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# The Political Psychology of Virtual Reality: Scandinavian Trail Blazing

Editor

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Abstract. This article identifies some research opportunities concerning the political psychology of virtual reality.

Past articles of IBPP ("Virtual Reality Technology and Mental Health: Comments on the Medicine Meets Virtual Reality 5 International Conference", Vol. 1, No. 10, January 31, 1997; "Political Psychology and Globalization", Vol. 1, 13, February 21, 1997) have posited that the continued infusion of virtual reality technology (VRT) into everyday life--e.g., psychological therapies, support for the international development and transfer of goods, capital, technology, services, and knowledge--may result in noxious political and social psychological consequences. Some of these consequences may include (a) an emotional distancing in construing reality leading to a lowered threshold for tolerating human and civil rights; (b) social alienation leading to less initiatives for the collective welfare of those whom one represents and less direct contact with these people; (c) antisocial and hyperinstrumental tendencies as well as less personal accountability; (d) the permeability of ego boundaries and a weakening of a primary, coherent self-identity leading to multiple identities and more unpredictable social behavior in the eyes of others; and (e) virtual group dynamics with consequences so far largely unexamined. Are we closer to a virtual international court for virtual genocide and crimes against humanity that may result in virtually little chance of convicting a defendant regardless of data supporting allegations? Will "it wasn't me, it was my virtual self" prove more effective as a way out than "I was just following orders"? Will there be a greater probability of totalitarian political control through efficient marshaling of persuasive communications and shaping of intrapsychic and interpersonal processes?

In contrast, the developers and implementors of at least two VRT applications in Scandinavia take a quite different stance by positing a host of positive benefits. Sweden's Minister of Health and Social Affairs, Margot Wallstrom, uses teleconferencing as part of her official duties. Only a few miles from her hometown, she works from an office equipped with computer, modem, videoconferencing equipment, and scanner to transmit charts and documents. In this way, she can spend more time with her family and more closely monitor other significant others in her family's lives. She believes there are additional benefits as well: that she can "think, or write, or even make phone calls without disturbance" and "stay longer in a videoed meeting....on the phone, you lose concentration"; that people are better prepared and get to the point more quickly than on the phone; that working a distance from her country's capital gives her a different and useful perspective on politics; and that she's more in touch with people, experiences the daily life ongoing outside of Stockholm, and makes sure politics is rooted in reality.

In Finland, the VRT project Helsinki Arena 2000 is nearing completion. The project contains an interactive guide to government offices and provides real time access to lectures, arts, and cultural events. Risto Linturi, a prime mover of the project, "sees no limits to its uses." Supporters of the project believe that it will "give the one million residents of the Finnish capital a new concept of bringing people together" and that people will be united through the telephone, the computer, and the Internet. According to New York Times reporter, Youssef Ibrahim, Finland has the highest per capita use of the Internet and mobile phones in the world--more than 60% of the country's citizens are linked to the Internet. Collectively assumed positive consequences appear to be an underlying rationale for this.

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So there certainly are pessimists and optimists about the consequences of VRT for the world of today and tomorrow. Basic and applied research--theoretical and empirical--is needed to delineate Issues, perhaps even Nietzsche's gay science and methodologies of decadence. And in developing and carrying out this research, one should note that human experience with virtual reality goes back, well, perhaps as far as there have been humans--humans with the psychological skills of representation: e.g., sensation, perception, reading, imagination, interpretation, problem solving, and communicating about representation. The reality is that VRT should be more accurately conceived of as merely a technological adjunct to what has long been a reality not a novel virtual one. (See Giussani, B. (June 24, 1997.) Government by videoconference: Swedish minister telecommutes. The New York Times. (http://www.nytimes.com); Ibrahim, Y. M. (July 11, 1997.) All the sights of the city just a mouse clock away. The New York Times, p. 4; Kaufmann, W. (1974.) Nietzsche: Philosopher, psychologist, antichrist. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 72-95; Political psychology and globalization. (February 21, 1997.) International Bulletin of Political Psychology, 1(13), 4-7; Virtual reality technology and mental health: Comments on the Medicine Meets Virtual Reality 5 International Conference. (January 31, 1997.) International Bulletin of Political Psychology, 1(10), 8-10.) (Keywords: Globalization, Virtual Reality.)