



## RODENT'S RAMBLES

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'Hologram Originated Academic Xenotype makes possible for the first time the dissemination of quality teaching to any part of the world where there is an internet connection'



# WORLDWIDEWEBB

When Beatrice and Sidney Webb were nurturing the infant LSE, they took great care to ensure that the teaching staff of the new institution were up to date, scientific, experts in the new skills, and a clean break from the old-fashioned scholasticism of Oxbridge. Hands-on, state-of-the-art, practical technical skills, not theory and dead writers. Auditing, not Aristotle was the watchword. The spirit of this dedicated modernity is being well cultivated if a document leaked onto my desk is to be regarded as genuine. The report, for whose authenticity I cannot of course vouch, announces the approach of cyber-LSE. The new core initiative, Hologram Originated Academic Xenotype, makes possible for the first time the dissemination of quality teaching to any part of the world where there is an internet connection. This follows an earlier pilot initiative where LSE's delivery van had painted on each side the slogan 'LSE: a world class institution'. The School has decided to go a step further now, and to create what will be in effect a cyber van which will cruise the internet, spreading the word.

The truly radical aspect of the scheme is that the cyber van will have a cyber driver. It will dispense with, or transcend, human teachers. Following the success of cyber simulation on terrestrial television channels, with the computer generated presenter 'Roger Melly, the man from the telly', the project will generate the first virtual teacher, tentatively to

be called 'Sonia MacNee, the Prof from LSE', who will give virtual lectures on a potentially limitless range of subjects, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Initial marketing surveys have suggested as a suitable advertising catch phrase: 'If it's Sunday, it must be sociology.' This was thought to be more likely to hit the ground running than 'If it's Monday, it must be macro-economics.'

The initiative is not without difficulties. A problem with any system of virtual learning is the quality of interactivity. It is one thing for a computer simulation to give lectures and presentations, but answering questions, and facilitating discussion and argument, is more difficult. A cyber-simulation must be able to embody, or disembody, a level of intelligence and, more importantly, imaginative and lateral thinking, comparable to that achieved by humans. Initial tests are already under way to see if 'Sonia MacNee' will pass the Turing test, which determines whether an investigator, interrogating a source without knowing what that source is, can tell whether it is a human or a machine. Unfortunately an earlier version of the pilot became contaminated, with several interrogatory conversations inadvertently taking place not with the prototype 'Sonia MacNee', but with human members of the School. The report, which was issued before the mistake was discovered, concluded that the investigators were dealing with very low grade computers, and commented that, in some of

the answers given to the investigators, the addition of the prefix 'management of' to descriptions of almost every activity from proof reading to catching a number 11 bus indicated a level of intellect and imagination somewhat below that of a pocket calculator.

The reverse problem, which has emerged in other preliminary tests, is that just as the identity of the cyber-teacher can be problematic, so can that of the cyber-student. The problem of essays downloaded from California and presented as original pieces of student work is as nothing to that of the students themselves being artefacts. Cyber students, or even hologram hominoids, might gain qualifications, apply for jobs, and draw salaries. Once face to face contact is replaced by education in cyber space, the old empirical verities are abolished. LSE has had experience of this in the past. In the 1960s it was commonplace for members of the school to read in their morning papers that LSE had been occupied by drug crazed Maoists, the library burnt to the ground, and all the ice cream in the senior common room fridge eaten by revolutionary Trotskyists, only to come in a little while later to find the buildings intact, the ice cream safe, and the students all in the library reading. So virtual teachers with virtual students would not be unprecedented. Whether virtual corporate raiders are an advance on virtual insurgents, the report, in the version leaked to me, does not say. ■