

Beyond the Information Age: In Search of New Images of the Future

By Wayne Visser

As the new millennium looms large on the horizon, speculation about humanity's recent progress are becoming ever more frequent. Even more so are whisperings that humanity might be teetering on the threshold of a new phase in its evolutionary development. Not surprisingly, a search for new images and metaphors to serve as positive visions for the future has begun in earnest. The purpose of this article is to explore some of the more recent of these images to emerge from the outstanding research and imagination of a few pioneering individuals.

A good place to start is to get the Industrial Age well behind us, for it has been a crumbling image for at least the past four decades. In its wake however, we find the explosive rise of a revolutionary successor. I am of course referring to the Information Age. Notable authors on this subject include Peter Drucker, Robert Theobald, Daniel Bell, Yoneji Masuda, John Naisbitt, Alvin Toffler and Peter Russell.

Few people today would disagree that the Information Age represents the new and popular metaphor of our time. However, the question for the future is, does this fashionable image have the energy and endurance to carry humanity into the 21st century and beyond? In reply, many say: "Yes, for it has yet to fully transform society", and they cite visions of an emerging global society, decentralized, yet intimately linked by the wonders of information technology. Others, though less prescriptive and fewer in number, say: "No, society is already reaching beyond the Information Age and a new vision is needed which will help clarify and call forth the next phase of our collective development". It is the latter call for a new vision which I wish to pursue further in this article.

One of the pioneering voices in this regard is American futurist Hazel Henderson. In her recent book *Paradigms in Progress*, she states her position unequivocally: "The Information Age is no longer an adequate image for the present, let alone a guide to the future. It still focuses on hardware technologies, mass production and economic models of efficiency and competition, and is more an extension of industrial ideas and methods than a new stage in human development."

Henderson's suggested alternative is what she calls a "restructuring of the exploding Information Age" into an emerging new Age of Light. She bases this image on evidence of a growing realisation by humanity of its dependence on nature, and more precisely, on light from the sun. Beyond the mushrooming ecological movement and the call for sustainable development, she draws support for her theory from the recent phenomenal growth in leading edge technologies which do nothing more than attempt to mimic the ingenuity of Nature. Examples of these include:

- Artificial intelligence technologies: Expert systems, hypertext, associative learning programs, multi-processor parallel computers, neural net computers.
- Biotechnologies: Gene splicing, molecular engineering, cloning, plant hybridization, bio-remediation, immunology, gene machines, nano technologies.
- Energy technologies: Photovoltaic cells, fusion reactors, biomass converters, membrane technologies, molecular assemblers, synthetic photosynthesis.
- Lightwave technologies (phototronics): Fibre optics, optical scanners, lasers, holography, optical computers, imaging technologies, solar technologies.

Henderson explains her conception of the Age of Light even further, however, and suggests that it includes a symbolic interpretation, namely the "flowering of our consciousness in a new Age of Enlightenment". This idea of Henderson's dovetails nicely with the work of Peter Russell, author of the ground-breaking book *The Awakening Earth*. He draws the following conclusions from his research: "Rapid as the growth of the information industry is (with the number of people employed in the industry doubling every six years by 1980), it may still not be the fastest growing area of human activity. There are indications that the movement towards the transformation of

consciousness (i.e. self-development and inner growth) is growing even faster. The number of people involved in this area seems to be doubling every four years or so (by 1980) If the growth of interest continues to swell, so will the number of people, and we may reach a point, possibly sometime early next century, when the employment curve for the "consciousness processing" will overtake that of information processing. The evolution of human consciousness will then have shifted from the Information Age into the Consciousness Age".

The implications of a transition to the Consciousness Age are outlined by Russell in a scenario which he calls the High Synergy Society. He describes some of the likely consequences of such a shift in the following terms:

- No limits to growth: Personal and spiritual growth become as important, if not more important, than growth defined in material terms.
- Unemployment revalued: The reduced need for formal employment and a growing use of time for inner development (self-actualisation).
- Healthy, holy and whole: A movement towards holistic health practices and a corresponding decrease in physiological stress and illness.
- Left and right: A shift towards greater synthesis of right-brain (feminine/yin) and left-brain (masculine/yang) qualities.
- Synchronicity rules: An increase in the occurrence of meaningful coincidences at an individual and collective (social super-organism) level.
- ESP and the miraculous: An increase in phenomena such as telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition.

Certainly positive, transformative visions of the future - beyond the Information Age - are not limited to those of Henderson and Russell. Others may be found in the writings of Marilyn Ferguson, Fritjof Capra, Francis Kinsman and Willis Harman, to mention but a few. The purpose of the article has merely been to draw attention to the importance of identifying and working with these "post-industrial" guiding images and thereby creating a better future for all life on Earth. After all, we do, literally, create our future, limited only by the boundaries of our imagination.

Article reference

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