Through a Teleprinter Darkly

Evolution has not ceased and the wheel of the world may even be turning faster. Even those with no eschatological preconceptions might ponder the unifying influences of modern telecommunications, and wonder whether we are not one step further on the unitary path which leads only from whence we came. Kant gave a neat proof that, 'There exists either in, or in connection with world – either as part of it, or as the cause of it – an absolutely necessary being' (this result has been considerably extended (particularly by University Computing Departments who really misinterpret Kant in demonstrating that the supreme being must be a CDC-7600 or other such mythical beast)). Unfortunately he also gave a neat proof of the opposite assertion (this is Kant's fourth antimony (Sb for short)) as a completely unbiased philosopher should, and any expert in first-order predicate calculus will inform you that this implies the truth of all assertions (empirical findings suggest that this is so – our model of the universe is conditioned by what we have *not* observed (however it is not obvious that when we have observed everything the world will come to an end (it will probably do so long before))).

I must admit that these musings came into my mind (again, without raising the question of its existence) when the teleprinter was first installed in the corner of my office – 'servus sevorem Dei', I said to myself whilst waiting for the GPO engineers to instal my Datel 200 modem, 'you will intercede for me and together we shall solve Bessel's equation in double-precision and calculate π to thirty decimal places' (3.14159265358979323 8462643383279 – very useful if you are marooned on a desert island). Three weeks later, when the GPO had been, my musings were cut short by the coarse realities of twenty-second response times and frequent system crashes – my deity not only had feet of clay but, at £8 an hour, it was clearly a religion for Kings not princelings.

However, times have changed – the cost of hardware has dropped whilst that of liveware has risen, and the promised networks, databanks, reactive responders, and other such delectables, all now exist – I dreamt I was in heaven with my ASR33. However, it is fascinating to note that although the ontogenesis of a time-shared computer is a single central processor, this togetherness is deliberately hidden from the users – the ego is lulled into lonely isolation unaware of the id (or operating system in the words of the modern mystics) through which flows the life force of the entire race. No company offering time-shared computer services has yet taken advantage of the communion possible between all users of the machine (probably because of the GPO's rigidly enforced monopology as a common carrier – even Western society has its taboos).

At first sight the implications of such communion may seem absurd – each user of the system wishes to act independently and interaction between them is undesirable to say the least. For example, an engineer at one terminal and a psychologist at another may not want the effect –

Gaines, B. R. (1970). Through a teleprinter darkly. Behavioural Technology 1, 15-16.

CONSOLE I	CONSOLE II
LET MASS = 89.7	MEN ARE ALL ALIKE
LET ACC = 3	*IN WHAT WAY*
DID YOU KNOW THAT MEN ARE ALL ALIKE	THEY'RE ALWAYS BUGGING US ABOUT SOMETHING OR THE OTHER
YES, LET K = 5	*CAN YOU THINK OF A SPECIFIC EXAMPLE*
PRINT K*MASS*ACC	WELL, MY BOYFRIEND MADE ME COME HERE
HAVE YOU A BOYFRIEND	*WHAT IS 5 TIMES 89.7 TIMES 3*
NO, PRINT K*MASS*ACC	ABOUT 1350, HE SAYS I AM DEPRESSED
1350.0000	*I AM SORRY TO HEAR YOU ARE DEPRESSED*
THAT IS NOT CORRECT	IT'S TRUE. I AM UNHAPPY
ARE YOU DEPRESSED	*THAT IS NOT CORRECT*
YES, THERE MUST BE SOME DECIMAL PLACES	NO, SOMETIMES I AM HAPPY
I AM SORRY TO HEAR YOU ARE DEPRESSED	*WHAT IS 5 TIMES 89.7 TIMES 3*
	THERE MUST BE SOME DECIMAL PLACES
OH, SHUT UP!	OH, SHUT UP!
TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR MASS	*TELL ME MORE ABOUT YOUR BOYFRIEND*

In small doses, with only one or two terminals involved, the effect is comprehensible and annoying. However, as is usual in this world, it is quantity not quality which is important, and many of the more obtuse problems which now create some difficulties, such as semantic information retrieval and inductive logic, might be solved quite trivially when really large networks come into play. If fifty percent of the world's population are connected through terminals to one network, then the questions from one location may be answered not by access to an internal data-base but by routing them to users elsewhere – who better to answer a question on abstruse Chinese history than an abstruse Chinese historian.

Although with a few minor software modifications and the implementation of a world network one has not only solved all the more difficult problems in computer applications but has also brought the human race back to its primal Jungian state of racial experience, there are some minor difficulties remaining. The backing store of the computer has become a large array of human brains with good storage capacity and an overall acceptable rate of retrieval. More importantly the peripherals of the computer have become human eyes and ears scattered across the globe. However, although the computer is not subject to individual human limitations, having a racial consciousness, it is restricted in its knowledge to human racial experience. The severity of this restriction cannot as yet be evaluated and depends on certain inconclusive empirical findings related to the whereabouts of the moon when no one is looking at it.