

C is for Convergence (and Communication, Content, and Competition)

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INTRODUCTION

I first met William Melody in the summer of 1986. He was interviewing me for the position of research associate with the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) Programme on Information and Communication Technologies (PICT) in the United Kingdom. Melody had arrived at the ESRC in 1985 from Simon Fraser University in Canada to direct PICT. I had left Canada in 1979, and had been working at SPRU – Science and Technology Policy Research at University of Sussex since 1980. SPRU was, and is still today, a large research institute. I had worked on many topics while at SPRU, including the measurement of technological competitiveness, technology and the domestic division of labour, the protection of intellectual property rights and technology transfer, but I had never undertaken any work on information technology (IT), as it was called at that time in SPRU. I fancied a change, so applied for the job of PICT research associate, to work with Melody in selecting and managing the six PICT centres. Before the interview, I did some reading and talked with some SPRU colleagues who did know about information technology and whose proposal had already been selected as one of the first three PICT centres.

My main questions were: what is so special about IT? Is it any different from other technologies with which I was more familiar, such as those for oil exploration or for domestic work? What challenges does it pose to understanding innovation, work and everyday life? What theoretical tools do we need to understand it? What questions does it raise for social theory?

I do not remember all of the answers, but one has stayed in my mind, perhaps because it is an answer to them all: convergence. Ian Miles, one of my SPRU colleagues, explained it in the following way.

New IT, often defined as the convergence of computing and telecom, is made possible by the increased power and reduced cost of information-processing via microelectronics. Modern computing and telecom ... treat data in digital form. This facilitates the process of convergence, as the same data can be processed by many devices and

media. Analysis of this potential is crucial to understanding IS [Information Society] (Miles 1988: 7).

I probably reproduced a form of this technicist definition of convergence during the interview in response to a question about why, even though I had no experience of doing research about information technology, I wanted to work with PICT. I must have done something right in the interview, however, as I was offered the job. Thus began a very steep learning curve.

Communicating Convergence

What I learned from Melody and others in PICT was that this technical view on convergence was rather partial and limited. Convergence could mean a great many other things, though it was not always defined by people who wrote about it. At the very least, convergence could also refer to the coming together of hardware and software, of mass communication and personal communication and of the policy instruments for controlling these technologies. Convergence was not only the technical merging of computing and telecom but also an economic and industrial restructuring of these two industries which hitherto had very distinct characteristics in terms of market structure, conduct and performance. It was hoped that the monopolistic powers of the large telecom companies would be challenged by their encounter with the more competitive environment of the computing industry. While Melody certainly made a major contribution to challenging the monopolistic position of AT&T, global market forces were too much even for him. The information and communication technology (ICT) industry remains characterised by oligopoly at the beginning of the 21st century.

I learned even more from Melody about convergence. This part of the story relates to the use of the C for communication in the PICT title. My former colleagues in SPRU such as Ian Miles and Christopher Freeman emphasised the technology and the potential of IT as a new techno-economic paradigm (Perez 1983), which would give rise to whole new sectors as well as affecting all other areas of economic activity. A new techno-economic paradigm alters relative costs of inputs and outputs and thus the conditions of production and distribution for both old and new products. It also involves the emergence of a new 'common sense', a new best-practice set of rules and customs for designers, engineers and managers which differs fundamentally from that of the previous paradigm.

Interesting and important as this is for understanding long-term economic changes, what Melody and some of my other new PICT colleagues pointed to was the content of the information and the importance of its communication. Not only

did a change in techno-economic paradigm encompass the production and use of microelectronics and telecom in a wide range of industries but it also stimulated a recognition of the importance of information and communication processes in economic and social life. Attention needed to be paid to the changing and growing role of information services: the emerging ones, which we called interactive or value added network services back in the 1980s; and the more traditional information services of the mass media, publishing, library, education and postal delivery.

While working with PICT I was also thrust into debates about the information society. For Daniel Bell (1973), one of the features of the ‘information society’ was indeed the centrality of information as an organising principle. While Melody was always the first to emphasise the importance of information in social and economic life, he reminded me that it had always been thus.

People working in long-established and well-settled sectors of society as education, libraries, printing, consultancy, administration, and the entire bureaucracies of every organisation in the world were suddenly reclassified as part of the information sector and transformed into pioneers in the progressive and futuristic information society (Melody 1996b: 313).

Melody introduced me to the complexities of understanding and measuring information as a commodity. Drawing on the work of Charles Read and the Information Technology Advisory Panel (ITAP) (1984) report, Melody was scathing in his critique of neo-classical economics for treating information as perfect and costless. Everything we know about institutions and the economy as a whole suggests otherwise, even if our conceptual tools for dealing with imperfect, and sometimes very costly, information were themselves not always adequate. Just because something is difficult to measure is not a reason for pretending that it is not there or does not need to be measured. One of the ambitious, cross-centre PICT projects was entitled Mapping and Measuring the Information Society.

A few years after both Melody and I had left PICT, I found myself teaching many of these ideas in the Department of Innovation Studies at the University of East London. In one of my courses, entitled, Technology, Information and Consumption, his presence was keenly felt. Translating these ideas about convergence for undergraduate consumption was often a challenge for both the students and me and of course the shifting and contested nature of the term convergence had to be addressed each and every time I taught the course. PICT had as part of its remit the training of junior researchers, but the ideas went beyond postgraduate and PhD training and were taken up in many undergraduate programmes.

I now find these ideas about convergence reappearing in my work, which examines the ways in which people interpret the advantages, disadvantages and uncertainties of particular health treatments. In this research, we recognise that people have access to multiple sources of information and thus it is important not to reify the new, the Internet (Henwood et al. 2001). We aim to analyse the significance of different media and sources of health information in the discursive production of 'risk narratives' as constructed by both producers and consumers of health information. Convergence helps us to understand the multiple media that people draw upon, the multimedia form of some of the new media and the relationship between content and medium.

My work with Melody was primarily about managing a large research programme. Nonetheless, I remember him best as a teacher. As Henry Adams (1907/1990) said, 'A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops'. Melody helped me to understand the complexity of convergence, which I have since passed on to my own students and which continues to inform my own research.