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Ángel J. Gordo-López and Ian Parker

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CHAPTER 13

The Cyber and the Subjective

STEVE JONES

It has been often mentioned that technologies shape our images of ourselves, but little has been made of how our selves shape technology. Once science overcame superstition, the explanatory narratives humans used to make sense of life processes mirrored the scientific narratives explaining nature. Holy fires and vital life forces gave way in the Enlightenment to complex narratives concerning mechanics, physics and biology. Industry operated on the basis of hydraulics, and science estimated that the human body operated as a machine, that various connections of pipes, tubes, motors, governors, made life possible. Genetics forms the foundation for the life sciences at present, and our computer technologies' binary codes mimic DNA.

What has happened to our human narratives, though? Do they, too, mimic the digitized, fragmented bits to which we have become accustomed by science? Postmodern discourse as a form of human and social narrative would seem to suggest that in fact we have adopted a kind of digital, or at least digitized, viewpoint. Postmodernism has much to offer as we try to determine who we are in the late twentieth century, approaching a new millennium. But as postmodern philosophers would probably readily admit, it is but one of many explanatory schemes. Perhaps that will be the legacy of digitization: as the bit has standardized the format by which the media of communication operate, it has also levelled the value of the content mediated. At least it has inscribed valuation within the subjective, for if, as Nicholas Negroponte (1995) and other 'digerati' are wont to

point out, 'bits are bits,' then it is only what individuals do with bits that matters. If we understand humans in a fashion similar to the way we understand digital being, might we not also level the value of our selves, or at least imagine into being a hypersubjective realm in which mediation of the self through communication is the *sine qua non* of networked technologies?

As other chapters in this volume remind us, our most recent technologies are indeed particularly ones of the self. They conflate the narratives we construct about who we are with ones we construct about who we are in relation to technology, rather than in relation to one another. One might even say that these are not only technologies of the self, but selfish technologies. The affective dimension of network technologies is difficult to assay, but is of great importance. The contributors to this volume have done a masterful job of mapping out that terrain, alerting us to the tasks that lay ahead as we come to grips with new subjectivities.

A note about the subjective: I am an interloper into the discussion of cyberpsychology. My training is in the study of communication and in cultural and critical studies. Any scholars in the social sciences and humanities, however, ignoring the consequences of network technologies for their work, do so at their peril. The issue is not merely whether the Internet, for instance, can disseminate information more rapidly, whether on-line journals are a suitable arena for publication, or whether educational technology will displace traditional teaching methods. An overarching issue is the manner in which these technologies implicate the objects and subjects of scholarship, along with scholars themselves, in new webs of significance and meaning that impart new frameworks to our experiences and encounters. In addition to encapsulating us in any variety of Foucauldian panopticons, like some global Hawthorne effect, network technologies affect our thinking and behaviour as much because of the attention we pay the technology (and ourselves embedded in it) as because of anything else.

Additionally, we must attend to the very definitions of selfhood as these technologies engage us more than imaginatively in realms other than the ones we physically occupy. Marshall McLuhan's (1964) characterization of the media of communication as 'extensions of man' was meant to make sense in the realm of the senses. The Internet, however, is in these terms extrasensory. It less extends our senses and more extends our selves. The discussion in these pages of cyborgs and bodies is relevant and important. We must continue that discussion and consider the nature of software agents and bots to

best understand the social system being envisioned and engaged in these networks. In addition to asking who we are when we are on-line, and who we are when we are off-line, what heuristic power may derive from asking who we are when we are, simply, not present? Does telepresence fundamentally alter not only the nature of both presence and selfhood but also the nature of absence?

The critical nature of these chapters is of great importance, too. We must move critical discourse about cyberculture to the forefront of our debates about network technologies. And when we do so we must keep at bay nostalgia, not for the past, but for the future. Behind much of what has been written about cyberculture lies a series of 'if onlys' that at best make its authors seem presumptuous, and at worst reveal an uncritical perspective. One is reminded of a type of Country and Western song with the refrain, 'We could have had it all'. Predictions of the future are as much about the past as they are about our imagination, and, as James Carey (1998) pointed out by borrowing from David Abrahamson (cited in Carey), 'the only thing certain about the future is that we know nothing about it'.

What is needed, I believe, is an interpretive turn to our discussions of cyberculture. Let us ask of ourselves: for whom are our words meant? For the psycho-technological complex in its entirety? For the individuals engaged in it in innumerable ways? For ourselves, the disciplines of which we are a part and/or for (not necessarily because of) the experiences we have had of technology? As we write, debate, speak about these matters, do we repress what we explain? Do we explain it away? Do we explain it into being? In what ways do we make meanings even as we understand those extant? Vannevar Bush's (1945) fortunate phrase in the title of one of his essays, 'As We May Think', inspired not only the artefact we term the Internet, and its hypertextual character, but the meaningful and deep structures of thought with which it is overlaid. The network of networks mimics human thought, but at a level beyond the individual it mimics culture itself. Post-structuralists should recognize the Internet's character as an articulative process and not only a technology. In Lewis Mumford's (1934) terms, it is the *technics* of the Internet that are of greatest importance. The Internet more than any other modern technology embeds technics in reference to social relations. Consequently, our inquiries and interventions into cyberculture are, as Stuart Hall (personal communication) said in relation to cultural studies, deadly serious intellectual work. And cyberculture appears to be a particularly resonant site for such work. Will the

work we do also have serious material, cultural effects on cyberculture in turn? The Internet particularly has roots in academia, and we should be attentive to that rootedness as we examine both its past and its future.

In regard to articulation, the Internet's meaning, as meanings within and among culture(s) generally, is not simply in its structures, nor is it in its users, although at any one given time it is located specifically there. Rather, its meaning is in the connecting between and among nodes, accreting and dispersing, (virtually) ahistorically, or so the technology makes it seem to us. The Internet, and thus cyberculture (although I do not equate those but only refer to them in the same sentence to note their for-better-or-worse constant conflation and necessary interdependence) are technology-as-process rather than technology-as-product.

Within a technology-as-process where and how does one locate the self? Judging from the chapters in this book (although this is the least of its contributions), the relationships between society and self are in flux, and self (itself) is in flux. Self has always been multiple, as most recently and popularly noted by Verve singer Richard Ashcroft declaring 'I'm a million different people from one day to the next,' although he goes on to note that he 'can't change the mould' he's in. A pertinent question, then: who has made the mould? Is it indeed a human construction at all, or a technological one, or a combination of those? In what ways is cyberculture a mould, a cyberstructure, as a technology-as-process, perhaps one akin to a coral reef that grows, is eaten away, regrows? An example: Most of us have a variety of voices we use on the telephone. One voice is for friends, another for family, still another for telemarketers, and so on. Those are typically voices we do not use in person, or at least we are not conscious of using them. Did the telephone split our selves via our voice? Was the potential for such a split there already? Does networked communication fragment us similarly, along lines of identity forged by email address, IP node, Internet tool, or something else altogether?

Answers to these questions have typically engaged issues of culture, technology and communication, and in turn those issues fall upward to analyses of the human relation to space and time. The chapters in this book do as well, to an extent. But they also focus on subjectivity in a way that must force us to a more substantive discourse of what space and time mean in relation to communication. Marshall McLuhan (1964), Harold Innis (1972) and James Carey (1989) have greatly added to our understanding of space and time in relation

to communication. This volume's contributors in their own way further that work and allow us to bring subjectivity into these discourses. We have thus far had a tendency to apply subjectivity only at those times when we need to explain how and why digital media, quintessentially linear, bounded, discrete forms, seem anything but linear, bounded and discrete. How has it come to be that these technological forms seem analogue, continuous and relative? Is it their speed? Is it that time is not linear, not flowing, but discrete, and that our perceptual processing provides sufficient closure, as it does when we hear a CD, or use a telephone, for example, and hear sounds made up of millions of discrete bits that form analogue sound?

I ask these questions because they have been much on my mind lately, as I have tried to make sense of the transition from one type of society to another, from one forged by the Industrial Revolution to one inscribed by bits and lasers. It took decades to make sense of the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, and it will likely take decades to make sense of the one from an industrial society to a networked one. The upheavals the first transition brought to the surface were vast, and in many cases dangerous. Whether the ones we are now experiencing are, or will be, dangerous, we cannot yet know. That they are vast, however, is certain. We are beginning, however, to chase down that vastness, perhaps like William Cowper's philologists 'who chase/A panting syllable through time and space/Start it at home, and hunt it in the dark' (1968: 691). Illumination follows.

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