

Brave new media world

By Darryl D'Monte

There's little doubt that we are in the New Media Age, where art, design, computing, architecture, writing, journalism and entertainment converge. But is too much being made of the benefits? Will a blogger ever enjoy the credibility of a seasoned journalist? Or an artist create a masterpiece on a computer?

The proponents of every new technology can be forgiven for exaggerating its benefits. Nuclear power, for instance, was vaunted as going to be "too cheap to meter," but we all know just how steeply it has fallen from grace. Somewhat similar claims are made on behalf of the "new media". In Mumbai recently, the Comet Media Foundation (www.cometmedia.org), which is engaged in the promotion of alternative education for children, held a workshop to enlist students for its courses in new media, to be run by an offshoot called Cosmos.

The workshop began with a salvo against the daily newspapers as having "too many words of too little value". At a prior event, Nirmalendu Jajodia, a software developer and Comet board member, predicted that "blogs" -- individual websites carrying news and views -- would spell the end of the newspaper. Someone quoted Victor Hugo to the effect that there was no power on earth more powerful than an idea whose time had come, and no prizes for guessing what this was in the current context. A speaker from Tata Interactive Systems showed a cartoon where a child asks his father: "What programme does God use to upload the sun every morning?" Its variant was a dog sitting at a PC, consoling his fellow canine sitting on the floor that his friend's doggy identity wasn't evident on the Internet...

While it would be easy for an "old media" hand like me to dismiss such hype as typical of Gen Next, it is instructive to understand what the new media is all about.

It is the convergence of many disciplines -- art, design, computing, architecture, writing, journalism and entertainment. That is why there is a flourishing School of Convergence in Delhi. Cosmos speaks about its forthcoming post-graduate courses helping to break down barriers between disciplines, rather than teaching people "how to operate

machines". Indeed, in some ways, it is even "anti-disciplinary" since it tends to subvert several forms; it should not be conflated with the often politically correct "multi-disciplinary" approach to problems.

The media, to be sure, is all pervading or "24x7", to employ the new lingo. The new media encompasses digital representation, automation, modularity, variability and transcoding of messages. Nina Sabnani, who heads the new media studies department of the prestigious National Institute of Design (NID) in Ahmedabad (www.nid.edu), referred to how this technology could have a tactile or emotional element as well. For instance, NID students had designed a tree, the leaves of which would droop in response to higher levels of toxic pollutants like suspended particulate matter. This visual representation drives the point home much more tellingly than, for instance, the Pollution Watch infographic with its opaque indices, like ppm, on NDTV's nightly news. Similarly, the petals of a virtual flower dubbed "Floriend" begin to droop on a PC if a person fails to keep in touch with his friends in cyberspace.

New media guru Roy Ascott's paper titled provocatively 'Is There Love in the Telematic Embrace?' was circulated at the workshop

(http://telematic.walkerart.org/overview/overview_ascott.html). Computing and telecommunications have converged into one field of operations, giving rise to a "telematic culture". Telematics, as he explains helpfully, is used to designate "computer-mediated communications networking involving telephone, cable and satellite links between geographically dispersed individuals and institutions that are interfaced to data processing systems, remote sensing devices and capacious storage banks. It involves the technology of interaction among human beings and between the human mind and artificial systems of intelligence and perception".

Ascott senses that out of this technological complexity, there emerges a synthesis of the arts. Such "integrated data work" has the capacity "to engage the intellect, emotions and sensibility of the observer". In other words, art no longer implies an object that is viewed by the observer, but a constant interaction between the two. Presumably, the contemporary installations that many artist-activists are increasingly resorting to these days are forerunners of such art. These installations are often subject- and time-specific and are dismantled later, subverting the whole panoply of desires that revolve around ownership of conventional paintings and sculpture. Thus the capacity of mobile phones to capture the instant in a photograph, which is communicated to a circle of friends or even a much wider range of observers, lends an entirely new dimension to the concept of photojournalism.

Most of "Gen Ex" isn't aware of the dramatic surge in this technology. Sabnani explained how a simple mobile has more computing power than a PC. India, it is now

estimated, will own 300 million mobiles by 2007. The revolution in what is termed the "gaming" industry -- computer games -- is nothing short of astounding. Its global revenue, \$ 30 billion a year, now exceeds that earned by the US film industry at the box office in that country; the new fad will be wireless gaming over the cellular phone network. Two US, one French and one Japanese firm dominate this market.

While entertainment as a whole is now worth \$ 3 trillion, animation alone accounts for \$ 70 billion, according to the industry. Much of this work is already being outsourced and it is estimated that, by 2015, the value of animation work being done offshore will be worth \$ 136 billion, globally. However, judging by the samples of some of the animation films screened at the workshop, there is one serious problem. Local animators are so smitten with Hollywood stereotypes that their characters have the same body language -- an exaggerated waddle, thick lips and the like -- that were universalised by Walt Disney films like *Jungle Book* and *The Lion King* . As Chandita Mukerjee, the documentary filmmaker who founded Comet, observed, the country has such rich mythology and a plethora of characters that it is regrettable that we should be using Hollywood typology even when firms are not outsourcing their work. Japanese animation film, for instance, is usually less violent than its US counterpart, while Eastern Europe animators used this mode to make very powerful social statements.

A speaker from the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore admitted: "Even we don't know what it (the new media) is: we try and find out together with our students." This is a radically new pedagogic method, one that most old-timers find quite unsettling. "E-learning" or instruction online rather than in a classroom is gaining ground rapidly: worldwide it was worth less than \$ 2 billion in 1999, but has jumped to \$ 23 billion today. In the US, this method accounts for 45% of all training in information technology; it was a meagre 3% in 2000.

The very nature of the media is changing, with an increasing number of young people in the West being weaned away from newspapers and television for their news, which they get instead from websites and blogs. Shaina Anand, a Mumbai-based new media filmmaker, is experimenting with "tellavision" to explore themes connected with communal riots. Some "tactical media" initiatives, in fact, were deliberately set up to subvert the conventional media, which is driven by advertising and is resorting to "dumbing down" with a vengeance.

A fascinating use of the new technology is in relation to GIS -- Global Information Systems. By digitising satellite data we can now obtain maps of countries and cities that allow us to home in on a particular street. It can identify the names of buildings and, by overlaying data from MTNL websites (at least for major metros), one can even obtain the names and telephone numbers of the occupants! The data can be cross-

checked with the electoral rolls which, those in the GIS industry assert, are voluminous and more accurate than people think, presumably the biggest such exercise in the world. The Thane-Belapur constituency, which is reputed to be the most populous in Asia, has digitised its data. Imagine GIS as a tool in the hands of governments at various levels -- typically, for levying property tax. Or in rural areas, to estimate which areas are drought- or flood-prone. The advantages for commercial use are self-evident: any marketing strategy would depend on such data, which would drastically reduce the hit-and-miss methods in direct mailing and the like. Much of the data, including satellite images from NASA, are in the public domain, the only restriction being the capacity of computers to download such huge files.

Lest we dismiss the new media as intellectually inferior, Nishant Shah, a researcher and teacher from the Centre for Study of Culture and Society in Bangalore, assured workshop participants that this was far from the truth. He encourages his students to research areas like the media and history and to place new media in its cultural and social context. Thus there is a divergence between social technology of the familiar kind and "technosociality". Shah was at pains to emphasise that culture was not necessarily embedded in our tradition but in our daily experiences.

Jayalakshmi Chittoor from the Centre for Science Development and Media Studies in Delhi, who is an editorial consultant for its monthly *i4d* hard-copy magazine -- "information for development" for the uninitiated (www.14d.csdms.in) -- corrected the impression that the new media was only for geeks, techies and unconventional artists. She cited how it could help communities that have never used a PC; at introductory courses, instructors would ask participants to break a (cheap) watch in order to help them overcome their fear of technology. States like Andhra Pradesh have progressed quite far in computerising rural and urban land records; even illiterate persons can access some of these records by touch-screen techniques. Chittoor herself, as she informed this columnist, was able to get some titles to property changed in Kerala from Delhi, simply because they were on the computer.

Chittoor believes that the Right to Information Bill will greatly empower public access to information. Only some time ago, Brinda Karat, recently nominated by the CPM to the Rajya Sabha, and Professor Jean Dreze, Dr Amartya Sen's frequent collaborator, had written articles condemning the fact that poor village women in employment guarantee schemes had to double up to complete a task for which only one would be paid in grain and wages. The loot continued with relief officials maintaining kutchra and pucca records of work done, with the latter vastly inflated in order to pocket the difference. Much of this could be erased by a combination of the right to know law, which was largely the outcome of years of relentless campaigning by the Kisan Mazdoor Shakti

Sanghatan in Rajasthan, and computerisation. On the issue of copyright laws relating to software and the like, Chittoor referred to "copyleft" as opposed to copyright.

All said and done, the new media offers exciting prospects for young people who are adept at picking up the skills required. Established artists like Akbar Padamsee too have made forays into computerised art. The careers available in animation and gaming are virtually inexhaustible: to the consternation of this columnist, several young college graduates were ready to sign up immediately with some company representatives at the Cosmos workshop!

However, one should guard against people making too much of the benefits. The obvious counter to the proposition that blogs will replace newspapers is that a blogger will never enjoy the credibility that any seasoned journalist who has put in many years of careful research possesses. An artist may have all the tools that his electronic paint box provides him, but it will not enable him to paint a masterpiece. Similarly, all the computerised search engines and other tools will not create a poem. People are free to publish their own newspapers, even their full-length manuscripts, but who will read them? Sabnani talked of a beer mug that NID has come up with, whose base glows when it is empty. But of what possible social use is such a device?

Finally, one should never forget that there are many Indians who do not have access to electricity, let alone a computer, and that some 40% of Indians cannot read or write. There is a very real danger that the new media and all that goes with it will serve to deepen the digital divide unless someone channels it into useful purposes.

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