

# MINDING THE FUTURE

- a thought experiment on presenting new information (\*)

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## Introduction

Much may be learnt about the status of communication susceptible to provoke personal and social change by considering any of the variants of the following thought experiment. This involves the despatch and reception of a « perfect message », carefully reflecting on possible attitudes to it, and the action to be taken. Much may also be learnt by attempting to develop or redesign the experiment itself, possibly by adding other features to it.

## Despatch problem

Consider any of the following variants :

### A. Bangladeshi girl (1)

In Bangladesh a girl was born. Because of a low-probability genetic accident she has all the attributes of a supergenius. She is now 19 years old (in 1983). She is totally impoverished and bound to a dominating husband, but has had access, since an early age, in a little rundown school, to a very extensive library funded by the legacy of an eccentric. She is especially talented in the psycho-social sciences and has made (as history acknowledged 50 years later) a number of interrelated breakthroughs of fundamental significance to world society, faced with the crises she has so deeply studied. *What should she send, in what form, to whom, and how should she ensure that its complex significance is understood or influences change appropriately ?*

### B. Future Development Council (2)

In the year 2500 A.D. a form of time travel has been developed. The Planetary Development Council has the ability to transmit artefacts and individuals in order to communicate with the past. It also has long experience with an interconnected series of approaches which ensure the dynamism and harmony of a society free from injustice of any kind. There is great concern with the situation of the planet in the watershed period of the early 1980's. *What should the Council send, in what form, to whom, and how should it ensure that its complex significance is understood or influences change appropriately ?*

### C. Ancient Council of Sages (3)

In the year 1500 B.C. in China a strange historical coincidence brought together a group of 12 extremely wise men and women. They were remarkable for their insight into human nature and society and for the manner in which they could evolve in relation to one another. They could clearly foresee long-term patterns and were particularly concerned at the crisis period which was likely to emerge under the conditions of the early 1980's.

*What should the sages do or leave for that future period, in what form could they leave it, to whom should it appeal, and how should they ensure that the complex significance of their insights is understood or influences change appropriately ?*

### D. Network of the Wise (4)

During the 1960s a number of exceptionally gifted wise men and women formed a network which by the end of the 1970s had developed a deep insight into the human condition. It was on the basis of their breakthroughs that society later achieved the much desired harmony and justice for all. They had the special advantage in the 1980's of having unlimited resources at their disposal.

*What should the network send, in what form, to whom, and how should it ensure that its complex significance is understood or influences change appropriately ?*

### E. United Planets Development Programme (5)

A galaxy-wide organization of sentient species has existed for millions of years. The many variant solutions to the problems of social harmony and individual development have been tested on millions of worlds. Several million years ago a United Planets Organization was brought into existence within this solar system. It duly created a U.P. Development Programme (UPDP) of which one of the principal LDP sections is the Third World (« Earth ») Division. In the face of the critical situation of the 1980's, the Division has decided to change its long-standing « indirect » policy (despite the extremely low level of education on the planet, especially where communication-related matters are concerned).

*What should the division send, to whom, and how should it ensure that its complex significance is understood or influences change appropriately ?*

(\*) Presented at a meeting on Forms of Presentation (Geneva, 1980) of the Goals Processes and Indicators of Development project of the United Nations University.

(1) This case is suggested by that of the Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan (1867-1920), famous for his work on number theory.

(2) This case has been explored as a theme in science fiction.

(3) This case is suggested by the Greek and Florentine academies.

(4) This case is suggested by the Club of Rome and Aspen networks.

(5) This case is suggested by the Doris Lessing novel « Shikasta » (1950) and by Isaac Asimov's « Foundation » trilogy.

## Reception problem

In each of the following variants, how can those concerned arrange their communication structure so that they receive insightful new information ? How can they develop appropriate filters to select the vehicles of such information prior to having comprehended the nature of the insights ?

- A. U.N. Secretary General
- B. U.N. University Rector
- C. Government Prime Minister
- D. Secret Service Director
- E. University Rector
- F. Individual (meaning you or me)
- G. Corporation President
- H. Newspaper Editor
- I. Nongovernmental organization (NGO)
- J. Foundation
- K. Charismatic religious leader
- L. « Eminence grise »

## Action problem

Once the « package » containing the information has been received, the possibilities for subsequent action include :

- A. Open and digest
- B. Destroy
- C. File (« pigeon-hole »)
- D. Send on to... (« buck passing »)
- E. Insert in « time capsule »
- F. Open and misrepresent
- G. Exploit to advance existing interests
- H. Discuss and research it in such a way as to destroy its potential for change (coopt as an element of an existing debate)

## Nasty thought

In the Despatch Problem listed above, consider the possibility that in each case the intention was « malevolent » rather than « benevolent », as has been assumed. Then consider the remaining points again in this new light. How could you distinguish between « perfect » messages of the two types ? Is your difficulty part of the fundamental problem ?

## Problem of reflecting on possible action

The following are some of the factors for the above receivers, which determine what is done with the « package » :

- A. What is it ?
- B. Nature of source (« from whom ») ?
- C. Why was it sent?
- D. How was it sent?
- E. Who arranged for it to be sent ?
- F. When does it come from ?  
(out of date ?)
- G. Does it conform to my/our accepted style (jargon) ?
- H. Is it in accordance with my/our current policies ?
- I. Will it affect my/our status/motivation (job security/advancement/skills) ?
- J. Will it demand anything of me/us (a switch of allegiance, change of lifestyle) ?
- K. Will it render my/our activity obsolete?
- L. Is it relevant to any of my/our current programmes ?
- M. How can I prepare myself/ourselves for its possible impact (avoiding premature judgement) ?

## Questions

- A. Would **you** open the « package » ? Are you sure ? Think a bit more.
- B. Would you expect anyone else to open it ? And then ?
- C. How would you go about « opening » it to your understanding ?
- D. How different (change provoking) would it have to be before you could not afford to open it ?
- E. Would you send such a message if you had the means ? Do you have them ?
- F. Could you send such a message if you knew what to put in it ? Do you know what to put in it ?
- G. Do you believe that one or more such messages have been sent ? If so, what have you done about it ?
- H. If the basic concept of a « sent message » is an « imperfection » what other form of action can the originators take?

## Afterthoughts

- if you do not know how you are part of the problem, you cannot understand the nature of the solution required.
- If you do not know how you are part of the solution, you cannot understand the nature of the problem faced.