

Cell Phone Technology and the Challenge of Absent Presence

Kenneth J. Gergen
Swarthmore College

"Let your home know where your heart is."
Billboard advertisement for cellular phone.

The setting is a retirement home for the elderly. Wilfred enters the veranda in search of two close friends. He is in luck, they are both present. But alas, one is lost to her walkman and the other is engrossed in his book. Neither notice Wilfred's presence. Frustrated, Wilfred is left to stare silently into space. Such is the beginning of Ronald Harwood's London play, *Quartet*. Young or old, we instantly identify with the scene. How often do we enter a room to find family, friends or colleagues absorbed by their computer screen, television, CDs, the telephone, the newspaper, or even a book? Perhaps they welcome us without hesitation; but sometimes there is a pause, accompanied even by a look of slight irritation. And at times our presence may go completely unacknowledged. We are present but simultaneously rendered absent; we have been erased by an absent presence.

It is the 20th century expansion of absent presence that I wish to explore in what follows. My concern is with the growing domain of diverted or divided consciousness invited by communication technology, and most particularly the mobile telephone. One is physically present, but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere. Typically it is a world of relationships - both active and vicarious - within which domains of meaning are being created or sustained. Increasingly these domains of alterior meaning insinuate themselves into the world of full presence - that world in which one is otherwise absorbed and constituted by the immediacy of concrete, face-to-face relationships. In what follows I wish first to explore the development of absent presence and to consider its broad consequences for cultural life. As we shall find, these consequences are both significant and multi-dimensional. Inasmuch as they also disrupt broadly valued traditions they are effects about which one can scarcely be neutral. I will then take up the entry of the cellular phone into cultural life. In certain respects the cell phone extends the domain of absent presence. Yet, because of its particular technological configuration it stands to subvert or reverse the major effects of other communication technologies. Finally we shall turn briefly to the future. Although cellular phone technology now generates interesting and significant cultural formations, it is unclear whether the trajectory can be sustained.

The Expansion and Implications of Absent Presence

Walter Ong's (1982) classic treatment of orality and literacy was chiefly concerned with the effects of print technology on mental life, including the structure of memory,

rational analysis, and forms of understanding. Little attention was devoted, however, to the implications of print technology for social life, to the ways in which print relations impinge, for example, on patterns of trust, intimacy, family life, and community relationship. Yet, in terms of social life there is an important sense in which print technology is one of the most significant revolutionary forces of the past 2000 years. To appreciate this possibility it is useful to consider the social genesis and function of language. Language comes into being - into meaning - through coordinated relationships among persons. It is through language that persons acquire their ways of understanding the world and themselves. Within communities both an ontology of everyday life and a moral code are typically established in language, and these languages play an integral role in both constituting and rationalizing communal traditions and institutions (Gergen, 1994). Thus, as we come to generate languages of justice, freedom, and knowledge, for example, and as these languages come to play a constitutive role within our institutions (e.g. law, governance, education), so does a group gain the possibility of mutual understanding and the recognition of themselves as an identifiable community.

Lacking outside interference, local ontologies and moralities can be sustained with relative ease. Lacking dissenting voices, there is little with which to compare and little grounds for question. Thus, so long as all voices join in the assertion of a flat world, there is little reason to cry out that the world is round! Such a claim, in itself, might seem nonsense - without meaning. It is thus that the development of print technology harbors the potential for pandemic revolution: myriad voices from far-flung locales may enter without detection at any time to challenge the cherished realities of one's immediate community. Print technology functions much as a Trojan horse; once inside the walls a veritable army of discontent can spring forth. In print the absent voices are now present, and as they are absorbed the claims of local community are diminished. Of course, as censorship, newspaper closings, and book burnings all suggest, virtually every traditionalist and tyrant has come to realize the unsettling potentials of print technology. The creation of home town newspapers, Bible study groups, and the academic canon are but a few manifestations of the same technology pressed into protecting the established realities and moralities.

Yet, despite its significance, print technology must be seen as but a first force in the historical emergence of absent presence. Technological developments of the present century have dramatically expanded the domain. I am not speaking here merely of the development of lighting systems that enable people to read on a round the clock basis. Nor is it simply the massive increment in published works - newspapers, novels, professional books, and the like. It is said that approximately 90% of the published works of the Western world were produced in the preceding century alone. Rather, we must consider as powerful contributors to absent presence virtually all communications technologies that enabled people to communicate at a distance.

There are first of all what may be considered the technologies of *monological presence*. Here we may include most prominently the emergence of radio, electronic recording devices (e.g. phonograph, cassette and compact disk recordings), film, and

television. In each case the technologies are populist - with radio and television reaching now virtually every household in the United States - and sustained by major industrial investments. In their contribution to an absent presence, however, there are two noteworthy factors. First in certain respects there is a relatively low degree of dislodgement potential, that is, the capacity to unseat local commitments to the real and the good. As monologic technologies they may provide information or stimulation, but in doing so they speak but are not directly spoken to. They insert alterior voices into daily life circumstances but there is little means (save, for example, by talk radio) by which one can respond. One cannot ask for clarification, elaboration, or examples, nor can one raise questions. In effect, there is little potential for the kind of dialogic engagement from which more profound transformations in understanding and commitment are born. Nor do the monological speakers typically have knowledge of the personal lives of their audiences. The messages of radio, television and film are in this sense impersonal. As a result the voices carried by such monologic technologies typically remain one step removed from the life of the audience.¹ They may be heeded or not, relegated to the status of "background noise," or terminated at the flick of a switch.

The second important feature of these monologic technologies is their *progressive privatization*. At their inception such technologies facilitated collective reception. Families might gather round the radio and then the television. Recorded music was typically played on a family unit, and thus available to all. The cinema served as an invitation for an outing - with friends, a date, or with family. The incoming voices were thus made available to all. Under these circumstances an audience could deliberate on what they had heard or seen. There might be broad differences in opinion that would work against the disruptive capacities of the medium. As many communication studies demonstrate, there are many instances in which an audience appropriates the meaning of the incoming material for their own purposes. For example, Brown's (1994) study of soap opera audiences suggests that, contrary to the common view that the "soaps" sustain a patriarchal value structure, women negotiate the meanings of the materials in ways that galvanize resistance against the patriarchy. Through their conversations women use these materials in empowering ways. However, as the cost of monologic communications technologies has declined and miniaturization has progressed, so have they been progressively removed from collective deliberation. Many households now have multiple television sets, so that different family members may indulge their independent preferences. On many jet planes each traveler has a private screen with multiple channel choices. Video cassettes now invite film viewing in the privacy of one's room; devices such as the Walkman allow people to indulge their musical tastes in private. Further, with the multiplication of radio stations and television channels, there is a diminishing chance that others will have been exposed to the same materials. In sum, in the case of monologic technologies we find a relatively low degree of transformative power, but an increasing potential for immersing people in private as opposed to collective worlds.

A useful contrast can be made between monologic and *dialogic communication*

technologies. In this latter category we may include the telephone, video and computer games, and most prominently the internet. All such technologies facilitate the flow of interactive movement in meaning. I shall postpone consideration of the telephone until we take up the development of the cellular phone. In the case of video and computer games, while dialogic, they are also relatively barren in terms of content relevant to a world outside themselves. We worry about the reverberations of violence in such games, but the analogy between space warfare, for example, and the challenges of everyday life is thin. Far more important in terms of transforming our constructions of the world, is the internet. In terms of absent presence the internet promises to be far more profound in its consequences than the development of print. Here we have a technology that enables instantaneous connections to be made among persons throughout the world. Alien voices from any locale and around the clock, may instantaneously insert themselves into one's consciousness. Further, email communication invites a high degree of dialogic engagement. In contrast to monologic technologies, one participates in the construction of the world, and this construction can be uniquely tailored to, and expressive of, one's individual circumstances. Unlike many monological technologies, email is also fully privatized. In effect, the present is *virtually* eradicated by a dominating absence.

Cultural Reverberations of Absent Presence

The internet is profoundly disrespectful of tradition, established order and hierarchy.

Fareek Zakaria, Editor, [Foreign Affairs](#)

Given the surging expansion of absent presence - both through monological and dialogical technologies - it is important to consider more fully the impact on cultural life. This account is pivotal, inasmuch as we shall find telephone technology functions in such a way as to deflect or alter these tendencies in significant ways. We consider, briefly, four significant changes in cultural life:

Dangerous Liasons

In Laclos' 18th century novel, *Les Liasons Dangereuse*, the major protagonists and lovers, Valmont and Merteuil, develop a pact that will enable them to compete in the seduction of others. Their intimacy will be reinforced by their ability to reveal their desires and manipulative intentions to each other, and to rely on each other to help in consummating these desires. Yet, in each seduction they risk the possibility that their own intimate bond will be broken. Either may fall in love with the object of desire. The result of this delicate play of desire and trust is catastrophe. In an important sense the emerging domain of the absent present renders daily life a landscape of dangerous liasons. As radio, television, magazines, books, and film consume our fantasies, ignite our desire, offer new ideas and directions, so are the realities embedded in what we often call our "primary bonds" placed under potential threat. One's interests and enthusiasms may be directed elsewhere. The dialogic development of local meanings may also be curtailed; when we are listening to voices from afar we are no longer building together the realities and moralities of the

local. As internet interaction increasingly absorbs our attention, new clusters of meaning emerge. While these may be compatible with the primary domains of reality and morality, they may also function independently, tangentially, or antagonistically.

Herein we find the dark side of what cyber-gurus such as Howard Rheingold (1994) hail as the coming of cyber-community. It is when the local ceases to hold sway, when it becomes irrelevant or alien, that the essential bonds of communal trust are frayed. Friendship, intimacy, family, neighbors cease to be the primary sources of meaning, and become the objects of deliberation from yet another domain of reality. More dramatically, when the command of the local is destroyed, the stage is set for flagrant violations of its moral standards - for indulgence in child pornography, the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate movement, or the massacre at Columbine High. It is important here not to overstate the case. The conditions under which cybercommunal processes can captivate the user remain quite unclear, and many critics are highly skeptical of the forces of cybermediated relationships.² For example, as the volume of email continues to expand, so is there an inflation of the word. Individual communiques can become lost in a sea of competing contenders. And when one is responding to a volume of electronic mail, his or her replies may shift in definition from "personal expressions" to "utilitarian" or "obligatory" acts. The personal may become pragmatic. At the same time, there are populations for whom cyber-communities may be a fruitful or indeed essential option. For the aged, the infirm, or the isolated cyber connections may be an invaluable source of support; for the prison inmate the cyber community may be a useful link to the culture at large; for those who need a support and empathy a cyber community may provide far more resources than one's family and friends.³ In whatever fashion, as the domain of the absent present is enlarged so is the importance of face to face relations likely to be diminished.

Horizontal Relationship

It is common in western culture to think of relationships in terms of their degree of centrality; in the academic world, for example, we theorize extensively on the impact of "significant others" in our lives. Further, there is strong value traditionally placed on close relationships. We commonly count lives the richer when they achieve depth or intimacy in relationship. The value placed on depth can be contrasted with yet another ideal, that of breadth of acquaintance. We are wary of the social isolate and pity the outcast, and we speak of the enrichment, opportunity, and substantial support to be derived from having an array of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. For analytic purposes let us frame the former ideal in terms of *vertical* and the latter in terms of *horizontal* relationship. In these terms it is also clear that these ideals tend toward antagonism. Relating in the vertical register typically requires dedicated attention, effort, commitment, and sacrifice. When one is successfully engaged in the vertical register we frequently find there is no need of others or little interest in them. By the same token, to have many friends, colleagues and the like is also demanding of time and effort. The adolescent who thrives on popularity carries a heavy burden; the young man who seeks out his chums each night may have difficulty with serious

relations; and the adult who relies on "networking" dwells in a labyrinth without end.

In this context we may see the expansion of absent presence as essentially favoring a cultural shift from the vertical to the horizontal register of relationship. As the technologies of absent presence divert and redirect attention so do they expand the range of relationships (either actual or imagined) in which the person is engaged. To become enamored of the works of a given author, film director, composer, dancer, or jazz musician, for example, is essentially to broaden the network of relationships in which one is engaged. For many men televised sports, for example, serve as surrogate companions; during Sunday afternoon football a young man does not require either a spouse or those "buddies" with whom he once attended the games. The internet expands the horizontal network exponentially. Surfing the web functions much like saying "hello" to a vast brigade of acquaintances - some superficial, others arresting. In significant degree we may be witnessing a wholesale devaluation of depth in relationship. This is surely suggested by the fact that the average age at which people marry has increased, while the likelihood of remaining married continuously declines. As census data indicates, we will soon live in a country in which the majority of people live alone. But, it should be added, these people are not likely to be living without television, radio, CDs, a VCR, and a computer.

Humans without Qualities

In Robert Musil turn of the century volume, *The Man without Qualities*, we confront the possibility of a culture in which individuals have little in the way of identifiable character. It is not only Ulrich, the major protagonist, who feels that I am "equally close to and equally far from all qualities and that they are all, whether (my) own or not, strangely a matter of indifference." (p.151) Rather, Musil sees the society as moving in this direction. Although prophetic in certain respects, Musil had yet to encounter the dramatic expansion of absent presence. In certain respects the communication technologies in question may be considered self-eviscerating. For what is required in order to achieve a quality of character, a personality trait, or a moral posture - or indeed any personal manner of thought or feeling that we might typically identify as "myself?" In important degree the possession of an identifiable self requires a community of persons who recognize one as a certain kind of a person, who affirm this recognition over time and situation, and who hold one responsible for sustaining this manner of being. As Alasdair MacIntyre has put it, to be a moral self is "to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life within a community."⁴

Yet, as the domain of absent presence expands so is the scaffolding for a recognizable self eroded. With each new enclave of meaning - whether vicariously or interactively constituted - there are new selves in the making. To view a film depicting war, romantic love, heroism, sexuality and the like is silently to play out the possibility of a different self. The horizons of being are challenged; the local may slowly seem parochial. The Walter Mitty, Frank Harris, or Thomas Ripley within may yearn for escape. With video and computer games these yearnings may gain in

clarity and potency. Such games indeed seemed to have fueled the actions of the Columbine High assassins. In the case of the internet, to form an email relationship, to join a list serve, to participate in chat room, or to explore a virtual religion or a pornography site is to expand on the possibilities of "who I am." At the same time, however, as the communal sources for an identifiable self are diminished, it becomes increasingly difficult to answer the question of "who am I?" We move then into a cultural condition in which our identities are increasingly more situated, conditional, and optional.⁵

The New Floating World

In late 19th century Tokyo a new way of life sprang forth among the merchant class, a way of life that centered on transient pleasure, and which revolved around entertainment, sensual indulgence, and prostitution. Because of its corrosive effects on social tradition, it was also a world decried by people of rank. In the 20th century West we confront the emergence of a new form of floating world, one ushered into being by the technologies of absent presence. My concern here is with the emergence of a world of meaning cut away from the pragmatics of everyday life. To appreciate the point return to the earlier argument for the social basis of language. As proposed, language comes into as people coordinate themselves around various activities. Consider then a *primary level of coordination* in which the activity takes place within material circumstances, and in which the language is essential to effective action. For the surgeon who calls for a scalpel, the pilot who calls for a flight plan, or the builder who calls for a rapidly sealing mortar, it is essential that the recipient's referential use of the language is identical. While not always so precise, the everyday use of language in face-to-face relationships is often of the primary variety. Comments such as "Please pass the sugar," "have you seen my car keys," and "the assignment for Monday is..." are closely wedded to pragmatic outcomes. Contrast this with a *secondary level* of coordination in which the actions at stake are those of speaking or writing. Here, for example, we might discuss our conflicting ideas about the president, the values embedded in the curriculum, or our impressions of a film or book. In such communication our talk may ultimately impinge on our conduct in material conditions of interdependency, but not always and necessarily. But then consider third and fourth order levels of coordination: where we discuss, for example, the dynamics of our conversation about abortion, or the values of poetry, or how history books have treated various minorities. Here we move toward what might be viewed as a floating world of signification, that is, a world in which the relationship of the language to ongoing practical activity is ambiguous if not irrelevant.

It is this the new floating world that is facilitated by the expansion of absent presence. To read a novel, see a film, or watch televised sports is to engage in a world of representation - what Debord might call the "world of the spectacle," and Baudrillard would term the "hyperreal."⁶ Similarly, when email exchanges create their own realm of "conversational objects," so can they float free from moorings in everyday life. But, we may ask, what are the reverberations of floating realities in everyday life? Here we should consider, for example, their suppressing effects on the

first level languages. Simply put, as our attentions are poured into floating realms, so do the skills, the repertoires, and creative developments required for effective exchange in daily relations diminish. As the philosophical literature on ethics continues to feed upon itself, the ethical dilemmas of daily life are cast aside; the endless discussions on electronic list serves often have little function other than ensuring their own continuation. At worst, to live in floating worlds of absent presence may mean the devaluation of mere day to day activity. Compared to the glories of space wars, the academy awards, and championship chess, having a full time job, going to the market, paying taxes, and raising children may seem exercises in ennui.

Again, I border on overstatement. In important degree it is the language of the un-real that furnishes the source of enchantment in cultural life. In the pragmatic language of the real that things simply are what they are - a man, a woman, the sun, the moon, earth, water, and so on. It is when languages are imported from another realm that the everyday realities are transformed, when the humdrum turns wondrous. It is by virtue of the non-practical realm of meaning the what we call idealization or romanticizing occurs - and woman becomes "the woman!" sunsets evoke rituals of worship, "moonlight becomes you" and water becomes holy. And there will always be a need for languages not so embedded in "the real" that we cannot turn in critical reflection; in an important sense, liberation from convention requires that we look beyond the practically embedded languages of the culture.

Retrenchment and Reconfiguration: The Cellular Phone

"Without my cell phone my emotional life would be in ruins."

Sarah, from Willow Grove, PA

The erosion of face-to-face community, a coherent and centered sense of self, moral bearings, depth of relationship, and the uprooting of meaning from material context: such are the repercussions of absent presence. Such are the results of the development and proliferation of our major communication technologies of the past century. Yet, curiously enough the telephone was not included in the preceding discussion of absent presence. We must now make amends. It is also when we begin to consider the function of the telephone that we begin to appreciate the profound potentials of the cellular phone. This is not to say that the effects of the cell phone are univocal. Clearly there are differing forms of usage, each of which modifies what I shall here consider its central thrust in cultural life. Consideration of these matters must await discussion of the telephone.

When the telephone entered cultural life early in the century, it primarily served as an extension of face to face relations. Neighbors and business colleagues could communicate with each other without the inconvenience of transporting themselves bodily. Neighbors had instant access to each other, and with the help of an operator, could reach those outside the immediate vicinity. (I recall here my attempt at the age of five to "run away from home," only to have found that my parents were able to

trace my every move as they talked by phone with observant neighbors.) To be sure, we find here the expansion of absent presence, but far different in kind from that previously considered. The telephone does indeed demand that participants divorce their attentions from their immediate surrounds. However, it is essential here to distinguish between absent presence arising from what might be called *endogenous* as opposed to an *exogenous* sources. Unlike radio, mass publication, film, sound recordings, and television - all of which originate from outside the community - telephone conversation in the early years was largely endogenous. It originated within and extended the potentials of face to face relationships.

In many respects the telephone has lost its capacity as a resource for endogenous relationship. In part this is due to the public dissemination of telephone numbers and the lowering costs of long distance transmission. There is, for one, a standing invitation for the distantly known to enter suddenly into our immediate lives ("We met last year at...." "I am calling because your daughter is my daughter's best friend at school..."). More significantly, the world of commerce increasingly seizes on "the cold call" or telemarketer to generate business. The answering machine, originally used to ensure that the messages of intimates would not be lost, is now used as often for defense against the distant and the commerciant. It is not a recording instrument that is desired, so much as a screening device to select among calls one will chose to answer. (Many have even abandoned their answering machines in order to reduce the flow of messages for which an answer is anticipated.) Further, because the automobile (along with mass transit and jet transportation) invites a high degree of mobility, and because dual income families are becoming the norm, there are few denizens of the face to face community present on a round-the-clock basis. Most suburban communities stand relatively empty during the day. In effect, there are only remnants of the face to face community remaining for which the telephone may serve as a prosthetic.

It is at this juncture that the drama of the cell phone becomes most fully apparent. The cell phone now serves as an instrument par excellence for endogenous strengthening. The realities and moralities of the face to face relationship are revitalized. This is so not only because of the perpetual connection which a mobile phone allows. But the very fact that the user is rendered vulnerable to calls at any time of day or night invites careful selection of those who will be granted access to one's number. Such access is typically limited to those who are otherwise "close" in the traditional sense: family, intimate friends, close colleagues and the like. It is thus that the nuclear circle can be perpetually sustained. Yes, the domain of the absent presence is broadened,⁷ but this time it is typically the casual relationship that is disrupted as opposed to the nuclear. The dialogical nature of the communication serves as a further source of vitality. Examples of such nuclear strengthening are everywhere available. On an hour's rail journey from New York to Philadelphia the man in the seat behind me called his "Maria" no less than four times to share the fruits of his ruminations. Sandra from Willow Grove uses her 45 minute commute to spend time with her intimate friends each day. Neighbors supply their growing

adolescents with cell phones to insure close and safe watch.

The efficacy of the cell phone in extending the power of endogenous realities is partially reflected in the resentment many feel toward those using them in their presence. It is not simply that one's reverie may be interrupted by a nearby conversation; it is the fact that such conversation actively excludes one from participation. Cell phone conversation typically establishes an "inside space" ("we who are conversing") vs. an "outside space" constituted by those within earshot but prevented from participation. The fact that "it doesn't matter whether you listen or not" underscores the impotent insignificance of the outsider. If one happens to be closely related to the cell phone user (and relatively equal in status), resentment at the other's engagement may become acute. In the manifest structure of privilege, one is defined as secondary, not significant after all. The efficacy of the cell phone in sustaining endogenous ties is further revealed in the complaint voiced by many that "my cell phone is like a prison." Here we find backlash resistance against the continuous intrusion of obligations, standards and expectations of one's circle of intimates. In a world in which one is often and increasingly engaged in multiplicitous relationships, the continuous enforcement of a single perspective may often seem restrictive and oppressive.

This revitalizing of face to face relationships also has broad-scale cultural reverberations. Consider the consequences of absent presence as earlier discussed. Rather than the levelling of significance in relationships, the cell phone lends itself to a retrenchment of verticality. Given the privilege granted by the cell phone to a select few, there is less tendency to move laterally and superficially across relationships. Rather, one's communication time is increasingly spent in the presence of "those who matter." By the same token, breaks are placed on the concatenating tendency toward self-fragmentation and diffusion. With the cell phone, one's community of intimates more effectively sustains one's identity as a singular and coherent being. One is continuously, if sometimes painfully, reminded of one's place in the flux of social life. Here too lie the resources for refurbishing the moral compass. By revitalizing the singular identity, so too is a singular pattern of rights, wrongs, duties and obligations made clear. The contours as conscience are clarified.

With respect to the floating worlds encouraged by preceding technologies of absent presence a more complicated picture emerges. On the one hand the cell phone does invite an expansion of a symbolic world that may be little related to the immediate, practical surrounds of either speaker. When the pedestrian, the diner, or the passenger on the train are locked in cell phone conversation they cease to be full participants in the immediate context. It is the fatal impact of such diversion that now leads many states to outlaw the use of cell phones while driving. (An Israeli driver was recently arrested because he was driving with his knees as he occupied himself with two cell phones.)

At the same time, there are more subtle ways in which the cell phone facilitates new integrations of the absent and the present. Consider a story related by a colleague: At

a family dinner table the parents are putting the breaks on their teenage daughter's social plans for Saturday night. She simply must be home by midnight, they argue, and her friends' parents would all agree with them. However, rather than yielding to the demands of the far superior forces, the daughter pulls her cell phone from her pocket and proceeds to call her friends. When one after the other the friends inform her that their parents agree to the late hours, the dialogue takes a different direction. Slowly a compromise plan evolves. The worlds of adolescents and adults, families and distant neighbors are interwoven. In another instance, I listened as a customer in the checkout line of a local store called a friend. As we all became aware, she was shocked to hear that an acquaintance had died. After the call was complete, a customer whose purchases were being tallied at the cash register turned to say that she also had known the man, and was sorry to hear the news. At this, the merchant joined in to say that yes, the news had appeared in the morning paper - which he then supplied for all to read. Again, the cell phone helped otherwise disparate worlds to be knitted. In effect, because of its flexible insinuation into wide-ranging social contexts, and the semi-public character of the communication, the cell phone is virtually unique in its capacity to link otherwise absent worlds to the immediate circumstance.

Perils of Prophecy

Quicker than a click. Mind-blowingly diverse. Internetcentric, synergistic and digital. In the extreme. (In 20 years) the trends grabbing hold now (will) become just another part of our rapidly evolving and distraction-rich lifestyle landscape.

USA Today, Millennial edition

A case has been made for the emergence within this century of a pervasive state of absent presence. Yet, while the form of absent presence favored by most of the century's major communication technologies is inimical to community, relations in depth, the sense of self, moral character, and functional linkages between realms of meaning and action, the cell phone serves as a potentially powerful device for impeding the cultural drift. In many respects we might thus welcome the continuous development and proliferation of cell phone technology. At the same time there is reason for significant pause before drawing such a conclusion. Two lines of argument are especially pertinent.

On the one hand we can anticipate significant resistance to the proliferation of the cell phone of present construction. There is good reason to suspect that there are substantial segments of the population whose lives are so intimately twined with technologies of television, video, recorded music and the internet, that the kind of localism favored by the cell phone would operate as a hindrance to a valued way of life. From their standpoint, the very outcomes favored by the cell phone may have a negative connotations. Cell phone technology not only favors a kind of parochialism, but as well stands as a wedge against the kind of polyvocal participation required in an increasingly multi-cultural world. A singular and coherent sense of self, commitment to a single moral order or to a single community, may seem arbitrarily

limiting. Participation in the full global flow of signification means staying loose, traveling light, and seeing issues from all sides. From this standpoint, a new form of cellular phone technology is desired, one that indeed is far more consistent with the other communication technologies described above.

Such resistance and desire will also feed the fires of technological change, and specifically transformations in the cellular phone that will undermine its present functioning. That is, while having doubts about around the clock accessibility to a small group of intimates, there is much to be gained by a small mobile instrument that possesses capabilities to extend outward into the social and material world. Already there are cell phones that contain calculators, calendars and other offerings of the palm secretary. We can anticipate the development of cell phone technology that will function like a small computer - enabling entry into the internet and world wide web. One will be able to exchange email, listen to music or read the latest zine. With this inevitable tendency toward expanding the functions of the instrument, absent presence of the exogenous variety will only be intensified. There is good reason to hope, however, that investment in traditional cultural values will stimulate further innovation that will insure that a tension remains between stable and nurturing traditions and the forces of unfettered change.

Footnotes

(1) It is interesting to consider print technology in this regard. Although a monologic technology, print often carries a transformative capacity far exceeding radio or television. In part this difference may be traced to the fact that the act of reading borders on the dialogic. That is, because one can pace one's reading - pausing to deliberate, and to silently act out the part of the author - reading facilitates a higher degree of engagement. To put it another way, in reading one often creates a vision of the author along with a private relationship with him/her.

(2) See for example, Jones (1998), Kiesler (1997), ,and Porter (1997).

(3) See for example, Miller and Gergen (1998).

(4) MacIntyre, A. (1984) *After virtue*. 2nd. ed. Notre Dame Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press. (p.202).

(5) For further discussion of technology and the loss of self see Gergen (1996, 2000).

(6) Debord, G. (1983); Baudrillard, J. (1994).

(7) Over the past 15 years, the number of people subscribing to wireless phone services in the U.S. has increased exponentially, from some two hundred thousand in 1985 to almost 80 million in 1999.

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