Alternate networks

I. We're working on communication/information tools. We began with the idea of an ecological information center, and as our work progressed, we became aware of a variety of related efforts. Gradually our focus expanded to cover a range of needs and possibilities summarized here. In addition to thinking through the basic issues, we've been getting together the equipment, expertise, and the basic ideas necessary to do something about them. There's a lot to be done, and perhaps this note can help bring us together to do it.

II. There is a loose network, through publications like this and especially through person-to-person contacts, that serves the communication/information needs of the movement. But people get overloaded and stretched thin, and the information capacity of the network isn't high enough for the things we are trying to do. Groups sometimes operate almost in isolation, cut off from other people trying to do the same thing; and most of us have only limited access to the fund of knowledge and skills potentially available.

III. The tools provided by the existing information/communications technology serve different needs and embody different values. Bulk information systems, such as libraries or computerized information retrieval systems of the standard sort, can't do the job because they are impersonal, rigid, and gruesomely expensive. They have none of the flexible, intelligent adaptiveness of the face-to-face network. The academic system and the business—industrial system have face-to-face networks of their own, but they can't or won't relate to us for obvious reasons.

IV. So, a successful communication/information system is going to require a kind of wierd ingenuity to get us out of tight places. It may not be clear that this is such a crucial problem. We can't prove it is—our understanding isn't that complete. But we see one of the big problems of the Transformation as the replacement of the hierarchal-coercive institutions by decentralized-consentive ones. A good handle on the creation of communication/information systems wouldn't solve that problem, but it would make it a lot easier, especially for large groups (over twenty) with many conflicting interests.

V. Any useful system is going to have to embody some key values, no matter how it comes into existence, or how it works. Essentially, it will have to be under the control of the people who use it, and not the other way around. It will have to really *serve* their needs, and it cannot burden or restrict them according to *its* internal necessity. Partly that means we have to be careful of ego and power trips, even very subtle and very justifiable ones. Less obviously, if it is not going to burden and alienate the people who use it and who make it go, it is going to have to be *highly* efficient, returning a great deal of value for very little work.

VI. It may seem that there is a contradiction between an efficient system and one that supports human values. Obviously, we don't think so, or we wouldn't be working on it. We believe the problem comes from the way our society treats design and technology. All the work is done in a back room somewhere, and the marvelous new system is sprung on the hapless population, sealed up in a plastic box to keep out prying fingers. If it doesn't mesh with what people were doing, then it's the people who have to change. That kind of efficiency is over with. The communications/information network of the movement is already here, and it is going to keep in growing and adapting. What we hope to do is design some tools that the network can use.

VII. Those tools can conveniently bedivided into hardware and software. The software is fundamental, because it is the cheapest, most flexible, easiest to use and most open-ended. Software for us is the 'how to', tested out until we know it works, and available in a language that people can understand. So far, the network operates almost completely on software, and most of the software is created and tested on a preconscious level. As we bring this creation and testing up to consciousness in our own activities we find all kinds of glitches that can be straightened out and ways that we can use our knowledge about man and the world to strengthen and extend our software.

VIII. The hardware becomes important when we have good software. The computer is a good example. When we have the software down pat, we can program the machine to do the shitwork, and people can play. But if the software really doesn't do the things we wanted, then the system is going to impose its values on us. The computer can't solve our information/communication problems, but it can be a powerful tool in supporting our solutions.