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14 The challenge of absent presence

Kenneth J. Gergen

"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 notices 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, telephone, 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 twentieth-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 – the 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 multidimensional. 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,

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it stands to subvert or reverse the major effects of other communication technologies. Finally, I shall turn briefly to the future. Although cellular phone technology is currently generating 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 2,000 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 (for example, 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 like 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

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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 twentieth 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 now reaching 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. Although, as monologic technologies, they may provide information or stimulation, 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,

[1] It is interesting to consider print technology in this regard. Although it is a monologic technology, print often carries a transformative capacity far exceeding that of 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

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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 family. The incoming voices were thus made available to all. In these circumstances an audience could deliberate on what it 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 numerous instances of an audience appropriating the meaning of the incoming material for its 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 several 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, although dialogic, they are also relatively barren in terms of content relevant to a world outside themselves. We worry about the reverberations

silently to 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.

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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 much 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, e-mail 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, e-mail 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 – through both 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. I consider, briefly, four significant changes in cultural life.

Dangerous liaisons

In Laclos' eighteenth-century novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, 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 might 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 liaisons. As radio, television, magazines, books and film consume our fantasies, ignite our desire and offer new ideas and directions, so the realities embedded in what we often call our "primary bonds" are placed under potential threat. One's interests

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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 the realities and moralities of the local together. As Internet interaction increasingly absorbs our attention, new clusters of meaning emerge. Although 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 and 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 cyber-communal processes can captivate the user remain quite unclear, and many critics are highly skeptical of the forces of cyber-mediated relationships.[2] For example, as the volume of e-mail continues to expand, so is there an inflation of the word. Individual communiqués can become lost in a sea of competing contenders. And when one is responding to a large volume of electronic mail, one's 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 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 the importance of face-to-face relations is likely to be diminished.

Horizontal relationships

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, strong value is traditionally placed on close relationships. We commonly

[2] See, for example, Jones (1998), Kiesler (1997) and Porter (1997).
[3] See, for example, Miller and Gergen (1998).

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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* relationships. 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 one frequently finds 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 every evening 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 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, and the likelihood of remaining married continuously declines. As census data indicate, Americans 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 video-cassette recorder or a computer.

Humans without qualities

In Robert Musil's 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 Ulric, the major protagonist, who feels that he

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is "equally close to and equally far from all qualities and that they are all, whether [my] own or not, strangely a matter of indifference" (1954 [1930], 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 McIntyre has put it, to be a moral self is "to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratible life within a community"(1984, p. 202).

Yet, as the domain of absent presence expands, so the scaffolding for a recognizable self is 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 e-mail relationship, to join a listserv, to participate in a 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 situated, conditional and optional.[4]

The new floating world

In late-nineteenth-century Tokyo, a new way of life sprang up among the merchant class, a way of life that centered on transient pleasure, and 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 twentieth-century West we confronted the emergence of a new form of floating world, one ushered into being by the

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

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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 meaning through relationships 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 quick-drying mortar, it is essential that the recipient's referential use of the language is identical. Although 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 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 (1983) might call the "world of the spectacle" and Baudrillard (1994) would term the "hyperreal." Similarly, when e-mail exchanges create their own realm of "conversational objects," they can float free from their 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 the skills, the repertoires and the creative developments required for effective exchange in daily relations diminish. The philosophical literature on ethics continues to feed upon itself, while the ethical dilemmas of daily life are cast aside; the endless discussions on electronic listservs 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 with the

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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. To an important extent it is the language of the un-real that furnishes the source of enchantment in cultural life. In the pragmatic language of the real, 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 that what we call idealization or romanticizing occurs – 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 twentieth 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 5 to "run away from home," only to find that my parents were able to

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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 attention from their immediate surroundings. However, it is essential to distinguish between absent presence arising from what might be called *endogenous* sources as opposed to *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 owing to the public dissemination of telephone numbers and the falling costs of long-distance transmission. There is, for one, a standing invitation for the distantly known suddenly to enter 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 is increasingly seizing 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 as often used 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 choose 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, few denizens of the face-to-face community are 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 prosthesis.

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 not only because of the perpetual connection that 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

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the absent presence is broadened,[5] 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 fewer than four times to share the fruits of his ruminations. Sandra from Willow Grove uses her 45-minute journey to work 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 participating. 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 a backlash 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 a multiplicity of relationships, the continuous enforcement of a single perspective may 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 leveling 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, brakes 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

[5] Between 1985 and 1999, the number of people subscribing to wireless phone services in the USA increased exponentially, from some 200,000 to almost 80 million.

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place in the flux of social life. Here too lie the resources for refurbishing the moral compass. By revitalizing the singular identity, a singular pattern of rights, wrongs, duties and obligations is made clear. The contours of 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 surroundings 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 distraction that has led many countries and US 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, the cell phone facilitates new integrations of the absent and the present in more subtle ways. Consider a story related by a colleague. At a family dinner table the parents are putting the brakes 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. 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 over, a customer whose purchases were being tallied at the cash register turned to say that she too 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 produced 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 twenty years] the trends grabbing hold now [will] become just another part of our rapidly evolving and distraction-rich lifestyle landscape. (*USA Today*, Millennial edition)

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A case has been made for the emergence within the twentieth century of a pervasive state of absent presence. Yet, although 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 the lives of substantial segments of the population are so intimately entwined 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 negative connotations. Cell phone technology not only favors a kind of parochialism, but also stands as a wedge against the kind of polyvocal participation required in an increasingly multicultural world. A singular and coherent sense of self or a 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 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 from a small mobile instrument with the 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 a cell phone that will function like a small computer, enabling access to the Internet and the world wide web. One will be able to exchange e-mail, 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.

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