

TELECTRONICS AND CULTURE

I have a vision of the world ten years hence, that is part sociology, part science fiction, and part nightmare.

The world will be essentially controlled by individuals who have three characteristics: they have an Internet address and/or Web site; they possess a cellular telephone; they understand English well as a first, second, or third language. This new ruling class will be concentrated in the nations of the North, but members will also be found in Nairobi, Buenos Aires, Bombay, Singapore, Jakarta, Caracas, etc. They will travel easily from continent to continent by jet; communicate readily in English over Internet; have instantaneous access to vast information resources; make financial transactions from Hong Kong to Johannesburg to Lima to Singapore. They will also be the authors, inventors, agents, and actors of the emerging cosmopolitan, multicultural world culture inspired by and at times dominated by Disney, MTV (suitably adapted to Argentine or Maharastran conditions), McDonald's, Hollywood, Microsoft, Nestle, Philips, Sony, etc.

The other 99 percent of the world's population, including the innumerate, computer-illiterate underclasses of the North and the vast majority of peasants, farmers, and workers in the South, will be gently ruled by the one percent -- with minimal physical coercion, much cultural influence, constant selling of consumer desires, and an electronic culture of satellite TV, World Cup soccer, MTV, jeans, locally-adapted rock, and at the high culture level, the "three tenors" at the Baths of Caracalla.

As a small window on these large issues, I am interested in what is technically called "software localization". This is the process of adapting software written in one country (almost always the United States) to the language and culture of another. Most interesting is that, at present, the economic and cultural pressures are away from localization and toward the adoption of English as the standard, North American (Microsoft/Intel) software-hardware as the medium; and English-language Net/Web as the carrier.

Can there be an alternative vision? Could the new electronic media of information and communication be used to strengthen and deepen local cultures? Could localization occur in any context other than a fundamentalist, tribal, or "Iranian" context? Is the "new global culture" really a culture at all? Or is it, as one localizer put it, "only an interface"? How can the world preserve its complexity, richness, and variety when faced with powerful forces for multinationalization, globalization, and, cultural homogenization?

The only answer of which I am certain is that the outcome will not depend on the technology, but on political and cultural will.

Kenneth Keniston
March 21, 1997

Kenneth Keniston, D.Phil.
Andrew Mellon Professor of Human Development
Director of Projects
Program in Science, Technology, and Society
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue / Room E51-163
Cambridge, MA 02139 - USA

3:13

24.03.97 15:02