



Chapter 4. Surfing the Third Wave

*Every few hundred years in Western history
there occurs a sharp transformation.
We cross what I call a “divide.”
Within a few short decades,
society rearranges itself — its worldview;
its basic values; its social and political structure;
its arts; its key institutions.
Fifty years later, there is a new world.
And the people born then cannot even imagine
the world in which their grandparents lived
and into which their own parents were born’*

*- Peter F. Drucker
Post Capitalist Society*

A New Species of Human

Human beings have evolved into a new species. Meet *Homo iconis* — the symbol-using human. This creature represents a very new stage in human evolution. *Homo iconis* is both citizen and product of the modern age, the age of the Third Wave.

Previous human classifications, such as *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*, have tagged our species in terms of our individual and local behavior. We were tool users, upright walkers, thinkers, and so on. This modern creature, *Homo iconis*, on the other hand, is defined by collective behavior, i.e. shaping — and then being shaped by — symbolic environments. This, more than any other characteristic, defines the phenomenon Alvin and Heidi Toffler have called the Third Wave.²

Anyone who hopes to succeed in marketing a product, an idea, a value system, a political view, or a course of action had better understand both *Homo iconis* and the unfolding environment that is shaping his or her consciousness, attitudes, wants,

needs, feelings, and behavior.

A New Wave

The Toffler hypothesis of the Third Wave asserts that there have been three great waves, or shifts, in human existence, and that we are now well into the third one. The first wave was the movement from the nomadic existence of hunters and gatherers to the development of agriculture. That took us about 9,000 years.

The second wave, arising sometime in the late sixteenth century, was the shift to industrialization. Building upon the success of agriculture, advanced societies developed the means to concentrate capital and organize labor into large enterprises. The industrial corporation, its machinery, efficient energy, and its counterpart institutions changed human existence forever.

Now comes the third of these great waves, which many futurists characterize as the wave of information. Beginning about the end of World War II, it has brought profound changes of its own, which we are just beginning to recognize.

This Third Wave is a wave of paradoxes. Its effects are simultaneously global and local, collective and individual, unifying and disintegrating. *Homo iconis* has both created and been created by the Third Wave. The worldwide environment of images, data, and information is now shaping us in ways we scarcely understand.

To risk oversimplification for the sake of simplicity: the First Wave was about cheap food; the Second Wave was about cheap energy; and the Third Wave is about cheap information.

How does a thoughtful person figure out this new world? How can business leaders decipher its threats and promises? How can political leaders and policy makers interpret its imperatives? The only ones who can possibly lead and guide others through this profound transition are those who comprehend its basic dynamics, perceive its likely effects, and understand the choices it poses.

Ironically, many of those who believe they understand the Third Wave are actually being seduced by its effects. They have cooked up a naive intellectual stew of hyperbole, gee-whiz possibilities, and wishful-shouldful thinking. Nowhere is this more evident, for example, than in the cult-like fanaticism surrounding the Internet. Although the Internet will certainly have far-reaching effects on our lives and cultures, its effects will probably be nothing like those predicted or wished for by the overexcited cyber-geek cult.

The early advocates of commercializing the Internet's World Wide Web spoke glowingly of millions upon millions of eager web-surfers, all presumed customers waiting to be captured by any business savvy enough to put up a Web page. Their naive misapprehension of the most basic logic of marketing led them to apply Second Wave thinking — mass marketing — to a Third Wave phenomenon — an atomized

universe of special interests and disparate responses. The real promise of network technology is in *narrowcasting*, not broadcasting. Networks are very poor methods for people to find one another, but excellent tools for them to use when they have.

But more importantly, the Third Wave is ultimately not about computers or digital data or Internets. It's about a process of *atomization* that's going on at many levels. It's about the atomization of societies, institutions, social structures, nations, industries, markets, corporations, and enterprises of all types.

The Global-Tribal Paradox

Curiously, we Third Wave creatures are becoming simultaneously both global and tribal. This global-tribal paradox, the simultaneous unification and atomization of human experience, is one of the most important effects of the Third Wave.

Put in the simplest terms:

The more global we become in our awareness, the more tribal we become in our behavior.

Futurist John Naisbitt points to the recent deconstruction of nations into their original ethnic components.³ Global trade has actually emphasized national differences, not minimized them. There are no mass markets any more. Businesses have to target their products and services ever more finely to reach their customers. The wishful myth of America as a cultural "melting pot" is contradicted every day by racial tension and the increasing definition of ethnic boundaries. Even male-female relations have become increasingly polarized.

At the social and political levels, our leaders are becoming more and more confused and frustrated as they fail to grasp the increasing plurality of our societies. Problems of crime, drug abuse, family disintegration, and many others all get the same "one size fits all" political solutions.

The Bell Curve

To say that we have become a new species is not to say that we are becoming all alike. In fact, just the opposite is happening. The Third Wave is actually stretching out the bell curve of human possibilities, revealing ever greater differences between the educated cognitive elite and those less educated. Humans differ greatly in their ability and preference for processing information. Highly educated people, technical people, conceptual people, and those who organize, plan, manage, design, write, and analyze tend to be skillful and proactive symbol-makers.

But people on the other side of a certain dividing line tend to be utterly uninterested in processing information in their heads. For various reasons unique to their development, they tend to view reading, writing, and calculating as necessary evils,

not critical life skills. They function as reactive *symbol-users*, not *symbol-makers*. The symbol-makers will benefit handsomely from the fruits of the Third Wave information environment. They will have greater freedom and more choices of occupation, and they will be less confined to jobs that keep them in one place doing one thing. They will be the information elite.

Internet pundits have hailed it as "the great democratizer," meaning presumably that the possibility of universal access to cheap information will somehow lift the poor and the bewildered out of their disadvantaged state. In fact, it will have just the opposite effect. The information environment will be the great differentiator, if anything.

Notwithstanding IBM's politically correct television ads showing the six year old black girl somewhere in Africa logging on to the Internet, the bell curve is being stretched upward. The differences among people are becoming greater, not less. Most of the poor and the bewildered will remain that way, because of the impairment in cognitive ability, self esteem, and social coping capacity that characterizes their life positions. Most of them will not actively participate in the information revolution; they will, however, feel its effects.

One of the great ironies of the Third Wave is that the effects of the phenomenon itself tend to confound our very attempts to understand it. We are rather like fish trying to figure out what water is. But even at this early stage, we can detect some of the driving forces that are moving us in a new direction.

What's Driving The Third Wave?

At least five major primal forces seem to be driving the Third Wave. Understanding these key drivers can help us see, at least to an extent, where the Third Wave is taking us.

Productivity. The human impulse to do things quicker, better, easier, more cheaply, and more efficiently seems absolutely fundamental to our species. The agricultural first wave produced phenomenal gains in food production, so that it no longer takes all of our efforts for us to feed ourselves. In the developed countries, a remarkably small percentage of the population can produce enough food for themselves, the rest of the people, and part of the rest of the world. In the United States, for example, the farm labor force is now only about three per cent of the population. Second-wave productivity has also increased at an astonishing rate, spurred by the release of labor from agriculture, the development of ever more efficient methods of manufacturing, and steady advances in education, research, and development. The rising standard of material comfort has freed more and more people for abstract kinds of labor such as education, entertainment, publishing, and worldwide communication.

Travel. Some would argue that the Third Wave came alive with the jet engine. Since the end of World War II, human beings have moved about the globe with ever-increasing frequency. The second wave enabled the development of cheap and

convenient transportation, particularly jet air travel, with a wide range of supporting industries around it. This constant mobility, in the service of commerce as well as recreation, has put many disparate cultures in touch with one another. It has turned more and more people into global citizens, with a borderless view of how things can be done.

Telecommunications. Even those members of *Homo iconis* who are unaware of the constant, frenzied transmission of billions of packets of digital information around the globe still benefit from it. We now have digital money, which flits about among satellites and earth stations as banks, brokerage houses, and governments move assets around the world. Stock exchanges all over the world link their activities through sophisticated telecommunications technology. Information flows much more quickly than ever before, which means commerce evolves faster, people interact faster, and events in one part of the world can have immediate effects in other parts. Many experts contend that the fall of communism resulted as much from radios, televisions, and fax machines as from guns and tanks. No national government has yet figured out how to build a wall high enough to keep satellite signals from reaching its people.

Images. The worldwide image environment has had some awesome effects on human consciousness. Hundreds of millions of people, all over the world, stopped what they were doing when the O.J. Simpson jury delivered its verdict to the television cameras. This was a unifying experience for a global "culture" of TV watchers. Yet in the United States, blacks and whites were bitterly divided by the verdict of acquittal. Americans were simultaneously global and tribal in their response to an event. The medium unifies and its content divides. At the same time, we've seen an ever-increasing pollution of the image environment. The popular media, such as television, radio, and the popular press, are now fully compromised, at least in the image-oriented cultures like America. The amusement model has fully taken over as the paradigm of choice for commercial media. Thoughtful discourse and in-depth, linear analysis have been relegated to a few specialized media channels and publications. Indeed, the highly dramatized, simplified, polarized, and flavored images can confuse and distract even clear-thinking people from making their own interpretations of Third Wave issues and events. A thoughtful person would be well advised to turn off the sound of a television broadcast and quietly study the flow of images, to get clues to the shaping effect of electronic media on important information. Such a person needs less input, not more, and needs to subject that information to a much higher standard of quality.

Ubiquitous computing. The real significance of the personal computer is in the way it has decentralized and secularized computing power. Less than half a generation ago we thought of a computer as a mysterious, imposing machine operated by a special sect of high priests. Only large organizations had them, and they used them to process only "important" information such as financial data or research data. Now virtually any small business can have the benefit of sophisticated computing. Managers no longer have to send their business information to a special place to

have it processed. They enjoy the freedom and power that comes with the ability to mobilize knowledge in new ways. Children have access to astonishing resources for education and entertainment that were unimagined only five or ten years ago. The "on-line" phenomenon has put mind-boggling amounts of information at the fingertips of those who know how to get it. Much of it is useless, and much of the potential of ubiquitous computing and ubiquitous data is yet to be realized. But these technologies have brought irreversible changes. For better or worse, there will be no turning back the clock.

Impacts of the Third Wave

Some people will find this new world picture depressing and discouraging, while others will find it exciting and challenging. The case for optimism lies in understanding the likely impacts of the Third Wave and developing solutions to our issues and problems that take advantage of new truths. Some of the most significant impacts that we can capitalize on — or be victimized by — include:

Acceleration. Just about everything seems to be happening faster in this Third Wave. People move around the world within hours. Ideas move around the world in millionths of a second. Money flashes about at the same speeds. Newspapers are printed and published simultaneously in many parts of the world. The statements and actions of world leaders become part of our collective history in an instant. The antics of celebrities and misfits alike become part of the daily image-diet of people in all countries. In business, products are born and die in ever-diminishing life cycles. New industries reach saturation in one or two years instead of the ten years or more of past times. "Long term planning" is a thing of the past. The emphasis in business now is on strategy formulation and adapting to a rapidly changing environment.

Atomization. In the Third Wave environment, big things break up into small things. Mass markets fracture into specialty segments. There are more competitors in most industries, and customers have more choices than ever before. The "big three" American television networks that seemed an eternal part of the entertainment industry have lost air-share to an increasing number of new special-focus networks and channels. Mass-circulation magazines have given way to an astonishing array of specialty publications. Corporations are downsizing, outsourcing, and disassembling themselves into more tactically viable structures. Social institutions are breaking up and dwindling. Traditional religious institutions are losing members as people have other options available to them. Technical and professional specialties are becoming ever more narrowly defined. The standard "community" which has been a basic construct of our notion of civilization for thousands of years is breaking up. Especially in America, the increasing mobility of the population, combined with high divorce rates and changing demographics mean that fewer people live in the traditional multi-generation family situation. More and more Americans don't even know the names or even the faces of their neighbors. Twenty-five percent of American households have only one person. Whole countries are coming unglued, just as the USSR fell apart after the totalitarian grip of communist ideology weakened. Some of them are

disintegrating with horrifying consequences, while a few have managed to do so peaceably. Megastates like China and India could well come apart as Third Wave influences deepen ethnic and social differences.

Accentuation. Paradoxically, the Third Wave environment tends to emphasize rather than minimize differences among people. While many of us share the same superficial images and icons of our popular culture, we do not necessarily share attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or values. Two people in two different countries half a world apart can be eating Big Macs, drinking Cokes, and watching the same Hollywood-produced movie at the same instant, and still be worlds apart in their values and beliefs. Religious practices, political ideologies, attitudes about war, and attitudes about male-female relationships do not disappear just because two members of species *Homo iconis* use the same icons. As previously mentioned, the Third Wave will certainly widen the distance between haves and have-nots, not close it, whether the distance is measured in material standard of living, freedom of life choice, education, or access to information.

Agendas. Artist and counter-culture philosopher Andy Warhol's prediction twenty years ago that everyone would become famous for fifteen minutes has nearly come true. Anyone who can capture the attention of a journalist can get his or her particular agenda in front of the noses of millions of people. Terrorists become heroes, misfits become celebrities, and criminals become talk-show hosts. A strange characteristic of the continuous flow of sound and pictures in the Third Wave environment is that all stories, all messages, all issues, all points of view, all accusations, all arguments, and all agendas are raised — or lowered — to the same level of significance. Each bit of drama bursts into the collective attention at the same saturated level of significance as the one before it, only to be pushed off the stage seconds later by the next momentary celebrity. Political careers have been made and destroyed by telling images, crucial soundbites, and unguarded comments. Some analysts argue that the dramatic shift in power in the American Congress in 1994, from the Democrats to the Republicans, had more to do with political talk shows on radio than any basic change in voter sentiment. The Democrats didn't see the effects of this daily political assault until too late, and had no effective means to counter it. Beat philosopher Allen Ginsburg commented in the late 1960s, "We're in science fiction now. Whoever controls the images — the media — controls the culture."

Using What We Know

There is much more we need to learn about the Third Wave and its effects on *Homo iconis*. But we can indeed make use of what we've figured out so far. Business executives, marketing people, legislators, policy makers, educators, and social activists can all do what they do better by understanding the dynamics of this exciting and challenging new environment. Whether our future as members of species *Homo iconis* turns out to be beautiful or ugly is largely a matter of the choices we make and our understanding of the context in which we think about those choices and the problems they solve.

Chapter Notes (4)

1. Drucker, Peter. *Post-Capitalist Society*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993, page 1.
2. Toffler, Alvin. *The Third Wave*. New York: Morrow, 1980. Also see Toffler's famous book *Future Shock*, published by Random House in 1970.
3. See Naisbitt, John. *The Global Paradox*. New York: Morrow, 1994. See also Naisbitt, John. *Megatrends*. New York: Warner Books 1982.

