

By Anne Brodie May 5, 2006

The end of TV news and entertainment programming, the end of phone companies and advertising as we know it is not far off according to Anne Kirah, the Paris-based computer anthropologist for Microsoft.



It's time for cataclysmic change.

Kirah's business is knocking on people's doors and spending the day with them, watching, learning, observing and reporting. She learns how people live their lives in relation to their computers. She doesn't ask questions or hand out questionnaires. She observes. She knows what's going out there and organizes her findings into crucial information. Under the Microsoft banner, she travels the world observing and gathering information to help the company respond to peoples needs.

One of the most obvious and widespread results of the computer age is that people are turning off conventional television and putting down their newspapers in favour of their computers. TV becomes not the source, but simply the screening tool for personal devices and information from the internet. No waiting till six o'clock for information on the government's new policy or the fire downtown. It's already on the net.

Internet users can do what Kirah calls 'contextual or 'directed' searches for news and information at any time and in any place. No more anchor jabber, no more company or personal bias flavoring reportage. In ten years, the biggest TV newsroom in Canada has dropped from 600-thousand viewers to about 250 – 300- thousand viewers per night. And the fear is growing in news organizations all over.

Kirah says they have the 'fear of God' about the future, but she assures them not to worry. They can overcome obsolescence by changing their thinking. She urges calm and offers tips on survival.

"News companies must adapt to the new world. The way they can survive is if the reporters read the viewers constantly and give them what they want, by bringing in citizen video and stories. They must listen to the story unfolding and use all reasonable resources of the viewers. But they must give something back to build loyalty, and that's authenticity. Not stories filtered through company or political bias, but real news."

They must learn to think with freshness and originality in the digital world.

For instance, Kirah, who lived and studied in Norway, tells the story of a Norwegian newspaper which as the first outlet to report the tsunami in Thailand. Why? Because it released the stories and picture messages sent home by the 2000 Norwegians vacationing there.

It took conventional media a minimum of 3 hours to get helicopters and reporters on site. And in using citizen stories, the number of missing was accurately reported almost immediately by the paper and its online counterpart.

Phone companies are moving forward with research to strengthen their positions, as are other businesses which will be directly affected by the growth of online culture. With computer companies getting ready to dominate communications and dash the existing order, the biggies must move in order to be relevant to customers who are years ahead of conventional businesses because they embrace the internet.

Kirah says the advent of the computer is comparable to the Industrial Revolution which had ripple effects that lasted for generations.

‘Spam’ is not an annoyance for no good reason. It’s just irrelevant information.”

“Why try to sell me a car when I don’t want one? I want to wait until I need a car to check ads.”
Advertising will have to change to be contextual and personal.

“When I have a newborn, I’m interested in diapers. But in six months, I don’t want diaper ads; I want something else tailored to my needs.”

Imagine advertising creating information for the individual consumer? It’s coming because the consumer wants it.

People will work more and more at home, at their own pace, and without the stresses of bosses who don’t understand the functioning of the human brain.

“Companies that don’t allow multi-tasking on the computer will fail.”

Newspapers and other print media will be used for leisure time, offering people the chance to sit back, read and be surprised. But the other side is that sitting back and relaxing are at a premium these days. Years ago, the old saying was that computers would give us three day work weeks, well the opposite has happened – people are busier and more productive than ever.

And the first generation of internet savvy is already in the workforce, changing things and working more efficiently than their counterparts from the past. They’re old hands at directional searches, high speed communication, and the intellectual riches to be had through computers and producing more than any generation before.

Big words from the five foot powerhouse who concludes that: “The good news is that that’s it for a while. We won’t have to worry about any technological developments as significant as the computer in our lifetime.”