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Follow the Yellow Brick Road!

Fantasies of Center and Presence in Net Culture

Microsoft's well-known slogan "where do you want to go today?" gives promises of unlimited mobility controlled only by the person on the keyboard. I will be looking into instances, when this hype rhetoric (which bypasses the basic question that the will "go somewhere today" is limited by such mundane socio-economic factors as access and bandwidth) reappears in political discourses, especially in educational politics. In these discourses Internet and digital cultures are represented as promises and challenges of tomorrow, and investing in tech as a meaningful act in itself - literally, an investment in the future.

The Finnish Ministry of Education¹ has a very ambitious program of having all comprehensive schools wired and extensively equipped with computers by the year 2000. Secretary of Education, Olli-Pekka Heinonen, has repeatedly characterized this as an important shift towards information society, a tomorrow land made true with the help of computer technology and Internet, and inhabited by the children of today. What is actually done with the machines and Net connections in the everyday school practices, however, remains a mystery to all, as there is yet no regulation, or functioning schemas concerning this.² One is led to think that children are learning to surf, especially since Heinonen is constantly shown on television interviews in this "favorite pastime of his". In the media discussions concerning the Net and education focus solely on technology, not on its uses, impacts, or implications.

Similar rhetoric of Internet-saturated future was used also by Marjut Lauristin, Estonia's former secretary of social affairs, in the 1995 Interstading conference. In her presentation she emphasized the importance of Internet and computer literacy for Baltic countries. According to her, via Internet former Soviet nations can shift themselves to the center of things - bridge the gap created by 50 years of Soviet rule, and join the community of Western nations. It is as if youngsters of today, at home in the data-world, will give the nation the modern face needed for its successful marketing on international scale.

The discourses of Lauristin and Heinonen postulate two protagonists, namely, Nation (Estonia/Finland) and International Community (European Union, Western developed countries, financial power centers, etc). These ideological points of reference are posed unproblematically as entities with seemingly solid positions: Internet, again, is posed as the channel through which the nation as protagonist can overcome burdens of space - even time and history.

These models picture information highway as a post-local equivalent of L. Frank Baum's famous Yellow Brick Road outlined in the *The Wizard of Oz*. The long and winding road full of surprises and challenges leads to the gleaming and magical Emerald City. Once there, the city's gouvemur, a powerful wizard, can give the travelers just what they are lacking: brains, courage and a trip to Kansas - or progress, access, and presence in the "heart of action" - I find this parallel to imaginary lands of Oz quite appropriate, since when discussing Net space we are discussing a non-space which is constantly conceptualised through different fantasy-saturated schemas and spatial metaphors.

Even if the info highway surpasses geographical boundaries, the national, economic and cultural ones are unlikely to be effaced. When former centers of political and economic power are shifting radically in the age of globalization, multinational flows of capital, migrancy and media saturated cultures, nation states are not crumbling down, but seeking new alliances. European Union, for example, can be seen as an attempt to create an economic and political alliance linked ideologically to somewhat imposed discourses of "our European identity and culture"

Gaining concrete political power in the Union is rather difficult for Finland, a small eastern-Nordic country currently overcoming serious recession and suffering from mass unemployment. In this situation Internet is, in the rhetoric of Heinonen and the like, pictured as the pass to future. Since Finns are already among the leading nations in using Internet per capita, we have fair chances in the promised future situation, a world communicating through Internet, where Finland would - unlike in the EU - be over-represented. The chain of thought is overly national: our children will be the troops fighting for nation's space on the Net - Net equaling here the center; both the Yellow Brick Road and Emerald City. This rhetoric was well put to words by Blue Wings, magazine of flight company Finnair, promoting Finnish companies and culture:

*"The Internet is one of the main promoters of the Finns' internationalisation. Communicating through the Internet and by e-mail comes naturally to the young. . . . Johonnesdahl (representative of Telecom Finland) admits that it gives national pride a boost to know that Finland is first in several sectors in telecommunications technology and internationally recognised as a pioneer. In Germany, for example, the level of e-mail use is only what it was in Finland at the end of the 80s. "*³

I argue for a need to rethink these issues of nationalism and reorganization of periphericity, for it leads both to mystification of new information technologies, and enables political manipulation. As no one knows what Internet will be in 10 years, and rare politicians seem to have any grasp of it even today, predestining the medium as tomorrow's ground is rather naive. It helps to avoid focusing on more graspable socio-economical issues, as well as political aspects of Net culture. For me it is clear that the center of things in terms of power is certainly not to be found from the Net, or the EU for that matter. Capital might not have a home country, but it neither is floating somewhere - it is tightly bound to corporate structures focusing increasingly in the fast developing economies of Eastern Asia. Centers are economic ones; although they are perhaps more diffuse, less bound to national boundaries, they are no less defined.

The Wizard of Oz, one of the icons of Americana, brings us to the often posed question of which culture is the culture that goes most global, which language is the language of globalization and of the info highway, where does Internet or Microsoft originate? To make things a bit more complicated: if Internet and the "global scene" mediated through it are equaled with the "We-the new frontier (the way out for countries with former strong alliances to Soviet Union) what does it mean that power (equaling money) in "the West" is increasingly coming from Asia?

Again, the rhetoric of Internet as progress, emphasizing technology and techno-fantasies in stead of questions concerning uses or contexts, is mainly profiting corporations. After all, machines do come from somewhere to schools, and in schools children get socialized to using them - and this increases consumption on the home market. Internet is a commercial zone with its 24-hour shops and pay per minute connections.

To make a brief parallel, Frank Baum, the author of *The Wizard of Oz*, made his career in an overtly commercial branch, designing window displays. From 1897 on he edited a pioneer professional magazine *Show Window*; and in 1900 his book *The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows* gave in-depth advice in creating fascinating scenes in shop windows in order to attract the interest and will to shop of a passer-by. Window displays, these wonderlands of consumer goods, were built, according to Baum's concept, with electric lights, bright colors and colored glass.⁴

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the wizard using all these spectacular devices to create illusion of power is revealed as a charlatan, whose power only comes from the fact that the people of Emerald City blindly believe in it. Dorothy and Toto the dog can return home to Kansas only with the help of her will power. The moral of the story is that it is no authority, but individual enterprise, that makes the difference - and there is no place like home, however mesmerizing the technocolored fantasy lands might seem at first glance.

In the discourses of Heinonen and Lauristin, Dorothy's have taken over the scene. Private enterprise is still the key word, but motivation behind it is articulated as "the nation's benefit". As children will be educated in computing from an early age, they have better changes in the job-market, and with computer literate staff Finnish corporations will have better positions in international competition [future is here assumed as being one of national companies in stead of more hybrid forms of capital]. Free to surf between the assumed center of things and home, these subjects are given the utopian task to reorganize space and power, indeed, to shift Kansas a whole lot closer to the Emerald City.

1. <http://www.minedu.fi/OPM.html>
2. In the ministry's program "Finland Into an Information Society; more than 130 million FMK (\$25 m) are reserved solely for purchasing new machines to comprehensive and secondary schools, practical colleges and universities. Meanwhile, 1,5 MFMK (\$300 000) is reserved for further education of teachers responsible for the actual computer-aided teaching on daily basis, and around 20 MFMK are reserved for developing new computer-aided methods of teaching

As computers will be purchased within two years, by the time the contents and outlines of teaching will be even somewhat clear and teachers will have had basic education in computing and new teaching methods, the machines will already be outdated, and new purchases will be inevitable. Instead of first planning the strategies and then executing the plans, all should be done simultaneously. It is as if the feeling of being left behind from the train of progress vocalised in the ministry's memorandum could be corrected through immediate investments. See <http://www.minedu.fi/tietostrategia/>

3. Hannu Virtanen, "Spreading the Net for a Wider Web," *Blue Wings* Aug -Sept. 1997, 53.
4. Anne Friedberg, *Shopping Around-Cinema and the Postmodern*. University of California Press, 1993, 66.