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Whither Communications?

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TECHNOLOGY

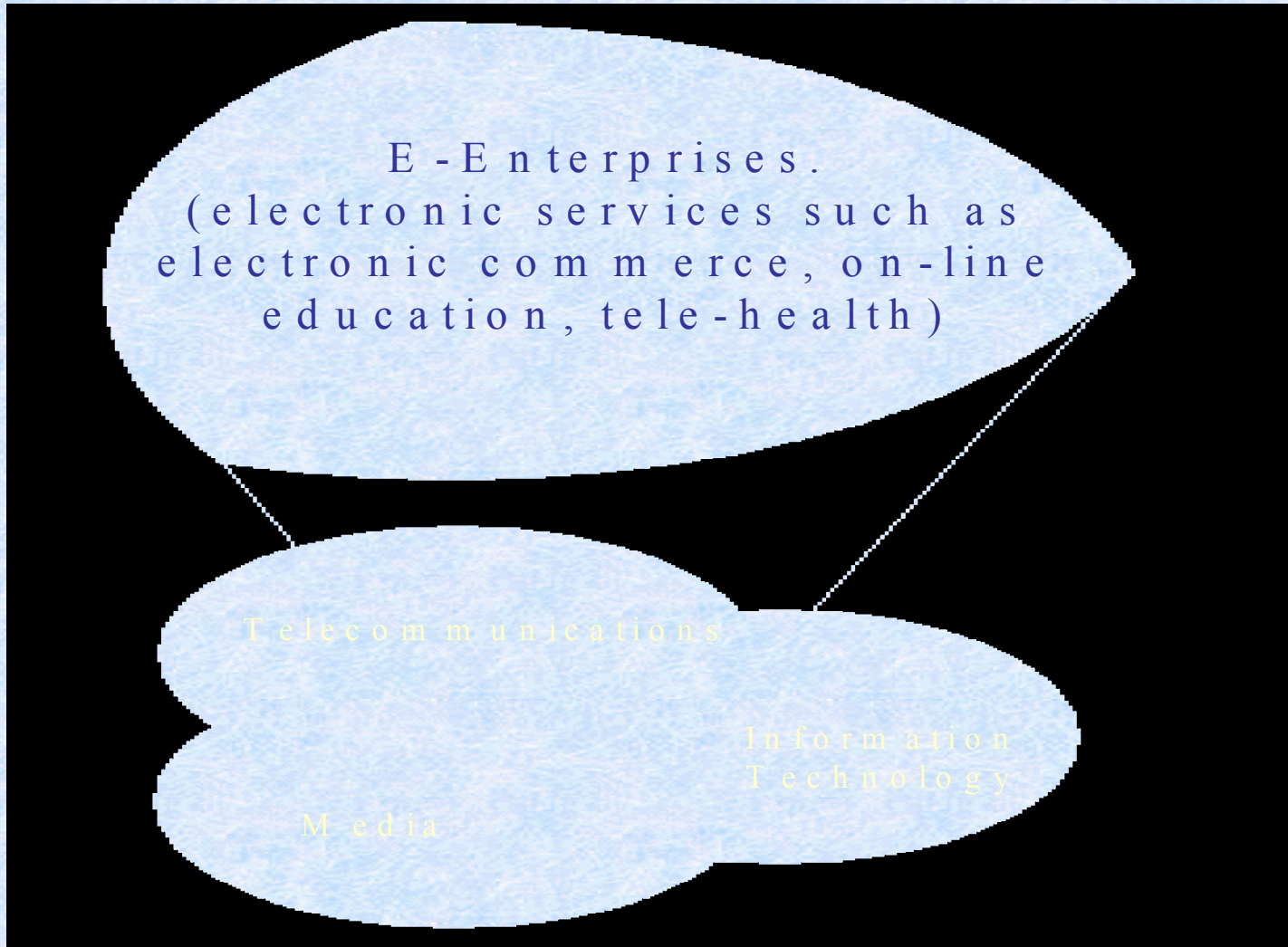# This presentation – in two principal parts

- How well is learning focused *about* communications technology?
  - Ten schools of thought about communications in society
- What do we know about *the user perspective* of the Internet and how might our understanding change in the future?
  - New kinds of research explorations

Propositions

- We have become obsessed with means and techniques in educational technology.
- We have limited participation in national communications policy formulation.
- We have little consensus about important research agendas in communications.
- We tend to offer limited learning of key conceptual frameworks about communications

3. Tertiary Convergence
(electronic enterprises based on 3 sectors)

E-Enterprises.
(electronic services such as electronic commerce, on-line education, tele-health)

Telecommunications

Information Technology

Media

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• Schools of thought:
1. network society: IT facilitates globalisation

- Nation state has 'lost its power, though not its influence.' (Castells)
- Advanced economies now compelled to join the 'global economic casino.' (Castells)
- IT facilitated new relations between economy, state and society in unprecedented global interdependence
- Growth of international policy making foru

  ie., G7, IMF, WTO, ITU
- New cultural interconnections ie., images, drugs, fashions, pollutants, beliefs flow across territorial boundaries
- See Manual Castells, Keniche Ohmae, Rupert Murdoch

2. No context: globalisation as an artificial concept

- Nations have historic and linguistic commonalities and some sense of shared identity
- Doubtful that the struggle for national identity/ nationhood will be eroded by global forces
- Communities are richly diverse and have ambiguous relationships to states
- New electronic global networks actually re-kindle traditional sources and forms of national life.
- National broadcasting still enjoys substantial audiences

See Anthony Smith, Will Hutton, JB Thompson

3. Revolution revisited : neo Marxists

- Globalisation facilitated a new resurgence of production and consumption around IT&T
- Political power being reconfigured around companies not countries
- Transnational media corporations have made significant inroads into national cultures and national identities
- Technological revolution has infiltrated our lives, increased our sense of isolation/ alienation and created new levels of routinisation and de-skilling.

See Nicholas Garnham, Kevin Robins and Frank Webster

4. The dries: economic rationalists

- Emerged partly from concerns in Western economies re growing levels of debt
- Belief in market fundamentalism
- Obsessed by by private incentives
- Best government is the least ie., Thatcherism
- Cut taxes to increase private incentives, accelerate privatisation and deregulation.
- Aspects of communications policy shifts from state subsidies re CSOs to user pays
- Shift away from democratic citizenship to elites

  See Henry Ergas, Michael Porter, Robert Albon

5. Dreamers : technological utopians

- Have a vision of an idealised society where we have all been liberated.
- Belief that 'information on tap' will lead to a dramatic improvement in the quality of life
- Grand benefits alleged - peace, prosperity, liberation
- Ignore power relations – 'just do it'
- Contribute little to resolving policy dilemmas
- Authors of big picture vision statements

See Tom Stonier, George Gilder, John Naisbett

6. Citizenship reborn: fresh start theorists

- New manifestations of democracy, citizenship and trade relations are emerging
- IT revolution will solve problems in new ways ie., concentration of ownership will be solved by de-massification of new media
- Internet is the new platform for electronic democracy
- Global trade flourishes via e business which eliminates distance as a disadvantage
  See Nicholas Negroponte, Mitchell Kapor, Jon Katz

7. I am … post modernists/cyber-culturalists

- The individual can re-evaluate and re-invent their sense of self
- Postulate death of the author – meaning of texts is in the eye of the beholder
- The Internet is a surfers paradise of non-sequential, non-linear expressionism
- Political control over the individual is now a declining force – little interest in policy

  See McKenzie Wark, Sherry Turkle, David Cox

8. It's fine, but… liberal pessimists

- Understand contemporary forces for change, see opportunities, but alarmed/ concerned about benefits for social policy
- Concerns about issues such as equity, access, rural disadvantage, gender barriers, privacy threats
- Strength of market fundamentalism and retreat of government means these social issues are largely ignored
- Tend to focus on problems rather than propose possible solutions
  See Barry Jones, Dale Spender, John Quiggen

9. Gung ho: technological determinists

- Implicit belief that science and technology can achieve anything
- Infrastructure comes first
- In communications:
  - in telecommunications - build the networks and they will come
  - in computing – users will always fill the expanding bandwidth
  - for the Internet – 'any to any' connectivity inevitable

  See Marshall McLuhan, Frances Cairncross, Al Gore

10. Users first : social constructionists

- Argue in principle that the fundamental question is not what the technologies are going to be like but what *we* are going to be like.
- Call for user based research in cultural and social contexts ie, work habits, banking, gambling and educational practices.
- Though the institutional trend in communications is towards convergence, many consumers are making choices in a highly <u>divergent</u> communications service environment
- Not only academic researchers but growing company investment ie usability work at Microsoft, Nokia

  See Don Norman, Supriya Singh, David Sless

Whither The Internet?

CRCSIT Partner Membership

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- That the interaction between users and smart Internet technologies will be through interfaces using speech and natural language conversation, gesture and other rich forms.
- The new system will be able to respond to user preferences for particular information and services via the Internet. Individualised information services will be constructed as personalised agents offered over the Net.

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- People will be able to access the Net from multiple devices with varying capability, providing services and functionality appropriate to the physical constraints of the device and the context of its use.

  Users will have active networks that are able to dynamically re-configure and execute software programs to provide network capability, traffic, billing and management services in a revolutionary way.

Putting user at the centre

- Need to shift from a supply driven paradigm to the understanding of demand
- To what extend do new communication technologies satisfy the *needs* of users?
- How do providers shift away from the commercial television model for audience research to explore new user based models for the Internet?
- What social investigations of learning contexts are educational technologists exploring?

User Bottlenecks

- Paradox of Internet usage in Australia- comparatively high rates of household access but overall poor transactional levels.
- Possible factors involved:
  - the vendor or service provision
  - personal and attitudinal characteristics of consumers
  - consumer interface issues
  - fulfilment problems
- Hypothesis – key bottleneck is **perceived lack of trust**

Transactional misconceptions

- Widespread hacking- ie., credit cards intercepted during transmission process and then widely used fraudulently.

- The onus is on the user/consumer in the case of fraudulent or incorrect transactions

- Internet banking involves a widespread use of credit card transactions

Polarisation of users – Group A

- Self confident – have assimilated the Net into their way of doing things.
- Clear sense that the Net is another choice of a communication platform
- Tried the Net for its various purposes.
- Neither blind to, or afraid of, risks involved in transactions
- Tended to be flexible, enterprising, able to embrace change

Polarisation of users – Group B

- See the Net as complex and threatening
- Usually only involved in rudimentary functions ie., e-mail
- Nightmarish visions
  - as 'a rapacious black hole'
  - as 'a vast spider's web'
- Tend to be conservative, change-averse and somewhat self conscious

Four Pleas – at least!

- That we widen our contexts of technological literacy
- That we put the learners at the centre of our design thinking and processes
- That we push for more investment into fundamental research into the social and behavioural contexts of learning
- That we participate much more prominently in communications policy debates