

A Time Of Turbulence- The Digital Interregnum

(September 2002)

The human capability to categorise and order surely lies at the heart of our capacity and desire to make sense and establish notions of explanation for our world. Perhaps the Victorians with their desire to collect, classify and so tame and explain their environment were the most profound example of this very human need. However I suspect from early consciousness we have been segmenting the flow of the world into 'handy bite size chunks', thus allowing us to assemble, disassemble and reassemble our experiences into more manageable accounts. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in our capacity to segment and by applying labels and names, to order sequences of events over time, thus we conjuring into some apparently substantial existence ages or epochs such as the Renaissance or the Age of Enlightenment. More recently we have seen the Age of Steam, today we live in the Digital Age, having recently, I suppose, passed through the Analogue Age. Such thinking can of course be helpful. However over simplification may also be damaging particularly when applied without the ordering benefit of hindsight. Today do we live in the Digital Age? What might we mean by this term?

To state one is living in the Digital Age carries with it ideas of passage or transference, in this case from analogue technologies to digital. There is obviously great truth in this statement, the PC has arrived, our mobile phones are digital and despite critical comment digital television will surely soon be in the majority over analogue television. Whether this is sufficient for us to truly state that we have 'arrived' in this age is however almost certainly suspect. Indeed this idea is probably profoundly damaging. At the level of technology we may indeed in some sense have arrived, but technology itself is of little value without users and their ensuing behaviours. Many of the recent disappointments relating to technology adoption in both the Internet and Mobile arenas can be interpreted as overemphasising the capacity of digital technology to be useful and expressive of real peoples lives.

At this point we might pause to ask ourselves when did this Digital Age begin? Is it to be marked by the rapid spread of the PC from the early 80s onwards or some other significant moment such as the birth of the Internet? If we take the PC as the significant moment on the basis that it ensures we have been 'in' the age for the longest period of time, a significant and often overlooked demographic fact becomes immediately apparent. Only 26% of the UK population has been born post the introduction of the PC (and this is the most optimistic reading). In other words for only this 26% is 'digital behaviour' or familiarity, a natural behavioural mode in as much as only this group has grown up surrounded by and using the artefacts of the Digital Age. For the rest of us, some nearly three quarters of the population, digital behaviours represent adaptations or modifications to pre-digital modes. For example to move from passively sitting in front of ones television to ordering clothes and banking on the same screen is a pretty big leap. Human behaviours neither adapt uniformly or necessarily along predictable lines or patterns, indeed it is our very unpredictability or 'infinite variety' that makes us human. Our adaptive rates will vary for many reasons including old chestnuts such as age and gender. However of more significance is likely to be life style, work and exposure to technologies and media. Indeed even the act of having children can change the pace of change and form of behaviours toward technology.

Looking back over the events of the last two or three years leads us to think of a further ordering of time. Perhaps it is now more helpful to sustain the optimism of the Digital Age but to see ourselves as in the processes of behavioural change, adaptation to our own technological creations (they, of course, will be further adapted by our actual usage), living in turbulent,

uncertain times where some apparently 'winning' technologies/uses may fail and others may almost spontaneously emerge. A time that may become easier to predict as adaptive behaviours become more naturalised, however not an Age rather an Interregnum.