Screening Out Reality: "Electronic Happenings in the Real World"

And the march of the machines

By Jim McCluskey
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The virtual world

Sitting in a busy carriage on the London underground I glance across at the row of commuters opposite. Each one is entranced, thumbing expertly their various iphones. One man's is wired via his earplugs and with his free hand he is munching from a bag of crisps. I am trying to speak to a friend sitting on my left, but sitting on my right someone is very loudly shouting into their mobile phone. 'Hello, it's me', he says, 'I'm on the underground!' (did anyone every say 'hello, it's not me'). I tap him on the shoulder and politely ask him if he would mind toning it down (I refrain from pointing out I know he is on the underground)? He does not appear to hear me. More accurately, he does not appear to be aware of my existence. He goes on shouting. I leave the underground and as I walk along crowded Oxford Street I hear a friendly voice just behind me shouting 'Hello, how are you?' I turn round smiling to greet the speaker and see that he is shouting into a mobile phone. I'm not sure I can take much more of this.

What is happening to the world? Everyone seems to want to be somewhere else rather than where they are. Virtual reality has become more attractive than real reality. We spend the day in tower-block offices staring at computer screens and drive home staring at 'the world out there' through our car wind screens to spend the evening 'switching off' and staring at our TV screens. Facebook has acquired the 'Oculus' goggles system entailing the 3D experience of the virtual world via two screens, one for each eye! We are screening out reality.

Screening out reality

Were people ever more effectively screened from reality? On the TV screen, likely as not, we will be viewing a quiz show; an 'entertainment' in which a virtue is made out of being able to fill our brains with a meaningless conglomeration of disconnected 'facts'. A popular alternative is a soap opera. This entails watching imaginary people enacting imaginary scenarios characterised by conflict, typically between the sexes and lubricated by conspicuous alcohol consumption. Fictitious drama on TV is awash with murder, rape, and violence. It is not, of course, the real murder, rape and violence actually occurring in our various on-going wars; wars which are the natural currency of power elites and corporations ever covetous of the resources of others. We are well screened from all that.

The 'entertainment' is interspersed with what are called 'news' bulletins, 'news' generally being something unpleasant that happens to someone else. Subliminal messages get through of exploding nuclear power stations, politicians of 'the great powers' dicing with the

possibility of global nuclear war, the vast approaching-irreversible rush to global disaster from climate change. But, not to worry, our attention is easily distracted by endless speculation about some celebrity misdemeanour or a penny on, or off, the price of beer. News is carefully tailored not to upset our cosy armchair comforts. No depleted uranium is coming our way soon. All those deformed babies in Iraq won't end up in *our* hospitals. It's all exaggerated anyway. Rioting in the streets? Not to worry it's just a few malcontent thugs quickly knocked into shape by the forces of law and order.

At the same time the inexorable cycle of 'work – earn – buy – discard – buy more – work more' is constantly energised by the vast, ever-inventive and ubiquitous industry devoted to the manufacture of envy and discontent. You thought you didn't have smelly feet – think again. And what about that under-arm odour that your girl friend doesn't like to mention? And, shock, horror, you didn't realise your lips are cracking and need constant 'moisturising'. Is your car really big enough for your needs and what do your neighbours think about it anyway? Can it outrun an avalanche? Are you sure you're up to date with the latest fashion and are your kids loosing face at school by not having the latest video game? The western world is more wealthy than any society in world history yet there are 3.5 million children living in poverty in the UK today. That is 27 per cent of children[1]. In the US there are 100 million people below the poverty line[2]. That is over 30% of the population. Well, those wars and aircraft carriers don't come cheap; somebody has to pay.

There is another type of screen which faces us every day; invisible but very real. We are on one side of this screen; the power elites (the corporations and the politicians) are on the other side. The media is the one-way filter which prevents us from seeing what is on the other side but leaves Them free to monitor our every movement. The rules are entirely different depending on which side of the screen you are situated. Even the language on each side is different.

On our side if people print money it is called 'counterfeiting' and they are sent to jail. On the other side it is called 'Quantitative Easing' and the culprits are praised for 'saving the economy'. On our side if people trade in weapons it is called gun-running, on the other side it is called creating jobs and helping the export industry[3]. OK its jobs for killing people. But they're not *our* people. They are 'unpeople' as described in Mark Curtis's book of that name[4]. On our side of the screen if a person is held under water until he is on the point of drowning it is called torture. On the other side it is 'enhanced interrogation'. For us, starting a gratuitous war is called 'the crime of aggression' for Them it is called 'humanitarian assistance'. On our side if a business person ruins his business by greed and incompetence he is declared 'Bankrupt' and losses everything. On the other side such a person's organisation is given billions of pounds of money which rightly belongs to those on the opposite side and he, the perpetrator, is given a multi-million pound bonus as in the banking fiasco. On our side arsenals of nuclear weapons are a nightmare waiting to happen. On the other side they are what get the feet of the political elite under the 'top table'.

Electronic happenings in the real world

As we spend ever more time in cyberspace, and on the opposite side of the screen from the movers and shakers, the electronic/machine incursion proceeds apace and not necessarily to our benefit. On our side of the screen millions suffer from lack of work. On the other side people are replaced by machines in the interests of 'efficiency' (for 'efficiency' read

increased profits). It is early days for machines in the life of the consumer. But already the number of cashiers at the supermarket is dwindling. You are given the option of a machine. They call it 'self' service. For 'self' read 'machine'. How long before it is all machine-service and not just in food stores? High streets are being abandoned as the traditional retail outlets are superseded by on-line shopping where machines sort and store the goods, take the orders, arrange and execute deliveries. We still sometimes have the option of talking to a human being. How long will it be before it is just that calm machine voice telling us if you want option 1 press button one, if you want option 2 press....?

In manufacturing the automotive processes become ever more sophisticated and all inclusive. CNC machines are Computer Numerically Controlled. By their use machine component design is highly automated. This is called end-to-end component design. And it is not just design. As well as computer aided design (CAD) there is computer aided manufacture (CAM). These computer systems are used to direct machine tools in the creation, modification, analysis, or optimization of a design and then to build that design. Traditionally tools were instruments for the use of people, increasingly machine tools are moving them towards being the tools of other machines until the factory itself becomes a super-machine as the dwindling number of workers are edged towards the exit. There is still space for some people in the manufacturing process but that space is rapidly getting smaller.

Parallel developments are coming in agriculture as electronically controlled machines become ever more adept at cultivating, planting, harvesting, and sorting.

In construction and architecture the tendency is in the same direction. It is very unlikely that Frank Gehry's designs with their doubly curved surfaces and intricately interlocking of forms could have been designed and built without a huge electronic input.

A 2014 article in The Economist states that almost half of all jobs could be automated by computers within two decades.[5]

War is being privatized. With the aid of electronics it is also being automated. The use of drones is the first major use of automated weaponry. It is likely to spread to land and sea-based weaponry since automation is popular with the politicians who are responsible for starting inter-state wars. Automated weapons minimize and could eventually exclude deaths of combatants, never popular with the voters. In modern warfare already many more civilians than combatants are killed. In the Iraq war about 26 civilians were killed for every US and Coalition combatant[6]. As more and more weaponry is automated enabling the combatants to be risk-free in their offices and bunkers thousands of miles from the killing we seem to be moving to a time when just about the *only* deaths will be those of civilians.

Most terrifying of all

Our electronic devices and their associated machines have senses and abilities way outside the abilities of humans. They can 'see' parts of the electro-magnetic spectrum of which we are totally unaware. They can look down from space and record what they see. They can perform billions of calculations per second and can analyse vast quantities of data at the speed of light. We use these electronic abilities to perform task which we are unable to perform ourselves, like monitoring and controlling the most dangerous source of power man have ever devised. Tragically, as we know from Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima

electronic controls are not up to the task. But most terrifying of all we use electronic warning systems to let us know when some state has launched an arsenal of nuclear weapons against us. These systems are neither full-proof nor foolproof. On many occasions they have warned us falsely that a nuclear attack is underway. The most famous near-

Armageddon 'incident' was on September 26th 1983 when Stanislav Petrov[7], a lieutenant colonel of the Soviet Air Defence Force was the duty officer at the command center for the Oko nuclear early-warning system. He knew that when he reported to the government that his electronic system was telling him Russia was under a massive nuclear attack the rigid power structure was such that a retaliatory strike could ensue and the world would come to an end. He did not tell them. As it turned out the warnings were false. He was honoured in the United Nations as 'The Man Who Saved the World' and was demoted by his superiors for not having obeyed orders.

Even if such a warning was correct the missiles would be approaching at more than 15 thousand miles an hour. The recipients would only have minutes to decide, first, if the electronic warnings were reliable and, second, what they were going to do about it. So the people who set up this system have arranged, by using the light-speed abilities of an electronic system and coupling them to the relatively snail-like abilities of humans, to trap us all in a nightmare situation in which the outcome could well be a nuclear holocaust.

It is not possible to check by direct human agency if a warning of an ongoing attack is correct. It is all happening too fast. But even if it were possible and the attack was confirmed, would a sane human being press the button to destroy the second half of humanity in the knowledge that the first half is doomed? What is described is the present situation combined with the existing circumstance of around two thousand nuclear weapons, many and perhaps all of which are vastly more destructive than the Hiroshima bomb, being held on hair-trigger alert, ready for launch at the press of a button.

Finally we must ask ourselves if the people responsible for setting up such a nightmare scenario are entirely sane.

We would be wise to get our heads out of cyberspace and take a long hard look at our leaders and the decisions they are making on our behalf. They have their nuclear bunkers – we do not.

Notes

1. http://www.cpag.org.uk/child-poverty-facts-and-figures

2. http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/12/08/338904/100-million-americans-below-poverty-line/

3. That nice Vincent Cable, Minister for Business and Enterprise is a huge help to the arms export industry with 180 of his staff devoted to working on these exports; more help than for all other export industries combined. See www.caat.org.uk – their publication 'Briefing' (p4)

4. 'Unpeople', by Mark Curtis, Published Vintage, 2004. Unpeople are '…those whose lives are deemed worthless, expendable in the pursuit of power and commercial gain' (p2)

5. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/01/17/rise-of-the-machines-economist_n_4616931.html

6. Civilian deaths according to 'Iraq Body Count' – 125,649-140,223

Lancet gave total number of violent deaths as 601,027. Most of these would be civilian deaths.

Taking the lower figure of 125,649 and relating it to the number US and Coalition military deaths, 4804 (till 2012) we get approximately 26.

7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanislav_Petrov

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