# Alternate networks

I. We're working on communication/information tools. We began with the idea of an ecological information center, and as our work progressed, we became aware of a variety of related efforts. Gradually our focus expanded to cover a range of needs and possibilities summarized here. In addition to thinking through the basic issues, we've been getting together the equipment, expertise, and the basic ideas necessary to do something about them. There's a lot to be done, and perhaps this note can help bring us together to do it.

II. There is a loose network, through publications like this and especially through person-to-person contacts, that serves the communication/information needs of the movement. But people get overloaded and stretched thin, and the information capacity of the network isn't high enough for the things we are trying to do. Groups sometimes operate almost in isolation, cut off from other people trying to do the same thing; and most of us have only limited access to the fund of knowledge and skills potentially available.

III. The tools provided by the existing information/communications technology serve different needs and embody different values. Bulk information systems, such as libraries or computerized information retrieval systems of the standard sort, can't do the job because they are impersonal, rigid, and gruesomely expensive. They have none of the flexible, intelligent adaptiveness of the face-to-face network. The academic system and the business—industrial system have face-to-face networks of their own, but they can't or won't relate to us for obvious reasons.

IV. So, a successful communication/information system is going to require a kind of wierd ingenuity to get us out of tight places. It may not be clear that this is such a crucial problem. We can't prove it is—our understanding isn't that complete. But we see one of the big problems of the Transformation as the replacement of the hierarchal-coercive institutions by decentralized-consentive ones. A good handle on the creation of communication/information systems wouldn't solve that problem, but it would make it a lot easier, especially for large groups (over twenty) with many conflicting interests.

V. Any useful system is going to have to embody some key values, no matter how it comes into existence, or how it works. Essentially, it will have to be under the control of the people who use it, and not the other way around. It will have to really *serve* their needs, and it cannot burden or restrict them according to *its* internal necessity. Partly that means we have to be careful of ego and power trips, even very subtle and very justifiable ones. Less obviously, if it is not going to burden and alienate the people who use it and who make it go, it is going to have to be *highly* efficient, returning a great deal of value for very little work.

VI. It may seem that there is a contradiction between an efficient system and one that supports human values. Obviously, we don't think so, or we wouldn't be working on it. We believe the problem comes from the way our society treats design and technology. All the work is done in a back room somewhere, and the marvelous new system is sprung on the hapless population, sealed up in a plastic box to keep out prying fingers. If it doesn't mesh with what people were doing, then it's the people who have to change. That kind of efficiency is over with. The communications/information network of the movement is already here, and it is going to keep in growing and adapting. What we hope to do is design some tools that the network can use.

VII. Those tools can conveniently bedivided into hardware and software. The software is fundamental, because it is the cheapest, most flexible, easiest to use and most open-ended. Software for us is the 'how to', tested out until we know it works, and available in a language that people can understand. So far, the network operates almost completely on software, and most of the software is created and tested on a preconscious level. As we bring this creation and testing up to consciousness in our own activities we find all kinds of glitches that can be straightened out and ways that we can use our knowledge about man and the world to strengthen and extend our software.

VIII. The hardware becomes important when we have good software. The computer is a good example. When we have the software down pat, we can program the machine to do the shitwork, and people can play. But if the software really doesn't do the things we wanted, then the system is going to impose its values on us. The computer can't solve our information/communication problems, but it can be a powerful tool in supporting our solutions.

IX. For a long time, human societies have had values similar to ours, without great success in their realization. If we blame that failure on human nature or original sin, then we're stuck. The human race is a biological entity, and biological evolution takes time that we don't have. We prefer to think that failure has come because the tools weren't ready. (or weren't used with enough conscious awareness, ed.). The Transformation is being brought about by the rapid evolution of man's tools, both hardware and (especially) software. If we can push that evolution in the direction of information/communication systems, it may make the big difference.

X. ". . . take a clay lump to make the dish, and the clay's usefulness is just where it isn't . . . So you take what of it there is to use what of it there isn't." That's from Lao Tzu, one of the oldest software designers. The value of this note is just where it isn't, in the space it encloses, not in the space it fills. Our ways of working inside this space are growing so fast, and are so open to change that any attempt to describe them is self-defeating. If you find yourself in the same space, and want to share ways of working or problems to work on with us, that's why we're here.

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First Progress report letter on rough plans for a Nation-wide "Movement"* Distribution Set-up

(*Open to suggestions for a better word than "movement" or "radical" to describe the broader and more comprehensive conception of social change that has occured since feminists, gays, high school kids, hippies, ecology people, anarchists, etc. have joined/changed/expanded the politically narrower "movement" of a year or two ago).

It all started a couple of months ago with the following article in *Vocations for Social Change:*

"There are several small, new radical presses which are producing valuable stuff but which have trouble getting it out, simply because there is no movement distribution network yet. My idea of what is needed is, (1) individuals around the country, on campuses, in the smaller cities as well as large ones, to introduce the liberal/hip/left/campus/head bookstores to movement publications—any and everyghing from Liberation/Ramparts type periodicals to underground papers, to pamphlet and poster publishers like Times Change Press, People's Press, R.E.P., etc. The individuals would probably have sets of samples, would take orders (and forward them to the publishing group), and hopefully make commissions sufficient to make the efforts worthwhile. Besides these individuals (or collectives) though, it would be necessary to have (2) a nation-wide structure in which to work—a co-ordinating office or something, to get new people distributing, to guarantee commissions and fair play, to send kits of samples around, to publish lists of what stores buy (and pay!), etc.

Financing might come from something like this: Bookstores get 40% off the list price, as it now goes. The local distributor would get maybe 12%. And 3% would go to support the co-ordinating office—leaving the publisher with 45%. A lot of us are feeling the need for outreach—getting beyond the cities and movement. It's badly needed at this time. If anything does come of it, let us hear about it, o.k.?"

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