

FROM MAGIC CARPET to THE INTERNET

One is tempted to call the silence of the desert tangible. I can remember thinking at the time: “..... the stillness in this place is so profound, one can virtually feel it”. In a bowl nearby, the blooms of a frangipanis were floating on a bed of water, their scent making the air heavy with fragrance and adding to the exotic feel of the place.

At my right elbow sat a child, her forehead furrowed in concentration. Little fingers darted across a computer key-board, the motion ending punctuated with a peremptory “Enter” as she completed the sequence for connecting her computer to the world wide web. Though I didn’t realise it at the time, I was standing on the verge of one of those life experiences that one cogitates on long afterwards as being virtually existential. Its influence was that great !

It is 1996, and I am in the modern city of Al-Ain in the United Arab Emirates. I am visiting a school for ex-patriots run by a “visionary”. As in the case of so many people who visit Arabia, this bluff English headmaster accepted a post “for a couple of years” to earn enough to set himself up comfortably “in the olde country” . However, other than having the odd flying visit, he has not returned home in twenty-five years, nor does he ever intend to.

Introducing the internet to the school is his unique solution to a challenging problem. When faced with the task of building a new school, the matter of a library had to be contemplated. He had always considered it a frightful waste of money purchasing reference books that, for the most part, were five years out of date by the time they were published. Add to this shortfall the cost and distance involved in importing books from Europe and the Americas to an oasis, and the high educational standards with which his name had become synonymous, and there were the right ingredients for a creative solution to a brooding problem. Introducing the internet to the school was his unique answer to the challenge.

Arguing that there could be no finer source of reference material than that which he thought inevitably would be published on “the web”, he boldly decided to forego a library. The design form of his new school was that of a rotunda, one which included at its centre “a hub”, a multi-media centre, light, airy and equipped with the state-of-the-art computers all linked to the internet. When introduced to him, I had listened to his rationale for this “high tech” school with some scepticism. Over the years, I had grown used to academics using every ruse available when arguing the imperatives for the purchase of new technologies. Indeed, I was visiting The Emirates from South Africa to advise on the equipping of the local academic complex with similar “new toys”.

The modem hummed out its synthesised theme song and, as though by magic, on the screen before me appeared the name “Yahoo”. I have always been an information freak; and to me the ultimate empowerment tool has always been having access to definitive information. To that end, I had collected about me at home a vast and diverse library of reference material..

Though now it’s “old hat”, looking back on that event four years ago, I realise that, for a half-hour, I participated in a “white-water” experience. Here, by chance, in the

back of beyond, I had stumbled across my ultimate empowerment tool. As I sat and watched this child whip through seemingly endless halls of knowledge, I reflected on the passage written by Franklin Adams “I find that a great part of the information I have was acquired by looking up something and finding something else on the way” and I knew that I had to have this facility.

A week later I returned to Cape Town, an event that was to prelude a hurly-burly of activity as I purchased all the pre-requisites for gaining access to “the web”. Though I regaled many a person with my experience, few appeared interested. I know now that few could vision what I was talking about. Though at that time local universities had portals, our household became amongst the first couple of hundred private homes in the country to gain access to the internet.

From the first day we logged on to “the web” the knowledge of each of us in our home has described a exponential curve. Since that time, my wife and I have had access to definitive information and profound professional opinion from experts living in numerous countries about the globe. I have witnessed my children grow to the point where their knowledge of information technology far exceeds that of their peer group; and the quality of material they present for school projects out-classes most school chums and constructively engages many a teacher.

Through the internet, I have had access to a library more extensive that I could ever have imaged owning. I have researched and published numerous articles, the information for which has been solely generated from the internet. I have made numerous acquaintances amongst a huge fraternity of internet habitués, all ready to answer questions, offer opinions and venture suggestions. Though I sit isolated at the tip of Africa, I am able to roam the great cities of the world, unencumbered by luggage and at little cost, in search of their sights and sounds. Though I have little likelihood of travelling the auction rooms of the northern hemisphere, I can complement my many collections through purchase after examining a potential possession in a virtual environment. Though I have no option but to remain geographically where I am, I am able to debate issues with people of all backgrounds and persuasions in chat rooms that fascinatingly have no astrophysical address.

However, my being a product of this country, South Africa, I believe that the greatest asset that embracing the internet has given me is that elusive morsel, that “part of what man is”, freedom. Through access to “the web”, finally I am free; free to pursue my own interests, free to have access to knowledge of all things and from a plethora of sources, free to express myself unfettered by editorial bias and authoritarian dictate; free to reflect on the chance nature of my discovery - a discovery made through the manipulations of one small child at the behest of a dedicated visionary living in a desert oasis - the internet

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