

WHAT WILL BE?

or After Reading A Visionary Book

Many people today are lured to and fascinated with the idea of a "Computerised Society" (or "Information Society", or "Cyberspace" or "Information Infrastructure/Highway"). IT industrial developers feel that the high time has come for amplifying their sales. Academic people, in their turn, find that their dreams have come true and that scientific results are at hand, or that they may approach new investigation domains. Politicians get fond of a new syntagm which their speeches will not forget to include and their practical actions will sometimes resort to. Young people dive abruptly into an apparently boundless world, promising of (at least virtual) high mobility and opportunities for acquiring new and pleasing skills and even for entering well-paid jobs. The remaining of the people will be either connoisseurs, able to face the situation and take advantage of it, or "have nots" (those who lack the proper knowledge) and "will nots" (those who, one way or another, oppose the idea of a computerised society).

Michael Dertouzos's book titled: "**What It Will Be: How the World of Information Will Change our Lives**" (*Harper Edge, New York, 1997*) addresses all the above strata of the society, bringing forth the author's accumulations over about twenty years.

Of the books expressing, over the last few years, visions, this book's vision makes one of the most credible. Professor Dertouzos was head of the "Computer Science" Laboratory of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was at once the person who gave an impetus to intensely knowledge-based activities of newly created firms, and the adviser to state authorities and some important organizations on the "Fortune 500" list. A kick-off to the "world wide web" technology (following his premonitory meeting with T. Barnes Lee, in 1993), and the determinant role played in encouraging Europe's vision on the information society are also contributions of some consequence for the advances in the IT field. All the above will be convincing, we hope, of the fact that M. Dertouzos was not only an worshipped prophet, or an authority in matter of prognosis-making, but a

personality who invented and wrought the future toward the information society (mainly scientifically and technologically, but not only). He addressed the book to the large public, because he felt that his experience and visions were, as said somewhere in the book, mediated to them and even misunderstood.

M. Dertouzos coined the phrase "information marketplace". The underlying idea is the replication via, ICT, of the activities flow in the market of Athens. The marketplace in Athens is, according to M. Dertouzos, as much a scenic place as it is an example of democratic organisation (it seems to lack a central body to exert control and co-ordination), in which plenty of goods go rapidly, efficiently and pleasantly from one hand to another. Dertouzos's vision also sprang (as he realised and confessed in his book) from his early implication in the development of time-sharing systems and his leadership of the research laboratory at MIT. The research laboratory embodied the clairvoyance and pragmatism shown by the US Government, just after the Soviet Union launched the first satellites, in their endeavour to regaining technological supremacy and keeping the competitive potential of the US economy steady by transferring funds to research.

The book reveals the fact that researches carried out on top technologies made an 100.000% return to the costs involved. For sure, a book of such substantiality in information and ideas, supporting our understanding of things and our perception of the future, escapes a surface analysis. One must come to the original. I shall try however to make some points.

The book is a balanced and inspired combination of answers to a set of MFAQ type questions put by technical people or by human and social scientists, or even by the author. The book has **three Parts**.

The **first Part** describes, in the author's view (a pragmatically oriented technical person), the so -far and the predicted evolution of Information & Communication Technologies

(communication systems, computer networks, man-machine interfaces, new software tools) as well as the behaviour of actors involved in such technologies. The description of the "spiders' " war is for instance significant.

The **second Part** addresses the changes expected to occur in everyday life, in pastime (where subjects thought of as "taboo" elsewhere are courageously faced), in health care and education, in culture and art, in business management and the public administration way of conduct.

Mostly optimistic about and favourable to the prognosticated changes, as he is, the author is nevertheless conscious of the necessity for warning about dangers in store (say, the new technologies are destined not only to defend peace but also to prop up spying activities and preparations of war).

Placed under the motto "Reunion of technology with humanity", the **third Part** of the book deals with societal problems. Comments are made on the economic value of information, the level of employment, the crime fighting and the rule of the law, on the attraction to "parishoning" (leaving large crowded urban areas for small rural communities), in parallel with a high rate of interconnecting people via electronic devices ("virtual urbanisation"). Nations are presumed to start be as "networks", i.e. no longer associated with a national territory, somehow closer to the primordial acceptance of the word "ethnos".

Wishing to calm down possible fears of a might- be syndrome of the "Big Brother" keeping technologies and changes in his hand, the author makes it clear that the countries which advanced technologies belong to are industrially developed countries but also democratic ones.

Abounding with dates, names of persons and organisations, short descriptions, the text of the book is as much informative as captivating. The author cares a lot for being rigorous in what he says and in making decent evaluations. An illustration of this is his abstaining from advancing a figure as to those who lost their jobs because of new technologies except for those employed in design activities. He looks at facts mainly pragmatically, taking the increase of productivity criterion as a basis. Although his origins are in Europe, the author meant his book essentially for American readers.

I owe the chance of reading the book to Professor G. Metakides and Professor P. P. Groumpos, two friends of the IT circles in Romania. My reading of the book was in one breath, bewildered as I was with its profoundness of knowledge, the author's sagacity and the good writing, I did an attentive reading of it. I hope many others will do the same. I am convinced that along with being an intellectual reward to the reader, the book will create an opinion pool, a positive feedback. I am inclined to believe that practical activities will rather find here their stamina than in official papers, casual speeches and ICT products publicity, which mass media never gets tired of.

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