Alternate Routes

A Journal of Critical Social Research

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Amanda McCarthy
Siomonn Pulla
Jeffrey Shantz

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Editorial Policy/Call For Papers

Alternate Routes (AR) is a refereed multi-disciplinary journal published annually by graduate students in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University Ottawa, Canada, K1S 5B6, altroutes@lists.carleton.ca. As a peer reviewed journal, *AR* provides a forum for debate and exchange among North American and International graduate students. We are interested in receiving papers written by graduate students (or coauthored with faculty), regardless of university affiliation.

The editorial emphasis of the journal is on the publication of critical and provocative analyses of theoretical and substantive issues. We welcome papers on a broad range of topics and encourage submissions which advance or challenge theoretical questions and contemporary issues. We also welcome commentaries and reviews of recent publications, works in progress and personal perspectives.

Alternate Routes is currently seeking submissions for Volume 18, 2002. Papers should be submitted double-spaced and in triplicate, following the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing system, keeping endnotes to a minimum. Please see our website for a style-guide.

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Perspectives

Millennialism and Y2K Cultures

Mike Patterson

Abstract

This paper explores responses to the year 2000, particularly the Y2K
computer bug. It consists of participatory action fieldwork and some
short interviews on the subject of Y2K. The results are a bricolage of
interviews with rural and urban peoples living with different perspec-
tives of the urban mainstream IT (Information Technology) culture, and
supporting theory, along with my comments and quotes from specialists
on the Y2K. The paper shows how peoples' expectations of the Y2K are
informed by their experience, and also how they will be affected by
Y2K, in one way or another, no matter where they live.

Theory of my Methodology

I am intrigued at that place where people (Native/non-Native) meet tech-
nology, as in the title to a previous paper, 'Where the Forest Meets the
Highway,' to see how Information Technology and people now feed off
and into each other. Wanting to do some more field work, I thought of
looking at local people and the Y2K. I live above a pizza shop in a huge
old boarding house (formerly Foster's Boarding House, ca. 1860?) by the
tracks in Valley, Ontario, a town of about 30-40 minutes drive south of
Ottawa, with some people I know well. Their stories of the Ice Storm of
97[1] began to blend in with ideas and stories about the coming Y2K.

I began with a fundamental question: Does one's closeness to the land
(and winter) make one more vulnerable to the vagaries of IT such as
Y2K? Or is the Y2K really an urban yuppie phenomenon?

I used informal interviews as a type of theoretical sampling where "the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where (and when) to find them," a process of data collection 'controlled by the emerging theory' (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45). I ended up with 'slices of data,' in an open inquiry with 'no limits to the techniques of data collection' (I also use newspapers and TV in an attempt at triangulation, see Albas and Albas 1998: 133), resulting in 'a variety of slices of data that would be bewildering if we wished to evaluate them as accurate evidence for verifications, but are useful in generating theory as this variety "is highly beneficial, because it yields more information on categories than any one mode of knowing (technique of collection)" (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 65-66).

I also used this participant action research as a learning tool for my own techniques in sociology. This paper therefore, is also an autobiographical narrative, based on notes that include everything in my 'field,' including influences of professors, classmates and friends.Charmaz and Mitchell argue that, beyond discourse:

> …there is also merit in audible authorship. We speak of the writer's voice from the standpoint of ethnographers committed to the vocation of using all we can of our imperfect human capacities to experience and communicate something of others' lives. We go and see and sometimes join; we ask and listen, wonder and write, and tell our stories, not necessarily in that order. We believe that these simple acts of outward inquiry and inward reflection together with effort and creativity will give us something to say worth of sharing. We do not pretend that our stories report autonomous truths, but neither do we share the cynic's nihilism that ethnography is a biased irrelevancy. We hold a modest faith in middle ground (Charmaz and Mitchell 1997: 194).

Charmaz and Mitchell (1997: 212-213; see also Charmaz and Mitchell, 1998) maintain that "We do ourselves and our disciplines no service by only telling half-tales, by only reporting finished analyses in temperate voice, by suppressing wonder or perplexity or dread." Clarity and truth are more likely found in 'ethnography, (where) the emergent self is

acculturated; it learns the limits of its own power' in a reflexive way This paper is a process, akin to what Mills describes:

> By keeping an adequate file and thus developing self-reflective habits, you learn how to keep your inner world awake. Whenever you feel strongly about events or ideas you must try not to let them pass from your mind, but instead to formulate them for your files and in so doing draw out their implications, show yourself either how foolish these feelings are, or how they might be articulated into productive shape... To maintain a file is to engage in the controlled experience (1959: 197).

These then, are some of my stories with commentary. Fieldnotes are in *italics*; names and place-names are inventions of mine:

> *Early on in my study, Prof. Mop asked me: 'Let me see if I've got this straight... you study the people you live with?' (this because of my last comp in which my situation and locale figured into my bricolage). I suggest that I could be a real fly on the wall above and behind the pizza shop, where people talk about all manner of things including, as of the fall of 99, the Y2K. To survivors of the Ice Storm in January last year, the Y2K takes on a special meaning.*
> *I mention the recent flood of media coverage of Y2K, including one U.S. commercial called Red Alert, which advises people to take part in seminars to learn how to hoard food, build shelters, protect oneself against vigilantes, and boycott the banking system. Prof. Ziggy says 'why don't you tie that into the American white survivalist movement?' Which seems to get everybody excited, and is certainly a tie-in for the Y2K and Millennialism in general.*
> *Back in Valley I ask Zeke if he would be my primary informant and assist in the project, and he agrees, conditional upon him seeing (vetting) and participating in the text.*
> *He wants to record everything, set up a café in the back with microphones and invite people in. I say no, we aren't*

> *allowed to use microphones or video. Disappointed, he pro-*
> *tests that it doesn't say so in the course outline. In the end I*
> *make a case for the fly-on-the-wall, low-tech approach.*

I soon found that living with people and practicing sociology at the same time were not only less than scientific but also hazardous. Soon after recruiting Zeke for the study, I talked to his wife:

> *I ask Zeke's wife Irene, who was the first to suggest a paral-*
> *lel between the Ice Storm and Y2K to me, and who initiated*
> *the idea of a local study on this for academe, if she would*
> *also like to participate in the project.*
> *'No way' she says, 'Leave me out of it.' I say OK but that I*
> *will be 'missing some great quotes,' to which she doesn't*
> *reply. People in the house have been watching the Clinton*
> *thing day and night for weeks now on MSNBC. It is always*
> *on in the pizza shop. I like the theme music…*
> *Before dropping out of the project, Irene angrily did say one*
> *thing while watching the Senate hearings: 'Before you talk*
> *about the Y2K why don't you find out how they can do this to*
> *a president… they can do this to us… soon they'll have a big*
> *chip to do it all.'*

Zeke and Irene's ideas differed as to the value of my study and ways to approach it (if at all), and I was suddenly in a situation where 'the differential social power between researchers and their subjects' problematic in ethnography became an arbiting factor in our complex social relationships, as I could not be 'studying down' (Adler and Adler 1997: 38) friends I had known for 25 years. As with Adler and Adler in their study with neighborhood children, where they found the primary researcher/ subject differential to be their parental authority, I found my 'subjects' constantly questioning me on my methods, validity of my research and what impact it might have on them. I quickly realized that if I was to get an idea of the Y2K, and not succumb to an intensely revealing area of study involving personal relationships, landlord/tenant issues, and moral and ethical questions involved in ethnography in general, I would have to expand my area of research beyond the pizza shop and the house, and learn to keep quiet about it.[2] There was also a problem in that my infor-

mants had had a previous research problem with my university, resulting in unhappy experiences for some of their children. This and other politically charged issues led me to realize I had to try to 'sustain and negotiate a nonpartisan identity' in a politicized setting, as both my status as student and the larger implications of Y2K were seen as political, and I soon found there was no 'middle ground' (Grills 1998: 78) and it would be best to retreat out into the field. I wrote the following in my notes:

I have expanded the scope of my fieldwork, partly because of the problematic nature of living and researching in a family home/work environment. I did not intend on researching the people I was living with, rather I thought to engage in the Y2K project through them, but I see now that any research within such a closed environment tends to take the whole environment into account, i.e. a particular research into attitudes on Y2K, done in a family environment, cannot become less than research into the family as a whole with its attendant rewards and jeopardies for the researched and researcher.

In the end, I found a great deal of information did come through the house and the pizza shop, once I had taken my focus off of it.

The Land as Prophylactic for Yuppie Y2K Fever?

I was soon after given the opportunity to do a survey at a high tech firm regarding their thoughts on the impact of the Y2K. Of the 30 or so employees I emailed, only 2 answered. One response was joking, the other came from the company's CEO:

My concern on Y2K readiness is the 9th day of the 9th month 1999. Apparently several 00s have to turn over at that time and this could be a preview of things to come. My view of what the millennium bug will unveil is a massive loss of data with small repercussions on the day-to-day operation of technology assisted devices. The value of the

> *data will determine the degree of severity in all Y2K situations.*
>
> *I believe that large corporations such as banks, government and consumer-dependant firms will have their act together but face dangers in their suppliers not being compliant. This could cause a slow down within distribution channels and impact on economic growth in the short term.*
>
> *Most of all, I see a lot of valuable time lost dealing with Y2K issues, today and leading up to Jan. 1 year 2000. But I can't see planes, trains and automobiles falling out of the sky unless a huge tornado rampages throughout the globe.*

This was my first response from the urban world on Y2K, and it showed a real fear of loss (data, time, economic growth) that is institutional rather than personal. Granted the respondent was a CEO, but how much of his perception of life as business or economy also inform his fellow workers? My next reaction came in the countryside:

> *Around noon I went to Northville and dropped in to O'Brien's general store. I noticed the book about the Ice Storm prominently displayed for sale. I asked a woman behind the counter, one of the owners in her early 40s, what she though might happen next Jan. with the Y2K. Would it be anything like the Ice Storm, I asked. She looked surprised (I don't think she had thought about it) and said 'I don't know...' and started to back away. I pointed to the cash register and asked if she thought that would work next January. She said 'I don't know' again and appeared a little embarrassed; I noticed that others in the store (a farmer and two younger clerks) pretended not to hear. I went on to say that I was doing a study for Carleton in sociology, and she began backing away as if I was about to rob the store. She looked shocked and taken aback. I said I was trying to get people's ideas on the Y2K, to which she replied 'we'll just have to wait and see,' and beat a hasty retreat.*

Aside from her telling reaction to myself being a sociologist (which is common I suppose), her reaction seemed to me to be indifferent to the

Y2K, as if it were something beyond her ken. At the same time, she did not seem troubled by it so much as an undercover sociologist in her store. I decided then that disclosure was not necessary in this study, and would certainly prove counterproductive in such short exchanges. Her casual attitude toward the Y2K, however, proved to be a theme in the countryside.

I have collected some 35 slices of data like the ones above so far. Twenty were rural responses, 12 were urban and several were unknown (i.e. via the Internet). The rural and urban responses showed big differences from the start (see two slices above). In Zeke's case, there is an understanding of both rural and global (urban) perspectives.

> *Roads are snowed in around here, can't go to class at Carleton, so talk with Zeke. He points to Y2K as another manufactured crisis (like the oil crisis of the late 70s) designed to consolidate power for the powers that be. Media fed mass hysteria to mold the masses. Another millennialist shift in power as the public becomes more aligned on the 'issue.'*

This opinion from the country reflects the city that Zeke and Irene fled 20 years ago. How much of the Y2K is manufactured, a product of media and over-information, something that gets to the heart of urban yuppie culture but misses the countryside? Newspapers and TV report daily on the Y2K; pullout supplements on the issue are common. But do they inform, or just compound speculation? Are readers/viewers excited by learning more about Y2K, or by the excitement of the phenomenon itself as it races across their screens? There are hundreds of Y2K websites on the Net, and the largest, *www.Y2Ktoday.com*, carries some 500 new stories each day. In Canada, the Millennium Report is posted at *www.2000cdn.com,* with 350 links to Y2K sites. These are things that would seem to separate the computer literate urban yuppie and the rural dweller.[3]

Baudrillard writes that "fascination is not dependent on meaning. It is proportional to the disaffection of meaning. It is obtained by neutralizing the message in favor of the medium" (In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities). The media is something which... neutralizes meaning through an excess of diffusion. For example, the media multiply events, 'pushing' the meaning – events no longer have their own space-time; they are

immediately captured in universal diffusion, and there they lose their meanings, they lose their references and their time-space so that they are neutralized. It all goes too quickly and too far, so that (sequences, events, messages) don't have time to return and reflect on themselves, hence to acquire a meaning (Gane 1993: 84). This could be a description of the highly media-led war in Kosovo, where control and release of images is a corporate strategy on both sides, also of the tumble of information on Y2K, now growing at an exponential rate.

I think the media obsession with Y2K can be seen in Baudrillard's 'fascination':

> *Fascination, in my opinion, is what attaches itself to what is disappearing. It is the disappearance of things that fasci-nates us. And for me the media are a place of disappear-ance. It is just as interesting as a place of production or a place of apparition. It is a place of disappearance; it is a place where meaning disappears, where significance, the message, the referent disappear. It is a way of making things circulate so quickly that they are made to disappear. And it fascinates us like a black hole (Gane 1993: 85).*

One could also say that there is a circularity of information imposed by journalism itself, an illusion of truth. As Bordieu points out, "no one reads as many newspapers as journalists... To know what to say, one must know what everyone else has said... This sort of game of mirrors reflecting one another produces a formidable effect of mental closure" (1996: 24) which tends more and more to reflect the journalistically pro-duced direction of a story, which is altered by chance data such as great pictures, or good soundbytes.[4] This is where the original topic (say Y2K) is also 'made to disappear' into a circular system of media production.

In the media and in cyberspace, the entire planet is evolving together, changing and problematizing exponentially as the 'globalization of risk' described by Giddens, continues as "the expanding number of contin-gent events which affect everyone or at least large numbers of people on the planet are made possible through cybercommunications" (1990: 124). At the same time, 'in the tyranny of the here and now' due to media and convergences and expansion of the arts, "a large part of North Amer-ican society now lives exclusively in the present tense... (and) the vast

expansion of the arts (and information) has made consensus much harder to achieve. It's not that we know so much more; it's that what each of us knows is different" (Fulford 1998: D8, D10).

The contrast in urban and rural perception, between the forest (in this case the weather) and the highway can again be seen in two customers who entered the pizza shop:

> *The pizza shop is one big oven with a small counter and ancient diner seats, with old notes and posters on the walls and plate glass windows looking north at the farm over the tracks... I met one customer, a commuter from Ottawa who didn't feel like talking about Y2K but wanted to get home and eat his pizza. Icy roads all the way here. Y2K meant nothing to him. Another customer who works at Canadian Geographic, described the Y2K as a vast expanse of little grains of sand on the beach, each part of the whole and connected like our computer networks, and in the year 2000 a huge tidal wave hits the beach and washes everything away.*

Two more rural responses:

> *I asked a woman at the store down the road what she thought about Y2K. 'I don't know,' she laughed. 'Half the people don't care about it and half or them are scared to death.' I asked her if the Interac would be still up, because nobody carries cash any more, and would the banks be working at all. 'I don't know,' she said. 'Maybe we'll go back to the barter system.'*
>
> *Freezing rain, schools are closed. Zeke, who used to drive the buses back when things were run by small local companies (not the big outfit that has all the business now) complains that things haven't been the same since the ice storm. They have cancelled school 3 times this year because of weather.*
> *'They're wusses,' he says. 'It used to be the schools that called the shots, now it's the bus company. They know they can get the kids to school, but they're afraid they can't get*

> *them home. It's different since the ice storm. They're afraid*
> *they'll get sued if something happens... '*
> *That afternoon I pick up a 15 year old kid hitchhiking back*
> *to Valley in the sleeting rain.*
> *'Like the ice storm' he says as he gets in. 'don't like to walk*
> *in this. I just live over the tracks.'*
> *'I live over the pizza shop,' I say. After a pause I say:*
> *'Damn good pizza.'*
> *'Yeah,' he says. After a minute, he says, 'he gives you a lot.'*
> *I then ask him what he thinks will happen in the year 2000,*
> *will the computers fail, will it be like the ice storm? He*
> *smiles:*
> *'Lots of people talking about that. I don't know. Some people*
> *say it could be the end of the world.'*
> *I say I don't think so and he agrees. I let him off at his home,*
> *a yellow clapboard house by the tracks.*

Sometimes people here describe the Ice Storm as having been a great experience. It brought the community together, made people apprecia- tive of their neighbours, and also brought work to the area which is con- tinuing today. It's not that people in the country are ignorant of computers or the possibilities of Y2K, these things are in the media every day, and in the local papers.[5] It is more, I think, that they have a community and the land to depend upon, whereas the urban Yuppies do not. Most people around here say they will be prepared for Y2K, but not because of Y2K; they are prepared every winter anyway, whatever hap- pens.

> *At the hardware store I ask the manager if he'll still be in*
> *business January 1.*
> *'They're supposed to have it all figured out,' he says, gestur- ing at his terminal at the cash.*
> *'As for my personal opinion...' and he leaves it hanging.*
> *I ask him what he's doing personally, will he put all his*
> *money in a sock? He smiles.*
> *'No, but I've got lots of firewood. I'll take out enough money*
> *and get enough food for a couple of weeks...'*
> *I ask him what he thinks the problem might be.*

'The Hydro,' he says, 'just like with the ice storm. They say they're ready, but...' and he trails off again.
I get the impression he is always ready.

I meet a contractor who built his own house by the river. Heated by 2 wood stoves, he survived the ice storm just fine. His power stayed on most of the time and things were not uncomfortable.
In passing he mentions that 'for that Y2K thing next year, though, I'm going to get a generator...'

Another impression from the city conveys a sense of helplessness. Despite his preparedness, this person could still be stuck in a dangerous situation:

Bell Canada just called to sell me some services. I asked Mr. Raj what he thought about Y2K.
'You know we have a newsletter that says that everything seems to be under control, they have checked and rechecked the system. They say everything will be OK, but you know, in the world of men and mice...On April 9 and Oct. 9 there will be trouble... (I correct him on the latter date)'
I ask him about himself:
'My family, we are going to keep some cash, some groceies, some bottled water, I live on the 27th floor of a building, you know if something goes wrong at midnight, I like to be ready... You can't go out to get milk if the elevators aren't running...'
I buy a monthly answering service.

As for myself, I am dependent upon computers for my livelihood. Y2K makes our vulnerability (those who live and breathe their computers) apparent, as do the following questions about the World Wide Web:

The frailty of these computer systems is becoming more and more apparent. Zeke pointed out recently that the website supporting the Mars probe took a record number of hits, a

> *number that astonished the Net counters. That was some 5*
> *years ago; the latest adventure with an on-line auction by*
> *Victoria's Secret catalogue drew so many hits that the auc-*
> *tion nearly crashed. With his hand Zeke showed the whole*
> *Web shaking. 'That's right,' I said, 'the system was never*
> *designed for this many users, and this is just the beginning.'*
> *'It's the engineers,' said Zeke. 'Like with the Y2K.' The engi-*
> *neers of this ubiquitous personal and global tool can barely*
> *see beyond their noses.*
>
> *How fragile is the Internet? How many users can it sup-*
> *port? How many hits at a time can be supported at any one*
> *site? If you were giving away Bill and Monica Oval Office*
> *videos, with music by Elton John, could any site support the*
> *traffic? Could the Net collapse?*

The Internet collapsing, the Y2K meltdown, are, like a Stock Market dive, results of systems we have created but cannot control. Another monied urban perspective, from the U.S.:

> *Karl dropped in this AM. A Ukrainian in his 40s on disabil-*
> *ity pension, he has been travelling across the States docu-*
> *menting fundamentalism and christian churches. Told me*
> *that when in Florida,*
> *'You wouldn't believe all the scare about Y2K. All the radio*
> *stations, all the talk shows, are talking disaster. The people*
> *in Palm Beach, retired Jewish New Yorkers, are talking*
> *about taking their money out starting in July, forget about*
> *December...*
> *'The stock market is going to take a fall. The U.S. dollar is*
> *artificially inflated because all these third world countries*
> *want it for security... but the U.S. doesn't produce anything*
> *anymore...*
> *'That's the problem with Y2K, the suppliers are all offshore*
> *and who knows about their computers? Car parts come*
> *from Mexico, most steel and aluminum is imported from*
> *Brazil. All the resources and products we need come from*
> *China or Korea or Japan...*

'So people want security, and that means gold or real estate
or cash. The U.S. is now printing money overtime to meet
the demand, because only 15% of U.S. dollars in circulation
are real, the rest is on paper or plastic. They have to keep
printing money because if someone can't get their money
out of the bank, there will be a real panic.
'It's a panic situation, it's dangerous."

Virtual Myth Theory

Our cyberdependence is real in the sense that whatever happens in the
Y2K, the reactions have already begun in the cities, the stock market, the
banks. Urban culture is the victim of Giddens' 'time-space distanciation'
that accounts for the above panic. As Baudrillard puts it, "for technology
as a whole, we could say what McLuhan says about the mass media: the
medium becomes the message. Technology itself becomes the message;
it doesn't push things forward or transform the world, it becomes the
world" (Gane 1993: 44).

Giddens discusses how "coordination across time (through time
zones) is the basis of the control of space," that space today being disas-
sociated from actual 'place' by relations fostered "locationally distant
from any given situation of face-to-face interaction – it is truly cyber-
space. In conditions of modernity (and in the IT age), place becomes
increasingly phantasmagoric: that is to say, locales are thoroughly pene-
trated by and shaped in terms of social instances quite distant from
them" (1990: 18-19). If the coordinations across time performed by the
Net are the 'basis for control' of cyberspace, are we controlling the tech-
nology or is it creating itself, as with Y2K and its attendant industry?
This is an urban question.

The two most significant elements producing the erratic character of
modernity are the "unintended consequences and the reflexivity or circu-
larity of social knowledge" (Giddens 1990: 152-53) that we see in Infor-
mation Technology. We are faced by Y2K, and more importantly its
attendant effects, partly because, as Giddens (1990: 152-53) explains,

in conditions of modernity, the social (and IT) world can
never form a stable environment in terms of the input of

new knowledge about its character and functioning. New knowledge (concepts, theories, findings) does not simply render the social world more transparent, but alters its nature, spinning it off in novel directions. The impact of this phenomena is fundamental to the juggernaut-like quality of modernity and affects socialized nature as well as social institutions themselves. For although knowledge about the natural world does not affect the world in a direct way, the circularity of social knowledge incorporates elements of nature via the technological components of abstract systems' (IT and Y2K).

Carleton Professor Tom Darby, a political philosopher, sees the Y2K as pointing to "fundamental truths about Western man at the end of the millennium," in that "what we're seeing is the result of our ignorance of who we really are, and the problematic nature of our relationship with technology."' Edward Tanner of Princeton describes this interrelation-ship as a 'revenge effect,' in which "technological solutions almost invariably breed more technological problems... technological systems have become incredibly complex. The components in any system have multiple links that can affect each other in ways that are almost impossi-ble to foresee" (Sibley 1997: B1-B2).

Baudrillard sees the problem of this technological world this way:

> With Information Technology, for example, there is an effect of the realization of the world. The world, which from the dawn of time has been myth, fantasy, fable, becomes realized through technology. This materialism seems to me to be a catastrophe in the etymological sense of the term. It is a sort of death, where everything takes on a garb of real-ity. You can imagine a point where all the thoughts waiting to be thought will be immediately realizable by means of a computer. I am not condemning technology, it's fascinating, it can produce marvelous special effects. But with this fac-ulty of giving reality to the world, then the possible, the imaginary, the illusory all disappear. Now, the illusory is

perhaps vital. A world without illusory effects will be com-
pletely obscene, material, exact, perfect (Gane 1993: 44).

To those dependent upon computers, and those who know about com-
puter systems and the Y2K, the problems listed above are things to
worry about.

The man responsible for the $200 million Y2K repair job at the Cana-
dian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Joe Boivin (anon. 1999: 10), sees
worldwide disaster in these circular abstract systems:

> We have a global threat here... If you look at infrastructure
> failures within many of the developing nations, who are
> hard-pressed today with all kinds of other natural disasters
> and financial crises, there's a very high probability that,
> never mind how well we do in Canada and the U.S., other
> countries are going to take a big hit." Boivin believes that
> Y2K constitutes more of a common enemy to humanity than
> any space invasion science fiction dreamed up. He advo-
> cates the immediate creation of globally coordinated task
> forces in order to sustain delivery of power, water, food and
> necessities in every country.
>
> Boivin sees a possible silver lining in Y2K's dark cloud.
> Because of population pressure and the destruction of natu-
> ral resources, he contends, humanity faces a stronger man-
> date for cooperation than ever before in history. Maybe the
> year 2000 is an opportunity, possibly the last chance we
> have to grab (Y2K) as the common enemy and put aside
> previous differences... I believe much of this is very much
> focused on survival of the species.

Much as I agree of his assessment with the impact of Y2K in third world
(or those in third world conditions in Canada, such as many First Nations
communities), only one of my sources mentioned the global and human
disaster implications of Y2K. Most responses and media reports are con-
cerned with coping, rather than survival, at one level or another.

In a recent survey of 417 Ottawa-Hull residents by the Corporate
Research Group, 84% were aware of the problem, but 42% say they have

not received enough information about it (implying that 58% feel they have? Information overload?). It shows that almost half intend to take a lot of money out of the bank, a third will buy survival items such as bat teries and canned food. The research firm's president feels the public has not been given enough assurances that things will function, as he expects they will. Still: "I have a 100-acre farm in Carp and I'm probably taking it more serious than most people. I have three woodstoves, two fire places and a huge root cellar. Next month, I'm getting a generator" (Guly 1999: B8, also see field note above).

A previous poll conducted by POLLARA across Canada shows over 1/3 of respondents expect Jan. 1 2000 to be "an extraordinary day marked by crises." While 67% claimed to understand the bug (and 27% not to), the survey suggests that "despite these figures, some observers doubt that the average person really comprehends the millennium bug, spawning exaggerated fears based on breathless speculation about wide spread disaster" (Bronskill 1999: A3).

I can't imagine that news that Canadian armed forces will be prepared for disaster deployment, with an almost $400 million budget and 60,000 troops committed (as opposed to 16,000 for the Ice Storm), is having a reassuring effect on the public (if the government is ready why call up 'the biggest peacetime deployment of troops in history?') (May 1999: A8).[6]

In a contradictory poll, Industry Canada showed that 75% of Canadi ans were aware of the bug, but thought it was mostly harmless, and some 80% believed that business and the federal government will be able to deal with the problem' (Pugliese 1998: A3). Without access to the ques tions involved, I could suggest that these varying results could be due to fluctuating public reactions to the Y2K, based partly on the timing of the polls and partly on the ever-changing, conflicting sea of information.

I ask my nephew, a programmer and Web design and pro duction person, constantly dealing with IT and PC problems at the office, what he thinks about the Y2K. 'Fuck off' is his exasperated response.[7]

In the country these speculations do not arise, they are not relevant. A sense of community and cooperation, and common sense, seem to be panaceas for a dependence on the Net and computers:

Yesterday at Reenie's Café Frank observed that the U.S. is sending experts over to Russia to help them with their nuclear arsenal's Y2K preparedness.

'That's good,' I said, glad to hear that at least that might be taken care of.

Eeyore, sitting at the end of the bar, wondered aloud if the ice machines would break down. He is holding a large coke with extra ice, and has a huge glass of icewater beside him. He needs copious fluids to cope with the drugs prescribed to him.

Frank says: 'You don't have to worry Eeyore, it's going to be in January, there'll be lots of ice outside until February, March...'

Eeyore brightens up at the thought, I mention he could go out on his back balcony and chip some ice off the railing.

I also had a chance to join some Internet chat rooms, and prompted or followed some Y2K discussions. The participants were mainly young people, looking to talk about anything. The edited excerpt below shows, perhaps, a common feeling among this group, that Y2K is almost trivial:

> *Taz-Devil   > WEll don't get me started on y2k*
> *joelr25   > y2k is nothing to worry about*
> *kitzo   > y2k is a joke*
> *Taz-Devil > Why you say that joel*
> *greg99   > y2k is nice*
> *kitzo   > i like it*
> *joelr25   > if your computer is set ,what makes you think the gov. can't fix the prob?*
> *Taz-Devil   > Well there computer are 100x bigger that your's*
> *joelr25   > my v.c.r can handle 2000*
> *Taz-Devil > And power plants*
> *kitzo   > just dont go to work on jan 1*
> *kitzo   > stay home watch football*
> *kitzo   > if you can*
> *mike-like gi> exactly kitz:)*

> *Taz-Devil > With no power how are you going to watch tv*
> *greg99 > i need y2k*
> *Taz-Devil > duh*
> *mike-like gi> grab a beer watch some games....*
> *kitzo > get batteries for it*
> *Taz-Devil > No madder if you pc is y2k ready or not the power goes off what good did it do to be y2k ready*
> *Taz-Devil > The world will stop*
> *Taz-Devil > No train planes*
> *Bill The Cat> That is why I am selling cat powered treadmills that will generate enough electricity to run your computers... just slap the cat on the treadmill and put some turpentine on its butt and you will have tons of electricity....*
> *Taz-Devil > How much bill the cat*

At home in the country, the upside of Y2K was brought home in February. The woman living next door was featured on the front page of a local newspaper, because she received a traffic ticket in the mail and the payment date somehow jumped 100 years ahead due to a Y2K computer glitch. The Ontario government sent out hundreds of fines for traffic offences that, "according to the government, will occur nearly 100 years in the future" (****** 1999: A1). While fixing their computers for Y2K, the government did a production run of new tickets and nobody noticed the glitch. My neighbor received formal notice of an overdue fine and was threatened with license suspension, wage garnishment and liens against her property – as of Sept. 26, 2097. "The funniest thing about it all," she says, "is that I'd already paid the ticket last year" (ibid).

> *'There is an upside to this thing,' says Zeke.*
> *I agree. The potential chaos revealed by the possibility of a Y2K meltdown, its enactment and affirmation long before the event, our dependence on our created systems rather than the land, has created for us a humorously precarious situation, at least those of us who are prepared.*

Some Conclusions

• I think we can see that Y2K is many things, including a different reality to rural and urban dwellers, and a composite abstract or virtual global reality that encloses them, and a manufactured media craze. It is a global and local concern, as with Latour's argument that "even a longer network remains local at all points," in that "it may be that the telephone has spread everywhere, but we still know that we can die right next to a phone line if we aren't plugged in… in the case of technological networks, we have no difficulty reconciling their local aspect and their global dimension" (1997: 117). So there are links between the 'high theory' of Giddens and Baudrillard, for example, with the phenomenon of Y2K as experienced by different people.

• Urban professionals in the cities have the most to fear about Y2K (not just physically, but in terms of perceived economic damage). People who live on the land, particularly those who survived 1998's Ice Storm, seem more prepared and less concerned. This can also bee seen as a class issue, at least in that there is an economic and status advantage to living in the city, overall.

• The data suggests to me that people in the third world and in third world conditions (such as many aboriginal people in First Nations communities in Canada, and weaker elements, such as the disabled and elderly) are most likely to be subject to infrastructure failure and danger (they cannot stockpile and need their abstractly generated income). These people are most vulnerable to the real systemic or administrative breakdowns Y2K may bring, unlike either city or rural dwellers I interviewed, who all live in the privileged Ottawa Valley. This should be a focus for further research this summer.

• Most participants do not seem to really fear Y2K, but nonetheless are taking precautions in their own ways. Survivalism is a related theme, but might be better tied into the overall millennium theme and its many other subgroups. Among the people I studied and saw represented in the media, few seemed to really be alarmed by the coming Y2K. Extreme measures, such as the man who is promoting a bunker and the Calgary woman who is hoarding and stockpiling, are rare so far (at least in the media) but will certainly increase as the year progresses. How do these actions reflect Millennialism in general, however, and how many can really, specifically, be attributed to Y2K itself?

• In defence of my triangulation approach, integrating personal comments, slices of field data, newspapers, contemporary thinkers and theorists and the like, I think that I have managed to present a good picture of the many factors that are feeding, and playing off of, the idea of and reality of the Y2K millennium bug. I, like most of my rural informants at least, can not say that I know what will happen, only that everyone seems to be taking some precautionary measures, based on their class, location and occupation. I appreciate that the results are hard to judge. 'As personal writing becomes more common among social scientists, researchers will need to develop new avenues of criticism and praise for such work. One element in this new evaluative understanding might be a clearer sense of how to combine 'scientific' with 'literary' standards, without mystifying the latter' (DeVault 1997: 224).

• This is, I think, in line with what Glaser and Strauss say about a reader's judging the credibility of theory (and the effectiveness of sociological writings, which become 'grounded theory'): "First of all, if a reader becomes sufficiently caught up in the description so that he feels vicariously that he is also in the field, then it is more likely to be kindly disposed toward the researcher's theory than if the description seems flat or unconvincing," also judged are

"how the researcher came to his conclusions" and the use of "multiple comparison groups" to make the "credibility of the theory considerably greater" (1967: 230-231).

• Although I had a rough start working with my friends, I think in the end I managed to avoid the 'Hawthorn effect' — allowing our procedures to affect the behavior of the sub- jects being studied (Albas and Albas 1998: 125), by keeping my note taking to myself (alone in my room) and learning to stop self-disclosing to everyone I met.

• I think that my sociology here has been partly autobio- graphical, and that is intrinsic to the way that this project evolved. As Mykhalovsky says: "To characterize autobio- graphical sociology as self-indulgent is also to make claims about the nature of its content. Just as the charge collapses the text's author and reader into one, it posits the writer's self as the text's object. This is a reductive practice." More posi- tively, there is "truth in the use of self-involvement as a met- aphor for describing the object relations of autobiographical sociology. To name my self as the content of autobiography is one way to describe its specificity; its distinction from work in which the self of the writer is not deemed worthy of inquiry," and further, "to write individual experience is, at the same time, to write social experience" (see Mills *The Sociological Imagination* where he states that 'private trou- bles become public problems). The approach I have used "points to the fallacy of self/other, individual/social dichoto- mies and replaces them with 'notions of simultaneity: how particular experiences both constitute and are constituted by social relations which transcend a given (research) particu- larity" (Mykhalovsky 1997: 239-240).

Notes

1. The Ice Storm occurred in January throughout Eastern Ontario and parts of Québec and the U.S. Freezing rain and record low temperatures left thousands of people without power or water, some for two weeks or more. Utility companies from across North America and the Canadian Armed Forces were called in to help deal with the damage, which included downed power lines and a loss of some 40% of the softwood trees in the region from ice damage.

2. I had already been advised that "it would be a good thing to consider the ethical and reflexive implications involved in this type of data collection – i.e. How might your closeness – not just physical – affect your data collection" and bias my research. In the end I decided that would be a study in itself (see field note above).

3. Urban and rural people seem to come together however, in the more extreme survivalist movements coming along. Although beyond the scope of this paper, there is a growing number of advocates of survivalism and disaster preparedness in the face of Y2K. Bruce Beach, a retired computer science teacher, has converted a 10,000 square foot bunker (made of buried school buses) near Toronto and is inviting 500 people, via the Web, to join him. Fred Walter, who works at a computer firm near Waterloo, has bought a hobby farm specifically to survive the Y2K. In the U.S., there are reports that manufacturers of freeze-dried food have been cleaned out of their stocks, a rush that is now hitting Canada. In Calgary, one woman cleaned out one of the city's largest army surplus stores of all its Canadian Forces rations (Lindgren, and Pugliese 1998: A3). Harvest Foodworks of Toledo, Ontario has begun receiving hundreds of requests for its dehydrated entrées, mainly via the Internet from the U.S. (ODD LOTS in the Financial Post 6/4/99: C8)

4. Bordieu points to the small differences that occur between networks and newspapers as stories evolve; the task of journalists is to 'scoop' each other or enhance the others latest scoop, 'differences (that) completely bypass the average viewer, who could percieve them only by looking at several networks at the same time. But these differences, which go completely unnoticed by viewers, turn out to be very important to producers, who think that they are not only seen but (that they) boost ratings. Here is the hidden god of this (media) universe which governs conduct and conscience. (1996: 25)

5. As reported in a local paper, front page: At a Chamber of Commerce meeting, people were told that Y2K failures could start with the beginning of

the new fiscal year in Canada, Japan and New York State on Apr. 1, followed by the new year in the remaining 49 U.S. states starting July 1 (requiring systems to make fiscal projections into 2000). Also, on Aug. 22, the calendar of global positioning satellites roll over and may cause problems, on Sept. 9 the computer clocks will roll to 9/9/99 which could be confused with 9999 (code to terminate a program), and on Oct. 1 the U.S. federal government begins its new fiscal year. Dec. 31 seems a long ways away.

6. At the meeting people were advised not to panic but to make sure their personal and business systems were set up for Y2K, and also make contingency plans should suppliers and other services fail. (Nicol, P.H. 1999. 'Y2K failures could start this April' in the ****** Advance, Feb. 3: 1).

7. I had to consciously resist incorporating the disaster literature into this paper, something Prof. Ziggy had suggested. Studying how people 'interact, co- operate, form groups etc. when faced with disasters... how people tend to prepare for possible disaster when they think it will appear, what discourse emerges...' Using survivalist and disaster literature as a comparison base seems natural, but from the beginning I have been unsure whether we are looking at a disaster, or even the preparations for one (I am not sure that the survivalists stocking up on food above are representative of my sample) and also I preferred this time to look at ways in which IT, the Y2K (and its culture) is being created and its larger implications for the people in this study. I have touched on survivalism and the coming Year 2000; the topic is now a growth industry (see Hyatt, Michael, Y2K: The Day the World Shut Down; Grant, R. Jeffrey, The Millennium Meltdown; the Y2K Citizen's Action Guide (by Utne Reader); Weber, Eugen, Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennialist Beliefs Through the Ages; Heard, Alex, Apocalypse Pretty Soon: Travels in End-Time America; Keller, Catherine, Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World; etc.).

8. I have been in touch with two programmers, Steve and Gordie Wong. They are having trouble with Y2K and other problems at their website. I say to Zeke 'two Wongs can't make it right,' to which he replies, 'no, that's racist. It's two whites can't make a Wong.'

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