Networking and the Conservation of Surprise, by Leif Smith

Just as material goods like computers and shoes have come within consumer reach through the process of competition, so can our "public" goods be provided in ever increasing number. Eventually, if the simple measures mentioned here are implemented, the act of "selling city hall" as office space or rental property will be just another component in an increasingly wealthy society that finds a political middle man obsolete.

There are people who make it their business to conserve the world's oceans and forests. They sometimes think of themselves as stewards who have assumed responsibility for precious things, wild and glorious things-capable of making life worth living to those who love them, but things also unpredictable and dangerous.

So it is with surprise--unpredictable and dangerous, but as essential to the well-being of humanity as oceans and forests. There are people in love with the unexpected, who seek differences, who do not wish life to repeat the same events in regular cycles--in short, who seek surprise. These explorers may choose, or be chosen by, a variety of realms, and their adventures may occur internally or externally. The pattern quest of the mathematician may be as filled with drama and surprise as the life of the explorer of mountains.

This venturesomeness of human beings is revealed not only in titanic quests, but also in multitudes of small adventures covering every aspect of life. The entire range of human exploration constitutes the wellspring of surprise.

The word "quest"--an aesthetics-governed pattern of explorations--comes to mind. This pattern allows an explorer to trace out and develop a realm within which occurs a life of adventure subjectively worth living. Such lives have been available to only a small number of the human beings who have lived or who now live, but I suggest that--if we are to cope with the changes past explorers have set in motion--we must now strive to make this mode of life available to all who wish it. The conservator of surprise must seek to create conditions in which the lives of explorers can flourish.

Tolerating Surprise

Humanity has not been good at tolerating the conditions required to sustain a world hospitable to explorers. Differences of opinion, expectation, and objective have been subordinated to the passion for uniformity. Among those conditions required by explorers are two that I believe are crucial. The first condition is that no barriers may exist between any two people who wish to exchange goods of matter or spirit. The second is that the fruits of the actions of each person, or group of freely cooperating people, must remain within their sphere of control until they choose to trade them away or to bestow them as gifts.

The satisfaction of these two conditions creates the basis for a global order of self-building systems of production and exchange. Within these systems any person chosen at random, regardless of the circumstances of his birth, has a chance to live a good life while making full use of his [er] powers of exploration. Such a condition has never existed on this planet. We might think of it as "civilization" defined in a way independent of technology.

For the last hundred years or so, the Austrian school of economics has been working out the place of self-building systems, known to them as "spontaneous orders," in the coordination of people's expectations and the integration of dispersed knowledge. Some of the recent work of F.A. Hayek, author of Law, Legislation and Liberty (1973), has concentrated on the relationship between designed orders and spontaneous ones, showing that many of the complex orders on which we rely are the product of human action but not of human design. It is therefore accurate

to refer to these orders as self-built, or autopoietic. Other Austrians, such as Gerald P. O'Driscoll (Economics as a Coordination Problem 1977), followed Hayek's lead and have developed the idea that freely changing prices, and entrepreneurial responses to them, are the key information-transfer mechanisms that make possible a complex self-building global order in which effective use of distributed knowledge can occur.

Creating Tools for Explorers

A global civilization based on the absence of restriction on possible connections between persons, for any reason sufficient to the two parties concerned, could be called an "open network." The efforts to conserve surprise and to bring about global open network are intimately related.

A self-building global order requires tolerance of multiple, independent regions of surprise generation, where the surprises may range from the introduction of new products and technologies, to new modes of life, to new theories of the universe. I propose that the way to. increase this tolerance for surprise is to convey to the world an image of the self-building system as the proper habitat for humanity. The task is to make it commonly understood that the self-building powers of complex human systems are maintained by the general and regular observance of limits on control.

Such education cannot be achieved by the broadcast of concepts, no more than could the idea of an electrically powered and lighted world be communicated by telling everyone about the ideas of Faraday and Maxwell. The use of a tool often tacitly conveys knowledge, usually inarticulate knowledge, about the world-view of the toolmaker. If the business of the entrepreneurs who create tools for explorers is the conservation of surprise; and if they do this because of a deep belief in the work of explorers, both as a worthy model of life and as an essential contribution to humanity; then perhaps some of this view will be conveyed to the users of the tools these entrepreneurs create.

Now is the time for a surge of entrepreneurial venture directed to the creation of surprise-handling tools. Among these will be general-purpose network generators--a venture in tool-making whose object is to provide explorers with connections that penetrate habitual barriers to communication. These generators will allow explorers to rapidly compose new networks to meet new circumstances, and will allow the [rapid] assimilation of discarded components of old networks into new ones.

The resistance to the decomposition of old networks will decrease once it is generally under—stood that new networks can be composed quickly. When people believe that the tools are at hand to allow them to adapt to new circumstances, they will be less inclined to try to freeze old linkages by constraining the opportunities offered to others. Ten years of operating a network generator have convinced me that this is so.

Network generators take things well known in one region and find other places in which they are useful surprises. They do this by establishing connections between people whose quests are somehow contiguous. The greater the store of abstract patterns and images available to the network weaver, the more insightful and stimulating will be the contiguities conjectured.

There is a way of thinking about self building systems, perhaps shared by some general systems theorists and Austrian economists. It leads to the understanding that the quest-serving balance and interplay of designed and spontaneous orders depend on conserving the origins of surprise. Deliberate abstention from controlling what goods fall where is essential to the preservation of surprise generative orders.

I call this understanding a "sense of freeorder." It has applications in many different areas, all of which have in common the feeling that a sense of freeorder encourages a deliberate limitation on efforts to control things. This allows for the use of more information than we would know how to include in systems designed for known-in-advance outcomes. A sense of freeorder is one of the most valuable assets, or competencies, that a weaver of networks can develop.

Appreciating Limits

The full utilization of dispersed knowledge, where what is known to each is not known to many, entails the conservation of surprise. Since knowledge of local detail, objectives, and expectations differs, it is likely that the use made of knowledge in one place will often create surprising effects in other places. Living in the presence of continual surprise is difficult unless one has acquired the habit of expecting yesterday's surprises to become tomorrow's opportunities.

The use of network generators as tools for assembling new resources will gradually impart to large populations an expectation of successful assimilation of change and will decrease fears of personal and group obsolescence.

The builders of network generators, which serve as general-purpose tools for explorers, and the weavers of networks who work within them, stand to gain much from the study of self-building orders. They will come to appreciate that the provision of facilities for the pursuit of widely varied unknown purposes can contribute more to the well-being of humanity than the most dedicated efforts to achieve a set of well-understood specific outcomes. They will also learn to appreciate that abstention from control, coupled with the constant introduction of surprising possibilities, provides the ground from which can spring completely unanticipated solutions to problems that would not have been overcome by direct assault.

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Leif Smith, founder of the Office for Open Network in Denver, was first exposed to Austrian economics in 1959 while attending Robert LeFevre’s Freedom School.

[Note 15Aug22: There is nothing in here about the idea that conservation means that surprise is either widely distributed and fine grained (in small parts), or concentrated and hidden in massive errors the preservation of which is possible only if a truth-hiding concentrated power dominates a culture. Surprise will be conserved - but will it be dealt with piecemeal, a bit at a time, or will it be hidden behind a wall of likes until, like a dam bursting, it will break through and sweep away a large parts of the once “protected’ society. Conservation by extensive distribution is less dangerous.]