

FUTUREtakes

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From the Desk of Tim Mack, President, World Future Society



I get asked an amazing number of questions as President of the Society, and I was asked recently to speculate on what the world would do without the Internet. While free floating thought experiments are often a part of disciplines like science fiction, I am more comfortable with more probable futures and I decided to take a less fantastic tact in answering the question. The most interesting part of such an answer is the energetic discussions it might stir up and I would be very interested in hearing from anyone reading this who has an opinion on this matter – or much more interesting, thinks I am completely wrong about the matters I discuss below. Get back to me anytime at tmack@wfs.org

The loss of the Internet for days, weeks or permanently would mean more than just an end to annoying spam and being cut off from the ideal way to settle arguments in bars. The ongoing explosion of virtual Internet business services of all sorts, accounting, payroll, and even sales would come to a halt, and so would many companies. Customer services could still be handled by phone, except where the phone system was Internet-based. Much more severely affected would be complex project management between companies, especially those projects based on shared CAD (computer assisted design) files or even shared PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) files. On the other side of the discussion, however, only about 20% of those asked in an Internet poll on potential systemic failures thought that loss of Internet corporate communications and collaboration would be catastrophic and 10% thought it would have no effect at all.

Of course, there are lots of jokes to be made about the loss of Internet, like “people would read books again...or talk to their family!” But the changes we have seen in Western culture are the result of wide-ranging forces (including cultural and economic factors), and not the impact of a single technology. However, the permanent-loss fantasy is just that, a fantasy (barring a larger global catastrophe) in light of past responses to global cable failures where the outage was a day or two and no more (even on transoceanic cables). The reason for this is that the Internet has become indispensable to most of its users, both for business systems and for personal information. The users of any computer-dependent system such as the Internet should have backup capability, and a recent poll showed in fact 70% of businesses do have an Internet failure response plan, where any gap in service would be largely bridged or at least minimized. New forms of e-government, critical research and modeling (for example climate change data) and an incredible evolving social/enterprise network are changing the nature of the globe and perhaps even the future of the nation state. To paraphrase Tom Friedman, it has brought us all together in ways we still don't fully understand, but will change the way that humans learn and create worldwide. It is not likely the human race would be willing to go back to those earlier times before the Internet for very long.

What this thought exercise did make clear to me is how important dialogue and vigorous debate are to good futures work, especially when done on a global scale. Putting out important questions and getting thoughtful answers are essential undertakings. Insight can come to experienced analysts, but no one individual understands all the nuances and cross-impact implications of a trend or set of circumstances. Accordingly, the cooperative organizational network has become one of the more powerful players in the global economy, whether for governments, nonprofits such as NGOs, or private sector corporations. One viable definition of such networks in a business setting is “a learning community dedicated to improving business outcomes by making the most out of ‘cooperative’ advantage.” And much the same appears to be true for other types of organizations as well – i.e. an effective way of gathering and utilizing enough intelligence and resources to meet organizational goals, using cooperative versus competitive methods. This development has largely been driven by the emergence of the global marketplace – the result of enabling technology. While it is now technically possible for any organization to expand its presence and influence globally, very few have the resources or experience to accomplish that effectively. Accordingly, organizations of all types are looking to define their unique strengths and turning to cooperative partners for the information, technology and human capital resources to fill in the gaps. This is most often happening in areas like research and development, where technology advancement often outstrips the ability to transform these advances into practical applications...and therefore joint programs prove essential. Other areas include communications strategies in new geographic or social arenas where the cultural nuances are not fully understood...and especially where language translation is required. When a marketing program or a public affairs campaign depends for its success on persuasive shades of meaning, local assistance is critical.

Global project management is another arena where cooperation trumps competition again and again, and the explosive growth of organizations like the Project Management Institute provides testimony to its value. But it is the indirect political and cultural implications of the growth of cooperative networking that may have the most far-reaching implications. While no one seriously imagines that the nation-state model will be gone tomorrow, the success of international hybrid organizations (with business, government and NGO elements) will do much to extend global fabrics of mutual interest and mutual understanding. While change always brings challenges in its wake, this set of changes seems to bring hope as well.