Open Forum: Will the Net conquer traditional communication?

1. Introduction (Guy Mollet)

Immediately after the dramatic events in NY, major Rudolph Giuliani was in the streets, covered with dust, talking to the people and helping out.
George W. Busch addressed the Americans on TV. The New Yorkers were wondering who their president really was

Let me outline what we have in mind for the next hour and a half.
- *In 10 minutes, I will champion the traditional ways of communicating and for 10 minutes, Peter will talk about the opportunities offered by the new ways of communicating.*
- *Subsequently, we will ask you to take position for one of the two points of view.*
- *We will split in two teams whose assignment will be to develop arguments for each thesis.*
- *After half an hour we will reconvene and each team will make a presentation to the other team.*
- *Finally, we will try all together to come up with a list of recommendations for CARNet.*

My thesis is that the new technologies are a support but not a replacement for the traditional ways of communicating.

Consider the following facts and questions.
1. The first dictionary of the Internet, compiled by Darrel INCE, professor at the Oxford Open University, contains 4000 definitions. The interesting point is that this considerable work of scholarship is a book and not a web site.
2. Stephen King tried to sell a novel on the net by charging 1$ for every chapter. He had to stop after 3 to 4 chapters.
3. In the USA, more and more On-Line retailers have started opening shops in the main cities of the country.
4. Last August, Genesys Conferencing, a conference organizing company, published a survey involving over 100 companies employing 500 people or more. It stated that 40% of the interviewees attended 6 to 10 meetings every week. A further 20% more than 10 meetings. The tendency is increasing.
5. In the USA, more and more companies are recruiting over the Internet. The final decision is always made person-to-person.
   Some companies have started using e-mail to communicate the decision to fire employees. This is very unpopular!
6. In the downtown of most cities of the western world there is a tremendous concentration of offices and businesses.

The Giuliani and Bush anecdote shows us once again, that physical presence is vital in communication.

Many studies (*Mehrabian A. Nonverbal Communication Chicago 1972*) have showed that the audience (YOU) is attentive for 80% on how the message is delivered and how the messenger is coming over (body language) and only 8% is aware of the content. Hardly anybody will remember what Bush said; everybody will remember that Giuliani was there with his body and with his soul.

A further study (Mintzberg, The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning) shows that managers rely for 80% on oral forms of communication. *"A conversation with a disgruntled customer gives more than a major marketing study."*

This brings me to the next important aspect of my thesis.

Most of us are using e-mail and SMS on a daily basis.
Most people also connect more and more.
However, studies have shown that vocabulary and personal expression is down and real understanding is decreasing. (Annette Cramer: Stimme)
What is happening is that ***"Connectivity proves more appealing than Content"***
People think that they communicate, actually they only connect.

Why is that?
Why *is it that* ***physical presence*** *and body language is more important to people than content?*
Why *is it that* ***connectivity*** *is more appealing than communication and than content?*

The reason lies 5 million years away.
We are not very different than our first intelligent ancestors were when they roamed and when they faced the dangers of the savannas of Africa.
Homo Sapiens, in his brief existence of 5 million yrs. has not changed a lot. He and she are still acting and reacting with their original, primitive survival instincts.
Therefore, for us social animals, smelling, eyeballing, touching, listening to the tone of a voice are still very important and very powerful signals.
Don't you love the smell of a new book? Would you sign an important contract without seeing your protagonist and shaking hands with him or her?

On the second issue, connecting to the others is an important element of security and safety. We reassure the others and they reassure us. They tell us and we tell them that all is well and safe.

The new toys, e-mail, SMS enable us to connect and be connected all the time, without frontiers. We love it and we play with it, instinctively for reasons of security and safety.

Are we therefore communicating better and collaborating better?
I don't think so.
Will ITC replace the traditional ways of communicating?
I don't think so.
Not when it matters. When trust is needed or when there is a real crisis, we walk, we take our bicycle, or the streetcar, or the car, or the boat, or the plane and we go to meet the others, physically.

Therefore I believe that it is a wrong question to ask whether the new technologies will replace the old ways of communicating and collaborating.
The real good question is:
 "Knowing that we are social animals, driven by our basic ancestral instincts, how can we exploit the new technologies to improve our communication and our collaboration?"

2. Added value to traditional way of communicating (comments made by the participants)

1. Using e-mail makes it easier to write messages (letters) than when having to write and send traditional letters. The Net improves "my willingness" to communicate.
2. The Net opens the possibility of creating new contacts over great distances.
3. E-mail is a new way to keep memos.
4. The Net opens huge access to information sources worldwide.
5. Videoconferences.
6. Multimedia.
7. Worldwide Multimedia is lightening the planet earth like the sun. Traditional communication, physical presence, is like sitting in a dark room with a candle as a single point of light.

3. A wishlist - e-mail to CARNet: Dear CARNet, we would like you to:

1. Be more targeted in the distribution of the "Content" of the Internet. You should consider giving different contents to different users.
2. Improve your image and market your products better.
3. Help de-mystifying the Internet, outside academia but also *inside*.
4. Organize a structured compulsory Net-education for the academic community.
5. Group services at one place in the Net.
6. Move from PC to Network computing.
7. Improve the usage of your own existing and available technology.
8. Open an 800 # (modem access) for every HR citizen. (Limited in time)
9. Promote and develop global trends, such as *Open Source* or *Wireless.*
10. Lead the way in non-commercial issues, also outside the academic world.
11. Improve the customer orientation of CARNet's employees and managers.
12. Use outside curators when organizing events that are other than purely technical.
13. Pursue discussions and forums like this one on a regular basis.