

## Technology and cultural shapeshifting

By George F. Simons ([www.diversophy.com](http://www.diversophy.com))

We may debate whether globalization *is* Americanization, or whether Americanization is only a prototype of the increasing “homogenization of culture” and “the impact of international financial flows on domestic economies.”<sup>1</sup> Less debatable is that cultures are becoming like rain forests, aggressively clear cut by technology.

Even large and powerful cultures struggle to resist English language dominance of the Internet and its takeover of business and professional communication. France displays the staunchest *résistance* in the West, but she is not alone. It is easy to stereotype the United States as a cultural mudslide and to fantasize that it is conspiring to dominate the world. It is not so easy to understand and manage the cultural forces involved in technology and globalization.

This resistance is not simply to language or how we communicate interculturally. It is to the social and political values being transmitted by electronic discourse. “The governments of France and Germany are taking steps to address the [social] inequities fostered by their own embrace of the American model,” observes Mother Jones magazine.<sup>2</sup> Language is but the cultural Trojan horse.

Activists (via email, news groups and websites) love to demonize corporate giants as despoilers of culture. How convenient if Microsoft or AOL had the equivalent of a major oil spill! But, is it not more reasonable to see these corporate shapers of culture as well as the movements against them as themselves equally shaped by the market culture and technology in which they float?

Cultures reinforce and empower themselves with how they use technology even as they are being dominated by it. Opposition to new technology could not succeed without it. Greenpeace, for example, is as well wired as many of its corporate and government targets. Recently in a province of Mexico, an opposition movement successfully carried out its political campaign by cell phones when demonstrators barricaded their offices.<sup>3</sup>

### Distortion or development?

The Internet is, in fact, a democracy that enables cultures to preserve and propagate themselves. Regional cultures are celebrated. The Celtic and Breton and Hawaiian languages are resurrected, shared and taught. Separatists are empowered. For better or for worse, cultures subtly transform themselves as they enter the thinking patterns of the new media.

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<sup>1</sup> Fields Wicker-Muirin, as quoted in “The Risk of Losing Something Big,” *Newsweek*, Special Edition, December 1999-January 2000, page 65

<sup>2</sup> [Motherjones.com/mother\\_jones/JF99/Americanization.html](http://Motherjones.com/mother_jones/JF99/Americanization.html)

<sup>3</sup> As reported by Carlos Gil

We will see fascinating shifts with far-reaching consequences. Where women's marketplace roles are more restricted than in North America and Europe, but where money and resources are available, as in some Islamic countries and Japan, Internet access is likely to produce more and more "cyberbusinesswomen." In Saudi Arabia close to 30 Internet service providers have special portals for women. Many cultural institutions may not shed their names but their reality will be radically transformed. Is this hi-tech purdah?

### **Shifting culture through mobility**

Reared in a time when people talking to themselves were seen as a few cards short of a full deck, I still start at seeing a person walking alone and talking animatedly, until I spot the handset or the button in the ear. When we talk about the challenges raised by technology to culture we tend to focus on the impact of computers, the Internet and electronic commerce. I suggest that the real fusion cuisine for cultural digestion will arise from the *mobility* of technology. Walk down the street, dine out, or ride a bus or train, and this mobility is in your face.

Recently in Paris, I experienced a new culture shock from this mobility. Staying in an out-of-town friend's apartment, I was dismayed to find no telephone. My friend was neither a recluse nor a Luddite. With two GSM phones and a laptop with a cellular Internet connection, his connectivity had traveled to Argentina with him. He is not alone. The number of people accessible primarily and sometimes only by mobile technology increases daily.

What U.S. Americans view as "underdeveloped" countries are not in short supply of mobile phones, either. More often than not these are "higher context" cultures that prefer phones to E-mail because phones cost less than computers and provide a more personal connection. On the other hand, Finland leads the world in per capita usage of cellars--not simply because Nokia does good marketing. (It does!) Rather, Finns insist that the cellular fits their solitary mentality. Lots of Finns prefer phoning to direct contact. Children in the same schoolyards phone each other regularly. What lowers face-to-face intensity for Finns increases contact in Egypt and Nigeria. Same technology; different cultural function and impact.

### **Shifting into polychronic style**

Handsets are developing Internet screens. This will make the Internet into an "Evernet." We will be effortlessly and wirelessly online whenever we wish, from wherever we chose. Currently many of us sit at a computer much of the time. This is not the future. The enhanced phone will replace the laptop at meetings.

While signs prohibit using mobile phones in certain places and there are cellular-free zones in trains, I predict that Miss Manners will lose this struggle. Cellular interruptions,

that we have tried to exclude from meetings ("Turn it off please!"), will triumph in the end, and become part of what we are doing rather than interrupting it. In Northern Europe many meetings and seminars already feel like polychronic events, more like Athens than Amsterdam. "Buy Nokia, sell AT&T," my stockbroker advised me yesterday.

Will people from polychronic backgrounds enjoy competitive advantage in adapting to this more oral, phone culture? Will the polychronic communicator displace the linear participant in meetings? Many of us already multitask, running several programs simultaneously on our laptops. We are less linear than we used to be.

### **Blurring the dominance?**

Ironically, Europe's greatest ally in resisting Net culture has been the artificially high price of hardware, software and telecommunication. This has "cost" Europe an entire generation of cybercomepetent children. Transforming mobile phones into Net appliances may start to shift the dominance, long before European telecoms and high-tech suppliers abandon their greedlock on cyberware. While Europeans lag behind North Americans on the Net, they surpass them in mobile phone use. Will they gain the advantage by using handheld devices to connect to data services and the Net. This will also encourage globalization, perhaps in a less "American" form rather than hinder it.

Instant and ubiquitous electronic communication contributes to a *blur* in which "work and home become one; consumers sell and sellers buy; workers become entrepreneurs selling their skills temporarily to the highest bidder and then moving on; competitors cooperate."<sup>4</sup> (See: Davis, Stanley M., et al., *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*). Speed and mobility also blur cultural contexts and cultural values as we have see and interpret them. This is culture shift of the highest order and suggests a very different future for how we think of and do intercultural work.

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<sup>4</sup> See: Davis, Stanley M., et al., *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*