

Net Myths: Communication beyond Space and Time?

English abstract of
RAINER FISCHBACH
Mythos Netz: Kommunikation jenseits von Raum und Zeit
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Leading issues

The net and *networking* have become seemingly powerful phrases recently. Those who employ them often do not distinguish clearly between their various meanings, thereby producing a considerable amount of confusion: Do they speak about the internet—an artefact provided by human labour harnessing advanced technology—, about a web of social relations, or about a more abstract concept of connectedness seemingly applicable to all of nature and society? Or is it just loose metaphorical talk expressing vague feelings? This kind of confusion makes for much of the lure exerted by the phrases *net* and *networking*, respectively—a lure that not seldomly evokes a kind of enthusiasm remindful rather of religious movements like the Great Awakening than of technological projects based on hard facts and headed towards calculable economic utility.

The book is divided into four chapters, each devoted to one of the promises that are at the centre of all the net myths:

1. The promise to abolish time and space,
2. the promise to constitute a generic key to the understanding of the universe and further to provide a blueprint for the future of mankind,
3. the promise of future society being dematerialized, based on a new weightless economy centered on knowledge as the primary resource and productive force,
4. and as a consequence of the abolition of space and matter, the promise to eliminate the very reason of urban agglomerations and physical traffic.

The detailed assessment of these promises arrives at mainly negative conclusions. While conducting inquiries into the precise nature of networked infrastructures, into the analytical power of the network metaphor, into the nature of knowledge based labour and into the forces that shape urban agglomerations, the book discusses

extensively the works of authors relying heavily on the network metaphor and references to the mightiness of the internet. Among these are prestigious names like MANUEL CASTELLS, DAVID HARVEY, GEORGE GILDER, KEVIN KELLY, PAUL VIRILIO, MICHAEL HARDT and ANTONIO NEGRI.

The argumentation departs from the fundamental lemma that all technological means to overcome space do not abolish, but rather reconfigure it by inscribing it a new metrics: They redefine the meaning of being close or being distant. Because they do not shrink space uniformly but some distances more and others less they have a tendency to polarize and fragment space—a tendency enforced by the profit seeking nature of capital having been progressively imposed on the infrastructures of transport and communication during the recent two or three decades. Against this background, the inadequateness of notions like DAVID HARVEY's *space-time compression*, which assumes a uniform compression, becomes apparent.

Overview

The following paragraphs give a more detailed account of the four chapters.

1. *Old-style and new-style futurists*: Besides laying out the basic limitations of all technological attempts to overcome space, this chapter explores the dark downside of these attempts and puts net enthusiasm into a historical context. The promise to abolish space is not new. The net enthusiasts of today have their forerunners in the futurists of the early 20th century. But while these have been decidedly anti-religious and fully aware of the destructive implications of space-compressing technologies—including total war as their outmost consequence—net enthusiasts of today breed illusions of social harmony supported by proliferating pseudo-spiritual talk. At the core of this pseudo-spirituality is a tendency to view the internet—an artefact built, maintained and run by humans—as a daemon-like super-organism.
2. *Deceiving metaphors—phantastic legends*: The central purpose of this chapter is to develop a proper understanding of the various meanings of the term *net*. If not referring to a specific class of physical entities its use can only be metaphorical or modellistic. It doesn't constitute an ontological category. None of the features attributed to nets by authors like MANUEL CASTELLS: resilience, extendability, decentrality etc. are intrinsic of net-like entities or may be conferred from an abstract modellistic image to arbitrary objects of reference. Especially the Internet is—as many other infrastructures—far less decentralized and resilient than stated in the accounts of its history and characteristics given by many authors. The popular assumption shared by many of these that it was conceived and built as a central asset of a nuclear war-fighting capability is demonstrated to be pure phantasy.
3. *Vanishing points of capital flow*: The promise to abolish space by telecommunication rests critically on the assumption that all labour becomes manipulation of digital symbols, and, by the same token, dematerialized and independent of

location—at least as, what is still far from happening, telecommunication facilities become ubiquitous and universally accessible. The chapter shows that even knowledge labour is not reducible to symbol manipulation but dependent on physical facilities and to a large degree on the physical presence of the involved persons. While the volume of telecommunication is increasing, physical resource consumption, physical transport and pollution are expanding not less. Perceived trends of dematerialization are proven to derive from fallacious interpretations of economic statistics. The idea of a friction-less market associated with that of a networked knowledge society is based on a misunderstanding both of the nature of knowledge and the constituting mechanisms of markets as well. An economy based on a friction-less market would just break down.

4. *Logics of agglomeration—logics of fragmentation*: The chapter starts with the explication of seven fundamental laws governing networked infrastructures. Beyond imposing a strong economy of density on them, those laws still make dem natural monopolies. This means that providing telecommunication and transport services to urban agglomerations, and especially to the wealthy quarters of these, is far more cost-effective and, as a consequence if this is done by profit-seeking business, profitable than to dispersed customers in rural areas. Lacking public intervention aimed at their balanced development, transport and telecommunication infrastructures tend to deepen spatial polarization. The technological and economic forces driving infrastructure development interact with agglomeration externalities and the persisting dependence of most human activities on physical facilities, on an ever widening range of specialized services and on face-to-face interaction to make for the unabated attractiveness of urban agglomerations—a proposition matching empirical data much better than the announced dead of the city. But the polarizing nature of those forces will foster broader social and political tendencies to more inequality and bring about a more fragmented rather than a unified future world.