

The Information Dispensation: The Bahá'í Faith and the Information Age

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In Note Format

Introduction

- Today in western societies more people are employed collecting, handling and distributing information than in any other occupation
- Millions of computers inhabit the earth and many millions of miles of optical fibre, wire and airwaves link people, their computers and the vast array of information handling devices together.
- Our society is truly an information society, our time an information age.
- How does the information age relate to the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh?
- What defines the Information Age?
- How does it fit into a Bahá'í perspective on history and humanity?

The Information Age: its nature and potential

- The nature of information
- Information comes from “**inform**”
- Literally “to give form to; to be the formative principle of, hence to animate”
- **Information** is “the act or process of informing; specifically, communication of knowledge of knowledge or intelligence”
- Information is the means through which the mind expands and increases its capacity to achieve its goals, often as the result of an input from another mind.
- Thus, information forms the intellectual capital from which human beings craft their lives and secure dignity
- The extraordinary growth in information and its availability is transforming our society
- Will IT, information technology, make the huge differences that so many expect
- Or does IT really mean “insignificant toys?”
- To answer this question, we must understand that one of the extraordinary developments in human history that has come to fruition during the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh has

- Have moved from the agricultural age through the industrial age and into the information age in a span of just 100 to 200 years.
- Who was successful before?
- We have lived most of our human history in the hunter/gatherer age.
- In that environment the person with the best way to kill an animal or select the correct items to eat was most successful
- Power came from strength
- In the agriculture age, the person with the most land and best agricultural machinery was most successful
- Power came from possessions
- In the industrial age the person with the best manufacturing process or the most capital was most successful.
- Power came from capital: intellectual or financial
- Who will be most successful in the information age?
- Future Shock's Alvin Toffler suggested that it will be those with access to information and the ability to process it.
- In other words, today knowledge is the key to power
- From this perspective, education and access to information become equivalent to the importance of having access to guns and money for earlier generations.
- In Info Age, power of nation-states is declining as power of individuals increases
- You as an individual can make a much bigger difference for the good of the world
- Or for ill (terrorism, crime)

When did the Information Age really begin?

- One recent book describes a new communications technology “that allowed people to communicate almost instantly across great distances, in effect shrinking the world faster and further than ever before. A worldwide communications network whose cables spanned continents and oceans, it revolutionized business practice, gave rise to new forms of crime, and inundated its users with a deluge of information. Romances blossomed over the wires. Secret codes were devised by some users and cracked by others. The benefits of the network were relentlessly hyped by its advocates and dismissed by the sceptics. Governments and regulators tried and failed to control the new medium. Attitudes towards everything from news gathering to diplomacy had to be completely rethought. Meanwhile, out on the wires, a technological subculture with its own customs and vocabulary was establishing itself.
- The time? The 19th century, during the reign of Queen Victoria
- The technology: the telegraph
- Tom Standage, The Victorian Internet
- So the Information Age actually began with the invention of telegraph

- Began on May 24th, 1844, Samuel Morse held 1st successful public demonstration of the electric telegraph
- Sent message from Supreme Court chambers in Washington, DC, to Baltimore, MD
- “What hath God wrought?”
- For thousands of years before that, people knew that if they wanted to send a message to someone 100 miles away it had to go by messenger, on horseback, and take better part of a day
- Now messages could travel over distance instantaneously
- Brought new age of immediate news, and often demanded immediate response
- Changed pace of life: humanity placed its collective finger on the fast-forward button
- From a world of village communities, rumour and gossip, the world became a web of wires carrying information and data
- The Information Age had begun
- What we generally mean when we think of the Information Age did not begin until the late 20th century
- Characterized by accelerating increases in available information
- Over 90% of scientists who have ever lived are alive today
- More new information has been produced in the last 30 years than in the previous 5,000
- About 1,000 books are published internationally every day
- Total of all printed knowledge now doubling every 7-10 years
- Even faster for science and technology
- John Naisbitt’s 1980’s classic Megatrends said that S&T information increases 13% each year and doubles every 5.5 years
- So a university degree can become obsolete within a decade
- Driven in part by equivalent acceleration in underlying ICT's
- Tools that most of you probably can’t imagine living without
- Many different technologies contribute to the Information Age
- Printing and distribution
- Telephones
- Fax (and older telex)
- Radio and television
- Mobile phones particularly powerful in recent years
- (Digital Age 00-09-22: The African Renaissance)
- (Programme produced 1998)
- Initial projections were that total no. cell phone in SA would not exceed one-half million in 10 years
- Actual total. exceeded 2 million in just 4 years
- End of 2000: 3.2 million

- Vodacom & MTN estimate 10 million by 2005
- Cape Times 00-12-29 p. 4
- In South Africa, KPMG estimates that the number of users will exceed 12-million by 2005.
- KPMG estimates that by 2004 there will be more than a billion mobile users globally
- Main driver of this Information Age, however, are computers and the Internet
- Roots go back to first programmable electronic computer, built in 1946 with a memory of just 20 words
- IT revolution really started with spread of mainframe computers in the 1960's and the invention of the microprocessor in 1971
- For which a Nobel prize in physics just awarded
- In 1940s Thomas Watson, then chairman of IBM, predicted total worldwide market for computers as 5
- Today there are about 300 million computers in the world
- Computing power doubles every 18 months while cost halves (Moore's law)
- Of course your computer depreciates 1% a week because of this
- Still, effects extraordinary
- Experts estimate that Moore's Law has at least another decade to run
- Which means that by 2010 the typical computer likely to have 10 million times the processing power of a 1975 computer, at a lower cost
- In fact lower costs for higher power the second part of the revolution
- Over the past 40 years global computing power has increased a billionfold
- We can now perform number crunching tasks that once took weeks in just seconds
- Today a Ford Taurus car contains more computing power than multimillion dollar mainframes used for the Apollo space program
- Yet costs have decreased dramatically
- Over past three decades, real cost of computer processing power has fallen by 99.999%, an average decline of 35% per year
- Same phenomenon applies to our communications networks
- Capacity and speed have increased massively while costs have fallen dramatically
- In 1930 cost of 3-minute call from NYC to London was more than \$130 in today's prices
- Almost R1,000
- Same call now cost less than 20 US cents, R1.5
- Adding IT produces much more dramatic cost reductions
- In 1970 it would have cost \$187 to transmit the Encyclopaedia Britannica as an electronic data file coast to coast in the USA

- Today we could send the contents of the entire Library of Congress same distance for \$40
- The Library of Congress is the largest library in the world, with nearly 119 million items on approximately 530 miles of bookshelves.
- It is these communications networks, combined with computer technology, that created the Internet, the backbone of the information age
- Came into existence in the late 70's as an outgrowth of the ARPANET, a US DOD project
- Size of the Internet is exploding
- Worldwide there were almost 200 million people on the Internet by the end of 1999 (almost half outside of North America)
- One current estimate has total number at 300 million now
- By 2003 more than 500 million people will be online
- By 2005, 68% will be outside of North America
- The Internet is growing so fast that traffic is doubling every 100 days
- Radio existed for 38 years before it had 50 million listeners.
- Television took 13 years to get 50 million viewers.
- The Web reached 50 million U.S. users in just 4 years
- World Wide Web (incorrectly synonymous with Internet) growing even faster than Internet at large
- At last estimate, 100 million people use the Web
- 10 years ago there were only 50 sites on the World Wide Web
- (BBC Click Online)
- United States Internet Council stats
- Size of Web doubled in first half of 2000 alone to 2 billion separate Web pages
- (Click On-Line 00-09-07)
- Becoming more international: 50% of Internet users do not claim English as first language
- But 80% content still in English
- (Click On-Line 00-09-07)

Promises of Bahá'u'lláh

- Info Age clearly forms part of Major Plan of God, whose purpose is “the eventual establishment of His Kingdom on earth.”
- (Shoghi Effendi: Citadel of Faith, Pages: 139-140)
- Began the very day after May 23rd, date of the birth of the Bahá'í era
- Helps mark the final step in human evolution: planetary unity
- Makes possible fulfillment of ancient prophecies from all religions

- One Universal Manifestation
- How could Moses or Christ or Muhammad or the Buddha have taught the whole world?
- IT lets Bahá'u'lláh's voice carry to every corner of the planet
- Prerequisite for world peace
- Allows people to associate around the planet
- Thereby promotes healing of the world
- "They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations. Blessed are such as hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy and are free from animosity and hatred."
- TDP 50
- This is why ICTs specifically foreseen in Bahá'í Writings
- "A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity."
- --Shoghi Effendi, March 11, 1936, World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 203
- This is because they also help create the structures for world unity
- Bahá'u'lláh Himself saw first glimpse in the development of newspapers in His time
- "In this Day the secrets of the earth are laid bare before the eyes of men. The pages of swiftly-appearing newspapers are indeed the mirror of the world. They reflect the deeds and the pursuits of diverse peoples and kindreds. They both reflect them and make them known. They are a mirror endowed with hearing, sight and speech. This is an amazing and potent phenomenon."
- (Bahá'u'lláh: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, Page: 39)
- I thought I had seen fulfilment of Guardian's prediction launch of first geosynchronous satellites in 1963
- In 1945, English scientist and writer Arthur C. Clark theorized that if three spacecraft were set equidistant from each other in geosynchronous orbit the entire world could have continuous radio and television coverage
- 36,000 km high
- Third attempt, Hughes Syncom 3, used to broadcast Tokyo Olympics in 1964
- But clearly Internet takes "a mechanism of world intercommunication" to an entirely new level
- Albeit not yet "functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity."
- The realities of the Information Age also illuminate important Bahá'í teachings
- To take just two examples
- Spiritual foundations
- Resource distribution

- One major problem of Information Age is lack of moral guidance for using these new tools
- People in the West turn to technology and data for answers to questions about human purpose and values
- Backwards
- Risks what Thoreau warned us about: becoming “tools of our tools”
- We must not confuse a hammer with a home, a saw with a skyscraper
- The hammer cannot tell us what kind of home we should build
- But once we know what we want to do, where we’re going, the tool allows us to make our vision into reality
- Without divine guidance, we become the technological giants but spiritual midgets that seem so prevalent today
- Technology becomes a force for degradation
 - The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. Meditate on this, O people, and be not of them that wander distraught in the wilderness of error. The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities, when the Tongue of Grandeur will proclaim: "The Kingdom is God's, the Almighty, the All-Praised!" (Bahá'u'lláh: Gleanings, Pages: 342-343)
- One of biggest impediments to world unity is inequitable distribution of resources
- We often think of this in economic terms
- The world’s 225 richest individuals have a combined wealth of over \$1 trillion, equal to the annual income of the poorest 47% of the entire world’s population
- But if information and knowledge are the new sources of power, we must be equally concerned about their creation and equitable distribution
- Information Age has already demonstrated capacity to vastly increase sum of human knowledge
- Brad DeLong, economist at UC Berkeley: “IT and the Internet amplify brain power in the same way that the industrial revolution amplified muscle power”
- Metcalfe’s law (named after Robert Metcalfe, pioneer in computer networking): value of a network grows roughly in line with the square of the number of users
- So the more people who are connected through the Internet, the more knowledge and utility we create
- It has the potential to distribute that knowledge broadly
- Not yet realized
- Only 6% of the world’s population is online so far
- Even in richest countries, figure doesn’t rise above 35%

- For example, in 1999 only 1.72 million users online in Africa for a continent with more than 600 million people
- 1.62 million of those in South Africa
- One survey in Jan., 2000 of major SA metropolitan areas showed that black South Africans almost completely excluded
- Only 0.1% Internet access at home
- Black men Internet access at work 1.2%, black women 0.6%
- Must continue efforts to increase access to computers and Internet to previously disadvantaged groups in country and world
- To say nothing of winning the war on poverty
- But history suggests that this will improve rapidly
- Look at introduction of computers and telephones to Africa, world's poorest continent
- Not yet complete, but huge gains already evident
- Part of the solution and part of the reward in our fight against poverty
- This gives new significance to the fact that the New World Order will see a world legislature
 - "...whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples."

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Conclusion

- Thus Information Age becomes part of God's plan for releasing human potential and carrying forward an ever advancing civilization
- When we finally achieve this world commonwealth, with its global mechanism of intercommunication "functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity", we can finally devote our world's resources to human development, not war
- Bake sales for bombers, not schools
- Shoghi Effendi writes:
 - "The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race."
- This is the future towards which we as a human race are inevitably marching
- This is the destiny offered by Bahá'u'lláh

- And ultimately this is the promise of the Information Age