

## *Is technology always good for us?*

The problem with you,” boomed the voice from the audience at a conference last week, “is that you are a technology evangelist – you can not envisage it ever causing problems!” And I had to admit to being surprised and a little bit stunned by such a comment. It was, however, probably not completely unexpected. I had finished an hour and a half’s tirade about the changes that will be seen over the next 10 years with a challenge to all in the audience as to whether they were going to take their organisations into the new technological era – or die (I saw, I assured them, only those two options!) In the ensuing silence – they were obvious thinking about the challenge – a voice was heard from the back of the room, “I believe, I believe” it had said....

So, really, I deserved the question! And it started me thinking. The Information Age has allowed us to transfer more and more information over greater distances in less and less time. It has allowed us to communicate effortlessly across boundaries. I recently asked a workshop what was the most common language in the world. “English” said one, “No,” added another, “it must be Chinese!” “Wrong”, I replied, “it is actually 101010 Binary!” More words are transmitted every day over computer networks than humans have communicated by other means since the dawning of time.

And that could be the problem. I was recently at a conference that was addressed by a well know TV journalist. She told the story of being in the desert under war conditions and her newspaper cameraman colleague took a picture of a missile being launched. He checked it on the back of his digital camera, loaded it into a computer and fired it, via satellite, to the newsroom in London. “Hold the front page” screamed the picture editor as he cropped the image, and the picture was rolling on the presses in London 23 seconds *before* the missile actually hit its target!

Is there any need for such speed? Just because it can be done does not necessarily mean that it should be done.

It brought to mind the icon picture of the Vietnam War – the young girl running naked from the napalm attack. That picture took over 15 days to be processed using wet chemistry and traverse the world on a series of aeroplane hops – but it lost not of its poignancy for the delay. Could the speed of the information age be causing problems?

Indeed it does. In times of old, journalists encamped near the war, sometimes in comfortable surroundings. They would make an excursion to the theatre of war, gathered information and return to their base. The facts would then be pondered, exchanged, discussed and deliberated upon. The final piece was crafted, revised and polished. Only at that time would the difficult

part be undertaken – the transmission back to the newspaper. Originally by post or telegraph, more recently by telephone, as the text was dictated to the newsroom stenographer, or Fax.

Today journalists are living on the front line of the war, in amongst the troops and filing copy instantly from their laptops via satellite to the newsroom. I was not aware of anyone commenting let alone questioning that the TV journalists in the Afghanistan campaign were sending back video reports from the war zone using portable video-phones. These were individuals working alone – no sound, lighting and camera crews in the Afghanistan mountains. When the troops were ordered not to enter the city of Kabul – the journalists strolled into town ahead of the military looking for the next scoop story!

Everything has become such a rush that they are not eating, washing or resting enough. I was shocked to hear how many journalists were killed during the Bosnian crisis, just because they “got in the way” of a war whilst jadedly looking for the next story. I was taken aback during the Gulf War to hear journalists, who were on the hotel roof in the middle of Baghdad, describe a Cruise missile flying along the road below them and turning right at the traffic lights!

I recall “Stomin’ Norman” the commander in chief of the military forces in that war being asked at a news briefing “How do you know what is happening at the Front Line?” and he calmly replied with a ironic smile, “I watch CNN just like Sadam Hussein does!”

Personally, I do not want someone to risk their life just to bring me a news story a few hours earlier. Maybe we should look seriously at tempering the possibilities of the Information Age with some realism about the need for speedy information. Maybe technology is not always beneficial.