

Virtual geography and the 'academic' question of the university

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A relatively thinly populated country, with well developed means of communication, has a denser population than a more numerous populated country, with a badly developed means of communication; and in this sense the Northern States of the American Union, for instance, are more thickly populated than India (Karl Marx).

[Mark Poster (1990). *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*. Cambridge, U.K: Polity Press].

The question now asked by the professionalist student, the State, or institutions of higher education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?' . . . This creates the prospect for a vast market for competence in operational skills.

[Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984). *The postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature*, 10. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 14, 53]

In *The Network Society*, Castells (1997) argues that the almost instantaneous flow and exchange of information, and capital and cultural communication now characterize the global economy. These flows organize and shape both consumption and production, including education. The networks within which the flows occur themselves reflect and constitute distinctive cultures. Both they and the information they distribute are largely outside regulation by the nation state. The growth of a global economy in conjunction with the new telecommunications and computer networks that span the world has also profoundly reconfigured institutions fundamental to processes of governance and accountability in the modern state. State sovereignty, nation-based citizenship, the institutional apparatus in charge of regulating the economy, such as central banks and monetary policies - all of these institutions are being destabilized and even transformed as a result of globalization and the new technologies. Since control of education is a feature of state governance, this is a matter of state security and, for this reason, will not be left entirely in the purview of educationalists. While Castells (1997) does not believe it is the case, such characterisations hint at the idea of globalisation as inevitable and progressive.

Concepts such as education are problematic, however, in that they depend, in part, on how they are interpreted under modern technologically mediated conditions. And to the extent that technological change is proceeding beyond the capacity of many of society's institutions to interpret and adjust, it is an inadequate philosophical move to attempt to explain education under one domain (e.g., within a government policy discourse). There is therefore, "considerable importance to be attached to placing discussion of technologies on an agenda for critical debate especially about how they will, and ought to, impact on education . . . and also on the very process of policy formation" (Peters and Roberts, 1998: 29). This critical debate includes challenges to the university and consequently its future.

Under globalisation, there now appears to be a philosophical hegemony with the spread of western legal concepts of authorship and property that define the legal arena in the West.

Since there is no global law that is universally binding, this represents the privatization of law when, for example, two parties make legally binding agreements to govern their future relations outside the jurisdiction of any particular nation state. The third component in the new geography of power is the growing importance of electronic space where both the public and private sectors of nation states as well as trans-national corporations are challenged by questions of control. The issue of control extends beyond territorial problems into questions about digitization or electronic markets. Because of technology the foreign currency market for example, is of the order of magnitude that central banks of nation states are rendered incapable of exercising the influence on the exchange rates they are expected to wield.

Virtual geography

If we stop for a moment and think about it, we could say that in this networked world, we have two distinct sets of experiences. The first is our experience of familiar places and activities; the places where we sleep, the places where we eat, the places where we work, and the places where we are in all the in between times. From these places we acquire what McKenzie Wark -- an academic and journalist from Macquarrie University, in his book *Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events* -- calls a 'geography of experience'. And this has probably been the case since the dawn of time. The second equally familiar, but new, terrain is the one created by the electronic communications technology; the television, the telephone, and the Internet, to name a few, all of which create almost instantaneous global experiences for us. These globalised and varied experiences Wark calls vectors (forces that act together from various angles to produce a direction) that change our understandings of the world even as we receive them. As the vectors impinge on us, we are changed and so are they - the vectors interact with us, and one result is a change in our perceptions. Wark calls these changed perceptions, 'telesthesia', a perception at a distance. It is a considerably different perception from that created when we experience things up close. Telesthesia is our 'virtual geography', the experience that doubles, troubles, and generally permeates our experiences of our familiar local space. We are susceptible to these vectors because as Wark says 'we no longer have roots, we have aeriels'. In other words, these global vectors change our immediate world through changing the ways in which we see what we are familiar with - the familiar has been made unfamiliar.

However, the world of virtual geography also acts independently of our local world. The horror of conflicts and wars, streaming into our living rooms every night, become disempowering as we experience its horror and our inability to either understand it or do anything about it. It is, at the same time, a spectacle; our world becomes a virtual theatre of cruelty. Both of these effects interact to give further experiences. These events, now global spectacles, would once have been isolated and under the jurisdiction of some expert local knowledges and politics. Nowadays, these events have escaped this type of jurisdiction and instead are displayed on screen like a movie. The media technology -- whether by design or accident -- display images that are juxtaposed with each other in ways in which was previously impossible, thereby creating new images and impressions. These new images alter our perceptions, enter the realm of politics and economics, and have real effects. The social theorist, Timothy Luke, calls these new spaces 'glocalities' - spaces in which there is mutual interpenetration by both the global and the local and it is

difficult to analyse which is which. And from now on, we may never again be able to separate them.

Although there have been many explanations for the conflicts and wars, no explanation is regarded as the definitive one. From this we can say that neither the media, nor ourselves in the local, can adequately explain the horror. One thing the media often focus on, however, is the plight of suffering children in the conflict zones. These images of children certainly promoted the media globally as they captured our imagination and our immediate ways in which we experience the world. The images may also, perhaps, have helped 'us' to cope with the horrors by keeping alive the belief that there was still the hope to be had through activity, in the midst of such incoherence. After all, as they say, 'you have to do something!' As a result, all around the world money is raised and children are moved to various care centres in parts of that world or televised at feeding stations (often covered in flies).

As well as having devastatingly real effects in the local site, these types of events are clearly media ones. Such an event could not have happened 100 years ago; it is the media that has created the stage upon which to display the altruism towards the children. It is also a stage on which the war itself may very well have been affected in the local. These types of events are very complex; we certainly do not understand them in any masterful way. The problem is that their theorisation does not belong exclusively to any current academic discipline because no thing in the events can be taken as an exclusive object of study; the complexity is too great. And neither does the theorisation belong to interdisciplinary studies, which still take for granted the traditional 'field management' and contents itself with wandering along its own imaginary boundaries. The virtual geography of this event, it seems, is unavailable for (inter)disciplinary study because it is outside the boundaries of the disciplines. As Wark suggests 'we are faced today, then, with the requirement for a critical cultural intervention that is increasingly global in scope, and exceeds the boundaries of any particular national culture and hegemonic class order'.

Even so, he suggests, we must start somewhere and that is with our everyday experience. But this experience is not particularly local or even exclusively 'ours' any longer; the vectors of the virtual geography put paid to that. Now our research, our interventions, and our acts of resistance, must necessarily arise at the conjunction of the globalised information flows and the local sites. Under these flows of information and their hyper-textual, hyperreality, we are subject to multiple discourses that, in many cases, shatter the older view that we can identify exclusively, or in large part, with only one group, such as the working class and its political organisation, the 'industrial' union. That is not to say that we cannot identify at times with a union position, or that unions have no just cause. It is more that unions are historical constructions with certain types of political commitments that are diametrically opposed to their identifiable and historical enemy, the 'boss class'. Although we may find our interests represented partly by a show of solidarity under the banner of a union, most people nowadays are also situated at the intersection of the many other forces outlined earlier in this article, including owning shares and/or being bosses themselves, and identifying with numerous other groups and activities. In addition, as this article has been at pains to point out, virtual geography indicates that, among the many sensibilities that are available in the world today, today the experience of union membership solidarity is but one.

Current developments in universities

In recent months in Australian universities, unions have been involved with their Vice-Chancellors in contests over academic staff work conditions. Union members have been asked by their own organisation to suspend what amounts to their experience under virtual geography and adopt a much simpler dualistic view of the world - a world consisting of us (the union), and them (the management). But on the basis of virtual geography, a call for a full-blown commitment to a dualistic worldview has lost much of its persuasive power. That is not to say there have not been, and will not continue to be, displays of anger and interruptions to work, or that the union does not have a just case. Neither is it to say that the managerial adversarial and diversionary tactics (under the federalist policies that are underpinned by economic rationalist philosophy to reduce the State) are not unjust, and so on, it is just that the rationale for a single minded commitment has been undermined though much more powerful forces.

There is a real problem but it will not be addressed adequately by simple dualistic adversarial posturing. I think that the parties to the disputes ought to re-theorise their positions through research into the actual effects of virtual geography, otherwise, with the 'authentic' lack of authenticity on both sides that necessarily arises from the vast array of experiences under that very geography, we may, as they say, be merely rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

During the last ten years, Australian universities have become progressively more 'international' in focus, scope and strategy. The number of international students studying in Australia has risen to record levels, student and faculty exchanges have become more important activities for Australian institutions, and international activities of an entrepreneurial nature have assumed a significance far beyond that which could have been predicted a decade ago. Globalisation has characterised the latter part of the twentieth century and will continue into the twenty-first. A defining feature of globalisation is the way in which business operates: firms increasingly organise their activities on a global scale, forming production chains, including services inputs, that cross many countries and greatly increase global flows of trade and investment. Globalisation is not new, nor is it just an economic phenomenon: it has important political and social dimensions. It is driven by many factors, of which technology, the related mobility of people, goods and ideas, and a liberal trading environment are perhaps the most important. There is a danger in an increasingly global environment that both industrial unions and universities will become redundant; anachronisms in effect if they continue to cling to simplistic, dualistic, adversarial forms. Both the Unions and the Universities would claim that they have tried this means and it failed but the question remains: in a substantially change-oriented global context, or even a national, state or local one, have multiple points of view and power positions been taken into full account? Probably not. As in Australian law and politics, adversarial binary positioning and argument has a seriously limited capacity to get at the facts of the matter, let alone justice, truth or the human rights issues of it all.

Harvey (1989: 240) points out that technological developments in electronics have compressed traditional scientific notions of time and space that are the primary vehicles for coding and reproducing social relations. As a result, he argues, we are forced to alter quite radically the way in which we represent the world to each other and ourselves. In a more radical vein, Poster (1990, 1994) argues that in the postmodern age, the concepts of time and space have actually collapsed. Since our usual explanation of distance is through

Kantian categories of time and space, explanations such as those given by Harvey and Poster alter our concept of distance as a representation of the world. In fact, the removal of barriers of time and place is one of the stated aims of the Western Virtual University (1996: 2)ⁱ which is being established with the support of 18 Governors of the United States. An apposite example of the integration of the communications industry in education is the National Information Infrastructure Advisory Council (NIIAC)ⁱⁱ (1996: 1) which includes "private industry; state and local governments; community, public interest, education, and labour groups; creators and distributors of content; privacy and security advocates; and leading experts in NII-related fields". The report (NIIAC, 1996: 5) goes on to assert that there are "considerable unrealised benefits to education with the advent of information and information technology", although it does not elaborate who will benefit. The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Luke, 1996:1) claims to have proved "the potential of computer mediated communications in teaching university-level classes 'virtually' for both traditional students on campus . . . and elsewhere". Luke (1996: 9) says that the "Cyberschool is still largely experimental . . . [and it] may not meet all of the most promising expectations sometimes promised by them in theory".

Now, as globalisation proceeds apace, the media baron, Rupert Murdoch, has linked his *News International* company with the 18-member university network *Universitas 21* in a move designed to capture the major share of the rapidly growing global market for online higher educationⁱⁱⁱ. The *Universitas 21* network was incorporated as a company in London last year. Its 18 members are spread across 10 countries in Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. Murdoch recently announced that *News International* would set up a joint-venture company with *Universitas 21* through *News International's* London-based subsidiary, *TSL Education Ltd.* This venture company would begin offering custom-designed higher-education programs over the Internet next year. These would be aimed at college graduates who are already working, and would lead directly or indirectly to the awarding of degrees and diplomas by *Universitas 21*. Alan Gilbert, Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University and chairman of *Universitas 21* argues that individual campus brands or forms of pedagogy and their adaptation to distance education from face-to-face teaching is not the way e-education will go. As of March 31, *News International* had total assets of \$40-billion and total annual revenues of \$14-billion. The members of *Universitas 21* enroll about 500,000 students a year, employ some 44,000 scholars, and have a combined operating budget of almost \$9-billion.

Peters and Roberts (1999) argue that

with the advent of globalisation and the alleged decline of the nation state as the principle of economic and cultural organisation both the Kantian and Humboldtian conceptions have become problematic. Universities now function as one more bureaucratic subsystem among others harnessed in the service of the goal of national competitiveness in the global economy. . . . reduced to a technical ideal of performance within a discourse of 'excellence'.

They also note Wittrock's position that:

the nation-state and the university, can no longer take their continued existence for granted -- certainly not in the form in which they have appeared for over a century. . . . while there is no reason to expect the demand for higher education or scientific knowledge to diminish -- quite the contrary . . . such may well occur in a fashion that makes any discussion of the 'idea' of a university appear hopelessly antiquated (Peters and Roberts, 1999).

To the extent universities seek to increase external revenue sources, to develop closer links with industry and the university research base, and to demonstrate entrepreneurship through setting up science parks, spin-off firms, and business ventures, and contractual agreements, academic freedom will be diminished. There is a tension here. With the increasing use of electronic technology, academic freedom may derive from publishing on the Internet, which provides a 'free' space outside current institutional parameters. That, to some extent, affirms both technology and academic freedom. Academics inside the 'new' universities whose professional academic careers are based on publication, must at the same time conform to imposed managerial notions of quality that govern the level of remuneration increasingly provided under commercial contracts. And as the amount of remuneration derived from contracts increases, the space for freedom diminishes. Under that condition, academic freedom is less certain to be affirmed.

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ⁱ A Prospectus for the Western Virtual University (1996). [Http://www.westgov.org/smart/vu/wvuprorp.htm](http://www.westgov.org/smart/vu/wvuprorp.htm)

ⁱⁱ Common Ground: Fundamental Principles for the National Information Infrastructures. First Report of the Information Infrastructure Advisory Council March 1995. [Http://stargate.con-ed.howard.e...chives/commonground.htm#access](http://stargate.con-ed.howard.e...chives/commonground.htm#access).

ⁱⁱⁱ As of March 31, News International had total assets of \$40-billion and total annual revenues of \$14-billion. The members of Universitas 21 enroll about 500,000 students a

year, employ some 44,000 scholars, and have a combined operating budget of almost \$9-billion. Current members of Universitas 21 are: Albert-Ludwigs University Freiburg, Fudan University, Lund University, McGill University, National University of Singapore, University of Auckland, University of Birmingham, University of British Columbia, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of Hong Kong, University of Melbourne, University of Michigan, University of New South Wales, University of Nottingham, University of Peking, University of Queensland, University of Toronto