at distance and thus increases the need of substitutes, then of the network. One would find chatting tools unsatisfactory, not expressive enough, will want better ones, then dating sites, then better dating sites since the first one, of course, are too “impersonnal”, etc. Rationally, it does not cost much to directly talk to somebody, not much than sending an instant message. It is even maybe faster to walk and talk than to search and type. Web and interactive designers will spend a lot of time to try to fulfill the human need of feeling like being in a society, where everybody can potentially access physically anybody, feeling so easy to instantly have in most South American, African, or Eastern European cities.

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1 I just would like to outline the fact that the discussion is on this precise negative space, and is not meant at condemning chat, mail or the web in general. Similarly, Ivan Illich never said that medicine had to be burned and people come back to the “stone age”. He just points out the fact that it has to be controlled for it not to be counterproductive: giving for instance excessive diagnosis transforms healthy patients into “anxious patients”, and asking them to take medicine to fight their anxiety is then criticable (“health risks associated with these attempts of automated diagnosis outweigh any theoretical benefit”).
References
Dupuy, Jean-Pierre. *Pour un Catastrophisme Eclairé: Quand l’impossible est certain.* Seuil, 2002