Cultures of Information:
Information and Transmission

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Birkbeck College London, June 2001

ABSTRACT

Information is not just abstract and ephemeral but is an intrinsic part of physical existence, though the interplay between gesture, the body and information has been largely ignored in western culture.

What is the impact on our definitions of 'information' from the increasing interest in haptics and force feedback, quantum physics and investigations into traditional knowledge bases such as the I-Ching (Book of Changes)?

What are the implications of self-organising information structures currently being researched (e.g. the Grid — an enhanced, semi-'intelligent' internet)?

What implications do the subtle interaction between electro-magnetic forces generated by the human body with those of information devices (mobile phones, PDAs etc) have for our concept of 'information' and mediated knowledge?

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I'd like to begin with what I consider a sobering thought:

> *Consequences alone give a true character to random series that would have no meaning if human caprice had not chosen them.*
>
> *Georges Bataille, The Sorcerer's Apprentice*

INFORMATION

Information is the result of giving shape to something, of telling its narrative, its story, or that which inspires, imbues, imparts its quality to, permeates, fashions, describes.
It is here that Bataille's concept of the 'informe' is most revealing, for when is information a definite thing as opposed to a fluctuating and unstable agglomeration of data, formless?
I have begun to think of information not as a thing as such to be reified, but as a condition — something held together by its its own internal oscillation and by the interaction it has with external forces.

In considering information as a condition I think it is more useful to favour those traditions of knowledge which see phenomena as interconnected and mutually influential, rather than as objects in isolation.
In this respect the tradition of the Tao presents a fascinating approach:

The Tao is a seamless web of unbroken movement and change, filled with undulations, waves, patterns of ripples and temporary 'standing' waves like a river.
The intuition of the Tao is:

> that 1., nothing happens, no event or process ever repeats itself exactly.
> and 2., rolling change does not change itself... it is continuous duration, infinite space and infinite change.

The Tao proposes a network of vortices — cyclic patterns of process and threads of linearity.

It is a well documented and simple jump from the above description to those of quantum atomic structures (for instance in the work of Fritjof Capra and David Bohm), where the underlying energy in the universe — that of the fundamental energy of each atomic particle as well as the known but as yet unexplained zero point energy — those energies provide the basis of matter and anti-matter, and thus life itself. Many others have already proposed the Yin/Yang symbol associated with the Tao as emblematic of these impalpable energies without whose oscillation there can be no movement, no vibration, no frequency, no flow of energies from positive to negative, from high to low.

If the fundamental building blocks of the universe are in oscillation, how stable can a fact, a morsel of information be? Or, more pertinently what is stability? How much do we know of the condition of stasis? Could it be a case of Uninterrupted Flow? Or is it a Rupture and thus an exception? Is information really a destabilisation — Bataille's informe — something that disrupts the energies of the whole and the part, realigning the vortices of chaotic flow to reveal an exceptional thread of linearity?

The conventions of difference between technologies that most of us will have grown up with (e.g. between radio, television, telephones, light and power) are becoming destabilised by greater understanding and explications of electromagnetic forces, whose resonance is measured by their Hertzian frequency. Facts are so often nothing more than commonly held presumptions.

The rapid development and implementation of data-driven knowledge systems which we are able to question almost at will, wherever we are (at least in the West) moves our culture away from the material substance of information, and deeper into an ephemeral approach. If the so-called Grid or intelligent network comes to fruition in the next decade or so, then we will have another information entity to deal with and what will our interaction with it be? And what are the implications for the concept of the individual if we are building a collective self-organising memory which many of us will be able to rely upon to to gather, sort and process the information we desire?

> *... knowledge may pass for a kind of 'taste', 'tact' or even 'genius'. It is accorded the the characteristics of an intuition that is alternately artistsic and automatice. It is supposed to be a knowledge that is unaware of itself.*
>
> *Michel de Certeau, The Practice of EverydayLife*

TRANSMISSION

So if information is a condition, then transmission becomes a crucial area of study as a condition in itself. How are we to understand the implications and effects of the modes of transmission we adopt in our everyday lives for communication, for the exchange of knowledge and energies? The information passed in a handshake, the intuitions of touch, taste, vision, hearing and smell?

Gesture and information have barely begun to be taken as phenomena of study yet there exists an entire body of knowledge, codified by the philosopher Confucius in the fourth century BC and already considered at that time to be two thousand years old. This is the celebrated I Ching, or Book of Changes. It is a book of philosophy mediated by gesture — the throwing of the yarrow stalks, or more commonly now, coins. The system is predicated on the simple belief that the fall of the coins will be determined by the energies of the person throwing them. That is, the radiation shell of electromagnetic waves generated by the nervous system acting on a quantum level to affect the fall of the coins, or Mallarme's the roll of the dice.

There are several points of interest here: firstly, that the antiquity of the I Ching is entirely feasible. The Chinese have been meticulous record keepers for thousands of years. Other ancient cultures have also created astronomical charts and mathematical indices requiring enormous amounts of time for their observation

— the Babylonians and Chaldeans for instance — whose books dated back beyond the first millennium BC, and even beyond the second millennium, but which are in the whole are lost to us thanks to the vandalism of the Christian Church in the tenth century AD and later in the mediaeval period, which was intent on destroying what it considered blasphemous knowledge.

The I Ching is particularly interesting because, if information supposes resolution and fixity, then it represents a system of signs and tools for understanding the subtle interplays of balance and imbalance of energies. It guides the inquirer to the most relevant passages of wisdom by utilising a process of tapping into the fundamental energies of each individual — the number of combinations of which are vast. What is most revealing though, is that the Chinese have managed to distil these principles into a system of contrasting energies and influences, symbolised by the 64 hexagrams, defined by the combinations of 8 Trigrams. Simplicity itself, masking fantastic complexity.

Ancient beliefs such as the Music of the Spheres are no longer scoffed at as mere religious or folk superstition. We know that each planet, each star resonates and that these are perceptible. As our world becomes increasingly imbued with the information leakage, the radiation of electromagnetic waves from the information appliances and devices we rely on, I believe we need to understand more about the interplay of energies, not so much from health-risk point of view, but for a deeper understanding of how these energies affect us, each other and the environments around them.

I am coming more and more to question the narrative that science tells us of the phenomenological because its grasp of the ephemeral is so poor. That certain facts are indisputable is not the problem so much as the flawed methodologies by which they are obtained, and the power of the the wielders of these methodologies to shut out other voices with other methodologies, other solutions. That to me is not scientific, not a true quest for knowledge, but political.

I'll finish these musings with another quote from Georges Bataille's book *Guilty*:

> *The ultimate development of knowledge is questioning.*
> *We can't endlessly defer to answers... to knowledge... and knowledge finally opens a void.*
> *At the summit of knowledge, knowledge stops. I yield and everything's vertigo.*
>
> *Georges Bataille, Guilty*

> *Informe – A dictionary begins the moment it nolonger provides the meanings of words, but their tasks. Thus 'formless' is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that everything should have a form. What it designates does not, in any sense whatever, possess rights, and everywhere gets crushed like a spider or an earthworm. For academics to be satisfied, it would be necessary, in effect, for the universe to have form. The whole of philosophy has no other aim; it is a question of fitting what exists into a frock-coat, a mathematical frock-coat. To affirm on the contrary that the universe resembles nothing at all and is formless, amounts to saying that the universe is somethjing like a spider or a gob of spit.*