From the Republic of Letters to the Empire of Email

A COMPARISON BETWEEN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY DISCUSSION CULTURE AND A PHILOSOPHICAL ENQ UIRY PROJECT ON THE INTERNET

Richard Anthone and Steve Williams

> *I have often thought, that the best way of composing dialogues, would be for two Persons that are of different Opinions about any Question of Importance, to write alternately the different parts of the Discourse, & reply to each other.*
>
> David Hume: '*A* letter concerning the dialogues', *10* March *1751.*'

The eighteenth century is often called 'the age enlightenment'. It was a time of great philosophers like Newton and Kant but also, maybe even more importantly, it was a era when a much wider range of people became concerned with the arts, literature, philosophy and science. A more commercial and less courtly culture evolved through coffee houses, clubs, reading societies, commercial theatres and libraries. Private postal services across Europe enabled an explosion of thoughtful correspondence - the `republic of letters'. At the same time, the developing print technologies ensured a rapid exchange of ideas and controversies in the form of cheap books and pamphlets. Ideas, information and literary works seemed more ephemeral and less dominated by local influences, while the flourishing correspondence societies exemplified new kinds of impersonal interest groups.

Some of these cultural trends seem familiar to us in the age of the Internet - a new technology appears, enabling even more rapid forms of communication. Information about all kinds of issues is readily available. There is an acute sense that ideas and works are ephemeral and much doubt about what information to trust. There is an explosion of Internet correspondence that is both personal and organized into interest groups. Even the increased access to pornography that comes with the Internet was mirrored in the eighteenth century as clandestine publishers in Switzerland and the United Provinces smuggled radical books and pornographic pamphlets - so-called livres *philosophiques* - across the border into France and then to private libraries across Europe. So there is a sense of familiarity across the centuries.

THE SOCIABLE CENTURY

The eighteenth century is often characterized by its *sociability*. An enormous amount of social and cultural activity became apparent, as if somebody had dropped a stone in an ants' nest. This sociability mani-

fested itself in two forms. The first was the institutional sociability of organizations such as the Royal Society in England and the many other academies around Europe. Those institutions were recognized by governments and often patronized by 'enlightened' and absolutist kings.

The other kind of sociability was more informal - an expression of people's liking for 'being together' and organizing communal cultural activities with the goal of learning through discussion and the exchange of ideas. This is clearly expressed in the Latin quote 'Nemo solus satis sapit' - On your own, you never know enough (Van den Berg, p. 154).

Informal sociability was strongly related to the emerging cultural market economy - the exponential growth of book and journal publishing, the continuing commercialization of the postal services and so on. But such a commercial explanation doesn't take into account the spiritual labor involved in discussion, debate and correspondence. This was the driving force behind intellectual emancipation.

Discussion had a central place in every kind of social activity. Science became as fashionable a topic in society as the arts - again rather like today. Many people wanted to reason and they had a passion for knowledge (Zwager, p. 83, 1968). Writers and scientists would often submit their ideas to the salons and academies before publication (Habermas, p. 34, 1992). People repeated and discussed their newly-attained knowledge in the clubs, coffee-houses or even in the parks.

NETWORKS OF SOCIABILITY

Major academies like the Royal Society of London and the Paris Academy of Science were founded at the end of the seventeenth century. They were formed to organize scientific advance and debate. Moreover they were founded as a result of the rejection of university-based scholastic science (McLellan, p. xix, 1985).

Such organisations had two purposes: firstly to obtain and distribute useful scientific and philosophical knowledge and secondly to facilitate the integration of individuals into communities that transcended differences (Roche, p. 158, 1988). Therefore, academies played an important educational role. For that purpose they organized 'concours', or national examinations, where people could present essays. In France, two famous people won the academy prize: Rousseau and Robbespierre (Roche, 1988).. It was not only scientific academies that were founded; academies of fine arts, academies of letters and academies of music also flourished.

Almost every European country had a set of academies (McLellan, 1985). At first, contacts between them were tentative, but extensive correspondences soon developed to facilitate the exchange of publications and ideas, introduce members to each other, make travel arrangements, and more importantly, to set up common endeavours (McLellan, 1985).

As a result of the growth of these correspondence networks, academies began to employ people to maintain and enhance them - to make translations and to co-ordinate common projects. 'One note-

worthy example of the recognition of the distribution network of the scientific societies and its usefulness for disseminating science was the project undertaken in 1784 by the English board of Longitudes' (McLellan, p. 175, 1985).

Informal salons and debating societies also played an important role in the dissemination of knowledge by means of conversation and debate. Salons, like the academies, started to appear in the seventeenth century, but then they were of a different nature. The conversations in that time - like the salons of Mme de Rambouillet and Mme de Scudery - were very elegant, polite and courtly. Writers were considered to be mere servants.

By the eighteenth century, however, the salons had evolved into meeting places for all different kinds of people: scientists, writers, travellers, diplomats, artists and philosophers. The term philosopher, though, was only used for those who were political and atheist (David Hume frequently visited several salons but was not regarded as a philosopher, rather as 'un homme des lettres' - a well educated man.) The philosophy salons were in a minority and the most remarkable one was that of Baron d'Holbach (Charrier, 1925) where Diderot and D'Alembert (the encyclopedists), Helvetius and Grimm regularly took leading roles. Socially, the salons were very important because, unlike the academies, they encouraged the meeting of well-educated people with a variety of interests and specialisms. The salons enabled the circulation of information and provided a forum for discussion and criticism leading to philosophical and personal development (Roche, p. 242, 1988).

Salon discussion often started when a visitor told a story, reported piece of news, or read out a letter. Salons developed their own correspondence networks (though these were informal and not organized as in the academies). Unpaid salon members maintained the correspondences. Voltaire alone conducted an active correspondence with 1500 different people, Rousseau maintained a network of 600 people (Roche, p. 265, 1988). Ferney called Voltaire 'un salon par correspondence' (Zwager, p83, 1968). The correspondence networks provided coherence and a sense of community to people unable to attend salon meetings. Salon correspondence demanded a style of letter writing based on reason rather than emotion (Roche, p. 264, 1988). We cannot give a clear definition was what constituted a 'typical' city salon, but some common features were: regular meetings, conversation, equality of the sexes, equality of classes, friendship and respect (very important) and a hostess (mostly) who was the subject of much praise (Zwager, p. 23, 1968).

Eighteenth century coffee houses resembled the salons but, because their customers didn't need an invitation, they attracted a wider range of social classes. Dinner or lunch often preceded each discussion. Coffee house owners prepared tables with books as well as with food and drink. Visitors read, debated and passed on knowledge. Some of the coffee houses even evolved into 'musees', 'lycees' or small folk-universities.

Debating clubs were quite large-scale commercial enterprises that charged admission fees. An example of such a club was the *Robin Hood Society* in London where, every Monday evening, large groups of people debated subjects chosen from a list the week before. Orators were entitled to develop their arguments for 5 minutes and then the general discussion started (Zwager, p. 33, 1968). For example, on 20 May 1776 the *Robin Hood Society* debated the question 'Is it now compatible with the dignity, interest and duty of Great Britain, to treat with America on terms of accommodation?' The outcome of the debate is unknown. In 1780 there were 35 different debating clubs advertising meetings in London.

Women were drawn into the London debating clubs and were described in reports as 'fair orators' by those who approved and 'bar maids' or 'Strand girls' (i.e. prostitutes) by those who didn't. *The Times* of 1788 remarked that'... the debating ladies would be much better employed at their needle and thread, a good sempstress being a more amiable character than a female orator' (Andrew, p. xi, 1994). That women of many social classes attended such meetings and spoke at all deserves to be noted.

Correspondence continued to be an important conduit of ideas - even outside of the salons and academies. Letters provided an entry into the world of ideas for people who would otherwise have been excluded - including women. 'It seems to have been possible for a woman such as Mary Astell to introduce herself by letter to a philosopher - in her case the Englishman John Norns - and to carry on an extensive correspondence, which was eventually published.' (Atherton, p. 3, 1994)

Another factor which fostered the democratization of philosophical discussion was a view of the nature of human reason that stemmed from Descartes 'that sound reasoning was in the power of every human soul and that what was required in order to bring it about was not erudition but a method based on introspection, and hence within the means even of women' (Atherton, p. 3, 1994). Mary Astell, for example, in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies,* Part I, argued that 'All have not leisure to learn languages, and pore on books, nor opportunity to converse with the learned; but all may *think,* may use their own faculties rightly, and consult the master who is within them.'

What did people of the eighteenth century discuss? Many of their subjects would now be called 'philosophical'. Discussions of the time covered moral themes, problems of 'free will', education, religious subjects, social subjects, and the sovereignty of the king. They were often stimulated by plays and books. For example, Rousseau's book about inequality prompted many discussions and debates (Zwager, p. 150, 1968).

THE INTERNET

Our own century is, like the eighteenth, a time of fragmentation, increasing commercialisation and fast-developing communications technology. One could also say that, in a sense, we are witnessing a revival of correspondence culture.

And maybe this is because people want to be intellectually sociable again. Like the academies in the eighteenth century, universities today organize e-mail networks for the dissemination of scientific information. As with the networks of the salons and correspondence societies, people organize email-lists, news groups and online forums. One can choose a topic of personal interest and discuss it with others around the world. People can educate themselves by searching for information or by subscribing to recommended lists run by newspapers and libraries.

Knowledge seems even more ephemeral today than in the eighteenth century. Participation in impersonal correspondence (via the Internet) seems even easier. Yet there is also a sense of futility, a feeling that Internet discussion doesn't really matter. This, it seems, was mirrored in the eighteenth century; Diderot and Grimm, who produced the *Correspondence literaire* in manuscript form, believed their correspondence project to be 'an act of unprecedented waste'. (Bryson, 1981)

It is striking that there are numerous similarities between the Internet and eighteenth century correspondence networks. Still, there is an important difference: on the Internet most people are sitting alone behind their keyboards and screens. Unless specifically organized, there is no group-discussion conducted orally and no dissemination of common conclusions. Although one could argue that good-quality group discussions are possible on the Internet, there is rarely any connection between orally conducted discussions and written ones on the same topic.

And yet, it should be possible, especially in education. Why not copy the model of the eighteenth century and take advantage of the technical possibilities of the Internet. One way or another, written correspondence - transmitted electronically - can add an extra dimension to oral discussion. The act of writing can assist the processes of thinking and reflection.

THE PHILOSOHICAL HOTEL PROJECT

In 1996, Richard Anthone organized an Internet discussion project called *The Philosophical* Hotel. It was funded by the European Commission (as part of its Netdays collection of online events) and facilitated by Averbode, the Belgian educational publishing company. The project aimed to encourage philosophical dialogue, both oral and online, across a network of European schools with children between 10 and 14 years of age. The project involved a limited number of schools at first (two in France, four in Belgium, two in the Netherlands and two in England). It was then made available for several weeks to any schools who had heard about the initiative through correspondence or advertising.

We provided children and teachers, via online forums, with mini-stories, puzzles and questions to stimulate oral discussions. The forums were designed to look like discussion rooms in a hotel, complete with cartoon receptionists and waiters. Teachers conducted oral discussions with the children following a methodology appropriate to philosophical inquiry - beginning with numerous 'open-ended' questions and leading on to a dialogue of ideas.

After taking part in oral dialogue, children were asked to report their agreements and differences to others by posting discussion summaries to the appropriate online forums. Thus, the children created written reconstructions of *oral philosophical discussions* about thoughts and ideas. Although the children's writing and that of the online moderators was entered in their own language, it was then systematically translated into the other languages used in the 'Hotel'. Teachers printed out the discussion summaries and used them as a starting point for further classroom conversation. The resulting summaries were posted to the forum and thus, a cycle of dialogue had begun. This model of online philosophical discussion stimulates critical ability and creative thinking because it provides:

- a starting point for cycles of classroom conversations
- a refuge for all those who have questions (no online question is ignored)
- a motivation to return to discussions in response to comments from groups of children in other schools

One highlight of the project was a philosophical event held in an 'Internet theatre' in Brussels. Groups of children from an International school held discussions in a variety of languages with help from philosophers and teachers. The discussions were broadcast 'live' via the Internet. Translators from the European Parliament provided synchronous translations into five languages so that children from around Europe could understand all the discussions. Questions by email were accepted and discussed by the children in Brussels.

EXTRACT FROM THE ONLINE FORUM

The following extract was taken from the Philosophical Hotel forum which explored the question: Can you know everything?

Staf Lijn jes, young reporter for Kid City Newspaper · 11:20 am · 20/10/1997

Can you know everything? I hope not. Just imagine... one day you would know everything. This means you wouldn't have to learn anything. Never ever. You would never be surprised again. How boring life would be.

Richard, the receptionist · 17:04pm · 20/10/1997

One additional question: if you don't want to know everything, why do we HAVE and WANT to learn all kinds of things? How much do we really want to know? How much can we know? Just reflect on that. progress' you are talking about? Is there a way to get round that problem?

Ecole primaire Jean de la Fontaine · 16.03pm · 20/10/1997

We have thought about the question: can you know everything. We think tacit investigation is natural because it appeals to our senses. The understanding of one phenomenon can help us understand others. But isn't there a serious danger that we make mistakes in our solitary progress, mislead by our senses or a false deduction? We are really looking forward to your reactions.

Richard, the receptionist · 16:57pm · 20/10/1997

To ecole Jean de la Fontaine St Sylvain France: Welcome to the Philosophy Hotel. Sorry for my lousy French, but I hope you understand what I'm saying. If I get your point, you answer the question 'Can you know everything' affirmatively. Or at least the tacit learning. But what do you mean by that 'solitary

Ecole Primaire Jean de la Fontaine · 13:55pm · 2111011997

No, we cannot learn everything on our own. We would need more than a complete lifetime to discover just a part of all there is to know. What we meant by 'lonely, individual progress' or 'solitary progress' is this: Every time you hit your fingers with a hammer, it hurts a lot. So, a hammer is an object designed to hurt fingers. Is this a correct deduction? Or is it not?

Steve Williams · 9: 58am · 23/10/1997

To Ecole primaire Jean de la Fontaine and everyone: I think I understand your example about the hammer. Are you saying that people can best find truth by talking and listening to each other because we can correct each other's mistakes or say what we think and why. So I might think I know that a hammer is for hurting fingers but then someone disagrees. They have a better explanation. I listen and learn. Maybe there is a reply to Staf Lijntjes here who said: *'Just imagine ... one day you would know everything. This means you wouldn't have to learn anything. Never ever. You would never be surprised again. How boring life would he.'* But even if I think I know something, I can still be surprised by what others say about it. I might have to think again. So no matter how much I think I know, life is never boring if I keep wanting to learn and I like talking and reading about what others think. Is there a difference between really knowing something and thinking I know. Can I say I know something if I admit that one day I might change my mind? Some people think that they know everything they want to. Maybe learning is boring for them. Some school children seem to think that some kinds of learning are boring - why do you think that is?

Ecole Primaire de l'enfant Jesus · 15:47pm · 23/10/1997

I think you need other people to learn. That's what makes us 'rich'.

Ecole Primaire Jean de la Fontaine · 17:02pm · 23/10/1997

Dear receptionist: You have asked us why we think we need a complete lifetime to learn a little bit of everything there is to know. Here is our answer: We cannot discover everything there is to know in just a tentative way, because all knowledge together is a very gigantic heap! Even when we think a certain experiment is very valuable, two investigations will complement each other.

Derwentwater Primary School · 15:41 pm ·4/11/1997

Dear Ecole de Jean de la Fontaine and Richard: We feel that knowledge is not a gigantic heap. Instead, we view life as a series of empty corridors separated by many doors, many of which we will wish, at some time, to pass through. Each door is a choice in our lives. Knowledge is the key to unlock these doors. Everything we learn is a step along these corridors towards particular doors. We don't need to accumulate all the knowledge used to get through these doors of life, only the stuff we need to use now or possibly in the future.

Ecole Primaire Jean de la Fontaine · 17:47pm ·4/11/1997

Dear Steve Williams: You have completely understood what we wanted to say. It is by confronting our ideas and talking about them that we get closer to truth. We think there are different kinds of knowledge: indispensable knowledge, knowledge related to our future jobs, knowledge related to everyday life, knowledge just for fun, geographical exploration, music, painting, dancing, culture, poetry. There is a type of knowledge that can 'hit' you at any time in your life; It's a type of knowledge you eagerly search for.

Steve Williams · 0:30am – 5/11/1997

Dear Derwentwater: I like your analogy. It's very striking. I think we could play around with it a little bit. You say life is a series of empty corridors. Why empty? Is there anything worthwhile that might go on in the corridors? Your doors are like choices. Does that mean all knowledge should lead us towards achieving our goals in life? Are your choices the same as your goals? Also, what else apart from knowl-

edge might help us to get through the doors? How does knowledge help us get through the doors? Can you give us any examples? I'm looking forward to reading your ideas on any of these questions.

Derwentwater Primary School · 15:36pm · 5/11/1997

Dear Steve and Ecole Jean de la Fontaine: This is what we thought about the corridors. We thought that each corridor was a big glass cylinder with bigger glass cylinders surrounding each of these, telling our past, present and future. As we go along we see doors around us. The key to all doors is knowledge. This knowledge we get or experience from the many images, pictures, memories etc. that we see or glimpse through the glass. If we take a peek inside another door, and look back, the one we were in has changed for good. Knowledge changes our views of life. Even the floor is glass. Through this we see our present life and knowledge of the world. Our future can only be glimpse in the distant layers of glass of glass. All of our life experiences give us the keys (knowledge) to the many, many doors.

Barnstreet CPJunior School · 13:43pm – 6/11/1997

Dear Derwentwater: May we come in on the idea of corridors? How long is a corridor of knowledge? We think a corridor of knowledge is never ending because it is a life of learning. In life what doors do we come to? There may be good doors, bad doors, sad doors, a door that means life is over. The knowledge corridor could end when your life is over ... at death. We think at birth we enter into the first corridor of knowledge - there is no turning back. Do you think we have the same corridor? We feel that we all have our own corridor of knowledge. From Nathan, Sara and Danielle

CONCLUSION

Through projects such as this, the Internet allows us to revive the dialogical traditions of the eighteenth century correspondence networks. The Internet offers teachers what they are all too frequently denied: the opportunity to link with other and to supply teaching material on request. In this case, the teaching material is a collection of thoughts from other children and a model for good discussion. Maintaining and developing discussion networks in the eighteenth century and today requires much energy, much work, voluntary participation, a sense of intellectual adventure and above all the belief that 'On your own you never know enough.'

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