

**Comments on
“Technology, Humanity, Community” by Gerry Philipsen
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I feel slightly nervous and very humbled to follow such an eloquent speaker. Still, I was comforted when Professor Philipsen told us early in his talk that while he doesn’t know much about technology, having been alive for 57 years, he surely knows something about humanity. You see, I thought I would complement him quite nicely. Having spent the past twenty-five years puzzling over computer systems, I know a certain kind of technology quite well. Alas, I have paid for it with an ignorance of human affairs. When you are sufficiently embedded in a problem, the world with its jagged edges and unfinished corners falls away. This is the glory of computing, and its pathology. A long time ago, when I programmed computers for a living, instead of just blathering about them, my wife learned not to call me during the day. I couldn’t talk without slowly easing my way up from the depths, like a diver avoiding the bends. More accurately, I was in the embrace of my disembodied beloved, the raw code of the machine herself.

But then I thought a little more about what Dr. Philipsen told us and realized that things are worse than they first seemed to me. The surface of computer technology, and that’s really all that there is, changes so quickly that there are no experts, just those among us who are relatively less ignorant. The consequences are profound. The evanescence of computing systems explains their unreliability. It also explains why, after forty years of commercial computing, economists are still arguing about whether

information systems result in greater productivity. And each of *us* knows that every hour spent struggling with yet another piece of software is an hour we do not spend in the community of our quite embodied families and friends.

Did you notice that I just said: "...computer technology ... changes so quickly..." Worlds are hidden in the structure of that sentence. By making computer technology the subject of the sentence, I've invested it with agency, as if this human artifact were a visitor from outer space in whose gaze we are powerless. Technology doesn't change, of course. We change it. We, "embedded in our webs of meaning," change it. It should surprise no one that, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, one web is more equal than all the others, to paraphrase George Orwell. That web, of course, is turbocharged, American-style capitalism. This, too, is an artifact, as Karl Marx told us long ago—but that's a story for another time.

Like Lazarus in T.S. Eliot's great poem, I have come from the land of computing, come back to tell you all: our constructions may permit the disembodied self, but, believe me, it was unplanned. No one, and I mean no one at all, thought about the social consequences of allowing teens to chat with pedophiles masquerading as fourteen year olds. I have recently been in touch with a group of high school friends that I haven't spoken with in thirty years. I think this is a good thing. Yet the same technology—crucially embedded in an ideology that promotes the fast buck wrapped in pieties about free expression—allows my teenager access to pornography that would make a sailor blush.

Early on in *Walden*, Thoreau famously remarks that "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but an improved

means to an unimproved end, an end that it was already but too easy to arrive at.... We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.” This is the predicament in which we find ourselves. It is not just that the disembodied and segmented selves are nudged along by the new communications technologies, it is that the glories of these selves, neither committed nor accountable, as Dr. Philipsen has pointed out, are shouted from the rooftops. They crowd out, again in Dr. Philipsen’s words, other “enactments of selves and ... experiences of community.”

Just as Thoreau feared, we have magnificent media with which to communicate and no more to say than we had forty years ago. I was recently sitting in an airport waiting area, reading a book. That is, I was being spoken to by another disembodied self, the technology for this one having been invented five centuries ago. When the guy next to me pulled out his cell phone, my blood sugar began to drop. No more reading for me. He called someone, his wife, his girlfriend, his boyfriend, it’s not important, and said “Hi hon, I’m at the airport.” So that this could be said, his voice was beamed to the heavens, bounced from satellite to relay station and finally into the expectant ear of his significant other. Were these the words that launched a thousand satellites (if I might butcher what Antony said about Cleopatra, a very embodied pair)? Were these the words that kept us all glued to the TV screen in 1969, wondering if Neil Armstrong would make it back? Let me say them once more: “Hi hon, I’m at the airport.”

Still, if mass air travel had not been invented, another sort of communications technology, I suppose, neither I, nor this lonely businessman, would have been away from home that rainy morning in February. Here is a technical fix for a technical ill. We

reach out to touch someone only because we left home in the first place. In the process, we annoy the guy, that is to say me, who has a part of his bi-polar self in the 15th century and the other part in the 21st. It reminds me of a story I heard last week about a Spanish priest who installed radio-jamming equipment in his church to keep his cell phone equipped flock anchored firmly in the middle ages.

So, how can we talk about all of this? I ask you to consider the following questions:

1. Professor Philipsen told us that “distinctive communication technologies afford distinctive enactments of selves and distinctive experiences of communities.” Could it be the other way around, that distinctive enactments of selves and distinctive experiences of communities afford distinctive communication technologies? I think it was George Orwell who said that at 50 a man has the face that he deserves. Has our cultural insistence on privacy and unhampered self-expression paved the way for the communication technologies that we deserve?
2. Surely one of the distinctive technologies of the past ten years is the cell phone? Is the “enactment of self” different among a community of cell phone users?
3. It is often said that on-line virtual communities lead to what Professor Philipsen has called “segmented selves.” Yet, only the most disciplined Web user goes directly to where he/she wants to go. In fact, Web use seems characterized by the ease with which one can go in many and unplanned directions. So, are we segmented or wonderfully curious?
4. Professor Philipsen began his talk by contrasting the six references he found in The Reader’s Guide as a teen to the 147,000 that Google recently found for him. The Web

is sometimes called the most democratic of media since we all can be authors and we all can be indexed by google. Is this a world to be defended? Are all ideas, like all men, created equal?

5. Professor Philipsen says that “Disembodied selves are ideally suited to a form of communal interaction in which people exchange goods or services according to standards that are not respecters of persons.” Put in a slightly less kind way, the economist, Robert Shiller, has called the Web a “new-fangled vending machine.” Is it more than this?
6. About fifteen years ago, the late Christopher Lasch wrote a sequel to his *The Culture of Narcissism*. Its title kept occurring to me during Professor Phillipsen’s talk: *The Minimal Self*. What is on-line interaction if not the self pared to the bone, to the minimum necessary for exchange. A key feature of the narcissistic personality is the exactly the absence of self—and its construction as the context requires. Has the disembodied and segmented self made possible by the new communications technologies contributed to the narcissism—in the psychoanalytic sense—present in our culture?

Thank you for inviting me. I hope the rest of the conference is as stimulating as

Professor Philipsen’s wonderful talk has been.