

Crisis in the Post-industrial Age: Welcome to Role-play

By [Sergey A. Stroev](#)

Global Research, October 31, 2009

12 April 2007

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Already in the second half of the past century such insightful thinkers as Daniel Bell and Alvin Toffler discerned the beginnings of the transition from the industrial to the information level of social development. By the end of the 20th century and especially today this awareness has become almost universal. The question is now not whether the information society is real, but rather how to define its still forming structure, what are the contradictions that determine the dynamics of its development.

With the development of productive forces, labor productivity reaches a level at which the needs of the society in real industrial products can be met by a smaller proportion of the working members of this society. The labor reserves that are left unengaged are distributed between services and information production. As a result, the production of information increases drastically. However, at a very early stage of information society, when the old industrial paradigms of public consciousness held undivided sway, the information was seen primarily as a system of technologies, an applied science for increasing production. Therefore, the increase in the volume of information, brought about by the influx of labor force, resulted in the increase of technological knowledge, including the information production itself. There was a typical loop of positive feedback – a powerful mechanism of self-empowerment, leading to an explosion, which within a few years revolutionized the world civilization in almost all its aspects.

Any development, arising from contradictions and instability, in turn, itself gives rise to new contradictions, the preconditions of a new crisis, the resolving of which is a source of further development. That is why the main attention should be paid not to the already discovered opportunities determining a current process, but to the restrictions and contradictions maturing within this process, to the crisis looming in the background of current trends. Only such an analysis makes sense for the prediction of the future trajectory of development and, consequently, maximizes of the benefit of this knowledge. As for the linear approximation of current processes, it does not only lead to confusion, but creates an illusion of an imminent disaster. For example, a well-known “catastrophic” prediction of this kind was that cities would be destroyed under the horse manure, the amount of which was supposed to increase indefinitely with the development of the only then-known horse transport. Now this prediction seems ludicrous, but exactly the same kind of catastrophic predictions are made today.

So, what are the crisis phenomena, maturing within the observable developments of the society? Of course, we are far from pretending to give the full picture of crisis prerequisites. On the contrary, we intend to consider only some of them, which most attracted our attention, leaving others outside of this work.

As noted above, within the previous industrial paradigms of thinking that corresponded to the then level of productive forces, information was treated from an instrumental perspective and understood as a kind of knowledge valuable for a particular practice, in most cases, for production. In other words, information was considered mainly as an industrial technology. With the transition to a new type of civilization this view was overturned. Information has been regarded as a self-sufficient value, independent of its applicability in the manufacturing process.

It is pertinent in this context to trace the development of the word “information”. The root of this Latin word is the same as in the word “form”. In accordance with the ideas, going back to Aristotle, a thing is composed of form and matter, and matter is understood as something structureless and featureless. The entire structure of a thing lies in its form. Information is the characteristic of a form. In modern science, information is understood as the reciprocal of the entropy, that is, a measure of the structural organization of matter and variations in its distribution from absolute uniformity. Accordingly, the record of information reflects no more than any non-random reflection of one non-uniformity in another non-uniformity. For example, the reflection of geometric and color unevenness of a surrounding landscape in the uneven exposure of a film, or in the uneven distribution of graphite flakes in the fibers of a sheet of paper containing a pencil-made textual description of this landscape.

This new meaning of the word “information” is noteworthy, in that it actually takes the problem beyond the consideration of the meaning of this information. If within the industrial modernist paradigm information is understood as a kind of knowledge, now it has found a kind of independence from meaning. Meaning is now transferred into the domain of purely subjective and even arbitrary interpretations. On the other hand, information has become an objective fact, “the thing-in-itself”, which can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways depending on the context and the aims of the interpreter.

Such an understanding of information in the cultural and civilization terms reflects the postmodern idea that the world is nothing but a text, but devoid of the author’s intention and giving the reader an unrestricted freedom of interpretation. Accordingly, if within the modernist culture a linguistic sign stands for and points to an object, in the postmodern culture it means only itself. Language is now presented not as a tool for empirical knowledge of the “objective reality” and sharing knowledge about it, but only as a kind of game in which words are defined only in relation to other words. A whole set of such signs forms a network of units, intersecting and branching, but closed on the cycle of self-definitions. It is essentially a giant tautology. Accordingly, the exchange of words is nothing more than playing signs defined only in relation to other signs, and completely unrelated to whatever knowledge of reality, transcendent to the language.

Of course, such a postmodern interpretation of the language as a play on words, autonomous from any meaning, can be seen as an exaggerated metaphor, smacking of a desire of somewhat eccentric culture experts to shock the reading public. However, it reflects a very real crisis. In fact, quite serious researchers, very far from postmodern epatage, note that the focus is now on encryption technology, increasing the volume of information and, especially, the development of its communication, i.e. the engineering and management of information. At the same time, the question of the content of this information, its meaning, is driven to the periphery of their interests. By and large, the rapid and complex motion of the ever increasing flows of information is regarded as a socioforming and self-worth phenomenon, regardless of the presence or absence of whatever substantive meaning in these flows. The main thing is to establish the process of

communication, which becomes the source of the emergence and growth of a dynamic net social structure. The social role and importance of information exchange displays the increasing invariance as against its content.

The famous French traditionalist thinker Rene Guenon, who presented the most detailed and systematic characterization of the crisis of modern civilization, noted that one of the main manifestations of this crisis is the growing dominance of the quantitative characteristics over qualitative ones. Guenon analyzed the reality of his day – the reality of late industrial society, approaching the limits of its development. He did not live to witness either the information revolution, or the emergence of postmodernism. Nevertheless, the characteristics of civilization crisis, pointed out by him, did not lose their importance; their relevance even grew several times during the transition to a postindustrial society. Virtually all the aspects of socially significant existence manifest the tendency for the accelerating growth of their quantitative characteristics, given the erosion and decay of their qualitative component. Moreover, as Jean Baudrillard aptly noted, the loss of the meaning of the process does not stop the process, but rather increases its effectiveness: “Everything that exists continues to function, even if its *raison d’être* disappeared long ago. It continues to operate with the complete indifference to its own content. And the paradox is that this operation does not suffer from this loss, but, rather, becomes more sophisticated. ”

An example of this is modern science, or, rather, scientific activity. The number of scientific publications is increasing exponentially. As a result of this limitless growth the possibilities of generalization and analysis of the information volume fall. Hence, the reduced level of generality, division and fragmentation of the world picture and the ever narrowing scope of specialization. However, it is this narrow specialization, the transformation of a scientist to a technology specialist using several methods in the narrow field of research, that has dramatically improved the efficiency of generating new scientific evidence and, accordingly, the number of publications. Here we see essentially the same loop of positive feedback. While the 18th and 19th c. science (up to the philosophical level) was basically the practice of analyzing a limited number of empirical facts and observations, the modern science has become in fact the technology of manufacturing facts. Their analysis, and, in particular on the philosophical and ideological planes, is relegated beyond the scientific activity and left to the domain of “speculations”. But even if we bear in mind the level of special scientific theories (more special and less relevant to the pretentious notion of “scientific theory”), rather than philosophical and ideological levels, here, too, we observe a cardinal paradigm shift. What was valuable for the previous classical science was theory, considered as a step to understanding the world and its laws. The modern post-Kuhn science defines scientific truth as an agreement of a scientific community, that is, considers it not in relation to the subject of scientific knowledge, but to the social communication of this scientific community.

The collapse of scientific world picture, of the authority of theory and the cult of accumulating “objective facts” as a self-sustaining activity still remains in the framework of positivism, that is, the modernist concept, though already reflecting its decline and the crisis of modernist paradigm in general. However, the crisis, generated by the implementation of this concept, becomes a source of a post-modern coup, already denying the very notion of the “objective fact”. Indeed, as any intellectual content in a scientific work is emasculated, this work is increasingly becoming a formal sign (or a stream of formal signs) signifying, in accordance with the paradigms of postmodernism, only itself. If truth is only an agreement of the scientific community, then a scientific fact is what this community recognizes as a fact that under the currently adopted internal rules of social interaction. And a scientific

article is also only a formal sign, denoting its rating under the arbitrary and conventional rules of social interaction of this community, and not correlating with any transcendent reality in relation to this social interaction.

Thus, we can view the modern (and future) scientific community not as a community based on the idea of knowing the objective world and penetrating into the mysteries of existence, not even as a community, formed as a result of the social division of labor. We can view it as a communicative community that has developed around a specific information channel, almost invariant to the content going through this channel of information. In other words, the scientific community is essentially a subculture. If we imagine a role-playing game of a sufficient scale and level, in the framework of which a science is modeled, then this gaming scientific community would not be qualitatively different in its principles of operation from the community of “real” scientists. And the academic training in universities can be safely attributed to the element of entourage adopted within the framework of the social game-playing, at the moment still considered mandatory for the participation in this game.

The scientific community has been taken here only as an example. All the above line of reasoning can be repeated for almost any other social community, and in most cases, even with more justification. This, however, is a simple consequence of post-industrialism. When only modest labor costs are required to meet the needs of the society in real material products and services, everything else becomes play-time, that is, activities, obviously optional, conditional, virtual and invented, but allowing to maintain the social structure and control. If we assess this game as not too exciting, not too interesting, and certainly not creative, we shouldn't forget that it is a simulacrum of the old industrial world, where labor was a necessity. In other words, the vast majority of the boring aspects of contemporary social meta-game are no more than the flip side of its realism. It is easy to understand for everyone who has seen the Wachowski brothers' “Matrix” or watched the play of economic models in live action role-playing games.

So, let us fix a few important points. The flow of information on network channels is a necessary condition for the development of communication. Communication, in turn, is the organizing factor for the network societies that have acquired obvious features of hangouts or subcultures. The specific content circulating on these communicative channels of information to a certain extent affects the identity of a network community. However, this content is absolutely irrelevant in terms of its primary functions, it just provides the prerequisites for sociality as such in an environment where work has ceased to be objectively necessary and has lost this function. This, of course, is to be understood as a model simplification. A certain amount of labor will always be necessary for life support, at least in the form of automatic technology control, but the volume of this really socially necessary labor is rapidly declining. It is in this sense that labor “disappears”, and the volume of it, which is really needed, can no longer provide social occupation. The unoccupied society is a threat to stability, it is explosive. Only a very few individuals have the inner freedom to apply the opened vast ocean of free time to creative self-development. The overwhelming majority of individuals are principally incapable of self-development, and being left to themselves, undergo rapid desocialization and marginalization, becoming a threat to the existence of civilization as such, but primarily – to the social groups holding the privileged positions, i.e. for the stability of the elites.

That is why, partly consciously and partly spontaneously, a system appears, which somehow organizes and regulates the being of the masses, left without the socializing effects of labor.

This system includes two main contours – the entertainment industry and imitation of work. These contours are interrelated and support each other. Imitation of labor to some extent serves as a fuse against the satiety from entertainment, sets measure and limits to it. Entertainment and leisure remove tension from the monotony of the imitation of work. The link between these contours is money, correlating the measure of affordable entertainment with the measure of participation in the imitation of work.

It is important to understand that modern money is not the money in the classical sense. Classical money is a means of exchange of one product to another, which determines the correspondence of their value to human labor socially necessary for their production. In today's society money is virtual. It serves not as an equivalent of labor, materialized in a product or service, satisfying a particular need, but as a reward for the involvement in social plays.

Modern money is a tidbit, which exists only to impart the appeal of gambling to the social interaction carried out according to conventional rules. It thus becomes not the equivalent of materialized labor, but the equivalent of the involvement in social interaction or the equivalent of the flow of information that comes through social interaction and the ability to handle these flows according to the informally set rules. The vast majority of individuals in the post-industrial civilization do not really produce, but just perform a social whirl. They run about, hang out, distributing and consuming information, forcing upon others behavioral patterns and attitudes (created not by them), to get those others to part with their money, received, however, not for work, but for the distribution of similar patterns. Programs breed programs, and the behavior of most human individuals is determined only by the interference of random sets of primitive commercial programs embedded in their brain, which will soon be superseded by others.

As is known, the power of the 'carrot' is significantly more effective than the power of the 'stick', because it motivates a subject in authority to seek approaches to powerful influence, while the use of the stick leaves this motivation beyond him. Money is exactly the carrot, which serves as an incentive to engage people in the social structure of the game based on pre-defined rules. In some cases, however, it can also be used as a stick, that is, the mechanism of coercion to participate in these games. But its purpose is but one – to regulate the vital functions of an individual and give him some scope for his activities in the channel, which are, nonetheless, easily regulated by a few templates.

It would however be a mistake to regard this situation as a conspiracy of a limited group of individuals united in a secret organization against the rest of the humanity. A network society is devoid of any clearly defined hierarchical verticals, any powerful influence at the top. It is fundamentally a horizontal interaction. However, as long as people are qualitatively unequal in their abilities, their interaction in the network is asymmetric. But in most cases supply and demand do find each other. Indeed, the maximally primitivized "mass culture" of pop-music is perfect for manipulators, because it organizes primitive psyche, making it easier to manage. A simple message produces a simple reflex. It is highly functional in terms of management. But, on the other hand, pop music reflects the aspirations of those for whom it is intended. For them the release from cultural education, imposed by the society to restrain violence and promote personal development, is really a liberation. They have pleasure in its purest form, unencumbered by culture, unsustainable for them. They are used to natural instincts and desires and enjoy the corresponding level of language, humor, music, watching naked women on TV screens, etc. They reject any emotional, let alone intellectual, constraint. Thus supply and demand meet. Everyone has the freedom to

take is a niche in society, consistent with its nature, and the result satisfies both the elite and the masses.

The essence of effective control is not in exerting force against the wishes of the object of management. It is in the management of these wishes. Social reservations are offered for all tastes, and each takes the one that suits him, from which he will not only try to escape, but will resist any attempts to pull him out. However the “manipulators” themselves occupy a niche that meets their own needs within this system. And in this sense they find themselves within the control of the system just as well.

The information environment is the only the habitat of modern network communities. These communities are extraterritorial; they do not exist in physical space, but in the information one. Of course, certain people that make up these communities have a specific localization in the physical world. But this hardly defines the localization of the nature of their relationships and interactions in the space of information, which increasingly coincides with the social space. With the development of communication, the information space has become independent from the physical one. And with the development of transport and the opening of borders, there began to emerge an inverse relationship. Now, not so much the physical location determines the nature of communication links, as the nature of communication links that can easily adjust to themselves the spatial location of individuals. The extraterritorial centers of power and authority (primarily multinational corporations) outbalance the functions and prerogatives that once belonged to the territorial entities such as nation-states. Belonging to different subcultures now substitutes for national identity. “Scythians”, “elves”, “Jedi” increasingly reveal their existence in population censuses. It is not by chance that that their subjective self-identification is experienced by them as a replacement of an ethnic one. Subcultural communities and parties close themselves to one degree or another in isolated worlds, divided by a mutual misunderstanding, which previously separated civilizations far apart from one another.

Once the social existence of human communities has shifted from physical space to the information one, many coordinates of existence changed. Previously, information about some event correlated with this event and could be evaluated as true or false. Now the situation has become different. One or another item of information is an event in itself. Now “to be” means first of all not exist in the physical world, but in the information space. For example, how can one organize a rally? Just make it look mass when shown on television. How mass this rally is in “reality” is not important. In fact, it is precisely what it appears on the screen. In reality it will be seen by hundreds, maybe thousands of eyes. On the screen it will be seen by hundreds of thousands of eyes. Its social effect will be exactly as it appears in the information space, rather than in the physical one.

Hence the conclusion: the distinction between information and misinformation has disappeared. The truth or falsity of information cannot be evaluated given the transition of social existence to the information world. In the postmodern world a linguistic sign refers only to itself, and the meaning of the text are not in this text, but in the context of its reading. The same can be said about information. Its existence is a self-sufficient entity. Information about an event is this event itself. What is left outside media coverage does not matter for social life and can be considered as not having occurred. Conversely, if something is appointed by a wave of information as fact, the effect of this information will not depend on whether it happened in physical reality. Media coverage in itself has made it a fact. There exists only the flow of information, which forms social consciousness. If two opposite flows of information clash, “truth” becomes a category of probability, and the

balance of probabilities will be determined by the ratio of the intensity of these flows.

It is well-known that being determines consciousness. Being in the information network society determines the appropriate forms of consciousness. Large streams of data require the rapid switch-over of attention. If each message is read thoughtfully and carefully, we have neither enough time nor mental strength to cope with the requirements expected by modern society. Attention deficits, low capacity for any long-term focus are characteristic features of contemporary children and adolescents, yet they have their reverse side in the ability to switch quickly and perform several different things at once. This is natural adaptation to modern social life and social communication. The consciousness, adapted to interruption and switching over, can easily cope with constant interruptions of a movie by commercials, but absolutely cannot stomach the measured literary style of Russian classics. It comes to ridiculous lengths, when a modern young individual can read classical literature only watching TV at the same time. Consciousness, adapted to constant interruptions and switching over, is not adapted to their absence. It's enough to look at old Soviet newspapers and contemporary ones to assess the gap between the old and the new method of information perception. An old Soviet newspaper has an editorial on the whole sheet. Who is going to read this editorial? Modern "advanced" young at best react to this form of presentation of information with a stereotypical humorous commentary: "Couldn't cope, 'cause there are too many letters". Now feature articles have literally become a medley of all sorts of short messages, colored collages, photographs and pieces of articles that refer to the following pages. Modern newspapers are not for reading, and for a look-see.

The same style is everywhere. A typical representative of today is focused on rapid and superficial browsing of information. All that requires concentration and attention is rejected. A modern man is not inclined to think; he either grasps the idea, or skips it and goes to the next. There's no time to stop and go into something. The flow of information is moving too fast. The speed of perception and response to information are inversely proportional to the depth and criticality of its perception. The openness to assimilation of the new has its reverse side in the rapid purge of memory reserves from the old.

Such a man represents a modern mass type. He adapts quickly, grasps easily, and catches useful fractions of information in a continuous flow of information noise. He quickly adapts to the new and is not burdened by the load memory of the old. He is dynamic, mobile, and communicative, never hitched upon anything, does not complicate his life with philosophical questions and deep feelings, is not tied down to any place, family, permanent work, or circle of communication.

Such a man is perfectly manageable. His picture of the world is fragmented and eclectic. His desires are formed of the current fashion and he does not reflect on their causes. His constant purging of memory does not permit him to compare and understand the medium- and long-term development prospects. The lack of propensity for deep analysis and grasping detail makes his views and beliefs a mere reflection of a current wave of information. In short, such a person can be easily completely reformatted, beginning with his world views and beliefs, and ending with his taste for clothes and household habits.

However, his ultimate manageability is combined with his own subjective feeling of freedom, perceived as freedom of implementation of all desires and freedom from internal restrictions and stereotypes. In essence, a man of this type is a typical product of the postmodern: devoid of the inner core and unity of style, arbitrarily eclectic, completely dependent on the external context.

But since there are managed and manipulated ones, there are also managers and manipulators. It is clear that the latter are people of the opposite type, possessing – within certain limits – independence of information flows and the will to control them. These are people who have an inner core and resistance to the influence of the external information. They are reflective and always think about the cause they have of this or that desire, and critical enough to see that the movement of information waves is not simply a natural element, but has internal mechanisms, which can be controlled.

In a certain sense we can speak about the emergence of a new class. In contrast to the power of feudal lords, based on the might of the sword, and the power of the bourgeoisie, based on the power of capital, the power of the newly emerging caste is based on the same source as the power of the priesthood – in the possession of the power of information (which can be converted into money and, consequently, ownership, and resource of forceful impact). However, for the classical magicians, Brahmins and Druids, information is a kind of sacred secret knowledge passed down from generation to generation, an incorruptible and static treasured tradition. Conversely, for the new ruling class (for which Alexander Bard and Jan Zoderkvist introduced the term “netocracy”) information is not fixed knowledge, but a dynamic flow, which determines the structure of social communications. No specific knowledge is a source of power (because in this era any recorded knowledge becomes instantly obsolete and loses its relevance in terms of management capacity), but the control over the movement of an information flow. This control involves the dialectical unity of two opposite sides. On the one hand, a certain detachment and non-involvement in this flow. On the other hand, the possibility of an on-line mode of critical analysis, the extraction of particles of correct and useful information in the information noise, making effective solutions on the basis of this analysis and modulating the information flow in line with them, directing it to the desired effect for themselves and thus forming the behavior of network communities. In short, the problem of power in the modern world is largely, if not completely, reduced to the effective management of incoming and outgoing information, to the ability to resist and control the information and disinformation effects, and to the capacity to successfully generate these effects.

A certain paradox lies in the fact that the creators of virtual matrices, for their part, themselves stay within the framework of these matrices. There inevitably emerges a problem, well articulated in Viktor Pelevin’s novel, “Generation” P “”: “But how do we <...> know in what we should involve others? Of course, there is intuition. <...> But whence comes some particular trend? Who invents it, if everyone in the world – and of this I’m sure – is just trying to catch and sell it, <...> or guess and print it? <...> On the one hand, it appears that one is making a false panorama of life for others (like in a museum they make images of a battle, and a viewer sees real sand, worn-out boots and cartridges, while tanks and explosions are painted on the wall), following only his presentiment of what will sell and what will not. He and other members of the exhausting advertising business intrude into the visual-information environment and so try to make other souls part with their money. The aim is simple – to earn a tiny fraction of money. On the other hand, this money is needed to try and get closer to the subjects of this make-belief panorama. In fact, it is as stupid as to attempt to escape into a picture painted on the wall”.

It is therefore evident that the key difference between netocracy and consumeriat (if we use Bard and Zoderkvist’s terminology) is not participating in the creation of a virtual matrix (since everyone is involved in its creation, in one way or another). The essential difference is that netocrats realize the virtuality of this matrix and the conventionality of its laws, and so

constantly adjust and rebuild it in conformity with their tastes and interests (“Do not try to bend the spoon. Just understand that there is no spoon”). The consumeriat is oriented to consumption of the finished product and, and, by contrast, does not penetrate into the “internal kitchen” of the game. It is therefore doomed to play by the rules, which are laid down by others. This situation is very familiar to people who have an experience of participating in role-playing games. In such games there is almost always a manifest quality gap between those who play against each other under a proposed script and those who look for vulnerable places in the proposed model and play to change the script itself, thus involving others in their own game.

If we turn to the political realities and glance at the current state of Russia’s opposition, we see remarkably similar processes in both the “left” camp and the “right” camp, as well as among the “moderates” and among the “radicals”. Different people have chosen different roles and even different realities according to their aesthetic preferences and temperaments, and are often not in contact with each other. These parallel realities are amazingly diverse in terms of entourage, but they are strikingly similar in their virtual nature. In terms of external control it is not that important what particular game the subjects of control play: whether they represent the third consecutive “United Communist Party of the Soviet Union”, unembarrassed by the absence of the Soviet Union itself, or whether they are reviving “the age-old Slavic Neopaganism” based on Mr. Asov’s fantasy, or whether they divide St. Petersburg into “Cossack villages”, or whether they decide who is the rightful heir to the throne of Russia according to the laws of the Russian Empire, or whether they honestly and openly go into the woods to play elves and goblins.

The substantial boundary today is not between Nationalists and Communists, and not between “radicals” and “conformists”. The essential boundary is between those who are satisfied and mindlessly consume the proposed script of role-playing games and those who, aware of the virtual political space and trying to understand the structure of the simulacrum, are learning not to play against the “enemies” (which is specified in the script), but to intercept the script itself .

Translated from Russian by Helen V. Shelestiuk

Original text: <http://russoc.kprf.org/Doctrina/Simulakr.htm>

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Sergey A. Stroeve](#), Global Research, 2009

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Sergey A. Stroeve](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are

acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.
For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca