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Correspondents Theory 1800/2000

Philosophical Reflections upon Epistolary Technics and Praxis in the Analogue and Digital

Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

When we talk about things like the 'lost art of letter-writing' or the 'digital communications revolution,' what do we mean? What do we lose and what do we gain as we move towards digital ways of being in the world? Critically engaging with many of the canonical writers in the philosophy of technology (Martin Heidegger, Albert Borgmann, Don Ihde, Bruno Latour, Hubert Dreyfus and Jürgen Habermas, for example), and following what has been termed the 'empirical turn' in that discipline, this thesis answers such questions by means of a philosophical, comparative study of epistolary technics and praxis in the early nineteenth and 21st centuries, making use of Romantic era archival letters and related materials to compare and contrast our own, Internet-enabled experience of communicating over distance. In so doing, it seeks to contribute towards our understanding of the ways in which information and communication technologies influence humanity by taking a long-view of many of the more radical claims (whether optimistic or pessimistic) for the ways in which the Internet effects change in culture, society and self. The thesis is structured thematically, with chapters examining the experience of distance and presence in these two periods, the potential for meaningful engagements by way of communicative media, the technological reconfiguration of social networks, and shifts in the public/private distinction. In its conclusions it is broadly sympathetic to the somewhat pessimistic positions of Heidegger and Borgmann, finding evidence and supplying argument to support the notion that the Internet does in some circumstances serve to diminish our meaningful involvements with the world and each other. It is, however, critical of many of the more extreme arguments for the substantive impact of the Internet, which very often lean too heavily towards naive technological determinism, neglect the social shaping of technology, overemphasise the radical novelty of the Internet, or simply deny or downplay many of its undoubted benefits.

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Preface

When we talk about things like the 'lost art of letter-writing' or the 'digital communications revolution,' what do we mean? What do we lose and what do we gain as we move towards digital ways of being in the world? In what ways have our communicative technologies traditionally shaped our world, and how is this different to our Internet-enabled age? How are our ways of living, interacting, talking, or even thinking, changing as a result? To put such questions more formally:

- In what substantive ways have our means of interpersonal communication over distance changed in the last 200 years?

- In what ways, and to what extent, do these technological differences change our everyday meaningful experiences of ourselves, our society, our culture, and our place in the world?

This thesis addresses these questions through a comparative study of epistolary technics and praxis in the early nineteenth and 21st centuries. Critically engaging with many of the canonical writers in the philosophy of technology (Martin Heidegger, Albert Borgmann, Don Ihde, Bruno Latour, Hubert Dreyfus and Jürgen Habermas, for example), and following what has been termed the "empirical turn" in that discipline (Achterhuis 2001b), this thesis makes use of Romantic era archival letters and related materials to compare and contrast our own, Internet-enabled experience of communicating over distance via email, blogs, social networking sites and such. By taking this "long view" of technological change, and by understanding technological history in a non-essentialist, non-deterministic manner, "full of surprises, the unexpected and ... unintended and unpredictable side-effects" as Don Ihde (2008: iv) puts it, this thesis seeks to challenge many of the more radical utopian and dystopian claims made for the ways in which the Internet effects change in culture, society and self. The thesis is structured thematically, and proceeds as follows.

- Chapter One lays out the rationale for the thesis' methodology, arguing the need for a historical approach to the question of technological change through a critique of the shortcomings of presumptions of the radical novelty of the Internet. It then introduces the Harden/Allan letter-journals which form a historical touchstone for the thesis, and finally précis's Chapter Two by way of a brief discussion of the need

for a philosophical approach modelled on contemporary empirical work in the philosophy of technology.

- Chapter Two, on philosophy, technology and humanity, sets the theoretical groundwork for the investigation, looking at canonical philosophers of technology, including Heidegger, Borgmann, Ihde, McLuhan, Feenberg, and Latour. It outlines my position, which is broadly sympathetic to the positions of Heidegger and Borgmann, but which recognises the severe limitations of hard-line technological determinism and essentialism and the need to examine concrete technologies in their socially-embedded contexts.

- Chapter Three, on distance and presence in epistolary networks, examines the materiality of physical objects like letters and digital objects such as emails to describe how each in their way serve to influence our experiential conceptions of the distance between us and the presence of our correspondents. It then goes on to consider the ontological status of these objects in general, with particular focus upon the Benjaminian "auratic" dimension of material objects, and the problematic ontological status of digital objects.

- Chapter Four, on things, devices, and focal engagement, uses Albert Borgmann's critique of the device paradigm to discuss the ways in which our mediating technologies can shape our meaningful engagements with the world and each other. By examining the ways in which letters and letter-writing helped shape and orient the lives of Jessy Harden, Dorothy Wordsworth, and others, it presents evidence to support Borgmann's view that pre-modern technologies, such as the humble letter, could often act to support more meaningful engagements than our contemporary mix of media.

- Chapter Five, on communion and alienation in social networks, discusses the ways in which the Internet changes the ways in which we relate to each other both in terms of the way it changes our appearance (diminishing our presence to bare text or representing us as an onscreen avatar) and our possibilities for connection (put most simply, it has never been easier to talk to strangers). It examines utopian and dystopian claims for the widescale change such differences will effect and finds reasons to think both positions overplayed, owing perhaps to their mutual overemphasis on the "virtual" nature of online interaction.

- Chapter Six, on the public/private distinction, discusses the ways in which the Internet changes our experience of public and private space. Through a discussion of Irwin Altman's theory of privacy as a boundary mechanism and the history of privacy in the West, it considers changes in our ways of being public and private resultant from the shift from the exchange of letters in 1800 to digital epistolarity today. It finds that privacy was largely regulated in letters by physical constraints and a culture of discretion, factors which are diminished by the fluidity and potency of the digital infosphere and the digital diffusion of the context of situated action.

- Chapter Seven then concludes by summing methodological and theoretical contributions, reflecting upon study limitations and providing future directions for research, and, finally, closing with some last words upon the subject of the current scale and pace of technological change.

This thesis aims beyond the hype and hysteria characteristic of much writing on the subject of the Internet, finding that the Internet effects change, but not to the degree so many seem to either wish or fear. Nonetheless, in remaining broadly sympathetic to the philosophies of Heidegger and Borgmann, this study does find substantive reasons for concerns about the kinds of association possible via the Internet, which derive from factors such as the diminished materiality of digital documents, reductions of meaningful engagements both with and through technology, and changing conceptions of public and private space. However, it avoids the broad-brush dystopianism of both Heidegger and Borgmann by remaining alert to the constructivist nature of technological development, eschewing strong technological determinism, questioning the extent of the Internet's radical novelty, and paying due heed to those benefits it does undoubtedly bring.

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My first, and most profound, thanks must go to my supervisors, Prof. Michael Moss and Dr. Susan Stuart. The project was initially conceived by Michael and without the steady support, care, and counsel of both, this thesis would not exist. Our supervisory sessions were always illuminating, challenging and fulfilling in equal measure; I regret their ending. Next, sincere thanks to Dr. Iain Brown at the National Library of Scotland, who co-conceived the project with Michael and provided orientation and support in using the NLS' manuscript collections. To Prof. Evelyn Welch and Ruth Hogarth for their tireless work in co-ordinating the AHRC's *Beyond Text* programme, under which this research was funded. To the various research institutions in the Lake District I visited in the summer of 2010: all staff at the Wordsworth Trust's Jerwood Centre, Grasmere, especially Jeff Cowton, Curator, and Rebecca Turner, Assistant Curator, for their time and patience; Clara Li-Dunne, Museum Manager of the Armitt Library, Ambleside; and Nick Rogers, Collections Manager at the Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal. Portions of this research were presented at various conferences and events. In particular, an early version of Chapter Four was presented to the Romantic Studies Association of Australasia's "Romanticism and the Tyrannies of Distance" conference, held at the University of Sydney 10-12 Feb 2011, and I must express my gratitude to everybody I spoke to there for feedback and stimulating conversation. Next, thanks to all staff and students from other projects funded by the AHRC's *Beyond Text* programme for valuable discussion and critique at various programme events. And to all staff and students at HATII, especially those who attended the always lively Tuesday reading group, including Michael and Susan, Prof. Andrew Prescott, Dr. Hannah Little, Dr. James Girdwood, David Macknet, William Young and Michaela Clari. I am indebted to this group for my introduction to Heidegger and for the development of many of the critical arguments in Chapter Five. Special thanks to Prof. Eric Ketelaar for his judicious advice about early drafts of this material, given in his role as external examiner during the HATII annual review process.

To all my friends and family, I must say this: in the archives of the NLS (MS5308/608) there is a letter from John Hume in which he apologises to a friend for his lapse in correspondence: "I think nothing of dispatching a Quarto in fifteen or eighteen months; but am not able to compose a Letter once in two years: And am very industrious to keep up a Correspondence with Posterity, whom I know nothing about, & who probably will concern themselves very little about me; while I allow myself to be forgot by my friends whom I

value and regard." In this I know how Hume felt. It seems the height of irony that I should have been so long engaged in researching and writing about epistolarity that I never found time to contact my loved ones – I look forward to finding that time. Finally, to my beloved girlfriend Lena: at last I am finished! I am unable to fully articulate the ways in which I have relied upon your patient and unwavering support through the darker days of this process, or the thanks I owe you now it is complete. I love you and cannot wait to start the rest of our lives together.

Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Signature: _____

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"But suppose now that technics were no mere means, how would it stand with the will to master it?"

— Martin Heidegger

1 Introduction: "Social Networking didn't start with *Facebook*"

"In all subjects of deep and lasting Interest you will detect a struggle between two opposites, two polar Forces, both of which are alike necessary to our human well-being, & necessary each to the continued existence of the other."

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1.1 Introduction

A recent piece entitled "The History of Social Networking" on the *Digital Trends* website (tagline: "update your lifestyle") helpfully reminds us that "social networking didn't start with Facebook" (Nickson 2009). Curiously, though, the author looks no further back than to the 1970s, and the use of Bulletin Board Systems by early Net enthusiasts, to discover the roots of this "booming trend." This little article is helpful in one respect, for in the torrent of hyperbole that attends the birth and maturation of a genuine cultural phenomenon like *Facebook* (with 800 million users as of September 2011), it is worth reminding ourselves that through bulletin boards, mailing lists and chat rooms, the Internet provided a platform for interpersonal interaction long before that one website launched in 2004. This piece is, though, emblematic of a larger problem: our contemporary tendency narrowly to identify social networks as Internet phenomena, which they obviously are not. Broadly conceived, social networks are nothing more than configurations of people connected by interpersonal factors like kinship, friendship and common interest. They are as historied as humanity. Neither is there novelty in their technological mediation: examining the flood and flow of familiar letters across the ages, what are we witnessing if not a "social networking" technology in action? Since at least the Bronze Age, messages inscribed on some form of substrate have circulated to sustain interpersonal connections over distance. More recently, a multitude of more tractable media—from telegrams to

telephones, radios and fax machines to text messages—have been co-opted for similar ends. All of which is not to say that the Internet has not introduced certain changes in the ways we can connect and communicate. But it is to start by reminding ourselves that Internet cheerleading often occurs within quite restrictive frames of reference.

This rather limited sense of history can be linked to a common tendency to think of the Internet, and digital information technologies more generally, as something radically novel. For Edsger Dijkstra, who first used the term "radical novelty" in relation to information technologies, the speed and power of computing, combined with the complexity and sensitivity of digital information, made it "a radically new intellectual challenge that has no precedent in our history" (Dijkstra 1989: 1400). In a digital network, information flows more quickly, cheaply and easily, is in many ways more malleable and manipulable, and open to new possibilities of collection, storage, transmission and use. To paraphrase Nicholas Negroponte's well-known distinction: atoms are heavy but bits are light. No longer tethered to physical media like paper, "the instantaneous and inexpensive transfer of electronic data that move at the speed of light," allows information to become "universally accessible" (Negroponte 1996: 4). Thus assured of its radical novelty, numerous commentators have since lined up to predict all kinds of radical change the Internet portends.

For the last forty years or so, there have been growing claims from futurists that society is undergoing a new wave of development, towards post-industrial, flexible information economies (Bell 1973; Drucker 1992; Toffler 1980). The Internet, with its astonishing speed and scale of development, has come to seem both apex and avatar of this change; it is now commonplace to talk of an "Internet Revolution," comparable by implication to the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth-century. Some venture much farther. For the eccentric John Perry Barlow, for example, "we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire" (qtd. Wellman and Gulia 1999: 168). As is the way with discourse surrounding the Internet in general, the particular focus of this revolutionary excitement tends to change quickly, keeping pace with technological development, leaving in its wake a glut of outdated terminology and the sad ghosts of yesterday's hype and hope. From bulletin board systems, through email, to MUDs and MOOs, to blogs, then *Second Life*, and now social networking sites such as *Facebook*, each has been seen as a radically new addition to our communicative ecology, and celebrated as such, at least at first. Blogging, for example, has been described by many as "native to the web" (Blood 2002; Nielsen 2005; E. Williams 2008: 117), "a new and quintessentially

postmodern idiom that's enabling writers to express themselves in ways that have never been seen or understood before" (Sullivan 2008), which heralds "an information reformation similar in consequence to the Reformation that split Christianity in the sixteenth century" (Hewitt 2005: xix).

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato says that "the discoverer of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practice it," (Plato 2001: 189/274e) and this seems certainly true of those engineers and enthusiasts caught up in constructing and experiencing Internet applications in their early days. The early to mid 1990s saw the 'digirati' caught in the rapture of the assumed radical novelty of the Internet, and speaking in almost messianic terms of its utopian potential: "Like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped," said Negroponte, who noted "four very powerful qualities that will result in its ultimate triumph: [namely, that it is] decentralizing, globalizing, harmonizing, and empowering" (Negroponte 1996: 228). Similarly, for Howard Rheingold, the Internet as a platform for "virtual community," a new social space freed from the strictures of geography, held the liberating potential "to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost – intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage" (Rheingold 1993: 4). This cyber-optimist rhetoric did not go long unchallenged. Soon a smaller (though still significant) chorus of counterweight dystopian voices was convened. Humanists and philosophers averred over the valuative change wrought by this new "technological information," criticising the attenuations of Internet communication, affirming the importance of locality, situation and the body for human-relations, and fretting that this "virtual" world would detract from meaningful engagement with "reality" (Borgmann 1992, 1999b; Dreyfus 2009; Malpas 2000; Postman 1993; B. T. Prosser and Ward 2000; Slouka 1995). As Jim Hightower, a Texas radio pundit put it: "While all this razzle-dazzle connects us electronically, it disconnects us from each other, having us "interfacing" more with computers and TV screens than looking in the face of our fellow human beings" (qtd. Wellman and Gulia 1999: 169). But whether they predicted change for better or worse, these diverging factions were curiously united in their base assumption that the coming change would indeed be drastic; they had all bought into the overarching narrative of the Internet as something radically novel. In what immediately follows, I wish to present methodological arguments to support my view that where the Internet is concerned, the extent of its radical novelty should be our object of study, and not the assumed first principle from which such study begins – we must not confuse *explanandum* with *explanans*, as Bruno Latour would no doubt remind us. I present these preparatory

arguments in order to justify the general methodological approach of this thesis. Once given, I go on to outline this general approach, introduce the National Library of Scotland's Harden/Allan collection, which serves as a touchtone for this research, and close this introductory Chapter by discussing the need for the philosophy of technology.

1.2 The Question of Radical Novelty

The most direct reason for not assuming the radical novelty of the Internet is that it might not actually be radically novel. Observe, for instance, that most if not all of the things considered new about the Internet can be argued to have their precedent in technological history. R.W. Hamming, for example, finds parallel examples for each of the attributes Dijkstra cites in support of his thesis of radical novelty: particle accelerators are similar in size and power consumption; the twentieth-century telephone network was of comparable complexity; and our common languages share with digital information a sensitivity which means that very small changes in code can lead to huge and unexpected changes in performance (Hamming 1989: 1410). If the speed of information flow is at issue, many historians of the telegraph stand ready to argue that that it was that technology that constituted the radical novelty, with the Internet a mere progression (Baron 2000: 217ff.; Standage 2007). Where the technological provision of a shared social space is raised, we can point back to the ways in which the telegraph and letters before it were used to similar ends (Whitty 2007: 31ff.). And contrary to the protestations of Danah Boyd (2005), discussed next, the conceptualisation of the blog in terms of antecedent forms, particularly as a new form of diary, has delivered insightful results (Dijck 2006; Herring *et al.* 2005; McNeill 2003; Bonnie A Nardi et al. 2004). All of which is certainly not to say that there is nothing new under the sun, but it is to remind ourselves that technologies never drop from the clear blue sky. They build on prior innovations and existing infrastructures, and remediate previous forms and genres. As Terry Winograd says, "the alleged 'radical novelty' of computers is not so earth-shattering as to justify throwing away past experience in order to gain the pristine virtue of the 'blank mind'" (Winograd 1989: 1413). Of course, it may be that the conflux of all these particular attributes in one technological network *is* something radically new. But, again, I would argue that this is a question to be asked rather than an assumption from which to start.

The next reason for not starting by assuming radical novelty is that such an assumption can lead investigation by the nose. Barry Wellman has noted that much of the early literature on the socio-cultural impact of the Internet is characterised by "presentism" and

“parochialism,” the assumption that only phenomena that have happened since the Net arrived are significant for our understanding of it and a tendency to examine online phenomena in isolation (Wellman 2004: 124). Wellman dismisses such a view as “punditry.” This is, perhaps, a little unfair – for those who took such an approach did have considered (though misguided) reasons for doing so. Consider, for example, Edsger Dijkstra’s rather puritanical prescription for how to conceptualise the computer as a cultural force:

> By means of metaphors and analogies, we try to link the new to the old, the novel to the familiar. Under sufficiently slow and gradual change, it works reasonably well; in the case of a sharp discontinuity, however, the method breaks down. Though we may glorify it with the name “common sense,” our past experience is no longer relevant; the analogies become too shallow; and, the metaphors become more misleading than illuminating. This is the situation that is characteristic of the “radical” novelty. Coping with radical novelty requires an orthogonal method. One must consider one’s own past, the experiences collected, and the habits formed in it as an unfortunate accident of history, and one has to approach the radical novelty with a blank mind, consciously refusing to try to link history with what is already familiar, because the familiar is hopelessly inadequate. (Dijkstra 1989: 1398)

Dijkstra is not alone in this dogmatism. His protest echoes Marshall McLuhan’s famous objection that “[w]hen faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects ... of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future" (McLuhan and Fiore 1967: 73-74). For McLuhan, of course, this concentration on what is familiar blinds us to all that is most important. He felt himself, rather grandly, to be “in the position of Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy was quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them” (McLuhan 1964: 19). More recently, Danah Boyd has argued against the use of “broken metaphors” which compare the practice of blogging to that of journalism or diarising. While “not fundamentally wrong,” Boyd dismisses such appeals to the past as “frustrating, misleading and problematic,” failing to sufficiently capture the “essence” of blogging, and obfuscating the very differences which make the form interesting (Boyd 2005: 3, 5). The irony of the general assumption of radical novelty, though, is that it itself frustrates, misleads and problematises investigation in just the way that an approach modelled on continuity is assumed to. For if we dismiss the familiar as “hopelessly inadequate” and opt only for the “presentist” approach, do we not run the risk of mistaking the time-worn for the novel? Dijkstra, McLuhan and Boyd have a valid argument that conceiving of new technologies only in terms of continuity might risk missing what is truly new; but privileging schism over continuity and searching everywhere for the invisible effects of

radical novelty has the opposite effect of blinding us to all that is most mundane, ordinary and everyday in our use of technology. The assumption of radical novelty loads the dice of discourse; for everything is novel to a "blank mind." What is more, while it might well be the case that some aspects of the Internet are radically new, it is almost certain that not everything about it is. And the danger of the general assumption of novelty is that those things which are merely old wine in new bottles acquire the same heady buzz of hype as those things that truly are novel. Relatedly, how can we possibly judge a 'radical novelty' in an ahistorical manner? As John Mullarkey (135) says, "in order for any novelty to be recognised as new, it must firstly be recognised as such, there must be something familiar about it. 'Absolute novelty' seems like a contradiction in terms: it has nothing with which to contrast or stand out as new.... In other words, novelty seems to be in need of some form of generality or continuity."

A third argument in favour of the historical approach is the observation that radically novel possibilities do not inevitably lead to radically novel consequences. Consider this list of failed futurist predictions given by Luciano Floridi (1999a: 1): "tele-democracy, the paperless office, the workerless factory, the digital classroom, the cashless society, the electronic cottage, tele-jobs, or a computer generation". As Floridi points out, the "simplistic exaggerations" of such over-enthusiastic sloganeering stem from a basic misunderstanding of the slow and complex nature of technological change – in other words from *technological determinism* (the thesis that the mere existence of some technology will inevitably have distinct and determinable psychological and social consequences). We'll examine the severe limitations of this one dimensional thinking in depth in the following Chapter, but for now I want to argue the narrow point that hailing the radical novelty of a technology can encourage such thinking by dismissing history as irrelevant and opening the way for abstract speculation. Deterministic statements such as "Like a force of nature, the digital age cannot be denied or stopped" (Negroponte 1996: 228), lead naturally to a frenzy of guesswork about what will remain once this technological tornado has run its course, and this conjecture is lent credence by the thesis of radical novelty in both its insistence that such guesswork is all we have to go on and its raising of expectations to such a level that speculative prophecy can be mistaken for sober enquiry. Moreover, radical novelty focuses too much attention on the new material possibilities enabled by a technology at the expense of due consideration of the processes of social construction whereby it comes into praxical use. Just because some technology makes it possible in principle for there to be paperless offices or campusless universities, this does not necessarily mean those things *will* come about. To appropriate the pragmatist's maxim,

“what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy [of technology]” (Rorty 2007: *ix*). Radically novel possibilities remain possibilities until instantiated in the world and embedded in practice. As we examine in the following Chapter (§2.6), the processes of social construction which technologies must undergo before their emergence as such means that there can be no simple way of predicting the shape they will finally assume. History can help us, however, by showing the kinds of processes by which such shaping has occurred in the past.

Our final reason for questioning the extent of the radical novelty of the Internet, or the suggestion that any such enquiry must remain ahistorical, is best summed by George Santayana’s famous pronouncement: "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." For as Patrice Flichy (2007: 1) points out, one encounters an uncanny sense of déjà vu when reading over the sorts of claims that are made for the changes the Internet will bring: “Time after time, the same social reformers cherish hopes of solving problems of education or reviving the functioning of democracy, the same Cassandras perceive new media as a threat to culture or citizen’s rights, the same ideologists see the dawn of a new civilisation.” Consider, for example, the following eulogy which, as Todd Lappin (1995: 1) notes, could easily come from the songbook of any Internet cheerleader, but which actually comes from a speech made by Herbert Hoover, while acting as US Secretary of Commerce in 1924, on the utopian potential of radio:

> We have ... established an entirely new communication system, national in scope. In the whole history of scientific discovery there has never been a translation into popular use so rapid ... [L]et us not forget that the value of this great system does not lie primarily in its extent or even in its efficiency. Its worth depends on the use that is made of it.... For the first time in history we have available to us the ability to communicate simultaneously with millions of our fellowmen, to furnish entertainment, instruction, widening vision of national problems, and national events. (Hoover 1924: 3)

Or take this lament for the lost art of letter-writing—made (somewhat prematurely) by Spencer Leigh Hughes in 1884—which strongly resembles much of today’s misguided angst regarding the technological degradation of language by short-form messaging services like SMS or *Twitter*:

> In the old days a letter was an important affair, not to be lightly scribbled, and only sent when the writer had something to say. In the present day all the resources of steam and science are strained to deliver promptly letters that are very often jerky, scrawled effusions, the style and frequently the sense, being sacrificed to the

> writers determination to abbreviate and condense, after the manner of the postcard and telegram. (Qtd. Milne 2010: 118)

Wellman and Gulia (1999: 167) argue that the "up-to-the-minute participants in this breathless debate [over the utopian and dystopian potentials of the Internet] appear to be unaware that they are continuing a century-old controversy ... albeit with new debating partners." While their sentiment is correct, in fact Wellman and Gulia do not go back far enough. The Internet's commentators on both sides—whether voicing enthusiastic hopes for emancipation or gloom-laden predictions of alienation—rehearse well worn arguments which have their roots in the Enlightenment and it's Romantic, reformist aftermath. As Krishan Kumar observes, the futurist idea of the information society "fits in well with the liberal, progressivist tradition of western thought," maintaining as it does the Enlightenment's strong faith in science, rationality and progress. Kumar continues: "To the extent that knowledge and its growth are equated with greater efficacy and greater freedom, this view, despite its pronouncement of a radical shift in societal arrangements, continues the line of thought inaugurated by Saint-Simon, Comte and the positivists" (Kumar 2005: 31). In confirmation of this thesis, we need merely quote *Wired* magazine's `Manifesto for the Digital Society' from 1996:

> [T]he Digital Revolution that is sweeping across society is actually a communications revolution which is transforming society. When used by people who understand it, digital technology allows information to be transmitted and transmuted in fundamentally limitless ways. This ability is the basis of economic success around the world. But it offers more than that. It offers the priceless intangibles of friendship, community and understanding. It offers a new democracy dominated neither by vested interests of political parties nor the mob's baying howl. It can narrow the gap that separates capital from labour; it can deepen the bonds between people and planet. (Wired 1996: 43-44)

Humanist objections to technology, meanwhile, reach back at least to Rousseau's *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences,* first published in 1750, which saw scientific progress as corrupting the pure state of nature and resulting in materialism, atheism, and a lessening of human spirit: "as the commodities of life multiply, as the arts are perfected and luxury extended, true courage falls away, the militant virtues fade away" (qtd. Mitcham 1994: 293). Similar concerns fuelled the early nineteenth-century Luddite rebellions of textile craftspeople who protested against the industrialisation of their art and diminution of their way of life (Bailey 1998), and found poetic expression in the Romantic "turn to nature," famously articulated by Wordsworth's elegiac verse for his Lakeland home, "[t]he anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my

heart, and soul / Of all my moral being" ('Tintern Abbey', lines 107-111, W. Wordsworth 2000b: 134). At the outset of sociology, such concerns were writ large in Max Weber's critique of the "iron cage of bureaucracy," where the scientism and secularism of modern society left it bereft of meaning: "The fate of our times," thought Weber, "is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (qtd. Dawe 1971: 62). Since we will encounter these arguments in various forms in what follows in this thesis, I will not labour the point. Suffice to say that discourse surrounding the Internet often tends to reflect hopes and fears about modernity in general, and that the sorts of concerns that the Internet raises are by no means new (this alone perhaps bespeaks something of its radical novelty). To take the sort of "presentist" approach argued by the assumption of radical novelty would be to risk repeating a history of hyperbole and hysteria, and to forget a very basic fact: that the way people cope with change is to hope for the best and fear for the worst. For in its most abstract form, the fuss and factionalism over the Internet derives from a source older even than the Enlightenment: the conflict which necessarily occurs whenever the forces of tradition encounter those of change. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed in a letter to Thomas Allsop, dated 8th April 1820:

> [T]he contest between the Loyalists and their opponents can never be *obsolete*, for it is the contest between the two great moving Principles of social Humanity—religious adherence to the Past and the Ancient, the Desire & the admiration of Permanence, on the one hand; and the Passion for increase of Knowledge, for Truth as the offspring of reason, in short the mighty instincts of *Progression* and *Free-Agency*, on the other. In all subjects of deep and lasting Interest you will detect a struggle between two opposites, two polar Forces, both of which are alike necessary to our human well-being, & necessary each to the continued existence of the other. (S. T. Coleridge 1971: 35, original emphasis)

All of which *does not rule out* the possibility of there being aspects of the Internet that really are radically novel. It only serves to highlight the distortions to which any analysis of the Internet that takes radical novelty as its starting point, or ahistoricity as its watch word, can fall prey. I make these points forcefully in justification of this thesis' historical approach.

1.3 The General Approach of this Thesis

This thesis compares two kinds of epistolary network: our own Internet-enabled age of communicative riches, and a former time where the means of interpersonal discourse over distance was restricted almost entirely to the familiar letter. In any historical study of a

subject as evidentially expansive as "epistolarity" we must encounter an immediate problem of focus. Letters, as we have said, have flowed for thousands of years; although mere fragments of fragments of the total that ever existed exist today, this still amounts to an unmanageably large number of documents scattered in museums, libraries and archives the world over. For pragmatic reasons, therefore, I have chosen to limit this study (in the main) to one age, and (in the main) to the letters of one remarkable network of friends and correspondents who flourished in the English Lake District in the early nineteenth-century. The choice of this time and these people as the main, though not exclusive, focus of this historical investigation is not incidental.

The early nineteenth-century stands as the last age before those twin powers of electricity and steam ramped up the speed of travel and communications, radically reshaping cities and villages in a process of industrialisation the scale of which justifies the term "revolution." Not until the invention of the telegraph in the mid nineteenth-century could people communicate over distance at any speed quicker than that at which paper could be made to move, and such means of movement had remained pretty similar for thousands of years – relying on people or animals to move them over land, and human- or wind-powered ships to carry them overseas. The administrative infrastructure we in the UK recognise today as the Royal Mail traces its history back to the sixteenth-century and the reign of Henry VIII. At the turn of the nineteenth-century, the commerce of letters was vast in scale, linking up business, governmental, military, and intellectual institutions, and connecting individuals in a social world stretched by the strains of empire. Yet all this relied on a postal service which was, in the words of Nichola Deane "sprawling" and "chaotic" (Deane 2003: 394). Prior to Rowland Hill's post office reforms in 1837 and the twin innovations of the Penny Post and carriage by railway, it was also expensive and slow. While letters could circulate remarkably quickly in the city—under William Dockra's seventeenth-century London "penny post," for example, a letter posted at 8 o'clock would be sorted at 9 and delivered by 10—they travelled much more slowly between cities and nations. In 1812, it cost 1s 2d to send a letter the 400 miles from Edinburgh to London, about a tenth of the average daily wage of an agricultural labourer (E. H. Hunt 1986: 965). The same journey, by mail coach—of "velocity, at that time unprecedented" as De Quincey (1851: 131) eulogised—took two and a half days and used a total of 160 horses which had to be changed 40 times (Milne 2010: 35, 42). Delivery times were significantly longer to places not served by the few coach roads, with letters often carried by post-boys on foot. Getting letters overseas took substantially longer, as we will see. Despite such difficulties though, letters were the sole practicable way to

communicate over distance at this time, and people made do. The post was what actor-network theorists like Michel Callon (1986: 204) and Bruno Latour (1987) term an "obligatory passage point," an indispensable node in the network of actors which dispersed people *had* to negotiate if they wanted to communicate. While today we have an assemblage of options, each of which we are much freer to take or leave simply because of the number of available alternatives, letter-writers in the ages before electric and electronic telecommunications faced a communicative cartel, the putting of ink to paper and the postage of the result.

Our recurring touchstone in considering the ways in which such documents supported interpersonal communication in this period will be a remarkable collection of documents now housed within the manuscripts collection of the National Library of Scotland, namely the illustrated letter-journals of the Harden family of Brathay Hall in the English Lake District, written between 1801 and 1811. Rightly described by Iain Brown, then Curator of Manuscripts at the National Library of Scotland, as "one of the most complete records extant of the day-to-day existence of an affluent and well-connected middle-class household" (Brown 1995: 1), these historical documents—which combine image and text to record and communicate family events, social networking and personal reflections—prefigure much of what we see in the digital. While the Harden/Allan journals will be a central figure, however, the historical element of this thesis will also consider the lives and letters of members of the Harden's close social circle in the English Lakes, including William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Wilson ("Christopher North" of *Blackwood's Magazine*), the minor Lakeland poet Charles Lloyd and Richard Watson (Bishop of Llandaff), a prolific pamphleteer of the period. This network of literary folk have bequeathed a remarkably rich historical record—including fiction, poetry, letters, diaries and published memoirs—from which to garner an appreciation of the ways in which their social lives were shaped by the material affordances of communicative technologies in this period. In addition to the use of printed sources where available, this study has involved primary archival research with these documents held in the archives of the National Library of Scotland and at multiple sites in the Lake District, including the Wordsworth Trust at Grasmere. Since the Harden/Allan collection will figure so recurrently in what follows, it is worth taking this opportunity to introduce these letter-journals, and the people involved in their creation, in a little depth.

1.4 The Harden/Allan Collection

The letter-journals are, in the main, the work of Janet "Jessy" Allan (1776-1837), the second of five surviving children[1] born to Robert Allan, banker and proprietor of the *Caledonian Mercury* newspaper. Following the untimely death of her mother and the departure of her elder sister Agnes (known informally as "Nancy" or "Nan") for India in 1799, the unmarried Jessy became mistress of the Allan family home at Queen Street in Edinburgh. Striving to maintain sentimental connection to the exiled Agnes, who had accompanied her husband George Ranken, a Bengal Army surgeon, out to India in quest of raising a fortune sufficient to allow them to return home financially secure, the family maintained an evidently extensive correspondence across continents for more than a decade. None but a very few of the individual letters sent back and forth survive in any form today, some no doubt lost in their initial journey across the seas, the rest perished in the passing of time. We now only know of the extent of this correspondence because of the very constant references to incoming and outgoing letters contained in the letter-journals. The journals themselves, kept between at least 1801 and 1811, were sent out to India at roughly four-monthly intervals and obviously treasured there, for when Agnes returned in 1812 she brought them back with her and they remained in the family, passed down through the generations, until their accession into the archives of the National Library of Scotland in 1954. Jessy remarked in an entry dated 18th December 1810:

> I think with you that many of our letters must be lost as so many accidents have happened to ships both outward & homeward bound but on the whole I think we are lucky in getting so many; my journals I think have been particularly fortunate as I have not heard of you losing more than one or two of them out of the great number that have been sent.[2]

We should be as grateful for their endurance today. Although there are gaps where journals were lost—for example, one sunk in Weymouth Bay aboard the wrecked *Earl of Abergavenny* in 1805—most survive to provide a nearly continuous decade-long social and historical commentary. More importantly for our purposes, they also give frequent and explicit testimony as to the particular challenges of communicating over distance in that age, i.e., the technics and praxis of epistolarity in the Romantic era. The letter-journals functioned as a surrogate site of togetherness, passed around and frequently enlivened by additions or annotations from many members of the clan. Thus we have regular

[1] Three other siblings perished in infancy or childhood.
[2] Individual entries from the Harden/Allan letter-journals will be referenced by date, given in the form (dd.mm.yy). This date should then be referenced against the list of the National Library of Scotland manuscript reference numbers for the Harden/Allan collection given in the Appendix at the back, where a list of dates covered by each individual journal is also given.

contributions from Robert Allan, who as the father was accorded the honour of inscribing the final words in many of the journals before their dispatch to the India House, and pieces added as opportunity arose by their sisters Helen and Catherine ("Kate"), their Dublin cousin Margaret "Lexy" Weld, and by Jessy's husband.

Jessy Allan married John Harden (1772-1847) on the first day of 1803, and the journal records their courtship from their first meeting, aboard an 1801 crossing from Holyhead to Ireland, to their marriage (Jessy even wrote her sister on the morning of her wedding), to their subsequent long life together in Edinburgh and the English Lakes. Born in County Tipperary in 1772, Harden initially trained in the law but gave up that profession following the death of his first wife in 1800, and from there on lived largely from income derived from his estates in Ireland.[3] He was, by all accounts, an infectiously cheerful and modest man: Wordsworth called him "'that good old man with the sunny face" (Crabb Robinson 1869: 168); Charles Lloyd reportedly thought him composed of "Whip Syllabub, & Spruce Beer" (Brown 1995: 25); while to Hartley Coleridge he was "both merry and wise, but the best of the moral was himself" (H. Coleridge 1851: 267). Daphne Foskett says of him, "his happiness undoubtedly shines through both his diaries and his drawings" (Foskett 1974: 46), and indeed benign contentment does light up entries such as that of the 8th November 1805:

> I have just made a little etching with my pen of Jessy, & Joseph & Allan seated near them, for Kate. I shall finish some such group for you in the same style by the time the next journal is ready & shall endeavour to catch character & likeness if I can. I have perused this History & am sure it will give you & yours much pleasure to learn that our Home is so happy a one, & that Jessy, her spouse & Brats continue to enjoy life, rationally & innocently, tho' perhaps too gaily & intermixedly, but in so sweet a country the summers must always induce a concourse of visitors & ramblers.

As this entry indicates, Harden would occasionally complement the journal by contributing small illustrations. A keen and accomplished amateur, he would frequently sketch the family, capturing likenesses and family scenes almost "photographic" in nature (Brown 1995: 26), of groups gathered around books, firesides and harpsichords, or "playing cards

[3] Daphne Foskett, Harden's biographer, regards Harden's connection to the practice of law as questionable, but since an entry dated 24th February 1801 in the *Diary* of Harden's friend, the artist Joseph Farington clearly records "I had walked on the parade with Harden & had serious conversation with him. — He is going to Ireland to dispose of his house having given up his profession, the law", then along with the evidence presented by Foskett, I regard the matter as established. See: Joseph Farington, *The Diary of Joseph Farington, Vol Iv. January 1799 - July 1801*, eds Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1979) at 1507, Daphne Foskett, *John Harden of Brathay Hall, 1772-1847* (Kendal: Abbot Hall Art Gallery, 1974) at 2.

in the softly intimate circles of candlelight" (Brown 1995: 19), or even in the cellar perhaps bottling the homemade ginger wine of which the family was so fond. Journal and sketches were sent off together, and John Harden surely understated the impact of both when he wrote Agnes: "I am glad your Journal went off safe as it must prove at the end of its travels a proof of regard if not a source of amusement to y[ou]r India friends – the little sketch too I see reached its destinat[io]n – it will help to keep in mind Edin[burg]h & other agreeable associations" (24.12.10).

The content of the journals naturally reflects the concerns of their authors. As Brown (1995: 6) says, Jessy's "was a world of ease and leisure, and one where company was constantly on hand. Her journal records the social round in remarkable if almost oppressive detail." This listing of events and activities is much enlivened by the social milieu Jessy inhabited. Close family friends in Edinburgh included accomplished artists like Henry Raeburn (1756-1823), Alexander Nasmyth and (1758-1840) and Archibald Skirving (1749-1819), though Jessy thought the latter "an odd Fish & not in my opinion over agreeable" (09.11.09). Colourful characters abound, from "poor L'Evesque," a French clergyman eighteen years in exile, to the harp-playing Italian Di Nigro, "a great addition to a party" (09.07.02), to malcontent returned Indian colonists "in general seemingly so discontented with this country, they make themselves unpleasant to the inhabitants of it" (21.07.11). As we have said, in the Lakes this milieu enveloped some of the more significant characters of the Romantic epoch, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Constable, as well as minor characters of note, including John Wilson, Charles Lloyd and Richard Watson. To allow a mere part to indicate the whole, we might quote the following entry:

> On Thursday Eve[nin]g we drank tea at Mr Lloyds where we met the Wilsons & Mr Wordsworth. Friday morning we spent on the Lake, & the eve[nin]g at Mr Lloyd's again ... Both Eve[nin]gs we thought long enough as we had no other amusement but the music of our own Party which is pleasanter at home than stuck up with so many people.... Today we could not drive to Church as the Servant is taken very ill & (I fear) wont be out of bed for some days, we did not venture to walk to Church either, on account of the heat, so we ladies all remained graceless & the Gentlemen went on the Lake. I hear there is an India Fleet come in, I hope my Father will bring us some letters from you as he intended leaving Edin[burgh] as yesterday. (21.08.08)

As a diaristic account of quotidian reflections on events and activities in their "average everydayness" (as Heidegger would say), as a manifestation of a wide social network which crossed continents, as a "multi-media" resource making use of text and image, and as a family "space" which brought distant loved ones together, the Harden/Allan collection

prefigures, or is at least analogous to, much of what we see in the digital today in email, blogs, and social networking sites. At the same time, though, as is indicated by Jessy's longing for word of an "India Fleet" to bring a packet of letters from Agnes, these were very different times. The letter-journals, as physical objects, were much less tractable: when Jessy Harden sent her letter-journals to her sister aboard the East Indiamen merchant ships, they usually took between three and six months to arrive, and sometimes over a year. If Jessy sent each letter knowing it would be a "Lazy Traveller" (12.08.02), she also knew it might not arrive at all, "in consequence of Storms and Wars" (24.01.08). Words were understandably thought "stale" by the time they arrived, and there was an almost constant anxiety for news. As meditations on, and manifestations of, the frustrations and affordances of corresponding in the Romantic era, these documents offer a wonderful opportunity to meditate on the similarities and differences between epistolary technics and praxis in that and our own, Internet-enabled age, to ask what, when we talk about "the lost art of letter writing," we have (if anything) actually lost, and (equally importantly) what have we gained?

1.5 Why Philosophy of Technology?

We do not wish merely to depict these differences though; we also wish to be able to judge the kinds of valuative change which attend them. In other words, we want to have some way of getting from the '*is*' of description to the '*ought*' of judgement. Are we better or worse off as a result of these changes? In what ways do our communicative technologies shape our world? How are our ways of living, talking, even thinking, changed as a result? What do we mean when we say that our world is getting smaller? What *are* digital documents? How *present* to each other are we when we interact via the Internet? How does its mediation affect our meaningful engagements with the world and each other? What is different about the ways we can connect online? Are our distinctions between what is public and what is private changed by living online? Is the Internet, broadly conceived, making things better or worse? It is with such questions in mind that this thesis works within the field of philosophy of technology. The Chapter which immediately follows reviews this field, setting out key ideas from canonical thinkers in this tradition and establishing my position in relation to them. As an overture to that Chapter, I here make preparatory comments on the need for the philosophy of technology.

Technologies are everywhere, and yet we often struggle to think them. Tools are things we use in order to do other things, and—as Heidegger tells us (see §2.2)—because of this *in-*

order-to, most of the time we do not really *think* about them at all. We just get on with the work at hand – the tools recede into the background of our perception. Technologies form so much of the background against which we live our lives—from the pavements we walk on, to the gentle hum of an air conditioning unit, or the subtle weight of the clothes covering our bodies, to spectacles, chairs, lamp-posts, automobiles, pens, books, super-computers—that it is perhaps not surprising that they remain for the most part barely detectable, just there, texturing and shaping our perceptions and actions. For if we were constantly to try to think thematically about the being of each technology we encountered we would have scant time to ponder anything else. As Nietzsche (1997: 62) said, "Forgetting is essential to action of any kind, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic." Just as well then that technologies tend to sink into the background, to become forgotten. When a new technology appears there is, for a short while, a buzz of excitement – the glow of newness and novelty; but soon even the shiny mobile phone or new car gradually acquires the everydayness of everything else, we get to grips with it, take it for granted. Soon the novelty wears off, but so too does our ability to recall life before. We find ourselves asking: "How did I ever manage to cope before X (email, iPods, mobile phones, laptop computers) came along?" Life before becomes, as Higgs *et al*. (2000: 1) say, "obscure and difficult to imagine."

This praxical tendency to forget technologies has been mirrored by a historical tendency for philosophers to overlook them too. From the time we rise to the time we sleep, our days are technical through and through – but are we any better off than more primitive cultures? Do technologies help or hinder the good life? Indeed, how do they affect our notions of what the "good life" means? Where is this explosive incursion of fabricated devices into every corner of human existence leading us? Are we in control of technological development, or does our reliance upon technics make the master the slave? What ways of living are opened up and closed off by technological transformations of the possibilities for perception and action? Such questions are philosophic through and through. Yet not until well into the twentieth-century was there a recognised subdiscipline called 'philosophy of technology.' Simplifying slightly, this curious neglect can be attributed to two general preconceptions. The first, which persisted until the end of the nineteenth-century, was the definition of technology as 'applied' science—its mere 'handmaiden' (Ormiston and Sassower 1989: 7)—and thus the relegation of philosophical questions about technology to the status of mere side-questions to the seemingly more fundamental epistemological and ethical enquires of philosophy of science. The second preconception still persists: the underlying belief that technologies are rational-purposive, that we make them to do things

for us, and that as such they are ethically-neutral or value free. As Mario Bunge observed, in the 1970s, technology is often wrongly "considered soulless, aphilosophical, or even antithetical to philosophy" (Bunge 1979: 262). Countering such naive "instrumentalism" is the first task of our next Chapter, and so I will not present those counterarguments here. I only observe that over the course of the twentieth-century a growing band of thinkers sought to think technology more profoundly, in gradually more systematic and focussed ways.

The first wave of these thinkers, Martin Heidegger, Lewis Mumford, Jacques Ellul, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse—now (somewhat prematurely) known as 'classical' philosophy of technology—produced a group of radically uneasy accounts of technological, mass-society in the mid twentieth-century. Growing from the kinds of fears for modernity we saw voiced earlier—and developed against a backdrop of brutalist, modernist architecture ("machines for living"), the coming of the atom bomb, the sense of devastation and horror felt in the post-war period, and the cultural predominance of 1950s, advertising America mass-culture—such deterministic accounts saw humanity to be suffocated by the functionalism and calculation of machinery, reduced to mere components in a totalitarian system of commodification. Such dystopic accounts fell from favour as it became clear that their abstracted grand narratives struggled to pay due heed to the complexity of individual technologies, to appreciate their benefits where they existed, or provide concrete proposals for how to restrain or redirect technologies. In their place, influenced by sociological work on constructivism, philosophy of technology underwent an "empirical turn," as was identified by Hans Achterhuis and a group of fellow Dutch scholars in their book *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn* (Achterhuis 2001b). In that work, Achterhuis and his colleagues described the work of philosophers such as Albert Borgmann, Don Ihde and Andrew Feenberg, who approach technology less transcendentally than Heidegger, instead pursuing a more pragmatic course of engagement and conducting empirical studies of concrete technologies in their particular cultural and historical contexts. As Don Ihde reflected recently:

> My 1979 book, *Technics and Praxis: A Philosophy of Technology*, explored the various roles and relationships humans employed in technological contexts. But unlike Martin Heidegger ... [I] undertook the examination, not of the *essence* of Technology, but of specific technologies. What these taught me was how diverse they were, how differently embedded in different cultures even the same technologies may be, and above all, how technological history is so full of surprises, the unexpected and with unintended and unpredictable side-effects. (Ihde 2008: iv)

This thesis follows the empirical turn. It is a philosophic, historical study of the nature and effects of one potentially profound technological change: the switch from almost total reliance on letters to maintain interpersonal communications over distance two hundred years ago to our own "connected" age, where email, blogs and social networks serve similar though shifting ends. It seeks to offer a nuanced philosophical account of these epistolary technologies in their praxical use, to describe the ways in which the people involved in creating, transmitting and receiving them actually used (and use) them in their cultural and historical contexts. Hence this thesis' title: *Correspondents Theory* seeks to let these people tell their own stories in their own words—to tell us what they themselves found in their encounters with these artefacts—while retaining a critical, theoretical edge which enables us to go beyond mere depiction and make ethical and valuative judgements. At the same time, it is also an attempt to marry certain seemingly incompatible fundaments of phenomenology to concepts from actor-network theory, in order to allow the documents we will study to speak for themselves, as it were. For this thesis regards technological things like letters, blogs, emails, and so on, as *correspondents* in their own right, with their own quasi-agency. Such documents are, as David Levy (2001: 27) so rightly says, "exactly those artifacts to which we delegate the task of speaking for us." Specialised for specific tasks, they nonetheless help shape the kinds of things we say in them; and once released into the world, they take on a degree of autonomy. As Levy continues:

> To delegate to others is of course to exercise some measure of power and control over them. You get someone, or something, to do *your* bidding. But it also inevitably involves a loss of control. Someone else, an autonomous actor, now takes over, who will surely do things differently than you would — and perhaps not up to your standards. (Levy 2001: 29)

2 Questions Concerning Technology: Philosophy, Humanity, Technics

"Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral."
— Melvin Kranzberg

2.1 Introduction

There is a commonsense, and incorrect, interpretation of technologies that they are merely *instrumental,* rationally designed (by us) to do particular things (for us). Neutral and without substantive implications for our psychology, society or culture, they serve only to accelerate the achievement of, increase the scale of, or alter the conditions of, the ends of our intentions. Although, as Feenberg (2002: 5) points out, such "instrumentalism" is now largely out of favour among philosophers and sociologists of technology, it continues to endure in public debate. "Guns don't kill people, people do," say the National Rifle Association in the US. Yet, the person with a gun is clearly different from the person with a stick, with very different potentialities for action "in the heat of the moment," and a world without firearms would surely be a substantially different place in which to live (cf. Latour 1999: 176-77; McLuhan 2001: 11). Comparative murder statistics between the US and the UK plainly point to a correlation between the ratio of guns and the ratio of deaths in a population. Technologies enable, empower, facilitate or alternatively prohibit, hinder, discourage certain actions. Technologies make a difference to our lives; otherwise, what would be their use?

This is not to say that technologies *determine* action, of course—the person with a gun is still a moral agent who must choose his or her actions from amongst a multitude of possibilities. Nor is it to disregard the influence of societal factors and relations of power in shaping action. Yet it *is* to suggest that certain technologies *lend themselves well* to certain actions (in this unsettling example, murder), making them easier and so *inclining* us towards them. In sum, I am proposing that our technological objects affect our agency,

specifically that the ends of our actions are not logically independent of our means of realising them and that our conceptions of those ends can themselves be influenced by the technologies available. Upon such an anti-instrumentalist view, technology is not the servant of human needs, desires and values but plays a significant role in their constitution.

This is a strong claim which requires robust justification. But if it is, as I believe, correct, it is imperative we take the time to provide such justification, since the scope and complexity of our study will be much increased. We could not assume our human interests to be fixed, and then simply examine the effects of technological change upon them. Rather, we would have to examine the extent to which human interests, along with the psychological, social and cultural conditions which ground them, are themselves changed by a shift in technology, the extent to which our relationships with our technologies can affect our own conceptions of meaning, value and purpose. There is a rich and growing literature which engages critically with our uncertain relationship with technology, to critique the ways in which technology shapes us and the lifeworld we inhabit. Much of this work, especially the hermeneutic phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and the amodernist constructivism of Bruno Latour, can be seen as broadly being concerned to overcome our Cartesian conception of subject-object dualism; that is, to show as artificial and problematic our positing there to be two distinct realms, cognition and natural reality, subjects (observers) and objects (what is observed). Rather, for thinkers such as Heidegger and Latour, subject and object are mutually constituted, preceded and given form by their very interrelation. Cartesian subject-object dualism seems to underlie the instrumentalist position, setting us above and apart from our tools, and seeing us as able to manipulate and control them for our own, unaffected, ends. To break down the subject-object dichotomy is to see ourselves, our values and ends, as not unconditionally distinct from our tools, but rather as bound up with them in a lifeworld which forms the ground of those values and ends themselves. It is through a critical engagement with this work that we will seek to define the boundaries of our current enquiry. This Chapter, then, will divide naturally into two parts:

Firstly, we will take a micro view of our interactions with technologies by examining the phenomenological work of Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to describe the way in which our proficient use of technologies is an essentially intimate activity—pre-thematic and non-explicit—which blurs the boundaries of our body-schema and thus cannot be characterised in merely rational and purposive terms. We will then go on to describe the work of Don Ihde on the phenomenology of human-technology relations, his contention that technologies are “non-neutral,” the consequences of this fact for our technologically

mediated perception ways, and the ways in which our interpretative understanding of the world can be affected.

Secondly, we will take a macro view by examining four wider theories of sociotechnical change: the substantivism of Heidegger and Albert Borgmann, the technological determinism of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, the social constructivism of Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker, and the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour. This discussion will examine contextually issues which are central to our understanding of technology including the autonomy which may or may not direct its development, whether modern technology differs essentially from that of other stages of history, whether there is any such thing as an essence of technology, the extent to which technology determines the shape of society or *vice versa*, and the agential status of artefacts.

2.2 Phenomenology of Technology (1): Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty

As just said, a major part of Martin Heidegger's project in *Being in Time* is the deconstruction (or "destruction") of Cartesian subject-object dualism. Heidegger engages with the ontological status of our technologies—our "equipment"—to demonstrate the inadequacy of the subject-object schema for capturing the basic, everyday ways in which we engage with our tools. For Heidegger, we do not live in a world of objects which are always apprehended in their totality—measured, observed, or studied—rather, we live for the most part, in an unreflective world of circumspective dealings. Our tools, in use, withdraw into the background of our general comportment towards the world. As I type these words, I am not concerned with the laptop computer or word processing software I am using as distinct objects of reflection (as things "present-at-hand," in Heidegger's terms). Rather, in the act of writing, they, in a sense, withdraw into the background of the larger project I am engaged in (writing the first Chapter of my PhD thesis for the sake of my larger aim of becoming an academic). It is a "peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand," says Heidegger, that "it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically" (Heidegger 1962: 99). The withdrawal of the tool-in-use reveals it, as Peter-Paul Verbeek (2001: 125) says, as "a means of experiencing, rather than an object of experience".

For Heidegger, it is when the equipment malfunctions, is missing, or in some other way "unready-to-hand," that the tool itself becomes conspicuous and the object of reflective focus. In its obstinacy the object announces itself and we realise its role in our everyday lives: "the context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a

totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself" (Heidegger 1962: 105). It is at this moment of breakdown—say, when the laptop suddenly crashes—that I really grasp the way in which it forms part of a meaningful whole. This "totality" is the contextual field of involvements in which our equipment has its relative meaning, the meaningful whole in which "it can be this equipment that it is" (97). In our everyday lives, our tools are not the objectified, "present-at-hand" things of philosophical or scientific investigation. The laptop computer I am using to write these words, for example, is not some neutral thing to which I endow value, but is a familiar tool which has a role in my activities and a meaning which is inextricably linked to the larger context of my everyday life, my projects, values and concerns. To say what technologies are, we must talk not in terms of abstract properties, but of the ways in which they are involved in our practices and the roles they are assigned in our lives. We shall later return to this line of argument, in which the meaning of our technologies are only intelligible in the context of their praxical use and the gestalt of involvements within which they are embedded, to draw larger conclusions about the wider significance of our technologies. For now, we will build on the phenomenon of the *withdrawal* of the tool-in-use.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty built upon Heidegger's work to develop a phenomenology that described the central role of embodiment for our world disclosure. For Merleau-Ponty, the body—"our general medium for having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 169)—has "motor intentionality," a pre-intellectual, general understanding of the world. As my body moves my fingers across the keypad of this laptop, I don't conceive of them as occupying objectified locations; my body is not, for me, a series of points associated in space, but has a holism: "constantly subject to a unique law, the spatiality of the body must work downwards from the whole to the parts" (113). This "superimposed sketch" of the body is the *body schema*, an "immediately given invariant" (163) which allows me to experience my body as *my* body-in-the-world. Getting to grips with tools is not an intellectual activity, it is pre-thematic and non-explicit. Tools, when used habitually, blur the boundaries of this body-schema. "The acquisition of habit," says Merleau-Ponty, constitutes "a rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema". Merleau-Ponty gives several fascinating examples of this phenomenon:

> A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and the things which might break it off. She feels where the feather is just as we feel where our hand is. If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can "get through" without comparing the width of the

> opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against that of my body.... The blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressively as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of object than of the position of objects through it. The position of things is immediately given through the extent of the reach that carries him to it, which comprises, besides the arm's reach, the stick's range of action. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 165-6)

The focus of the blind man's attention is the street, not the stick itself, which has become a functional antenna through which he 'sees' the world. Hence, to become familiar and get used to our technologies is to, in a sense, blur the lines between us and them. Neurobiological research seems to support these phenomenological claims. Preester and Tsakiris (2009: 310) advise that experiments upon humans and also non-human primates correlate simple tool-use with specific changes in "receptive fields of bimodal neurons" which may be the site of the body-schema, arguing that such neurological changes are responsible for the feeling of withdrawal and transparency felt by the competent tool-user. Meanwhile, Cardinali *et al*. (2009: 478) claim that "tool-use alters the body schema ... what is modified is the somatosensory representation of intrinsic properties of the body morphology". Such research suggests that the body is not a fixed or constant object; its boundaries are, in the words of Preester and Tsakiris, "plastic and vulnerable" (2009: 308).

There are important limits to such plasticity, of course. The extension of the body schema to include non-corporeal objects is temporary and contingent—once the tool is put down, it soon ceases to be part of the schema (Berlucchi and Aglioti 1997: 561). Nevertheless, to return to our opening (anti-instrumentalist) contention that "technology is not the servant of human needs, desires and values," we here find evidence that this is the case. We have seen that our everyday dealing with tools is pre-thematic and non-explicit, and appears to affect us at a neurobiological level to the extent that it blurs our affective representations of our own bodies. As Andy Clark says, we have a "special character, as human beings, to be forever driven to create, co-opt, annex, and exploit nonbiological props and scaffoldings ... to exploit deep neural plasticity in order to become one with our best and most reliable tools" (Clark 2003: 6-7). Hence our tools affect us both physiologically and psychologically more deeply than a merely instrumental definition can allow. If our technologies interact with our perceptual and embodied processes at a pre-cognitive level, we cannot describe their use as merely rational and purposive.

Moreover, our tools are revealed by Merleau-Ponty as means of experience, extensions of our bodily-senses. To embody our "praxis" through technologies is, as Don Ihde says, "ultimately an *existential* relation with the world" (Ihde 1990: 72). The tool-in-use becomes a part of us in a very real sense and opens up to us new ways of relating to and experiencing the world. If we accept the problematisation of the subject-object dichotomy, and the phenomenological solution of mutual constitution, then the technological objects which mediate the perceptual interrelation of subject and object have a significant role in that constitution. It would be as Peter-Paul Verbeek says: "Mediation does not simply take place *between* a subject and object, but rather *co-shapes* subjectivity and objectivity.... Humans and the world they experience are the *products* of technological mediation, and not just the poles between which the mediation plays itself out" (Verbeek 2001: 131).

Our tools here begin to assume an ontological significance, shaping the co-constitution of humans and their world. This significance becomes a central theme for our research when we begin to ask: what happens to our perception when it is enacted via technologies? For if perception—the moment of interrelation of subject and object—alters, then both the perceiver and what is perceived might be altered too; humans would be different beings and their world a different place. Two questions arise: (1) to what extent do our technologies alter perception, and (2) how does such alteration then affect our interpretations of our meanings, desires and values? Moving on to answer these questions, we will draw on the work of the American philosopher of technology, Don Ihde, who has made the phenomenological examination of human–technology relations his central focus.

2.3 Phenomenology of Technology (2): Ihde on Human-Technology Relations

Ihde distinguishes between two senses of the word "perception" and terms them micro- and macroperception. Microperception is direct, embodied sensorial perception, while macroperception is our reflexive hermeneutic, cultural interpretation of phenomena to reveal meaning (Ihde 1990: 29). Illustratively, these two senses of our word "perception" can be seen in our use of the verb "to see," meaning both immediate sensory perception ("I see X") and interpretative understanding ("I see X differently now") (Verbeek 2001: 124). While, for analytic purposes, it is useful to distinguish these two dimensions of perception, it is important to note that they are necessarily entwined and co-dependent; they are in a gestalt figure/ground relation to each other, as opposed to one of mere hierarchical derivation. One is not prior to the other. An interpretation must be an interpretation of *something*, some sensory information delivered to us via bodily-perception; but, as

humans, we cannot have a bodily perception without its being reflexively interpreted and understood within the ground of our own hermeneutic-cultural context. As Heidegger says in *Being and Time*, "What we 'first' hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motor-cycle.... It requires a very artificial and complicated frame of mind to 'hear' a 'pure noise'" (Heidegger 1962: 207). This relationship between micro- and macroperception becomes interesting for our current consideration of our mediating technologies when we begin to consider the ways in which those technologies can alter microperceptions of phenomena and how this might change our macroperceptual understanding of our world.

Ihde's central hypothesis is that our mediating technologies transform direct perceptual experience by simultaneously enhancing perception of some aspects of phenomena and restricting others. In this sense technics are "non-neutral" (Ihde 1979: 4). A dental probe, for example, enhances the dentist's touch-sensitivity for the contour and solidity of teeth, yet at the same time reduces her sensory sensitivity to other qualities, such as temperature and moistness, which would be apparent if the tooth were examined using the "unmediated" touch senses of the finger. Similarly a telescope amplifies our vision, allowing us to see distant planets; yet our sensory experience of those worlds is reduced to only the visual - we cannot smell, hear, taste or touch them – and even some visual features, such as sense of depth, are reduced (Ihde 1990: 50). Examining other such examples, Ihde proposes that our use of technics displays an invariant 'amplification-reduction structure', where amplification or enhancement of some capacity necessarily co-occurs with a reduction or marginalisation of other capacities (Ihde 1979: 21; 1990: 76).

Humans, embodied in time and space, are limited beings. As such there is always some selectivity inherent in experience. We must exist in *this* time, concentrate on *this* rather than *that*, view an object from *here* rather than *there*, and so on. Our technologies help us overcome these limitations, enabling us to act and perceive beyond the strict spatio-temporal horizons of our bodies; in doing so, however, they also organise, focus and formalise phenomena, selecting certain aspects of reality and passing over others. Mediating technologies always prescribe (to some extent) the conditions under which they render the invisible visible, and the way in which they show reality is never strictly equivalent to that of bare, unmediated perception. To look at a picture of the Taj Mahal is not the same as being there; I cannot move around it to get a sense of it from different angles, I cannot feel the breeze on my face, I cannot smell the gardens and I cannot watch the character of the marble change as the sun goes down. Further, there is an aura or

resonance present in my *being there* which is lessened or not at all present in my merely viewing the picture. The microperceptual ways in which reality can be shown, and hence the boundaries of (macroperceptual) interpretative possibilities, are built into the material structure of our mediating technologies. These artefacts help shape our experience of reality by opening new means of access to the world; but in so doing, they transform perception through their inherent amplification-reduction structure which results in a correlative amplification and reduction of our interpretive possibilities.

This amplification-reduction structure becomes more pronounced as technologies move along a continuum between what Ihde terms "embodiment" and "hermeneutic" technologies (Ihde 1979: 3-27; 1990: 72-123). This analytic distinction describes the two basic ways in which we mediate our experience via technology and mirrors Ihde's earlier differentiation of the micro- and macro- dimensions of perception. Embodiment technologies are of the kind we have discussed thus far – the blind man's stick, the dental probe, the telescope – which amplify or replicate existing bodily competences (of sight, hearing, touch, etc.).

Hermeneutic technologies are different in as much as they substitute meaningful signs for the direct experience of reality. I do not directly experience the world *through*, but rather *with*, or by way of, hermeneutic technologies. A thermometer, for example, does not deliver an experience of hotness or coldness *per se*, but gives a relative value which I "read" and interpret as a representation of hot or cold. Phenomenologically the artefact itself, rather than the world, is now my "visual terminus" – though it is at understanding something about the world at large (i.e., the temperature) that my attention is ultimately directed. Such technologies assume a phenomenological positivity, since the noetic experience—how something is shown—is changed. I no longer perceive the 'world' directly, but instead the technology presents a value which I must meaningfully interpret as referring to something about the world. This physical opacity has the effect of introducing a partial interpretative opacity, since the noematic correlate (what is shown) is now a *representation* of something rather than the thing itself. Hermeneutic technologies change phenomena, translating them into an analogue, so that "the 'object' in an ordinary sense disappears so far as recognisability is concerned" and "[w]hat remains is the instrumentally delivered 'text' which is now 'read'" (Ihde 1979: 37-8).

This is not to suggest that the fluent use of hermeneutic technologies is any less transparent than that of embodiment technologies. Once learned, hermeneutic technologies—whether

thermometers, clocks, photographs, or written words of English—are equally as 'ready-to-hand' as hammers and dental probes (Ihde 1990: 94). Merleau-Ponty eloquently describes the way words can disappear in the act of reading: "The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion: my eyes follow the lines on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eyes and body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 466). However, a phenomenological difference remains. I directly experience the world *through* embodiment technologies, but hermeneutic technologies "call for the extension of my hermeneutic and "linguistic" capacities *through* the instruments, while the reading itself retains its bodily perceptual location as a relation *with* or *towards*, the technology" (Ihde 1990: 88).

Hence hermeneutic technologies assume a "phenomenological positivity," becoming a "separate and distinct positive factor" for our investigation, by introducing an extra layer of interpretive complexity to our understanding of the world (Ihde 1979: 32). There is also an increased potential for breakdown or misunderstanding because I no longer experience "reality" directly. Interpretative problems can occur both in my interpretive reading of the signs and in the relation of the signs to their referent. Digital technologies, of course, complicate things even further by taking analogue representational phenomena (words, pictures, sound recordings, etc.) and 'translating' them into a digital code of ones and zeros for transmission, then reconstituting them into analogue representations via screen or speakers for the perceiver to experience. There is what Ihde terms a "double translation" (Ihde 1990: 92), the first carried out by humans and the second by computing hardware and software. Hermeneutic technologies change *noema* and *noesis*, what is shown and how it is shown. By doing so, argues Peter-Paul Verbeek, they increasingly prescribe the ways in which the world can be shown:

> A hermeneutic technology, after all, provides a representation of reality, which implies that the design of such a technology predetermines which aspect of reality is to be made perceptible by it and in which ways. The "space" available for reality to express itself becomes more restricted as the mediation of our perception becomes more hermeneutic in nature. (Verbeek 2001: 128-29)

In the case of the hermeneutic technologies that are the focus of this study (letters, diaries, emails, blogs and so on), this might seem a strange thing to say. How can we say the material structure of hermeneutic technologies prescribes what can be shown if my diary or blog can record my work or my private life, or have any number of other foci. It could

even be entirely fictional. This objection has some limited hold because Ihde's analysis is directed primarily at scientific instruments. Technologically, science differs from literature in that scientific instruments must retain some reference or "hermeneutic transparency" to reality (Ihde 1990: 92). The thermometer, working properly, cannot just invent the temperature, whereas literature relies heavily upon the imagination of the author, who can choose which thoughts to express. Diaries, letters and blogs are as open to interpretation as any text. Still, however, these technologies *do* (to some extent) predetermine their content. If we compare any merely textual communication with a situation in which we are "face-to-face" with our interlocutor, we find that there is a rich world of non-linguistic clues to meaning which are missing, such as facial and bodily expressive cues and paralinguistic features like prosody. We also find that the asynchronicity of textual communication distances the interlocutors. In face-to-face conversation I can signal my lack of understanding with a frown and my partner might know to explain again, while in textual conversation such questioning must be more formal; it can even become impossible if the author of a text has since died. But where a technology reduces some experiential aspects, it also amplifies others, and so we find that the fixedness of a text allows me a different relation to what is said. I am not lost in the flow of conversation. If I do not understand a statement, I can read some background material and come back to read it again with a deeper understanding of the context within which it is said. In this respect, the asynchronicity and distance of textual communication might actually aid understanding. Such observations show, in a merely preliminary fashion, the way in which the changed microperceptional structures of textual communication can amplify and diminish macroperceptual possibilities for interpretation.

All textual communication is not the same, however – it can be accomplished via many different media, and the materiality of those media will differingly amplify and diminish the types of microperceptional information available (and thus the macroperceptional possibilities for interpretation). This issue will be taken up in the next Chapter, where the materiality of the analogue and digital media under investigation will be examined, and two central questions addressed: (1) what are the material differences between the analogue and digital technologies we are studying?, and (2) how do these material differences amplify and diminish the microperceptional information available and thus our macroperceptional interpretations?

For now, we will broaden the focus our investigation to examine schools of thought which seek to understand the emergence, praxical use, and socio-cultural implications of

technologies in a wider sense. We describe four main theoretical approaches—substantivism, technological determinism, social constructivism and actor-network theory—which each frame the question differently. By placing the emergence of these four theories in their historical context and examining critically their main tenets, we seek to develop answers to these fundamental questions and thus establish the broad theoretical base from which the remainder of this thesis will be built. Such discussion will orbit several key issues concerning socio-technical change, including the nature of technological development, the question of the essence of technology, the extent of its determinative influence on human history, and the perhaps counter-intuitive suggestion that technology itself should be afforded agential status.

2.4 Substantivism in Heidegger and Borgmann

Substantivism sees modernity as characterised by its particular relationship to technology, which embodies distinct values (efficiency, for example) which so shape our cultural sphere that they overwhelmingly influence the meanings we derive from life. Thus, for a substantivist theorist like Jacques Ellul, the "technical phenomenon" is a "monster," a deterministic and dominant force which pervades our "most important and trivial affairs" (Ellul 1965: 107). Our modern technical way of thinking, preoccupied with efficiency and order, technicizes every aspect of life—organization, marketing, surveillance, education, friendship, even sport (21-22)—and reduces us to a dehumanised uniformity which dictates our values. For substantivism, technology is autonomous, beyond our control and subject to its own interior logic; it sees each new technological advance to introduce new social and technical problems which in turn can only be answered through the introduction of yet more technology. "Technique," says Ellul, fashions "an omnivorous world which obeys its own laws and which has renounced all tradition" (14). We will here examine the substantivist thesis by critically engaging with the work of Martin Heidegger ("no doubt the most influential philosopher of technology" of the last century, according to Andrew Feenberg, 1999: 183), and one of his theoretical inheritors, Albert Borgmann.

Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* was an attempt to show that a 'world' is an understanding of being which precedes, and makes possible, the interrelation of humans and things. In his later work, however, he came to develop an epochal account of history in which our understanding of being shifts with our changing paradigmatic cultural understanding of the world. The ontological framework which Heidegger had earlier seen as the ultimate precondition of our having any experience at all is now itself revealed as

mutable and historically constituted. According to Dreyfus and Spinosa, Heidegger, in his middle period (around 1930 – 1950), proposed more or less six such "epochs of being":

> First things were understood on the model of wild nature as *physis*, i.e. as springing forth on their own. Then on the basis of *poeisis*, or nurturing, things were dealt with as needing to be helped to come forth. This was followed by an understanding of things as finished works, which in turn led to the understanding of all beings as *creatures* produced by a creator God. This religious world gave way to the modern one in which everything was organized to stand over against and satisfy the desires of autonomous and stable subjects. In 1950, Heidegger claimed, that we were entering a final epoch which he called *the technological understanding of being*. (Dreyfus and Spinosa 1997: 160)

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, first published in 1954, Heidegger argues that this shifting ontology invokes a deep schism between the harmonious *poiēsis* of the thought and handicraft techniques of ancient Greece, and the dominant contemporary attitude towards manufacturing as "making and manipulating" (Heidegger 1978: 295). He contrasts the poetic, craftsman-like "bringing-forth" of classical Greece with our current technological understanding of being which "challenges" and "sets-upon" nature, seeking "maximum yield at minimum expense." Nature has come to be seen as nothing more than a "standing-reserve" (*Bestand*)—a stockpile or warehouse—of energy and resources to be captured and stored. "Everywhere everything," says Heidegger, "is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand ... so that it may be on call for a further ordering" (298). This new technoscientific understanding of being, which challenges us to order the world as standing-reserve, is the ontological definition of technology, its *essence*, and is called by Heidegger *Gestell*, or 'enframing' (301). *Gestell* discloses everything—including ourselves—as a standing-reserve of stored energy which is on "stand-by," waiting to be released and made more available and utilisable through stockpiling, ordering and re-ordering. For Heidegger this new epochal understanding dangerously limits our possible ways of being-in-the-world by setting the conditions of appearance in restrictive, calculative terms. Our technology, which we naively assume to be merely instrumental to our ends, thus draws us into an escalating relationship of domination and control, the transformation of everything into a stock of raw materials ready for technological mobilization:

> The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already afflicted man in his essence. The rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth. (Heidegger 1978: 309)

Calculative thinking dulls us to a more originary way of being, the *poiēsis* of the Greeks, the truth of the "free, letting-it-be glance at things" as Rüdiger Safranski (1998: 399) puts it. Thus, it is not particular technologies which threaten us, but an autonomous techno-logic, a "destining of revealing," which overtakes our purposes, since: "Everything must be adjusted to the existing state of calculation" (Heidegger, qtd. Riis 2008: 293). As we enframe everything as standing reserve, we are threatened by the nihilistic possibility "that all revealing will be consumed in ordering" (Heidegger 1978: 315). If we allow organisation and reorganisation—the making accessible and optimisable of everything—to become their own ends, all meaning "disappears into the objectlessness of standing-reserve" (300). Information became Heidegger's paradigm example of this trend. As Dreyfus and Spinosa advise: "With the endless transformablity of information as his paradigm, Heidegger came finally to see that technicity could treat people and things as resources to be enhanced without setting desiring and controlling subjects over against objectified things" (Dreyfus and Spinosa 2003: 341).

Although hugely influential, Heidegger's philosophy of technology is no less controversial and we must raise two important criticisms here (a third, the dubious nature of the thesis of autonomous technology, we address below in §2.6 on social constructivism). Firstly, Heidegger's account of the essence of modern technology as something dangerously new relies upon our accepting his account of the transhistorical ontological difference between the ways of seeing of the Greeks (*poiēsis*) and the moderns (*Gestell*). However, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida argue that the history of being displays a much greater degree of instability than Heidegger allows (Thomson 2005: 59). To take just two examples which cast doubt upon Heidegger's binary divisions of classical/modern and *poiēsis*/*Gestell*:

- Heidegger cites our modern term "human resources" as evidence of a technological thinking which has subsumed even humans as "standing reserve" (Heidegger 1978: 299). But the claim that such an enframing of humanity is radically new seems bizarre if we must remind ourselves that human slavery was so embedded in the culture of ancient Greece as to be perceived part of the "natural" order of things (Plato 2000: 444b).

- In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger eulogises about the way the Acropolis perfectly "gathers" the surrounding environment. Yet this same complex (built in part by slaves, Hurwit 1999: 205), is itself evidence of a less than poetic history of technical action. Don Ihde (1993: 104) cites the historian J. Donald Hughes: "Those

> who look at the Parthenon ... often do not see its wider setting. Behind the Acropolis, the bare dry mountains of Attica show their rocky bones against the blue Mediterranean sky, and the ruin of the finest temple built by the ancient Greeks is surrounded by the far vaster ruins of an environment which they desolated at the same time."

Such examples blur the epochal ontological lines that Heidegger wants to draw, and perhaps suggest that a technological way of seeing the world has always exposed humans to the danger of valuing ends over means and products over processes. This is the position of Andrew Feenberg, who argues that the chief features of technology—"reduction of objects to raw materials, the use of precise measurement and plans, the management of some human beings by others [and] large scales of operation" (Feenberg 1999: 223)—have been common to all historical periods. Such criticism seems correct; there is in Heidegger, as Don Ihde (1993: chap. 8) has pointed out, a romantic nostalgia for the ancient Hellenic world and the handicraft techniques of Black Forest craftsmen which leads to "a certain blindness and prejudice" and colours his assessments of what constitutes "good" and "bad" technologies (Ihde 1993: 107). However, we need commit ourselves to neither Heidegger's assertion that modern technology is radically new, nor the underlying contention that this results from a fundamentally different ontological enframing of the world than existed in other historical periods, to appreciate his deepest warning, that as long as we regard our tools as merely neutral to our ends we allow technological thinking, with its rubric of calculation and efficiency, to determine our values and blind us to a more "meditative" way of being-in-the-World.

A second criticism of Heidegger's account of technology targets its essentialism. For Heidegger, the essence of technology (*Gestell*) is itself nothing technological (Heidegger 1978: 302). *Gestell* is a "destining of revealing" with its own telos, the nihilistic ordering and reordering of the world taken as standing-reserve. All technologies are, in the end, merely manifestations of this essential telos. When we examine individual technologies, however, we might observe that rather than enframing the world as standing-reserve they can actually serve to bring us into a deeper relation to the world and each other. Feenberg *et al*. (1996), in their essay *The Online Patient Meeting*, give just such an example: the use of computer-mediated communication *fora* among patients with severe illnesses of many types, including AIDS. The authors describe research which finds such *fora* can: mitigate the isolation felt by victims of stigmatising ailments; allow patients to talk frankly and openly about their conditions, perhaps partly as a result of the anonymity of written

communication and the way it can diminish the sense of vulnerability felt in face-to-face settings; enhance patients' access to information through top-down dissemination and peer-to-peer exchange of knowledge; and network patients to organise more effectively to coordinate actions in their interests (e.g., lobbying for access to experimental medicines). Such an example seems fundamentally at odds with Heidegger's essentialist view of technology.

Moreover, to view individual technologies as manifestations of a non-technological essence is not only questionable, but also deeply unhelpful since it levels all possibilities of judging specific technologies on their individual merits, as far as they can either add to or detract from the meaning in our lives. As Feenberg points out, Heidegger's argument is one of such high abstraction he "literally cannot discriminate between electricity and atom bombs, agricultural techniques and the Holocaust. All are merely different expressions of the identical enframing, which we are called to transcend through the recovery of a deeper relation to being" (Feenberg 2000: 297). Heidegger's abstract essentialism has extreme difficulty with such concrete examples, since it must either blankly respond that complex modern technologies which appear to enhance our relation to the world are in fact detrimental to it (and, against the evidence, show us how), or concede that not all technologies instantiate the *Gestell* (in which case, it is not an essence). Since Heidegger's abstraction results in a history of technical action which is (at the very least) open to question, and because it can tend to obscure the very differences between individual technologies which make them worthy of study, it has been marginalised in recent philosophy of technology in favour of what Hans Achterhuis (2001a: 65) terms an "empirical turn", a turn to more "empirically attuned and nuanced" accounts which examine concrete manifestations of technologies in their social and cultural contexts.

The problematic abstraction of Heidegger's essentialism is, to an extent, overcome by Albert Borgmann, the leading contemporary philosopher in the substantivist vein. Since Chapter Four engages Borgmann's theory in some detail, I shall here only introduce him. For Borgmann, we currently live in a "device paradigm" in which our relentless pursuit of more efficient ways of satisfying our desires results, somewhat paradoxically, in our becoming less engaged with the world (Borgmann 1984: 40ff.). The device paradigm overtakes a more skilful, nurturing way of engaging with the world, that of "focal" things or practices. 'Devices' are characterized by their concealing of the mechanics of their operation, the work involved in delivering goods and services to us. By concealing these additional elements, the device strips away the contextual involvements necessitated by

more primitive focal things or practices. For Borgmann, there is a "central vacuity" (Borgmann 1984: 199) to advanced technology which functionalises valuable focal things and practices until that value is lost and our meaningful engagement with the world is diminished. As we shift from production to service industries, we produce information rather than concrete objects, and the device paradigm takes a further step towards the eradication of focal things and practices by replacing reality with a rich and pliable "hyperreality" over which we can assume ever greater control: "Information processing attains its hypermodern exaggeration to the extent that it overcomes and displaces reality" (Borgmann 1992: 82).

Borgmann's distinction between devices and focal things is more concretely useful than Heidegger's distinction between *Gestell* and *poiēsis*, since it at least allows him to discriminate between the roles played by individual technologies and even acknowledge the positive role that some "devices" can play, insofar as they support traditional things and practices (Dreyfus and Spinosa 1997: 169). It seems, however, that Borgmann's philosophy of technology retains the broad-brush approach of Heidegger's essentialism. His conclusions regarding the Internet are bleak and uniform – the Internet, "entertaining and stultifying" (Borgmann 2000a: 356), weakens connection and commitment:

> Plugged into the network of communications and computers, they seem to enjoy omniscience and omnipotence; severed from their network, they turn out to be insubstantial and disoriented. They no longer command the world as persons in their own right. Their conversation is without depth and wit; their attention is roving and vacuous; their sense of place is uncertain and fickle. (Borgmann 1992: 108)

Any cursory glance at the reams of ill-thought, ill-spelled, oft-outraged and more often outrageous comments which litter Internet message boards, might tempt us to agree with this sweeping conclusion. But recalling Feenberg's example of the online patient meeting, Borgmann's description does not fit. As Feenberg (1999: 192) says:

> It is difficult to see any connection between these applications of the computer and Borgmann's critique of "hyperintelligence." Is this technologically mediated process by which dying people come together despite paralyzing illness to discuss and mitigate their plight a mere instance of "technological thinking?"

It is because Borgmann's philosophy can dismiss swathes of "devices" in such an off-hand manner that Achterhuis (2002: 107) regards it as merely providing a "a new coat for the old content of the classical approach," essentialism in the clothing of the empirical turn.

Remembering back to our earlier discussion of Don Ihde's phenomenological notion of the amplification/reduction structure of technologies, where the losses and gains of sensory information provided by each mediating technology are attended by concomitant amplifications and reductions of the possibilities for interpretation, we can sum up by reminding ourselves of this commonplace: *Individual technologies allow us to do some things better and some things worse.* Their use brings us into a different relation with the world and each other, simultaneously enhancing and limiting our engagement. With this in mind, we can certainly agree with substantivism insofar as it (*per* Heidegger) calls on us to recognise the limitations of a merely calculative thinking which enframes the world as standing-reserve and dulls us to a more meditative way of being-in-the-World and (*per* Borgmann) alerts us to the ways in which our technological devices can divorce us from meaningful engagement with the rich contextual involvements of focal things and practices. We cannot, however, blankly dismiss swathes of modern technology as either "good" or "bad," or as mere manifestations of some abstract essence. We must rather engage critically with technologies at an individual level, to analyse their attendant benefits and drawbacks as they are manifested in their local contextual use by human agents. Such is the aim of this current investigation.

2.5 Technological Determinism in McLuhan

In its strong form, technological determinism views technology as the main driver of social change, while in a weakened form proposes that technologies make possible—or dispose us towards—certain ways of acting but are not sufficient in themselves to fully explain the shape of our societies. Although substantivism and determinism share certain affinities, and are hence commonly conflated, I would argue with Andrew Feenberg (1999: 9) that they differ significantly. Substantivism is a theory of valuative change in which the increasing technological enframing of our lives leads to changes in the ways we interpret our world, and hence our conceptions of our own values and ends. Technological determinism, meanwhile, is a causal theory which links the adoption and use of particular technologies to particular societal results. Thus, the determinist can quite happily agree with the instrumentalist that technologies themselves have no substantive impact upon the ways we interpret the world, while readily endorsing the view that technologies determine the shape of the world we interpret. Substantivism is an essentialist approach which seeks to describe our relationship with technology in general terms; determinism is a theory of sociotechnical change which seeks to describe the effects of technologies *qua* technologies.

The term 'technological determinism' is thought to have been coined by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen, but as a trend of thought it reaches back at least as far as Marx, for whom the "superstructure" of society (politics, religion, art, etc.) was determined by its technological and economic foundation (Dusek, 2006: 94). In contrast to the dystopic imaginary of substantivism, technological determinism was born out of an optimistic, post-Enlightenment "progressivism" and Marxist materialism which believed technological progress would, as Andrew Feenberg puts it, "ground humanity's advance toward freedom and happiness" (Feenberg 1999: 2). Applied to media, determinism is best known through the work of the Toronto scholars Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. Innis proposed a media determinism in which each of our forms of communication entails a "bias" in its treatment of space and time, and argued that these biases so shaped the form of cultural and social organisation that the various stages of development of Western civilisation can be characterised by their dominant communicative forms (J. W. Carey 1967: 8).

McLuhan embraced this central idea and gave it its most audacious, and controversial, expression. For McLuhan, our media are so pervasive in their impact upon us that the content they carry is secondary. "The medium is the message," as his famous phrase goes, meaning that: "the personal and social consequences of any medium ... result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each ... technology" (McLuhan 2001: 7). In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), McLuhan argues that writing, and then print, produce modern society by creating the modern, rational and reflective individual. Pre-literate cultures, reliant on the oral transmission of information, lived in "acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless" (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967: 48). Writing distanced knowledge from the instantaneity of orality, privileging the "detached" visual sense and habitualising logical, linear thought. Print mechanised knowledge, ramping up the speed at which information could be produced and disseminated and enabling private, solitary reading which contributed to a "cult of individualism." Print technology, said McLuhan in a 1969 interview, shaped "every aspect of Western mechanical culture" and was "directly responsible" for a dazzling array of phenomena, including: "nationalism, the Reformation, the assembly line and its offspring, the Industrial Revolution, the whole concept of causality, Cartesian and Newtonian concepts of the universe, perspective in art, narrative chronology in literature and a psychological mode of introspection or inner direction" (McLuhan 1969).

For McLuhan, "electric" media (radio, telephone, television, *etc*.) were to be welcomed as a corrective to this fragmentation. Where writing had wrought division and alienation,

electronic media would reinstitute many qualities of oral cultures, bringing a "secondary orality," to use the phrase of McLuhan's former pupil, Walter Ong (1982: 134). Electric technologies promised to "reawaken ... tribal memories" (McLuhan 2001: 49) by reintroducing "the tribal and oral pattern with its seamless web of kinship and interdependence" (55). This, along with the potential to facilitate social and political functions at "electric speed," would result in McLuhan's famous "global village." Digital technologies, although McLuhan did not live to see their full emergence, fit comfortably into this redemptive schema. Paul Levinson, for one, believes the Internet "helps complete McLuhan's metaphor [of the global village], to the point of making it a reality" (Levinson 1999: 7). Despite the academic community's justifiably heavy criticism of the oversimplification, generalisation and exaggeration latent in so much McLuhanism, his ideas have been embraced by many of the Californian digirati. *Wired* magazine, for example, appointed McLuhan their "patron saint," and his brand of romantic techno-determinism is latent in much of the writing contained therein, with its frequent deterministic allusions to Gutenberg's printing press and the egalitarian, democratising potential of the Internet.

The ultimate problem with technological determinism is the very factor that makes it so immediately attractive to pundits and profits: its brutal reductionism. For McLuhan, media is cause and everything else merely consequence. All the hugely complicated facts of western psychological, social and cultural development are explained away as the effects of a single motive force: our hardware. The simplicity and explanatory power of such a theory easily explains its attraction but ultimately discredits it, at least in its strong form. Yochai Benkler, in the introduction to his book *The Wealth of Networks*, gets to the heart of the problem:

> Different technologies make different kinds of human action and interaction easier or harder to perform. All other things being equal, things that are easier to do are more likely to be done, and things that are harder to do are less likely to be done. *All other things are never equal.* That is why technological determinism in the strict sense – if you have technology "t," you should expect social structure or relation "s" to emerge – is false. (Benkler 2006: 16, my emphasis)

All other things are never equal indeed. McLuhan's analysis of the effects of media focuses upon some abstract and generalised human individual, the aggregated, cod-psychological changes in whom he extrapolates out into larger changes upon society. In seeing humans as reduced to little more than "the sex organs of the machine world" (McLuhan 1964: 51), he disregards the agency of individuals and forgets that technologies

are constructed and embedded within active social structures and relations of power (Cavanagh 2007: 145). By doing this, he can reduce the message of media to an inventory of uniform effects determined by their materiality. Upon examination, though, we find that his conclusion "the medium is the message" merely begs its own question, presuming cause where cause is precisely what needs to be explained.

The naive oversimplification of such strong determinism means that the label, "determinist," has become almost an insult in recent philosophy of technology. Still, I would argue that it remains entirely sensible to defend a weakened version of the argument and to merely say that *to some extent* technology shapes what we do and how we live. This weaker position, which fully acknowledges that the materiality of technology is not a sufficient condition from which to explain society, is adopted by Don Ihde. Avoiding talk of determinism, Ihde speaks instead of technologies having "telic inclinations" (Ihde 1979: 44) or "instrumental intentionalities" (Ihde 1990: 140). Ihde's claim is that technologies increasingly provide the material framework within which we act, that differing technologies privilege some types of action and disincline us from others, and that over time, dominant patterns of usage can appear as a result. Discussing the ways in which writing tools such as the dip ink pen, typewriter and word processor can act in differing ways to help shape the act of writing, Ihde continues:

> In none of these variants does the technology "determine" the style or the type of composition—but it does "incline" toward some possibilities simply by virtue of which part of the writing experience is enhanced and which made difficult (here returns the magnification/reduction structure). If one projects such inclinations across many users, the result is closer to predictable at the large-scale social level. Situating this whole phenomenon, however, is the cultural context. (Ihde 1990: 142)

We will return, in our next Chapter, to this issue of the inclinations which may or may not inhere in our writing tools. For now we should merely say that if Ihde is correct (I would say he is), then our challenge becomes one of striking the right balance in our theoretical questioning of technologies and simultaneously taking account of three factors bearing upon technological change: (1) the role of cultural context (including societal factors and power-relations), (2) the inclinations for action which inhere in the material affordances of differing technologies, and (3) the agency of the individual, who in each case *chooses* what to say, when and how to say it, and has their own reasons for doing so. It is to strike such a balance that much of the best work in recent philosophy of technology (particularly that of Feenberg and Ihde) has engaged with varieties of what is termed constructivism.

2.6 Social Constructivism

Constructivist programmes like the "Social Construction of Technology" (SCOT) understand technology as a socially contingent phenomenon and reject both the thesis of autonomous technology—that technical principles such as efficiency are sufficient to explain the shape of technological emergence and deployment—and the correlative characterisation of society as a mere effect of technology. For the constructivist: "There is not just one possible way, or one best way, of designing an artefact" (Pinch and Bijker 1984: 421). Instead, technologies are "underdetermined," with alternative designs often achieving the same or similar ends. The concept of underdetermination, alternatively known as the 'Duhem-Quine principle' in the philosophy of science, asserts that there can never be any one logically compelling ground for favouring one scientific thesis from its competitors (Latour 1987: 260n). Applied to technology, this thesis holds that technical principles such as 'efficiency' cannot sufficiently determine the outcome of technological design. As Feenberg (1995: 36) explains, " the constructivist argument holds that the route from a bright idea to a successful application is long and winding, strewn with inherently viable alternatives abandoned for reasons having more to do with social values and interests than with the intrinsic technical superiority of the final choice."

For constructivists, the task of understanding technology is firstly one of understanding the social environment from which the technology emerged and within which it is used. In a paper foundational to the SCOT programme, Pinch and Bijker (1984) propose an evolutionary theory of technological development in which a variety of competing designs co-emerge with a variety of competing claims about what these new technologies are for. There is a "flexibility" of both design and interpretation, and "different interpretations by social groups of the content of artefacts lead via different chains of problems and solutions to different further developments (Pinch and Bijker 1984: 424). As the involved social groups—users, designers, businessmen, politicians and so on—make differing demands upon the emergent technology, it is shaped until, over time, particular designs and interpretations win out in a process of "closure and stabilisation." Pinch and Bijker's famous example is that of the development of the bicycle in the late nineteenth-century, when competing designs held differing definitions of the bicycle's purpose. The "safety" bicycle, with two equally sized wheels (the design we know today), competed against the high front-wheeled "macho" bicycle (e.g. the 'Penny Farthing'), which was valued in a different way – not as a utilitarian transportation machine, but as a device for competitive sport and displays of bravado. That the former design and interpretation succeeded is, for

Pinch and Bijker, the result of a social process of negotiation rather than one of technical determination.

Because constructivist theories look for the social grounds of technological development, seeing the success of a particular technology as "the explanandum, not the explanans" (Pinch and Bijker 1984: 406), they are open to the criticism of merely replacing technological determinism with social determinism. There is still a linear logic of cause and effect, but the causal arrow is merely reversed – technology is now the effect of social conditions rather than *vice versa*. In part, this changed emphasis arises precisely because the previously dominant accounts of substantivists and technological determinists had overemphasised the effects of technology and neglected the question of the social origins of technology (Winner 1993: 368). However, because constructivism views technology as devoid of meaning in its own right—outside of its particular social context (Cavanagh 2007: 147)—then only social factors retain any explanatory power. The drawback of this is that constructivist accounts tend to overlook what Langdon Winner (1977) has called the "politics of artefacts," the socio-political implications which inhere in the very materiality of our technologies. For Winner, technologies "are ways of building order in our world" (Winner 1986: 28); once "socially constructed," they act to order and structure the possibilities of human action. Doors, for example, prescribe ways of getting in and out of buildings (i.e., we go through them rather than bash a hole in the wall each time we want to get into our houses). While this is not to say they *determine* action (because I could still make that hole if I wished), nonetheless, it is to remind us that they influence action and that a merely socially deterministic account of technology is therefore insufficient. Thus, seeking to correct an imbalance, constructivism can tend to go too far in the opposite direction and become ironically parallel to technological determinism. Both seek to cleave the social from the technical—to divide them into "two separate heaps" as John Law (1992: 3) says—and then simply make the assumption that one is the cause of the other. Our discussion thus far has shown that such a simplified view will not suffice, that the relationship between society and technology is much more nuanced and complex than such theories can acknowledge. One constructivist approach which avoids the pitfalls of both social and technological determinism is actor-network theory (ANT), which we will examine as our final school of thought.

2.7 Latour and Actor-Network Theory

Developed in the 1980s by Michel Callon, John Law and Bruno Latour, ANT asserts that "there is no reason to assume, a priori, that either objects or people in general determine the character of social change or stability. To be sure, in particular cases, social relations may shape machines, or machine relations shape their social counterparts. But this is an empirical question, and usually matters are more complex" (Law 1992: 3). Because it avoids the theoretical dead-end of determinism, acknowledging that society and technology can be both constitutive and emergent, cause and effect, ANT has become *de rigueur* in current philosophy of technology. A central methodological strategy is to deny the *a priori* distinction between society and technology:

> To distinguish a priori 'material' and 'social' ties before linking them together again makes about as much sense as to account for the dynamic of a battle by imagining a group of soldiers and officers stark naked with a huge heap of paraphernalia—tanks, rifles, paperwork, uniforms—and then that claim that "of course there exists some (dialectical) relation between the two." One should retort adamantly "No!" There exists no relation whatsoever between 'the material' and 'the social world', because it is this very division which is a complete artifact. To reject such a divide is not to 'relate' the heap of naked soldiers 'with' the heap of material stuff: it is to redistribute the whole assemblage from top to bottom and beginning to end. (Latour 2005: 75-6)

ANT rejects this divide by prioritising relations between entities over the entities themselves: "attachments are first, actors are second," says Latour (2005: 217). It proposes an ontology of "radical relationality" in which our analytic divisions between seemingly disparate entities—e.g., humans, technologies, concepts, social structures, etc.—are "flattened." Each is an actor in an assemblage of other actors, and the character of each is performatively determined by the particular configuration of the network within which they occur: "Nothing that enters into relations has fixed significance or attributes in and of itself. Instead the attributes of any particular element in the system, any particular node in the network, are entirely defined in relation to other elements in the system, to other nodes in the network" (Law 2000: 4). This is not to say that there are no significant distinctions to be made between social structures, technologies and humans, but is rather to change the focus of enquiry from these things as they might be "in-themselves"—humans *qua* humans, technologies *qua* technologies—to their being as they are in conjunction with other entities in a network of relations. The fundamental units of analysis are the links between actors rather than the actors themselves. Such a radical ontology has the methodological benefit of allowing humans, technologies and theories to co-exist in heterogeneous systems without seeking to prescribe any of them, *a priori*, as either causes

or effects in any given instance. Thus, it is a much more flexible approach than either technological or social determinism, and fits well with the "empirical turn" in contemporary philosophy of technology. In particular, ANT allows a description of the ways in which artefacts, once socially constructed, can act to shape and order human action.

Latour introduces the notion of "delegation" to describe the way in which our material technologies are routinely invested with normative values which act to bind society together. In *Pandora's Hope* (Latour 1999: 186ff.), he uses the example of the speed-bump whose prescriptive function is to enforce a moral and social obligation (to drive responsibly) by 'translating' this ethical appeal into a material fact (concrete, gravel and paint) which promises to severely damage my car's suspension system if I don't comply. In such ways we delegate values, duties and ethics to our artefacts and they, in turn, act to direct our behaviour. As Latour says elsewhere, "no human is as relentlessly moral as a machine.... It is because of this morality that we, humans, behave so ethically, no matter how weak and wicked we are" (Latour 1992: 232). It is not just that these technologies play strategic roles in society, prescribing action; they are part of the fabric of society such that "if these materials were to disappear then so too would what we sometimes call the social order" (Law 1992: 3).

Because they "act" upon us in this way, ANT attributes agency to artefacts, and since this is one of its more controversial features, it is worth examining the issue in a little detail. The first thing to say is that this assertion is less absurd than it initially sounds. Rather than attributing subjecthood to objects, it relies instead on a redefinition of our concept of "agency," to include any entity which modifies a state of affairs or makes a difference to the action of another agent. Thus, the things which make up the socio-technical world in which we live have agency in so far as they "authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible [or] forbid" the action of another actor (Latour 2005: 72). Diaries don't *make me* write my life and the Internet doesn't *impose* modes of communication, but they might "prefer" to be used in some ways rather than others and thus incline us to act in differing ways (Law 1992: 3). Thus we have another version of Ihde's notion of the telic inclinations of technologies, where the materiality of our artefacts influences action. As we began by proposing, the ends of our actions are not logically independent of our means of realising them and our conceptions of those ends can themselves be influenced by the technologies available. We delegate agency to artefacts, but they return the favour by acting upon us, prescribing certain ways of acting and

promoting others (Law 1992: 3). This is not determinism, whether technological or social, since the ways in which the "preferences" of artefacts interrelate with the agency of humans always remains a contingent question of the particular configuration of actors present in any given network.

2.8 Conclusion

The first half of this Chapter sought to show that our proficient use of technologies is an essentially intimate (pre-thematic and non-explicit) activity. To get used to using a tool is, in a sense, to forget it, to let it to withdraw from perception and become a means rather than an object of experience. Supporting such phenomenological insight with neuroscientific evidence which suggests that our tools blur the boundaries of the body schema, we have argued that our tools affect us psychologically more deeply than a merely instrumental definition could allow – that their use cannot be characterised as merely rational and purposive. We then moved on to consider Don Ihde's phenomenological investigations of tool use, and observed the "amplification-reduction structure" which attends our use of mediating technologies, transforming direct perceptual experience by simultaneously enhancing perception of some aspects of phenomena and restricting others. We then described how this alteration in the "microperceptual" dimension of experience can have a correlative effect upon the possibilities for our "macroperceptual" interpretations of the world. Using Ihde's distinction between "embodiment" and "hermeneutic" technologies, we went on to argue that the amplification-reduction structure of our "readable" technologies is more pronounced than that of our embodiment technologies, and that they increasingly prescribe the ways in which the world can be shown. I have argued that such insights heavily support the view of technology as "non-neutral" and hence compel us to dismiss any merely instrumental theories which regard technologies as without substantive implication for our psychology, society or culture.

We then moved on to consider four wider theoretical approaches to understanding technology. We agreed with the substantivism of Heidegger in so far as it calls on us to recognise the limitations of a merely calculative thinking which enframes the world as standing-reserve and dulls us to a more meditative way of being-in-the-World, and with the neo-substantivist position of Borgmann in as much as it alerted us to the ways in which our technological devices can divorce us from meaningful engagement with the rich contextual involvements of focal things and practices. However, we problematised both Heidegger's epochal account of technology and its abstract essentialism, arguing that we cannot blankly

dismiss swathes of modern technology as either "good" or "bad," or as mere manifestations of some abstract essence. We ended by asserting that we must critically engage with technologies at an individual level, to analyse their attendant benefits and drawbacks as they are manifested in their local contextual use by human agents.

Strong technological determinism begs its own question. Undoubtedly, technologies have a substantive influence upon action, but how much explanatory weight can we load upon them without theories such as McLuhan's collapsing into self-parody? By presuming technologies to be the sole cause of societal change, McLuhan reduces the message of media to an inventory of uniform effects determined by their materiality. What we end up with is an audacious romp through history which asserts rather than explains its grounds and presumes that social conditions and the agency of individuals make no difference to outcomes. Still, we suggested Ihde's notion of "telic inclinations" and the actor-network theory notion of "preferences" as a much weakened version of the determinist argument which remains sensible. Ihde's claims—that technologies increasingly provide the material framework within which we act, that differing technologies privilege some types of action and disincline us from others, and that over time, dominant patterns of usage can appear as a result—fully acknowledge the roles played by cultural context and human agency in the emergence, use and influence of technologies. To better understand the ways in which these factors interrelate, we next moved on to consider varieties of social constructivism.

By describing the programme of Social Construction of Technology, we saw the ways in which our technologies have "interpretative flexibility." Such observation weighs against the substantivist thesis of autonomous technology, which regards technology as outside of our control, and reminds us of the role played by society in shaping technology (a fact forgotten by strong technological determinism). However, we also saw the way in which social constructivism's adherence to the binary distinction between society and technology results in a theoretical approach which can descend into social determinism, and thus lose sight of what Winner calls the "politics of artefacts." Moving on to look at actor-network theory, we considered the way in which this approach avoids determinism of either a social or technological bent by collapsing the social/technological division. ANT's "radical relationality" is a network ontology which defines its nodes solely in terms of the relations between actors, with the potential for agency attributed to any *thing* (fact or artefact) which makes a difference to the action of other actors. This makes for a much more flexible methodology which allows humans, technologies and theories to co-exist in heterogeneous systems without seeking to prescribe any of them, *a priori*, as either causes or effects in

any given instance. Rather, each actor “mediates” or “translates” the agency of other actors in ways which remain always contingent upon the particular configuration of actors present in any given network. Such a conception, we argued, allows us to conceive most faithfully of the diverse roles played by societal factors, technologies and the humans who live in their midst. With this groundwork in place, we can now examine the specific technologies in question.

3 Where Am I and Where Are My Documents? Distance and Presence in Epistolary Networks

"How we are scattered today my Dear Nan ..."
— Jessy Harden

3.1 Introduction

The world has shrunk. When Jessy Harden posted her letter-journals to her sister in India in the early nineteenth-century, they usually took between three and six months to arrive. When I send an email the same distance, it takes seconds – travelling as packets of data down fibre optic cables at something approaching the speed of light. Technologies which transport either our bodies or our communications move ever faster, bringing places closer to each other in terms of the time taken to travel or communicate between them and increasing our extensible opportunities for action and interaction (Janelle 1973: 8). This effect is commonly called "time-space compression," succinctly defined by Allen and Hamnett (1995: 9) as the "reordering of distance, the overcoming of spatial barriers, the shortening of time-horizons, and the ability to link distant populations in a more immediate and intense manner." The metaphor of the technological abolition of space and time is longstanding, used at least since Hannah More wrote in 1787 "of ... the annihilation of space, I cannot partake," mourning the fact that her town was not served by the new high-speed, horse-driven mail-coaches (W. Roberts 1834: 270). Today, with the extensible opportunities of the Internet, the metaphor appears to some as literally true. Nicholas Negroponte, for example, proclaims: "Distance means less and less in the digital world. In fact, an Internet user is utterly oblivious to it" (Negroponte 1996: 178). The Internet, in such terms, requires no more than a few mouse-clicks or keystrokes to open up magical access to experiences and actions anywhere in the world. The World Wide Web seems to instantiate the techno-utopianism of Marshall McLuhan's "Global Village," bringing the

world closer together, opening access to information, and reshaping our working and social lives.

Some philosophers like Hubert Dreyfus (2000, 2009) and Albert Borgmann (1999b, 2000b) take issue with this rhetoric and its assumptions. They criticise the kinds of experience and action the Internet makes possible and unite in intuiting that there are: "fundamental differences between what is near, what is far, and what is neither and that issues that are moral in a broad and deep sense revolve around the ways we acknowledge these differences and assign them their place in our lives" (Borgmann 2000b: 91-92). Dreyfus and Borgmann both draw heavily upon the thought of Heidegger, for whom the technological annihilation of space by information technologies was a substantive concern. Heidegger's specific technological target moved with the times: in 1927's *Being and Time*, it was the radio (Heidegger 1962: 140); later, his ire was aimed at the television as the "peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness" (Heidegger 1971: 165). As Richard Polt rightly says, if Heidegger had lived to see mobile phones and the Internet, "he would shudder" (Polt 1999: 60). This Chapter examines critically the concerns of Heidegger and his followers, discussing the ways in which modern communication technologies change our experience of distance and presence. Following a broad philosophical discussion of these issues, the Chapter narrows down in its latter half to discuss the particular ways in which the early nineteenth-century epistle and twenty-first century technologies like the Internet differingly shaped and shape this experience.

3.2 Heidegger on why "Short Distance is not in itself Nearness"

Heidegger begins his 1954 essay *The Thing* with an evocative and provocative paradox. Time and space are shrinking, yet things have never been further away:

> *All distances in time and space are shrinking*. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all.... Man puts the longest distances behind him in the shortest time. He puts the greatest distances behind himself and thus puts everything before himself at the shortest range. Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness. (Heidegger 1971: 165, original emphasis)

The key to unlocking this passage is to understand the ways in which distance and remoteness differ for Heidegger, and to do so it will pay to examine his discussion of our existential spatiality in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962: §§22-24). In line with the general anti-Cartesian project of that work, and its presentation of the ontological difference which occurs when we relate to things as either present-at-hand or ready-to-hand (see §2.2 above), Heidegger presents two very different ways of conceiving space. Firstly, there is Cartesian "world-space," space conceived "in a purely cognitive manner" (1962: 140), as an otherwise empty container filled by present-at-hand entities and events, a bare stage within which props are situated and actors act. In such a geometrically ideal space the distance between two points is both metrically determinable and objectively true for all people. "Distance," then, denotes for Heidegger the ontical, measureable space which lies between present-at-hand entities located in objective "world-space." But, says Heidegger, the kind of space in which we mostly live is not objective in this way; we have a more primordial spatiality, one I will call 'existential-space'. How near and far things feel is not merely a matter of distance. I can walk a kilometre very easily, but not if it is up a mountain, or through five feet of snow, or if I have a bad leg; if the wind blows so hard that the rain hits horizontally, the walk will feel interminably longer than on a wistful, sapphire summer's day.[4] Similarly, the places which are most familiar to me—my home, my street, my office—are not merely objective geometric spaces, they are "existential locales" which are "suffused with experiential contours" as William Blattner (2006: 75) has it. Familiar regions are marinated with memory and meaning. Familiarity with places is what makes them ready-to-hand, it is why they feel intimate, comfortable, and 'homely.' They are our spaces, filled with our things – things which have a history for us, which evoke meanings, and with which we identify. This is something grasped by Wordsworth in his poem *Michael*, about a shepherd whose 80 years amongst the green valleys, streams and rocks of the Lake District meant the landscape "like a book preserv'd the memory," and whose fields and hills "were his living Being even more / Than his own Blood" (W. Wordsworth 2000b: 226).

Our everyday spatial involvement implies a pre-thematic sense of where things are, where we are in relation to them and how accessible they are. My copy of *Being and Time* is not 35 centimetres away; it is *at hand*, lying where I left it, on my desk, between the coffee cup

[4] Recent psychological work supports such insight. For example, Proffitt et al. (1995) found that conscious perceptions of hill steepness and walking distances are influenced by the wearing of heavy backpacks, while Bhalla and Proffitt (1999) found that the age of the perceiver had a similar effect. See: Dennis R. Proffitt et al., 'Perceiving Geographical Slant', *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review,* 2/4 (1995), 409-28; Mikul Bhalla and Dennis R. Proffitt, 'Visual-Motor Recalibration in Geographical Slant Perception', *Journal of Experimental Psychology,* 25/4 (1999), 1076-96.

and the *Thesaurus*, ready to be consulted. Of course, I *can* measure or guess at its metric distance from my body, shifting the book from its readiness-to-hand to presence-at-hand; but I usually do not, I just get on with my work, circumspectively dealing with the equipment that is helping me write my thesis. In reaching for the book, I do not thematically measure off stretches of space and calculate whether it is worth the effort; the book shows up as available to me, as *within reach*, and needing it, I pick it up. In sum, then, we are not phenomenologically present in 'world-space' for Heidegger; the familiar, everyday world in which we dwell is one of existential-space. Distance denotes merely the measurable *ontical* space of present-at-hand entities occupying any of a multiplicity of positions in objective 'world-space.' Remoteness, on the other hand, is an ontological, substantive phenomenon we experience when we are engaged in our everyday, skilful coping with things as ready-to-hand: "What is ready-to-hand in the environment is certainly not present-at-hand for an eternal observer exempt from Dasein: but it is encountered in Dasein's circumspectively concernful everydayness" (Heidegger 1962: 140).

Heidegger distinguishes two aspects of our spatiality, *de-severance* and *directionality*. Directionality describes the way in which we orient ourselves towards objects, while de-severence (*Ent-fernung*) "amounts to making the farness vanish—that is, making the remoteness of something disappear, bringing it close" (139). Being startled by a sudden noise, I will naturally turn (directionality) and seek out (de-severance) its source. As long as something is not de-severed, it remains remote, no matter how close it is distantially. This does not just mean things I have no knowledge of, but also familiar things which have so far withdrawn in their readiness-to-hand that they are no longer perceptually present to me, like the spectacles "which are so close to [me] distantially that they are 'sitting on [my] nose', [but] are environmentally more remote from [me] than the picture on the opposite wall." "Such equipment," says Heidegger, "has so little closeness that often it is proximally quite impossible to find" (141). From this, we can take two things. Firstly, for Heidegger, things are only "near" when they are both something I am concernfully engaged with *and* when they themselves are the locus of my attention (Dreyfus 1991: 134). Secondly, technology has some role to play in de-severing the world; the spectacles (a technology) help bring close the picture on the wall (which would otherwise remain a blur). Equipment for seeing and hearing, in its readiness-to-hand, withdraws from my perception in order to bring close what would otherwise evade my perceptual capacities. As I speak on the phone, the receiver recedes into remoteness allowing me to bring close

the voice of a friend. This friend is, at that moment, closer to me than my girlfriend in the next room.

So what is Heidegger's objection to telecommunication technologies like radio, TV and the Internet? He himself admits that technologies can help us in our de-severance, and even acknowledges that the will to overcome remoteness is part of our nature: "In Dasein there lies an essential tendency towards closeness" (Heidegger 1962: 140). Albert Borgmann (2000b: 99) gets at the root of Heidegger's complaint when he says that the technological abolition of distance "does not so much bring near what is far as it cancels the metric of space and time." All things become "equally far and near," Heidegger says, which is also to say that "everything is neither far nor near." In the end, "[e]verything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness" (Heidegger 1971: 166). For heuristic purposes, we can break up this complaint into two related, though distinct, claims:

1. That the cancelling of the distinction between what is near and far compromises certain aspects of experience that have been traditionally important for our being, specifically our being bodily situated in a particular geographic, socio-cultural location.

2. That "despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent" (Heidegger 1971: 166), which is to say that information technologies do not bring things to presence in a sufficient way.

We will address these points in turn in the following two sections.

3.3 Location, Situation, Experience

As Merleau-Ponty (2002: 294) says in *The Phenomenology of Perception,* "Being is synonymous with being situated." To be is to be *somewhere* – 'here' instead of 'there.' Telecommunications technologies impact upon our sense of place in the world by making our boundaries of physical location more porous and mutable, and weakening the correlation between location and experience. Community boundaries, which have traditionally played an important role in the formation of social identity, become distorted as an unbounded multiplicity of social contexts open up to us. When Heidegger returned to his hometown of Meßkirch in 1961 to deliver a talk on the meaning of home, he was powerfully struck by the cornfield of radio and television aerials which had sprouted atop each house. He saw these antenna as symbolic of the way in which "human beings are,

strictly speaking, no longer 'at home' where, seen from outside, they 'live'" (Heidegger, qtd. Pattison 2000: 60). Modern telecommunications equipment swells our spatial horizons far beyond those relatively narrow limits within which our ancestors dwelled, opening up possibilities for perception and action across the entire world. With the remote-control at hand, I can witness world-events without leaving my armchair, able to "simultaneously 'experience' an assassination attempt against a king in France and a symphony concert in Tokyo" (Heidegger 2000: 40). My friend in America is as near as the phone, while my next-door neighbour remains a stranger. What is served up by our TV screens and radios is "closer to man ... than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world" (Heidegger 1966: 48). What this means, for Heidegger, is that "humanity is, as it were, in a process of emigration. It is emigrating from what is homely [*Heimisch*] to what is unhomely [*Unheimisch*]." This erosion and erasure of "home," he feared, might lead humanity to a "condition of homelessness" (qtd. Pattison 2000: 60).

A traditional way of life, more definitely situated and constrained by space and time, had a very distinct "here," the locus of perception and action, of things present to the body or within easy reach, and an "away" which constituted the world of strangeness, myth, absence and otherness. Today, as Catherine Wilson (2000: 71) argues, our technological reach is so large that the old multiplicity of localised "heres" is "diachronically converging to a single large 'here.'" Cyberspace is both everywhere and nowhere. If I ask "where is this webpage located?," I can perhaps answer that it ultimately resides as bits of information somewhere in the "cloud" of servers scattered around the world. Its location would then be, in principle, determinable (although in practice very difficult to ascertain). But this answer tells me nothing experientially, since whether the specific server is located in Birmingham or Bangalore really does not matter to me. I just click a button and the webpage appears, there on the screen. A webpage is wherever I find it, wherever I, my Internet connection and my laptop or smart phone happen to be. And where is any other webpage? It is there, in the same place—which is no place—"lumped together in uniform distancelessness." The disorientation which can result from swimming in this sea of distancelessness is poetically grasped by Jerzy Kosinski in his novel *Being There:* "Everything on TV was tangled and mixed and yet smoothed out: night and day, big and small, tough and brittle, soft and rough, hot and cold, near and far" (qtd. Malpas 2006: 279). Without distance, it is difficult to get a real sense of the magnitude of things or to assess their relative importance. Lacking a fixed context, things are less determinable. How

big is the Taj Mahal? On *Flickr* it sits next to pictures of tea cups and seascapes. Now, we might embrace this change as the democratisation of things, an argument we will encounter in a little while when we discuss Benjamin's conception of the aura. But that the experiential context of things helps determine their relative importance in our lives seems unquestionable. If the view of the Taj Mahal from the entrance gates of its gardens could be had from the end of my street, or if I just have to flick a channel to see it on television, surely I will derive less *ecstasis* at seeing it than if I actually travel the miles of land and sea to see it in person. The effort we invest in achieving our ends has some importance for the amount of joy we derive from their achievement.

This is not to say that things in cyberspace lack context, but that that context is much more mutable and fluid, being unconstrained by the limits of physical presence. Without a definite "here" and "there," the manifold of contextual relations which make up our lives and on the basis of which we choose to do *this* rather than *that*, to be *this* rather than *that* person, are to some extent diminished. If everything lies about available and easy, it is less necessary to think about what matters before choosing, and what we choose can matter less. As Albert Borgmann points out, "In a premodern setting, what is present in space and time has prominence since a resort to elsewhere or elsewhen is slow or laborious. To the prominence of presence corresponds a focal area of nearness that is centered on my body" (Borgmann 2000b: 95-96). Borgmann believes that the seeming connection fostered by modern telecommunications is merely superficial, and that such devices in fact disconnect us from each other: "If everyone is indifferently present regardless of where one is located on the globe, no one is commandingly present" (Borgmann 1992: 105). In our wired world, people become increasingly available anywhere, anytime, without need for ritual, ceremony, or effort. As addressed in the next Chapter, the commanding presence in our lives of a practice like letter-writing is diminished because it becomes so easily accomplished through ubiquitous technological devices. Without the investment of time and effort in keeping in touch, perhaps social ties become devalued. Moreover, time online is time not spent offline, in face-to-face dialogue with people, and this puts at risk the possibilities of forming deeper, more valuable relationships. This "alienation thesis"—the idea that our communication technologies ultimately make us more rather than less alone—is examined in depth in Chapter Five, along with a more general discussion of issues surrounding the efficacy of the Internet for forming and maintaining social ties. For now, let us move on to consider the ways in which our potential for acting authentically is affected by the Internet.

If *Being and Time* has a moral, it is "be yourself," strive for authenticity. Each of us is "thrown" into a world we did not choose, but in our "thrownness" we have it within our power to take a stand on our being, to project and choose the kind of person we want to be. Inauthentic being lives in blind thrall to the mass opinions of a bovine public, it follows the herd, speaks as they speak, thinks as they think, and does as they do. *Das Man*, often translated as "the they," is Heidegger's term for this inauthentic averageness. Furnishing prefabricated opinions on everything, *das Man* disburdens us of the need to think through who we are and who we want to be. Heidegger thinks telecommunications technologies are dangerous because they are vehicles for *das Man.* For him, mass public channels like the Press—that "monstrous intellectual Something" as Oswald Spengler called it (qtd. Dwan 2003: 115)—corrode identity by making everyone the same: "every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others,' in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more" (Heidegger 1962: 164). Media-circuits are thus, for Heidegger, an enormous, anonymous identity-sink of indeterminacy and averageness. In the press, "[e]verything is leveled to one level ... which deals in all and everything with equal uniformity and mindlessness" (Heidegger 1968: 33-4). Such distortions injure our opportunities to live authentically: "The "they" ... loses itself in those '*opportunities*' which are closest to it, and pays Dasein's way by a reckoning up of 'accidents' which it fails to recognize, deems its own achievement, and passes off as such" (Heidegger 1962: 346-47).

Is this fair? Certainly, the mass media, the politics of nationhood and the economics of globalisation mean that variations of language, customs, and costume which were once remarkably pronounced over relatively little distance are ever more blurred. But as much as we might mourn the McColonization of the globe, there are also reasons to embrace this change. We need not be McLuhanist techno-utopians to see that greater communicative freedom over distance can make the world more pluralistic as well as more uniform. Technologies facilitate cultural exchange between national and ethnic groups which would otherwise remain a mystery to each other. Ideas, literature, food, fashions, art, and music intermingle, flowing fluidly across borders and blending with local styles to create innovative cultural hybrids. Greater dialogue between cultures can aid international understanding, broadening parochial horizons and perhaps diminishing tensions – the so-called "contact hypothesis," the underlying ideal of which is captured by Richard Rorty:

> [H]uman solidarity ... is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking, "They do not feel it as we would," or "There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?" This process of coming to see other human beings as "one of us" rather than as "them" is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel. (Rorty 1989: xvi)

Moreover, with our contemporary communication technologies, people for whom the world may not have felt so *Heimish* previously—the marginalised, suppressed or "subcultural"—can now seek each other out and share thoughts and experiences they might have kept back in more traditional communities; we saw in the last Chapter the cathartic benefits of the "online patient meeting" for those suffering debilitating illness, for example (Feenberg *et al*. 1996). Furthermore, while Heidegger criticizes *das Man* for its reactionary social normativity, which he thinks tramps down excellence and originality (Heidegger 1962: 165), it can be argued that Internet communities can promote authenticity by enabling a more open universe of dialogue than was ever possible in pre-modern, geographically-bounded communities, where the immanent weight of (particularly religious) tradition kept a firm grip on the reins on thought. Again, this is not to diminish the fact that communicative globalization has some potentially negative aspects,[5] but it is to say that there is at least a case to be made that the Internet, in some respects, might be an *enabler* of authentic being rather than something corrosive to it.

Heidegger's emphasis on authenticity leads him to concern for what the technological amplification of *das Man* does to language, which he famously thought "the house of

[5] Some, for example, voice concern that rather than enabling contact between diverse peoples and thus opening up their exposure to an increased range of opinions, the rich connective potential of the Internet promotes a "cyberbalkanisation" in which, "paradoxically, by vastly increasing the number of people it is possible to be involved with, the Internet enables a narrowing of focus. We can, given the nature of the Internet, the vast numbers of participants online, and the freedom of association it enables, choose to socialize or engage with people just like ourselves.... [W]e can intentionally restrict our interactions to those of exactly the same opinion sets as our own. Real world interaction cannot be so easily and deliberately structured and limited. There is good reason to fear such narrowing of focus and community, for it tends to make us more prejudiced and our attitudes more insular." [Mitch Parsell, 'Pernicious Virtual Communities: Identity, Polarisation and the Web 2.0', *Ethics and Information Technology,* 10/1 (2008), 41-56 at 44.] The potentially damaging impact of such "echo-chamber" discourse might be seen to be particularly severe among holders of ostracised or non-mainstream beliefs or proclivities, such as found among those drawn to hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi organisations, or among sex offenders. In the anonymous and easy exchange of discourse online, such people might find validation and rationalisation for their views and behaviours.

being". He distinguishes two types of talk, discourse [*rede*] and "idle talk" [*gerede*]. For Heidegger, idle talk is the emptiest kind of intending (cf. Heidegger 1992: 41), speech that has no real, first-hand understanding of the issues it aims towards, that has "lost its primary relationship-of-Being towards the entity talked about, or else has never achieved such a relationship" (Heidegger 1962: 212). Lacking authoritative grounds, such "gossiping" and "scribbling" nonetheless legitimises itself through reiteration – as each passes along what the other has said, the talk gains the authority of massed citation until the "average understanding ... will *never be able* to decide what has been drawn from primordial sources with a struggle and how much is just gossip", and moreover, will not actually care to find out, since "of course, it understands everything." Heidegger here is describing a sort of "commonsense" thinking that does not really think at all, but understands everything already through the prescribed prism of the social normativity of its time. This public-sphere normative tyranny he thought exacerbated by the press: "Today every newspaper, every illustrated magazine, and every radio program offers all things in the identical way to uniform views" (Heidegger 1968: 33). Heidegger is uneasy with idle talk because in its groundlessness it closes off genuine thinking and leaves Dasein "cut off from its primary and primordially genuine relationships-of-Being towards the world, towards Dasein-with, and towards it very Being-in" (Heidegger 1962: 214); it allows inauthentic everydayness to prosper by providing a refuge from thought – not having to think about why we hold the views we do or where our real expertise lies, we do not have to take the kind of stand on our being that authenticity requires. Idle talk is, for Heidegger, a distraction from authentic being.

As has been well observed, Heidegger's critique of the normative dominance of the public sphere and its levelling effect upon the profundity of talk derives greatly from Nietzsche (e.g., Zarathustra's "Just look at these superfluous people ... they vomit their bile and call it a newspaper", qtd. Dwan 2003: 113) and Kierkegaard (e.g., "all mankind's great inventions (railroads, telegraph, etc.) tend to develop and encourage windbaggery", qtd. B. T. Prosser and Ward 2000: 171). Dreyfus and Borgmann continue this line in our time, attacking the Internet as a place which supports the "deracinated opinions of ... anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere" (Dreyfus 2009: 78), and where idle talk finds a natural home:

> [W]hen it comes to the overall cultural effect of it, the result lies somewhere between the trivial and the troubling. To begin with the Internet, most of what flows through it, as far as I can tell, is overwhelmingly flimsy. There is much throat clearing, half-hearted criticism, throwing out of suggestions, crashing obviousness,

> and instruction by the moderately knowledgeable of the totally ignorant. The tone oscillates between the obsequiously laudatory and the rudely offensive, with much blandness in between. The Internet, for the most part, is a dump of wasted time. (Borgmann 1995: 29)

One can have sympathy for such observations but need not blame technology. Windbaggery is not an invention of the Internet, any more than it was borne of the telegraph, or the letter, or any other technology. Feenberg (1999: 191) gets this about right when he says in relation to Borgmann: "No doubt he is right that human experience is not enriched by much of what goes on there [on the Internet]. But a full record of the face-to-face interactions occurring in the halls of his university would likely be no more uplifting. The problem is that we tend to judge the face-to-face at its memorable best and the computer-meditated equivalent at its transcribed worst." To put this another way, many if not all of us are prone to windbaggery at some time or other (indeed, some see the Heidegger's critique itself in just this light[6]), it is just that we are perhaps more sympathetic to hot air when it originates from our own mouths or those of the friends we engage in conversation. Ironically, I find that this has been said best (in spirit if not spelling) by an anonymous commentator—of the kind such critique decries—named "warhelmet" on Ben Goldacre's wonderful *Bad Science* blog: "To be frank, I think that social networking sites are rubbish and full of innane [*sic*] twaddle. On the other hand, I travel on public transport, I go to places where there are lots of people having their own conversations. I overhear a lot of innane [*sic*] twaddle. It's [*sic*] how people communicate."[7] Such "twaddle" is more than merely hot air, though. As Robin Dunbar (1998) has argued, such gossip and small talk also has its place in our social system, acting in the same way as does social grooming among the primates, essential for the formation, fortification and display of social bonds (Tufekci 2008a: 546).

A comment widely circulated online (attributed to Robert Wilensky) goes: "We've all heard that a million monkeys banging on a million typewriters will eventually reproduce the entire works of Shakespeare. Now, thanks to the Internet, we know this is not true." Such a remark is both funny and true, but does not tell us much more than that most people cannot write like Shakespeare. Originality is, by necessity, rare. If we did not spend so

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[6] Habermas, for instance, thinks that "Heidegger's critical judgements … on the dictatorship of the public realm and the impotence of the private sphere, on technocracy and mass civilisation, are without any originality whatsoever because they belong to a repertoire of opinions typical of a certain generation of German mandarins." Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987) at 140.

[7] See: Goldacre, Ben, (2009), 'How Aric Sigman distorts the scientific evidence to mislead you', *Bad Science* [blog], comment no. 102, 26 Feb 2009. Available: <http://www.badscience.net/2009/02/the-evidence-aric-sigman-ignored/>, accessed 30 Aug 2011.

much time circulating clichés and engaging in small-talk, there would be no contrast against which the spark of originality could shine. Heidegger in fact recognises this necessity. Though his Kierkegaardian rhetoric on the matter seems to suggest otherwise, he is at pains to assure us that he does not use the expression 'idle talk' in a "'disparaging' signification", that it actually "signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of Being of everyday Dasein's understanding and interpreting" (Heidegger 1962: 210). *Das Man*, moreover, is "a primordial phenomenon" belonging to "Dasein's positive constitution" (167). The pre-given normative interpretations of our time, which idle talk helps circulate, are the backdrop against which any kind of world-intelligibility happens, and against which originality can occur: "In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed" (213).

All this is to suggest that although technology certainly makes idle talk more visible, it does not necessarily make it more likely. Nevertheless, as Feenberg (1999: 191) has said, there remains "an element of truth in this critique. On the networks, the pragmatics of personal encounter are radically simplified, reduced to the protocols of technical connection. It is easy to pass from one social contact to another, following the logic of the technical network that supports ever more rapid communication." We will examine further the ways in which the Internet can be said to attenuate personal encounter in Chapter Five, and find some evidence that its alterations of appearance and extended connectivity do give cause for concern regarding the kinds of social-ties it makes possible. For now, though, let us turn to the second of Heidegger's claims, that "despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent" (Heidegger 1971: 166).

3.4 Presentation and Re-presentation

Heidegger is suggesting that if things aren't disclosed in the right way, they are not really present for us. Here it might be helpful to distinguish between direct perceptual experience and indirect, or mediated, experience. When something is just *there,* "l have a direct cognitive relation to that object" and "am directly aware of the object itself," which is "presented" to me, in the words of Bertrand Russell (1911: 108). Indirect experience, on the other hand, comes second-hand by way of signs of some sort. To take an example, I have a painful twinge in my knee right now. I am aware of it because it hurts; it is directly present for me. By describing this twinge in language, I make you, the reader, *indirectly* aware of that pain. You do not feel the pain yourself, but knowing what pain is and what

knees are, you can approximate some impression of how I feel. Indirect experience, then, is mediated by description of some kind. It need not be by means of language – I could try to paint a picture of the pain, or create some dissonant piano-piece, or dance about on one leg; but however I try to convey this pain to you, I cannot make you feel it, short of bashing you on the knee myself (and even then I would only make you feel *your* pain, rather than *mine*). This is as much as to say that the "object" of an experience is not presented in indirect experience, but re-presented. Using this distinction, it is possible to say that the voice coming through the telephone is not really my friend's voice, although it sounds a lot like it, since it has been technologically processed: sound-waves were converted into electric pulses in one location, travelled very quickly down some long wires, and were then changed back to soundwaves by my telephone receiver's earphone. We should also note that in the process of being re-presented by the telephone, it is not only my friend's voice that has been changed. The rest of her—her body with all of its expressive movements—is not present at all: her presence has been *attenuated*. As we discussed in the last Chapter, a picture of the Taj Mahal is not the Taj Mahal. In any analogic or digital process of converting physical objects into a re-presentation, something of the original gets necessarily lost in translation—its physicality, if nothing else.

The Internet works almost exclusively on our distance senses of sight and hearing, particularly the former. The attenuated way in which objects show up through these channels has an obvious impact upon the ways we can engage with them. Viewing an indirect re-presentation of something, like a photograph, is to lose any chance of hearing, touching, smelling or tasting it, of seeing it in motion, of walking around it, or seeing its wider contextual environment outside the frame of the picture. It is to be unable to know what took place before or after the moment in which the photograph was taken, hence to be innocent of the extent to which the picture was staged beforehand or manipulated later. In a similar way, to communicate with an attenuated re-presentation of someone via phone or email is to forfeit a wealth of interactional cues which significantly aid understanding when we talk in person. Their face and body, so indicative of identity and expressive of emotion, cannot be seen, and Canny and Paulos give a sense of the rich communicative cues which are lost in their absence:

> [T]wo human beings in the same room interact on a wholly different level. The eyes are not just transducers but cues to attention, turn-taking, and sometimes deception. The hands complement speech with gesture in both conscious and unconscious ways. Dialogue is not a process of turn-taking speech, but a continuous and intimate coupling of speaker and listener. Much of the dialogue is nonverbal and subconscious. (Canny and Paulos 2000: 277)

In the absence of such embodied microperceptual cues, what macroperceptual possibilities for perception and action are lost? Is the person whose presence is attenuated to disembodied, voiceless typescript really *there*? If my interlocutor cannot hug or hit me through the phone, is the intimacy of our exchange affected? Can we really trust each other if we cannot look into each other's eyes? Do we value each other in the same manner, in the same seriousness and with the same respect as we would if we were in the same room? The idea that such things are negatively impacted by technology underlies the concerns of Heidegger, Dreyfus and Borgmann, whose concerns can be summed thus: that telecommunications technologies ultimately promote rather than diminish alienation by enabling soulless and shallow relationships which are based on projected (and perhaps delusory) images, relationships which are ultimately of a lower ontological and moral worth than "real life" friendships and which diminish rather than enhance overall human togetherness and wellbeing. We will examine this "alienation thesis" in depth in Chapter Five, but sticking for the time being to the narrow question of presentation and representation, we can make two objections to the charge that what representation brings forth is insufficient.

3.5 Two Objections

Firstly, we can call in the Derridean "purity-police" (Scholes 1988: 285) to deconstruct the binary distinction between presentation and re-presentation, précising this strategy by noting that for Derrida, that quintessential borderer, Heidegger swaddles himself in "the security of the near," soothed by an "insignificant rhetoric" of "proximity, of simple and immediate presence, associating with the proximity of Being the values of neighborhood, shelter, house" (Derrida 1969: 54, 51). The deconstructivist argument goes like this: when we talk about presence, what we really mean is a lack of mediation. However, as Albert Borgmann himself admits, cognitive science teaches us that "all perception is mediated and processed whether the object of perception is ten light years away and whether it is Newtonian or electronic" (Borgmann 2000b: 91). Even talking face-to-face, we are not *wholly* and *immediately* present to each other; our interaction is mediated by the space that light-waves and sound-waves must cross to reach my eyes and ears, and indeed by our perceptual senses themselves. Sometimes, at our best, it might seem that we are immediately present to each other, but in most of life some psycho-social distance pervades our interaction: meanings get lost in translation, misunderstandings occur, and some measure of anxiety and reserve influence our interaction. Unless we could plug into each other's minds, our communication will always be distanced and mediated in some

sense. By limiting their recognition of this fact, Dreyfus and Borgmann can be accused of a Derridean "metaphysics of presence," conceiving of the body of the thing as a "transcendental signified," a meaning which surpasses all signs. In *Of Grammatology,* Derrida argues against the possibility of a transcendental signified, agreeing with Charles Peirce that "the idea of *manifestation* is the idea of a sign" (qtd. Derrida 1976: 49). Derrida continues:

> *The thing itself is a sign....* There is ... no phenomenality reducing the sign or the representer so that the thing signified may be allowed to glow finally in the luminosity of its presence. The so-called "thing itself" is always already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence.... From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs.* (Derrida 1976: 49-50, original emphasis)

The deconstructivist critique is useful in reminding us that all communication, whether face-to-face or technologically mediated, is a semiotic activity. Even if something or someone is physically present, I still have a great deal of interpretative work to do to understand it or them. Your words and actions—whether you intend them to be or not—are mines of potential meaning, the coalface at which I labour to understand you. Whether I see your Porsche and guess you are rich, hear you yawn and assume that you are tired, or notice your "I love Heidegger" t-shirt and take it that you are a fan of fundamental ontology, the things I am reading are signs. Viewed in this way, all interaction is mediated by signs of some sort, and thus the privileging of presence over representation seems less significant. This is the move made by Catherine Wilson, though she does not invoke Derrida, when she rightly says that "[p]roximal and mediated experience lie on a continuum" (Wilson 2000: 79). We must not overemphasise this point, however. To do so would be to repeat a common flaw in deconstructivist argument, making the underlying assumption—which Richard Rorty dismisses as "awful"—that because a distinction cannot be made rigorous and precise it is therefore no distinction at all (Rorty 1984: 22). All communication might be via signs, but in face-to-face meetings many more signs are available to us than through technological mediation and this fact is important. Moreover, being physically present in the same space remains affectively significant, something wonderfully summed by Dreyfus' statement: "Whatever hugs do for people, I'm quite sure telehugs won't do it" (Dreyfus 2009: 68). Nearness matters. That you are here, travelled miles and miles to see me because I called to say I need you; that the Taj Mahal is in Agra and I must save up my money and book flights and ride overnight trains to see it: these things are significant. The affective experience of something is influenced both by our proximity to it and our difficulty in overcoming its remoteness. Location, situation and

embodiment have experiential impact. Nevertheless, the crucial insight that all communication is in some sense mediated allows us to consider the imperfections of face-to-face interaction and the possibility that distance can aid rather than harm interaction in some circumstances. This opens the liminal space for our next objection.

Don Ihde's theory of the amplification/reduction structure of technologies (see §2.3) states quite simply that in the immediate employment of any technology, we simultaneously enhance some capacity or capacities for experience or action and reduce or negate others. My car speeds up my movement but attenuates my bodily movements and muffles the sounds and smells of the world whizzing by outside. While looking through the telescope I can see the scars and pockmarks of the face of the moon but cannot see my own toes. In other words, there is always a balance-sheet of gains and losses in the use of any technology. Heidegger and his heirs too often stress the negative side of this equation, fixing their philosophical sights on the lost possibilities for perception and action, without giving due thought to the benefits brought. Even when this consideration is explicitly addressed, as by Malpas (2000: 117-18), their opinion is—in my view—too often negative. That digital information presents an attenuated version of the object is obviously true; but the object can be remarkably *enhanced* in many respects. A digital image of an illuminated manuscript might lack many significant qualities of the original—its physicality being not the least—but the tractability of the image has undoubted advantages. For example, Keio University's Toshiyuki Takamiya (2001: 347) lists among the benefits of that institution's project to digitise their copy of the Gutenberg bible (one of only 48 in the world): the provision of wider access to the object, preservation of the original, legibility enhancement where text is damaged, and the possibility of remote comparison, line by line, of different editions located as far afield as Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom. In terms of communication, technologies can be perfectly sufficient, perhaps superior, for some purposes. If I simply need to know whether a colleague in a different building has completed some piece of work before I get on with a related task, would it really be preferable to have to walk over to ask them in person? If I have had an argument with a fractious family member and want to clear the air but know that to see them now would just reignite high tempers, then I am glad to be able to take the time and distance to compose a letter of reconciliation, to draft and redraft and ensure the tone is exactly right.

The most remarkable enhancement offered by these technologies remains, though, the extraordinary fact that we can communicate over such large distances so quickly and easily. We might well prefer to interact face-to-face in most circumstances, but where that

is not possible, surely our new modes of communication can be appreciated. Consider this question: if your beloved sister were living in Bengal and you in the English Lake District, which would you rather have at your disposal, today's panoply of instant communicative means or just pen and post and a six-month wait for news? For people in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such a subject would have been felt very close to home—every one of the collections of family letters studied by Susan Whyman in her exhaustive work *The Pen and the People* described one or more family members travelling abroad or living in the colonies (Whyman 2009: 13). Even where distance was not insurmountable, as Konstantin Dierks attests of citizens of the emerging United States, although "[p]ersonal visits and face-to-face conversation remained the ideal mode of social interaction ... heavy workloads and busy schedules often made letter writing the only realistic alternative" (Dierks 2009: 164). All this is to say that the question we should be asking is not whether face-to-face is better than mediated communication—in many or most situations it might well be—but, where we are separated, in what ways are we made present to each other by our mediating technologies? What kinds of mediation are available, in what circumstances, and how does this affect the ways we interact? Having now mapped out the broader underlying philosophical stakes, we are now in a position to bear down, in what remains of this Chapter, upon the more particular question of what the early nineteenth-century epistle and twenty-first century technologies like the Internet bring to 'presence.'

3.6 Epistolary Presents

The most obvious thing presented to us by letters is handwritten text. While we will deal in later Chapters with the particular things said by letter-writers, and in §4.5 will discuss the *act* of handwriting, we should here note the affective resonance (in contrast to typescript) of handwriting as a *product*. As Heidegger rightly says in his otherwise off-beam rant against the typewriter during his Parmenides lecture-course of 1942-1943, "mechanical writing ... conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same" (Heidegger 1998: 81). The cultural link between handwriting, identity and personality is long standing. As J. L. Austin (1975: 60) observed, our written signature on a contract or other document identifies us, in our bodily absence, as the "utterance origin" of a speech-act. Our signature, and by implication our handwriting, is thus held to be a proxy for our body. As Dijck and Neef (2006: 15) point out, the handwritten signature is an explicit attestation of identity, "an absolutely individual and non-exchangeable sign, almost as unique as fingerprints or other biometrical data." Our handwriting is also popularly believed to express our personality. Whether it does or not—

and graphology is now generally dismissed as unadorned pseudoscience—the fact that graphologists continue to do good business in disconcerting areas like business recruitment (Greasley 2000: 47) indicates the strength of this association in the public mind. These associative links to the body, identity and personality mean that handwriting is usually considered more intimate than 'impersonal' typed writing. Even in the days of pen and paper, letters written in one's own hand were thought warmer than those written by a third-party scribe. When we receive a personally-written letter from a friend, as Erasmus said, "[w]e feel as if we were listening to them and seeing them face to face" (qtd. Daybell 2009: 651). In addition to these features of identity and personality, handwriting can convey significant semiotic clues which elude typed writing. Handwriting can speak of the evolution of the writer, most obviously in childhood, and can point towards the situation in which it was written – hurried handwriting could indicate the force and flow of the writer's feeling or their rush to meet an impending deadline, for example. The biographer Edmund Morris captures the complex interplay of all these characteristics when he says: "Script's primary power is to convey the cursive flow of human thought, from brain to hand to pen to ink to eye – every waver, every loop, every character trembling with expression. Type has no comparable warmth" (qtd. Gioia 1996: 29). When we communicate textually today, it is for the most part by means of computer-generated typescript, and although we can select from a range of different fonts, this writing nonetheless loses much of the personality of handwriting. Still, though, since we can now hear the "living voice" of the other over the telephone, and even see their faces through video-calling, it would be somewhat romantic to overemphasise this loss.

The symbolic value of letters extended beyond text. The kinds of materials used—paper, ink, seals and endorsements—could all speak of the writer's respect for their addressee (Daybell 2009: 654).[8] So too could the layout of the page. As Jonathan Gibson (1997: 4) has shown with his formulation of "significant space," "honoured margins" and heavy spacing between salutation, body of text and subscription would all indicate the depth of reverence for the name and person of the addressee. These cues had consequence. Willemijn Ruberg (2005: 249), for example, argues convincingly that the formal and linguistic features of letters were an important means of expressing identity for the social

[8] Daybell (660-61) also advises that the colour of wax used to seal the letter also signified content: "The most common colour for seals was red (of differing hues) produced by adding vermillion. Different colours of wax were used for different occasions, and medieval seals were coloured according to type of document (red for diplomatic, green for grants of perpetuities and natural for routine business). Black seals – produced by adding carbon or 'black earth' – signified mourning." In the Harden/Allan journals, Jessy's oversight in adhering to this convention seems to have caused Agnes much concern on first receiving one letter whose wax erroneously signalled bad news. Jessy tells her: "I am sorry that my not having red Wax at hand should have caused you so much uneasiness but I shall take care not to repeat that blunder." (17.07.03)

elite of the Netherlands from 1770 to 1850, a code of inclusion and exclusion which acted to reinforce ideals of 'correct' behaviour and manners among the Dutch upper classes.

Letters were not merely vehicles for signs; their materiality made them gifts in themselves. Here it is helpful to introduce Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura", a concept which powerfully captures some of the experiential changes we encounter as mechanical reproduction and digitisation blur the spatio-temporal boundaries of things. Benjamin describes the aura as an "ornamental halo" (Benjamin 2006: 58) which attaches to persons, cultural and natural objects, and derives from their links to the venerations of tradition and their gathering, over the course of time, an identity and history as the person or thing which they are. In his most famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin considered the way in which mechanical replicability had diminished the uniqueness and existential singularity of artworks and thus lessened their cultural resonance, authenticity and authority:

> The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. (Benjamin 1999d: 215)

Any physical thing (or person) has a singular presence in time and space, "its unique existence at the place where it happens to be," which is the determinative setting in which it endures change, accumulates associations with other entities, and amasses its historical testimony (Benjamin 1999d: 214). The existences of people and objects can be more or less remarkable, and while all will have their stories to tell, a few—by the happenstances of their origin, their particular characteristics, and proximity to remarkable institutions, people and events—garner great cultural significance, becoming *awe-some*. To encounter such an object or person, to be aware of its historical testimony whilst in its presence, is to feel its aura shining upon you. By way of illustration, in the summer of 2010 whilst researching at the archives of the Wordsworth Trust at Grasmere, I was upturned by the abrupt revelation that I was sitting at Wordsworth's table. The occasion was a meeting with the Trust's Curator, Jeff Cowton, in their impressive meeting room. A casual mention

of the table's heritage and association was all it took to turn this functional, scuffed and seasoned object into something sacred. Something which for ten minutes had been an unassuming surface for the scribbling of notes metamorphosed in a second into something formidable and wonderful. The aura, says Benjamin, is a "strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be" (Benjamin 1979: 250). The auratic object commands our attention while remaining remote and unapproachable. Standing out against the background of so many other taken-for-granted things, it has an essential otherness, an alterity which confronts us and commands attention, invested with "the ability to look at us in return" (Benjamin 1999a: 185). In perhaps his most poetic formulation, Benjamin calls the aura the "distance opened up with the look that awakens in an object perceived" (Benjamin 1999b: 314). The seeming inaccessibility of the object opens a contemplative space across which it seems to stare back at us, invoking, questioning and affirming our reverence for the people, things and traditions it represents.

The poets Philip Larkin and Andrew Motion describe just this emotional response in relation to manuscripts. For Larkin, the "magical value" of manuscripts lies in the startling realisation that "this is the paper [the writer] wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination" (Larkin 1983: 99). For Motion, it is the "gut-amazement of thinking, wow, Keats (or Tennyson, or Wilde, or Hardy) had this piece of paper when it was a blank sheet, their hand touched it, their breath swarmed all over it, and they made something immortal out of nothing" (Motion 2010: 120). The manuscripts of esteemed poets, of course, derive their cultural import from the reverence we hold for those poets and their poems. But aura attaches not only to museum pieces and masterpieces – according to Benjamin (2006: 58) it "appears in all things." As we saw in the case of Wordsworth's table, the experience of aura depends on the knowledge and sympathies of the viewer. Before I knew it was Wordsworth's table, it was just a table, and if I had not some regard for the poet then that is what it would have remained. While it might be questioned whether the quotidian mass of familiar letters, in their time, held any auratic import, I would argue that this is precisely what they held for the one person who really mattered: their addressee. Opening your mail to find a hand-crafted letter from a loved-one means something to *you*: the experience of the aura is yours, I would not feel it. But feel it you can, in the touch and scent of the paper, upon which the author leant as they etched words with authenticity and identity in their own hand, before sending it out into the world as "the scene, the stage, of [its own] fate" (Benjamin 1999c: 62), to journey space and time to be here now, in your presence. The

powerful, auratic sense of presence which can be fostered by familiar letters explains Elizabeth Barrett Browning's reaction to receiving "a letter from William Wordsworth!" in 1842: "Don't tell anybody but I kissed it!" (qtd. Milne 2010: 53). It was, moreover, described as early as the first-century AD, by the Roman statesman Seneca in an epistle to his friend Lucilius:

> Thank you for writing so often. By doing so you give me a glimpse of yourself in the only way you can. I never get a letter from you without instantly feeling we're together. If pictures of absent friends are a source of pleasure to us, refreshing the memory and relieving the sense of void with a solace however insubstantial and unreal, how much more so are letters, which carry marks and signs of the absent friend that are real. For the handwriting of a friend affords us what is so delightful about seeing him again, the sense of recognition. (Seneca 1969: 82)

Letters, then, brought two things to 'presence' simultaneously, symbols (words) and substrate (the paper they were written on). The material object carried with it something of the auratic presence of the author, but it also chained the message to the physical world and ensured the speed at which it could circulate was limited to the pace at which paper could be made to move, a fact mitigated but not eliminated by the coming of planes, trains and automobiles. The great communicative leap forward in this regard was the splitting of symbols from substrate, the conversion of messages into electric pulses, or light-waves, or radio-waves for conveyance via wire or radio, to be reconstituted in a human-readable form at their destination. As Tom Standage rightly points out in *The Victorian Internet* (2007), the first technology to achieve this breakthrough was the electric telegraph in the mid nineteenth-century, which had humans convert textual messages into a binary language (Morse code) for transmission as electrical pulses along copper wires. The electric telegraph called for, and thus inaugurated, our modern project of wiring the world with lines of communication, a scheme which accelerated in the twentieth-century as telephones and cable television became commonplace. The invention of radio in the late nineteenth-century—initially called "wireless telegraphy"—made information airborne, and continues to support our mobile telephone and Wi-Fi networks. Since the latter half of the twentieth-century, networked computers have taken these methods of binary processing to a new level of efficiency. Computers deal with "bits" of information—1s or 0s—which are transported in "packets" of data. In this respect, they are similar to the telegraph; but computers do not require humans to process signals as did the telegraph, and since computers can process signals with much more efficiency and accuracy than humans ever could, much more complex messages can be sent – with current processing power, we can now send not only text but also pictures, video, sound recordings and so on. The potential

complexity of our messages grows exponentially as improvements in software and hardware for processing, transmitting and displaying information continue to more or less keep pace with George Moore's remarkably prescient mid-1970s prediction that the complexity of integrated circuits would continue to double every two years (Moore 1975: 13). Technologies like radio, telephones and computers, then, allow information to flow as fast as electricity, light or radio-waves, and it is this fact that underpins the pronouncements of the technological abolition of space and time with which we began this Chapter. Yet there is, as always, a balance-sheet of losses and gains to be reckoned in our shift towards this way of moving information. Yes, we have made our communications much more fluid, tractable and mobile; but we have also made them much less substantial and left ourselves utterly reliant on a morass of mediating technologies to help us render them readable. The final main section of this Chapter examines the major implications of this change.

3.7 Digital (Im)materiality

Edmund Husserl asserts that "every thingly being has its place in world-space", a proposition he believes holds "in fact and *apriori* for *every thingly being whatever*" (Husserl 1989: 31, original emphasis). Similarly, Heidegger says:

> [P]lace pertains to being itself, the place constitutes precisely the possibility of the proper presence of the being in question ... Each being possesses in its Being a prescription toward a determinate location or place. The place is constitutive of the presence of the being ... Place is something belonging to beings as such, their capacity to be present, a possibility which is constitutive of their Being. The place is the ability a being has to be there ... (Heidegger 1997: 73, 75)

What place do digital objects like emails, text messages and blogs occupy? Where is, for example, the *Microsoft Word* document upon which I write these words? The most obvious answer would be to say that it is on my laptop screen, the thing I am currently seeing and interacting with. But since this on-screen representation endures only intermittently, conjured into existence as I open the document and disappearing completely when I close it, this answer is incomplete. For this document is the same one I was working on yesterday, and that means that something of it endures even when the representation does not. The thing that endures is, of course, the bit-pattern, the binary code manifested as voltage differences in transistor cells. We could perhaps, then, try to argue that the digital object *is* the bit-pattern, and that the representations it produces are merely secondary effects, like the shadows cast by objects in sunlight. But while the bit-pattern is the

necessary causal basis for the screenic representations, it would be unsatisfactory to regard it alone as the digital object, since in most instances I remain utterly unaware of it and even if I could bring it into view it would remain meaningless – were I, for example, to print out a copy of the bit-pattern of this Word document, what I would get would not be an intelligible copy of a PhD thesis, but just a very long series of 1s and 0s. Without the ability for representation, the bit-pattern is useless; but, equally, the representations could not exist without the bit-pattern. We must conclude, therefore, that both together constitute the digital object and that, while material things have a unique presence in space and time, digital objects lead double lives as both perceptible on-screen representations and as imperceptible bit-patterns of binary signals. This means that digital objects can never be directly presented to us in the Russellian sense, but only ever re-presented; they require, by their nature, the mediation of computer software and hardware, and lie at all times behind the screen of technology.

The presence of digital objects is indistinct for a series of other reasons. Firstly, digital objects are perfectly replicable; we can create copies which are in almost every way the same as the original. Hence the *same* bit-pattern, to all intents, can be in many locations simultaneously and so it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to maintain any straightforward distinction between digital originals and copies. This fact further problematises the identity, authenticity and authority of the object, already depreciated by mechanical reproduction. Secondly, the same representation can be in many places at the same time. Joohan Kim (2001: 98), for instance, gives the case of geographically dispersed players taking part in an online environment like *Second Life*, where a digital-object such as an avatar can be on multiple screens at the same time. Thirdly, networked computers and distributed storage make it possible for the composite parts of some digital objects, such as newspaper webpages, to be hosted on different servers in different parts of the world (Kim 2001: 98). Finally, the networked nature of Web documents makes it very difficult to define their boundaries. As Michael Heim rightly argues, the very character of hyperlinking implies the presence of other texts, which are only ever a mouse-click away. Indeed, Heim goes so far as to say that the Web makes all documents "virtually coresident" and seems to collapse "the whole notion of a primary and a secondary text, of originals and their references" (Heim 1993: 35). For these reasons, digital objects lack the determinable spatio-temporal location of physical objects. This is, of course, a decided benefit for futurists like Negroponte (1996: 228), who is triumphal in declaring that "bits will be borderless, stored and manipulated with absolutely no respect to geopolitical boundaries." But, if we follow the logic of Heidegger and Husserl, it places digital objects on an

unsound ontological footing. Indeed, their status as "thingly beings" is entirely questionable, and they seem insubstantial and more akin to dreams, hallucinations, and ideas (Kim 2001: 107). This uncertain ontology has concrete consequences for the ways in which we interact with digital objects.

Firstly, digital objects are both more robust and more fragile than physical objects. More robust because the bit-pattern can in principle endure forever without degradation (though in practice bit-rot can occur) and because the possibility for faultless replication means that endless back-ups can be made – as the wonderfully named Stanford digital preservation project has it, **"**Lots Of Copies Keep Stuff Safe" (Reich and Rosenthal 2001). On the other hand, the fact that alteration of any part of the bit-pattern can markedly alter the object, the complexity of the software and hardware needed to render the bit-pattern readable combined with the galloping pace of technological obsolescence, and the fact that it can only take a keystroke to delete the bit-pattern forever, means it is has a much more frail existence. As Joohan Kim says, digital objects are marked by two paradoxical possibilities, "eternal endurance and instant vanishment" (Kim 2001: 100).

Secondly, computers are bafflingly complex to the layman. To display a bit-pattern as something readable—as well as to transmit and store it—requires a huge amount of remarkably advanced software and hardware. The sheer complexity of this technology means that it remains a mystery to most of us, who deal with the computer as a "black box," considering little and knowing less what actually goes on inside the machine (as long as it is working anyway), something enabled by the now ubiquitous Graphic User Interface (GUI). As Sherry Turkle (2004) notes, while the first-generation of enthusiasts understood personal computers "down to the bits and bytes," able to "'open the hood' and poke around," we today are far more used to "taking things at (inter) face value." The increasing intricacy of the technology makes us ever more reliant upon it, and while knowing how to proficiently operate computer programmes such as *Word* remains a skilful business, for most non-computer experts such skills never broaden beyond the sketchiest appreciation of the multitude of underlying technological processes at work. Friedrich Kittler calls the stacks of programming languages and their underlying hardware a "postmodern Tower of Babel," whose complexity and inscrutability mean that "[w]e simply do not know what our writing does" (Kittler 1997: 148). Our lack of understanding of this opaque equipment seems to distance us from the objects we interact with when using it and gives rise to a fundamental uncertainty in our dealings with them. We have no phenomenological access to the bit-pattern, being able only to perceive the on-screen representations, and yet most of

us simply do not understand how the computer goes about translating the one into the other. Because we have only the re-presentations to rely on, we have less reason to be certain that the object we are now viewing really is the *same* as last we saw it. In physical media like letters, signs are intimately and permanently fixed to the substrate, and it is very difficult to remove or alter them without leaving some indication of having done so – black marks or holes in the paper, for example. The fluidity and ephemerality of digital information, meanwhile, makes it more open to imperceptible revision or deletion. Moreover, the complex nesting of multiple levels of coding languages mean that minor changes at one level can translate into very large changes at another – a small amendment to a Cascading Style Sheet, for example, can radically alter the look and feel of an entire website. Indeed, such minor changes might be all that is required to render the thing utterly unreadable, something that makes digital preservation particularly problematic. All of which is to say that there are fundamental reasons for uncertainties in our dealings with digital objects. Of course, in most of our dealings this is not a problem. We do not falter in fear and trembling when confronted by computers; we mostly trust the technology as a taken-for-granted and ready-to-hand piece of everyday equipment. Yet something of the uncertainty remains, and it can perhaps be felt most vividly in the gut-wrenching terror experienced when the representations abruptly disappear and the machine just stops working, such as (for *Microsoft Windows* users) when the "Stop error screen," commonly known as the "blue screen of death," appears. Such a moment of breakdown is hugely distressing because, at one and the same time, we realise how very little we know about this equipment and also just how dependent we are upon it.

Next, lacking "substantive duration" (Benjamin 1999d: 215), digital objects are poor in aura. Aura derives from a physical thing's singular presence in time and space, "its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (214). Digital objects are neither singular nor present; they are duplicable, discontinuous, and can be experienced only representationally. Being perfectly duplicable, they lack the authenticity and authority of the physical object, substituting a "plurality of copies for a unique existence" (215). The material presence of the letter was a continuity, it was the "scene ... of [its own] fate" (Benjamin 1999c: 62), and as it passed from hand to hand, it took with it something of the aura of each person and place it came into contact with. Digital representations, meanwhile, have an intermittent existence – they are resurrected each time we run the bit-pattern with the appropriate hardware and software. Even the perceptible endurance whilst on-screen is an illusion, as what seems a stable on-screen object is in fact blinking in and out of existence many times per second as the image frames update (Hayles 2004: 79).

Without a continuous spatio-temporal presence, digital objects cannot amass the weight of historical testimony that aura requires. It is difficult to imagine future scholars eulogising a writer's word processing documents in quite the same way as Larkin and Motion celebrate paper manuscripts. Certainly it will be impossible for them to wonder that "their hand touched it" (Motion 2010: 120), since we never come into contact with digital objects, which remain hermetically sealed in plastic and metal. Representations remain intangible behind the screen and bit-patterns live invisibly in transistors. Eluding our grasp, flashing in and out of existence, and lacking a unique existence, digital objects eschew aura. Now, this is not necessarily a 'bad thing.' Benjamin's artwork essay is, after all, commonly taken to be an affirmation of the possibilities of technologically-enabled mass culture and the democratisation that mechanical reproduction offers by allowing art "to meet the beholder halfway" (Benjamin 1999d: 214). Similarly, the Internet is often affirmed for its potential to open up access to information, lower educational costs, promote public dialogue, and so on. But while it obviously compensates by way of such interactivity and tractability, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that a major loss wrought by digital technologies is the diminution of what Larkin identified as the "magical value" of paper documents, the "aura."

Finally, there are questions to be asked about the ways in which the insubstantiality of digital messages might diminish perceptions of the substantiality of their contents. Many languages, including Chinese, Dutch and Spanish, exhibit metaphorical links between weight and importance – in English we use phrases like 'the gravity of a situation' and 'weighing one's options,' for example. Recent research into embodied cognition present persuasive evidence that this link is much more than merely lingusitic, and that the weightiness of objects can have a very real effect upon perceptions of importance. Jostmann *et al*. (2009), for example, found that subjects holding a heavy clipboard while answering survey quesitons on a range of issues (including money, justice, and community policy) made higher value judgements, judged issues as more important, and invested higher levels of "cognitive elaboration" than did those subjects holding a lighter clipboard. In a similar study, Ackerman *et al*. (2010) used heavy and light clipboards to test subjects' reactions to the CVs of job applicants, finding that: "[h]eaviness produced impressions of importance and seriousness" (2010: 1714). The authors propose that "experiences with specific object-related tactile qualities elicit a 'haptic mindset,' such that touching objects triggers the application of associated concepts ... even to unrelated people and situations" (1713). Such findings suggest that the differences in affective response to analogue and digital messages might run deeper than auratic associative links, into the very substance of

the thing itself. While letters are obviously not very heavy, they do at least have some mass, can at least be held, touched, smelled and so on; digital objects are, as we have said, intangible, transitory and weightless. Such facts may help explain affective responses like that of Herb, one of Sherry Turkle's (2011: 271) interviewees, who said: "E-mails get deleted, but letters get stored in a drawer. It's real; it's tangible. Online, you can't touch the computer screen, but you can touch the letter." Turkle herself seems to agree: "An e-mail or text," she says, "seems to have been always on its way to the trash" (168). Although unfortunately no follow-up studies I have found have yet used this methodology to examine differences between perceptions of significance and importance in analogue and digital messages, a recent marketing study funded by the Royal Mail lends some tentative credence to the view I am proposing. That research, conducted in association with psychologists from Bangor University, used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to monitor brain activity while participants read messages presented either on paper or on-screen, finding that physical messages generated more or deeper processing activity in the brain's emotional centres, were seen as more real, and activated areas of the brain associated with introspection and memory for longer than their digital counterparts (Todé 2011: 26). While such findings are still somewhat speculative, and much more research will be needed to fully test their findings and draw out conclusions, it seems fair to say that all this combines to hint that our communicative technologies increase our effective power, but at the cost of a diminution of the affective power of the messages carried.

3.8 Conclusion

The title of this Chapter—'Where Am I and Where Are My Documents?'—is, of course, rhetorical, intended to highlight an ongoing digital diffusion (or perhaps confusion) of the spatial presence of ourselves and the things we write with. Extending our perceptual and actional reach, digital technologies help us overcome distance and de-sever what would otherwise remain remote. But in so doing, they diminish the importance of bodily, geographic location (*viz*. time-space compression). They do not create this phenomenon—transportation and communication technologies from the alphabet to the aeroplane have always aimed in this direction—yet, with the connective power and minimal cost of the digital, there nonetheless seems something of a step-change in the magnitude, if not the quality, of the effect. Mediated communication over distance has never been easier, faster, or cheaper. With Internet-enabled smart-phones, we can be continually coupled to a communicative network which allows our attention to wander the globe, exchanging

instant-messages with people in Beijing one moment and Boston the next. We live an increasingly distributed existence. This extended actional/perceptual presence, though, prompts the question of what Heidegger has called "homelessness" and Borgmann a diminution of "commanding presence". Where, for instance, *is* my dinner partner, when they stop me mid-sentence to answer their phone? They sit across from me, yet their attention is fixed upon the de-severed phone-voice of someone who may well be in another time-zone. As Sherry Turkle (2011: 161) has recently commented, in the world of paper correspondence it would have been highly unusual for someone to turn away from you and start opening their mail, but it is now commonplace for our interlocutors to idly browse their mobile-phone messages, half-listening to what we have to say. Andrew Feenberg (1999: 191) argues that "the pragmatics of personal encounter are radically simplified" on communicative networks, "reduced to the protocols of technical connection", which make it "easy to pass from one social contact to another, following the logic of the technical network that supports ever more rapid communication." Turkle's example suggests that this logic of easy connection bleeds over into our offline interactions too. When Heidegger spoke of the "homelessness" entailed by technologies like TV and radio, he was anxious about what he viewed as the migration of the attention from the local to the global. In part these fears were founded in his concern for authentic being, and although we have in this Chapter found reasons to salve such fears, much remains to be said on this matter. We take up this task in Chapters Five and Six, where we will also discuss further the relative merits of differing forms of mediated communications as they compare to face-to-face meetings. In this Chapter we have (using Russell's presentation/representation distinction and Derrida's critique of the "metaphysics of presence") laid the groundwork for this latter question: put most simply, face-to-face might be better in very many circumstances, but we shouldn't get overly romantic about it – for that, too, is a hermeneutic activity, governed by signs and (as all interpretative activities are) oft apt to go awry.

Digital technologies make the question of the location of our documents problematic too. Digital documents are ontologically ambiguous; they lead double lives. Where the letter was a material unity of signs etched on substrate, digitalism splits documents into two: imperceptible bits of code ghosting the circuits of hardware and perceptible, on-screen representations which flicker intermittently in and out of existence. While the familiar letter was a singular spatio-temporal object which travelled as "the scene, the stage, of [its own] fate" (Benjamin 1999c: 62), from the hand of the signatory to that of the addressee, carrying with it what Benjamin called the aura and there presenting ("first-hand," as it were) the author's handwriting (with all the personality, individuality and authenticity that

implies), emails and such present merely impersonal typescript which cannot be touched and, having no mass, may be perceived as less significant. Such points combine to hint at a loss, suggesting that our communicative technologies increase our effective power, but at the cost of a diminution of the affective power of the messages carried. This theme will be taken further in the next Chapter, where we examine letter-writing as an example of what Albert Borgmann calls a “focal practice” and consider the ways our mediating technologies shape experiential worlds and potentially diminish value.

4 What Makes the Desert Beautiful? Familiar Letters as Focal Things

"'What makes the desert beautiful,' said the little prince, 'is that somewhere it hides a well' ..."

— Antoine De Saint-Exupéry

4.1 Introduction

In Antoine De Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, first published in 1943, the narrator (a pilot) is stranded in the Sahara desert and there meets a melancholic alien-boy, the titular prince. The little prince innocently recounts a series of meetings with materialistic adults, one a merchant who had invented "sophisticated" pills which eradicate thirst. Experts, the merchant had excitedly told the boy, calculate the pills save fifty-three minutes per week. The little prince responds: "If I had fifty-three minutes to spend ... I would walk very slowly towards a spring of fresh water." A little while later, the little prince and the aviator, their water-supply exhausted, vainly trudge the desert. Miraculously coming across a well, the narrator suddenly comprehends the little prince's meaning:

> I raised the bucket to his lips. He drank with his eyes closed. It was as sweet as a festival treat. This water was something entirely different from ordinary nourishment. It was born from the walk under the stars, the singing of the pulley and the effort of my arms. It was good for the heart, like a gift. When I was a little boy, the lights of the Christmas tree, the music of the Midnight Mass, the sweetness of the smiling faces, all made up the radiance of the Christmas gifts I received. (Saint-Exupéry 1995: 92-93)

I do not know if Albert Borgmann has read *The Little Prince*, but I feel sure he would endorse its sentiment. Borgmann detects an irony at the heart of technology: it promised to enrich our lives by disburdening us of toil and misery. In fact, he argues, it impoverishes us by diminishing our engagement with reality, as technological devices replace more traditional, skilful ways of dealing with the world which necessitated richer contextual

involvements with things and each other. With efficiency and usability as defining principles, modern devices divorce us from meaningful worldly engagement by hiding the mechanics of their operation behind successive layers of service interfaces and requiring less and less from us in the way of patience, skill or effort. Borgmann thinks this modern technological "device paradigm" stands in stark contrast to the world of pre-modern "focal things and practices," objects or actions which require commitment, attention and involvement, and command a presence in our lives.

This Chapter considers the extensive early nineteenth-century commerce of familiar letters as an example of what Borgmann calls a focal practice, examining the contextual involvements and effortful worldly engagement they demanded of letter-writers, and contrasting this with our modern-day experience of increasingly ubiquitous, cheap and easy-to-use communication systems. It draws chiefly on the experiences of Jessy Harden (1784-1853) and Dorothy Wordsworth (1771-1855), both of whom lived in the Lake District in the first half of the nineteenth-century. The Chapter will proceed as follows. Firstly, we lay out Borgmann's theory of focal things and practices, contrasting this with his critique of modern technology as the "device paradigm," discuss the application of this theory to information technologies and discuss critically the key arguments against Borgmann's theory. I conclude that although Borgmann's theory tends towards the dystopic because of a mistaken emphasis on the disburdening elements of technologies, at the expense of their ampliative qualities, in its striking and original position it is nonetheless extremely valuable in helping us to understand the possible losses we incur as we switch over to digital ways of being in the world. In the second half of the Chapter, we apply this theory to discuss the features of nineteenth-century communication that mark it out as a focal practice: the skill, attention, effort and patience it demanded, and the sense of togetherness and community it fostered. Along the way, we will make contemporary comparisons to attempt to elucidate the ways in which Romantic-era correspondence differed from our own Internet-enabled experience.

4.2 Borgmann on Focal Things and Devices

In his most influential work, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984), Albert Borgmann sets out his thoughts regarding modern technological life. Much in line with Heidegger (1978), Borgmann believes there is a fundamental difference between pre-modern and modern technologies. Until the Enlightenment, we dwelt in a world of "focal reality," where our dealings were mainly with "focal things and practices." These concepts

denote "the encounters each of us has with things that of themselves have engaged mind and body and centered our lives. Commanding presence, continuity with the world, and centering power are signs of focal things" (Borgmann 1992: 119-20). Since these terms and their definition are (perhaps by nature) slightly sketchy (Borgmann admits his term "focal reality" is just a "placeholder"), it is perhaps best to begin with Borgmann's paradigmatic example, the "culture of the table":

> The great meal of the day… is a focal event par excellence. It gathers the scattered family around the table. And on the table it gathers the most delectable things nature has brought forth. But it also recollects and presents a tradition, the immemorial experiences of the race in identifying and cultivating edible plants, in domesticating and butchering animals; it brings into focus closer relations of national or regional customs, and more intimate traditions still of family recipes and dishes. (Borgmann 1984: 204)

The meal as a focal thing, and the 'culture of the table' as a focal practice, gather together the context of the world in which we live, lighting up our surroundings and making them clear and articulate. A dinner party is a complex ritual that makes demands of us—it needs skill, care and knowledge of cooking traditions to prepare the food, requires us to come together in the same place at the same time, and calls for intimate conversation—but these demands give it a commanding presence which rewards our bodily and social engagement by illuminating and affirming the manifold relationships which bind us to the world. When a dinner party goes well, when we are truly thankful for our friends and for the food, when the jokes (and perhaps the wine) flow freely, when the candles dwindle but the conversation does not, then we feel ourselves in tune with the world, we simply know that this is who and where we want to be. Like Kurt Vonnegut's Uncle Alex, we think "if this isn't nice, I don't know what is" (Vonnegut 2006: 132). Such a focal event centres and orients our lives, "It is a final and dominant end which alone truly matters and fulfils and which therefore assigns all other things and activities their rank and place" (Borgmann 1984: 211). Focal things are simple, usually ancient things which require little or no complex machinery: "a wilderness in hiking; a horse in grooming, training, and riding; a rod in fishing" (Borgmann 1992: 121); engagement with them usually implies not only patience, skill, effort, and fortitude but also engagement with each other, with our cultural traditions, and our natural surroundings. Borgmann thinks, however, that the appreciation of such things and practices is being increasingly destroyed or displaced by a different, modern type of object: the device.

Guided by the watchwords of 'efficiency' and 'usability,' modern technological devices are defined, for Borgmann, by a logic of disburdenment; they exist to lessen the effort, skill, patience or fortitude it takes to get things done (Borgmann 1984: 140). In reducing our load, devices tend to conceal the machinery of their operation: "If the machinery were forcefully present, it would *eo ipso* make claims to our faculties. If claims are felt to be onerous and are therefore removed, then so is the machinery. A commodity is truly available when it can be enjoyed as a mere end, unencumbered by means" (44). Technology thus strips (focal) things down into bare commodities, separating ends from means, and making goods and services available to us as instantaneously, ubiquitously, safely, and easily as possible (41). By hiding the means of their procurement, though, devices sideline the contextual involvements implied by focal things. Where we once had to walk to the well, now we only have to walk to the tap; instead of going to the bookshop, we just "1-Click" on *Amazon.co.uk* and a few days later a book drops through the letter-box. To return to our earlier example: from a purely functional point of view, the purpose of food is the ingestion of calories. This logic leads to the industrialisation of food preparation, the provision of pre-prepared foods in expedient plastic packaging, to be stored in freezers and slung into the microwave when needed. Borgmann dislikes the commodious availability of such "convenience foods" not just because they are often unedifying; he blames them for diminishing the ritualistic culture of the table:

> Once food has become freely available, it is only consistent that the gathering of the meal is shattered and disintegrates into snacks, T.V. dinners, bites that are grabbed to be eaten; and eating itself is scattered out around television shows, late and early meetings, activities, overtime work, and other business. (Borgmann 1984: 204)

In the "device paradigm"—Borgmann's term for the pattern of modern technology—, we become disengaged consumers of isolated commodities, using up resources without preparation, resonance, or consequence (51). It is not just that we become lazier, or less skilful, or more impatient, as each wave of technology washes over us – although Borgmann clearly thinks we do. By deconstructing things into discrete devices and stripping ends from means, we also lose important contextual involvements with the world that the commanding presence of focal things made necessary. We can consume commodities without any concern for, or knowledge of, the means whereby they come to be delivered to us. A device-led life thus tends to lead to "a commerce with reality where the rootedness in the depth of things, i.e., in the irreplaceable context of time and place, has been dissolved" (50-51).

Saint-Exupéry's wonder-pill does not just remove the need to drink; it removes a whole world of effortful, contextual engagement. In the world of pre-modern things, before we damned rivers and lay down pipes to carry water directly from reservoirs into our homes, we had to walk to the well, draw water, and carry it home. For Borgmann, this work itself was spiritually beneficial: the walk might clear and focus the mind, the contact with nature and other people would reinforce our sense of place and community, and the exertion might eventually be rewarded by making the water taste sweeter. Alluding to a passage from the Book of Genesis, Borgmann (1984: 119) says: "Rebecca, going to the well, not only found water but there also companionship, news of the village, and her fiancé. These strands of her life were woven into a fabric [that] technology has divided and privatized into commodities." Devices like the merchant's pill replace the inter-relatedness of focal things like the village well with a bare, isolated commodity which conceals the context (the morass of science and industry) which makes it available. In so doing it disburdens us of the encumbrance of, and engagement with, the web of contextual involvements which connect us to the world and create meaning and value in our lives.

4.3 Borgmann on Information Technology

It should come as no surprise that Borgmann's estimation of modern information technology is overwhelmingly negative. It is, he says, the most prominent contemporary expression of the device paradigm (Borgmann 2000a: 352). In *Holding on to Reality*, Borgmann presents his most focussed philosophical analysis of information, which he defines as signs which inform humans about things within a certain context (Borgmann 1999b: 22). Borgmann discerns three kinds of information: natural, cultural and technological (Borgmann 1999b: 1-2). Natural information tells us about reality. It discloses elements of the world which are otherwise imperceptible to our immediate senses: the gathering clouds foretell the approaching storm; the browning leaves that drop from the trees announce the autumn. Cultural information, on the other hand, is information relayed via conventional signs, writing being the obvious example. Cultural information can tell us about reality, but it can also prescribe it by allowing us to draw up designs and instructions for making. A recipe is not a description of reality: before I gather, mix, and bake the ingredients, there is no cake. The recipe calls for the realisation of the cake, just as a musical score calls for performance, and an architectural blueprint invites construction. The role of cultural information in our engagement with reality is ambiguous and must be kept in balance. Signs can encourage meaningful engagement and allow access to elements of the commanding presence of reality which would otherwise remain

hidden, but they can also get in the way (Verbeek 2002: 73). Borgmann says of writing that it: "allows for an endless accumulation of information, and unchecked accumulation leads from perspicuity - the signal benefit of natural information - to confusion" (Borgmann 1999b: 49). Without cultural information, we are "confined by the darkness of ignorance," but in "the glare of excessive and confused information," we become unable to distinguish the significant from the trivial (231).

Finally, we have technological information, which is specific to devices. Borgmann argues that the complexity and power of modern technological devices have made it possible for information to be delivered to us *as* reality. He gives as an example recorded music. Borgmann argues that an audio compact disc is not information *about* reality – it does not report on what happened in the recording studio (presumably this is so because of all the production work that goes on between the actual recording of each instrument, and their layering and editing together as a finished track). Nor is it information *for* reality, a score for the performance of music, for example. I just insert the CD, press play, and the music is there, in the room. The information itself *is* the reality. What is more, the "preternatural purity and perfection" of its production trickery means that the track is a superior, idealised version of any 'live' performance, which sounds rough and flawed in comparison – it is "hyperreal" in Borgmann's phrase (Borgmann 1999b: 184). With technological information, Borgmann argues, the device paradigm has taken a further step towards the eradication of focal things and practices. It does not just displace meaningful engagement with reality; it *replaces* it with a rich and pliable "hyperreality" over which we can assume ever greater control.

Borgmann's concern is that "Information is about to overflow and suffocate reality" (Borgmann 1999b: 213). "Hyperintelligent" communication via e-mail or websites enables us to interact over incredible distances almost instantly, but Borgmann considers this a much diminished interaction: "Hyperintelligence allows us to diffuse our attention and action over ever more voluminous spaces. At the same time, we are shrinking to a source of instructions and finally to a point of arbitrary desires" (Borgmann 1992: 108). On the Internet, our bodily engagement is reduced to the tapping of a mouse or keypad; the risk associated with face-to-face communications is diminished because we can literally "switch off" whenever we want; our skills are diminished as the computer assumes ever greater responsibility for tasks, hiding the incredible complexity of its operations behind "intuitive interfaces"; our patience is eroded as we are conditioned to expect things to be delivered to us fast, faster, now. For Borgmann, it is the very fluidity and acquiescence of

cyberspace, its lack of "material density," as he puts it, that means it lacks the eloquence and commanding presence of focal reality. If everything is possible, everything is inconsequential, would seem to be his point. Disposable and discontinuous, cyberspace is so lightweight that it cannot challenge us and anchor our lives. Lacking such robustness and commanding presence in our lives, we become, in Borgmann's view, uncommitted and indifferent, forever arrested in a state which resembles Wordsworth's description of his salad days as a young student in Book III of *The Prelude*:

> In this mixed sort
> The months passed on, remissly, not given up
> To wilful alienation from the right,
> Or walks of open scandal; but in vague
> And loose indifference, easy likings, aims
> Of a low pitch; duty and zeal dismissed,
> Yet Nature, or a happy course of things
> Not doing in their stead the needful work.
> The memory languidly revolved, the heart
> Reposed in noontide rest, the inner pulse
> Of contemplation almost failed to beat.
> Rotted as by a charm, my life became
> A floating island, an amphibious thing,
> Unsound, of spongy texture, yet withal
> Not wanting a fair face of water-weeds
> And pleasant flowers.[9]

For Borgmann, technological devices are the charm that rots. Disburdening us of the need to invest effort, skill, attention and patience in the things we do, they stunt us in our spiritual growth, and condemn us forever to this fickle life of "loose indifference, easy likings [and] aims / of a low pitch."

4.4 Criticisms of Borgmann

In my view, Borgmann's critique of modern technology generally, and the Internet in particular, is too pessimistic and deterministic in its assessment. His description of cyberspace often fails to correspond to the way many people experience it. For example, where he perceives only restless disengagement, we can identify committed online communities of people united by common interests, developing rich and advanced dialogues (Feenberg *et al*. 1996); where he sees online presence as insubstantial, some users report that the anonymity and distance of online *fora* can help them open up to each

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[9] William Wordsworth, 'The Prelude (1805 Edition)', in Stephen Gill (ed.), *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2000a), 375-590 at 413; Bk III / 328-43.

other in ways they never would face-to-face; where he sees the diminution of connection, social networking sites can actually boost face-to-face engagement by acting as an effective shared means of organising every sort of "real life" meeting, from flash-mobs to flat-warming parties. Borgmann's negative view too often seems either to overlook or downplay such potentially beneficial aspects. We can identify two main criticisms of his philosophy which may help explain, and thus avoid, this tendency towards pessimism.

Firstly, we should question Borgmann's assumptions. Is he just an unreconstructed romantic with a nostalgic affection for tradition and an irrational aversion to change? His work is certainly defined by a cultural conservatism, but is this attitude derived from his theory or his theory derived from his attitude? Some critics imply the latter (Cutrofello 1993: 96; Kellner 1999), and while the fairness of such accusations is ultimately difficult to gauge, the undoubted small 'c' conservatism of many of his conclusions (traditional, craft technologies are good; hyperreal, modern technologies are bad) naturally raises such questions (Light 2000: 111). Relatedly, where is the 'reality' Borgmann seeks? His critique romantically appeals to an originary, authentic reality untainted by technology. But tool-use preceded Homo sapiens; there was never a time in which humanity was ever pre-technological (Stiegler, 1998). Thus, the deconstructivist can question the sharp binary distinctions Borgmann draws between the "real" and the "hyperreal," nature and culture, things and devices, and his presupposition of the superiority of the former over the latter term in each case. What is the original, authentic reality that Borgmann is struggling to hold on to; when, where, and for whom did such a reality exist? Borgmann denies the need to ask such questions, appealing back to the natural eloquence of reality and declaring: "The general question of reality needs to be answered rather than judged. Constructivists typically beg the question, demanding a persuasive construction of reality" (Borgmann 1999a). Answering in this way, however, simply re-asserts the epistemological realism that he is asked to defend.

Secondly, there is a problem of emphasis in Borgmann's conception of technology. The logic of technology is not simply one of disburdenment. Devices do not exist solely to lessen the load on our bodies and cognition, to mitigate misery, and remove toil from our lives (Borgmann 1984: 41). They also enable us to do things we could not possibly have done before. NASA does not design and build spacecraft and spacesuits to save astronauts the trouble of flapping their arms and holding their breath. Without these technologies, people just could not go into space. Similarly, if my friend and I live on separate continents without technologies we just could not communicate – our voices are not loud enough.

Technologies extend and supplement our bodily capacities; they do not simply replace them. Technologies reduce some aspects of experience, but at the same time they amplify others (Ihde 1979, 1990); Borgmann is open to the charge of sometimes neglecting the latter half of this equation and accentuating the former. He sees Internet communication as parasitic upon face-to-face conversation, a deficient version of some pure, unmediated contact, but himself undermines this metaphysics of presence when he leads a mournful eulogy for the lost art of letter-writing:

> [W]e know in what ways the telephone has led to disconnectedness. It has extinguished the seemingly austere communication via letters. Yet this austerity was wealth in disguise. To write a letter one needed to sit down, collect one's thoughts and world, and commit them laboriously to paper. Such labor was a guide to concentration and responsibility. One was brought face to face with one's circumstances and forced to gather them into a succinct account. Correspondingly, readers of letters, faced with so spare and brief a document, had to concentrate on their correspondent and immerse themselves thoughtfully in the sender's world. A correspondence used to amount to a life's monument, carefully constructed and gratefully treasured. (Borgmann 1992: 105)

Letters, and the postal networks which support them, are themselves technologies which replace face-to-face communications, and hence subject to the same objection Borgmann has to Internet communication: "Those who become present via a communication link have a diminished presence, since we can always make them vanish if their presence becomes burdensome" (Borgmann 1992: 105). Borgmann's tendency towards nostalgia can tend to neglect the historical constitution of tradition. At some time in very ancient history, the technique of written correspondence was itself novel, and there were probably much antediluvian critique of its diminution of the need for people to go and visit each other. It is just because the practice of letter-writing has been around for such a long time, and is so imbedded in human culture, that its benefits are clear to us now. To such a critique, Borgmann might nevertheless respond that devices and focal things are not binary categories, but merely opposite poles on a continuum. He might thus say that letters used to play a more focal role in people's lives than Internet communication, via its many channels, plays for us today. This argument, I believe, would be correct – and the rest of this Chapter constitutes my attempt to show why. Before we procede, however, we must address a more specific criticism made by Peter-Paul Verbeek which, if valid, would disqualify letter-writing from classification as a focal practice.[10]

[10] We do not have space here to do justice to Verbeek's wide-ranging critique. The reader is encouraged to read further: Peter-Paul Verbeek, *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and*

Verbeek thinks that there is a "clear difference" between merely "pretechnological things" like water-wells and fireplaces (and, presumably, letters), which required the expenditure of effort in the pursuit of clear aims such as water and heat, and "focal things," which must have value in and of themselves. He argues:

> No doubt some dimension of meaning can be found in the encounter with pretechnological things, but it romanticizes the past to claim that the disappearance of things like drawing water and gathering wood involves a loss of meaningfulness. People did such tasks not because they were intrinsically valuable, but because of the ends these tasks served—ends that technologies can realize in a different way.... [F]ocal practices do not serve any specific goal. They do require dedication and effort, but they are not "useful" the way that drawing water and gathering firewood are; rather, they are meaningful in themselves, as practices such as playing the piano or cooking and eating an elaborate meal with others. (Verbeek 2005: 187)

According to this argument, dealings with pre-technological equipment are goal-oriented while focal practices take place for their own sake. This difference is crucial for Verbeek to make the next step in his critique: devices cannot directly threaten focal practices because it is nonsensical to think that something which takes place for its own sake could be done in a more efficient way. Focal practices are "never straightforwardly aimed at the realization of an end for which technology could provide a more efficient means. People do not run marathons for transportation purposes, nor prepare festive meals to satisfy their hunger" (187-88). From this it follows, says Verbeek, that "Within the context of Borgmann's theory, therefore, technology cannot directly erode focal practices. Focal practices are threatened only ... indirectly, by the device paradigm. If people give up focal practices, they do not do this because they use technological devices, but because they are entirely submerged in the consumptive attitude that the use of devices invites" (188).

For my part I am unconvinced that the categorisation of focal thing and practices as *solely* ends in themselves (never goal-directed) is sound. Borgmann (1984: 206) himself says that the pre-modern world "was engaging through and through", and prominently cites the fireplace as a focal thing: "a stove used to furnish more than mere warmth. It was a *focus*, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a center" (Borgmann 1984: 41-42, cf. 72, 196ff.). Just as heat and light are central reasons for maintaining a fireplace, moving is an essential part of what it is to run and nourishment is vital to the culture of the table (try hosting a dinner party at which you keep everyone

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Design, trans. Robert P. Crease (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2005) at chapter 6. For further criticism of Borgmann, see *Techne*'s special edition on Borgmann, 2002, 2(1), available online at http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/SPT/v6n1/, and the excellent collection *Technology and the Good Life?* (2000), Eric Higgs, Andrew Light and David Strong (eds), University of Chicago Press.

hungry). A focal practice, says Borgmann, "is a final and dominant end which alone truly matters and fulfils and which therefore assigns all other things and activities their rank and place" (Borgmann 1984: 211), which definition does not exclude completely goal-directed activity. I hence favour thinking focal things and practices to lie on a sliding scale with all other activities. Work and leisure can glide in and out of focus in the performance of a single task – and the skill and patience and effort of working activities can themselves be focal. Take, for example, this thesis. I am writing it because I want to be an academic and know that I need a PhD to make that happen. This thesis is goal-directed. But that goal-directedness does not tell the whole story. I am also writing it because I enjoy doing this, because writing about such matters is (most times) an inspiring and fulfilling way of spending my time, because I derive pleasure from the times at four in the morning when I get lost in a haze of argument and the words seem to speak themselves, filling a page, to be shaped and reshaped the next day. It is a focal activity. I do it partly as work, but also partly as enjoyment, and as I do it I affirm the person I want to be: I define what matters to me, I develop and stretch my skills, I show discipline in digging deep to try my best, and so on. Such an activity cannot be disqualified from being judged focal simply because I also get paid for it, just as literature is surely no less valid because authors have book deals, or the footballer's joy at scoring in the final minute is diminished because he earns millions each year to play. Thus a goal-directed activity such as letter-writing, which aims at communication, can nonetheless be focal where it shapes, fulfils and defines people's lives. Of course people did not walk to water-wells, or chop wood for the sake of it, and on inclement days no doubt such work could be an oppressive burden. Nevertheless, such pre-modern technological obligations did help form the solid contours of people's lives. I now move on to argue letter writing as a focal practice.

4.5 Hand/Writing: Technology and the Effort of Inscription

Let's start with the *act* of handwriting. Writing is, as Hélène Cixous (1997: 41) reminds us, a physical effort, engaging both body and mind. This engagement can differ in accordance with the tools we use. Handwriting and typing are distinct sensorimotor activities, involving differing patterns of visual/kinaesthetic interaction. One of the commonly-assumed benefits of writing by keyboard and computer is that it lessens the work of writing: typing is usually quicker and less effortful (though not for the two-finger typists of the world, of course), and the ability to delete and rearrange words and paragraphs at will makes for (relatively) easy revision. For Borgmann, the work of handwriting focuses the mind: we commit words "laboriously to paper," and such labour is "a guide to

concentration and responsibility" (Borgmann 1992: 105). Many writers have linked technological changes in the work of writing to changes in the product of writing (see, e.g., Chandler 1995; Haas 1996; Heim 1999; Kittler 1999: chap. 4). When Jessy Harden sat at her writing desk to pen an epistle to her sister, did the tools she was using incline her to craft her words with any more care than would the digital tools we use today? Some might say yes. For example, Donald Jackson, official scribe and calligrapher to Her Majesty's Crown Office, writes: "we all know that the "feel" of a writing instrument and the kind of mark it makes affect our attitude to the act of writing itself.... The feel of the pen, the feel of the paper and the flow of the ink affect the way our thoughts and feelings flow" (D. Jackson 1981: 170). Don Ihde, in a similar vein, says of learning to write with a dip-ink pen after years sat at a typewriter: "I rediscovered the "art" of such writing. I could not claim that the use of the dip pen "determined" that I write in the style of *belles lettres*, but the propensity was certainly there" (Ihde 1990: 141). While it is ultimately difficult (if not impossible) to draw general conclusions from such subjective accounts, testimony such as this at least hints at the affective engagement some people can feel for the pen as a focal thing, and indicates that the kinaesthetic experience of handwriting can work to draw care and attention to the act of writing.

We must not go too far, though. Firstly, our conceptions of the work of writing by hand as an effortful focal practice plainly do not apply to those correspondents who delegated this work to scribes or secretaries. This kind of dictation is obviously at odds with Borgmann's conception of effortful engagement. Secondly, much handwriting in the Romantic era simply was not concerned with prettiness; it was concerned with getting letters on a page as quickly and easily as possible. To this end, the main hand taught to girls at the time was the italic, imported from Italy in the sixteenth-century and thought to be, according to Martin Billingsley's *The Pen's Excellencie* (1618), "the easiest hand that is written with *Pen*' (qtd. Daybell 2009: 653). Jessy Harden's own sloping italics resemble nothing so much as a rainstorm of letters showering heavily over each closely written page. Her sister Agnes evidently worried over the legibility of her own handwriting, for in an entry of January 1803, Jessy tells her: "I can read your handwriting perfectly easy so do write us all (except my Father) in that Style. <u>He</u> is not fond of it" (15.01.03). The fact that Agnes was sanctioned to write everyone except her father in a less formal script may merely point to the bespectacled elder's failing eyesight, or it could demonstrate the social significance of handwriting style. As James Daybell (2009: 653) advises, it was perfectly acceptable for a writer of superior social status to scribe carelessly—members of the elite, for example, would often write with "scrawling almost illegible hands, a mark of "aristocratic

reserve"—but where a superior was being addressed, shabby penmanship was not tolerated. Like our dressing casually or formally as the occasion demands, writers often used different hands for differing tasks. In this, Romantic letter-writers were surely no different than modern texters or emailers, who might well use the slapdash spelling and clumsy grammar of txt-spk in laid-back messages to close friends, but who assume best epistolary behaviour when the context is more formal.

Regarding the process of revision and editing, we can say this: the difficulty of erasing ink from paper means we have cause to think more deeply *before* we start writing. Pressing a key on a computer keypad merely changes the colours of some pixels on a screen; the words hang suspended and are erasable at a stroke. It is much harder to remove marks from paper without making more marks, and perhaps a mess. Starting again means starting from scratch. For Borgmann, this fact means that before commencing a handwritten letter, one must "collect one's thoughts and world, and ... gather them into a succinct account" (Borgmann 1992: 105), the implication being that more easily accomplished modes of writing and speaking encourage unreflective and verbose chatter. Borgmann's suspicion seems to be supported by an influential study by Christina Haas (1989) which set 15 experienced writers the task of writing "persuasive" letters by both computer and by pen and paper. Haas found that when writing with pen and paper, writers tended to plan more, both before beginning writing and before beginning their revisions, and that the written products tended to be both shorter and of better quality than their computer-written counterparts (Haas 1989: 149-50). Haas' work is not conclusive, however. Other comparative studies of computer- and hand-written letters have found no real differences between the two in either planning time or product quality (Card *et al*. 1984; Gould 1981). Moreover, we should not underestimate the amount of drafting and redrafting that often occurred in epistolary culture, particularly where social superiors or unfamiliar persons were being addressed. For example, when Thomas De Quincey finally plucked up the courage to write to his hero William Wordsworth in 1803—a letter which would change the course of his life—he first drafted it in private diary on 13th May, working and reworking it for more than two weeks before finally, on 31st May, sending what Robert Morrison (2009: 88-89) calls an "augmented, and in parts, thoroughly revised version."

4.6 Skill, Attention and the Epistolary Art

Whenever a writer sat down to pen a letter in the Romantic era, they drew upon, and enacted, a tradition of epistolary theory reaching back at least to Cicero (106-43 BC). This

tradition was manifested most visibly in an abundance of letter-writing manuals, which furnished the unacquainted with models and formulae. These manuals reached their peak of popularity around the mid nineteenth-century (Chartier 1997: 3), yet they had already become one of the most diffuse genres of early modern print (J. G. Altman 1988: 106). They largely took their cue from classical rhetoric, setting strict rules for structure and composition. Erasmus' foundational *Opus de Conscribendis Epistolis* (1522) prescribed a strict letter-writing formula: *exordium*, *narratio*, *proposition*, *confirmatio*, *coniuratio* and *peroration* (Robertson 1942: 10). Through English language works like William Fulwood's *The Enimie of Idlenesse* (1568) and Angel Day's *The English Secretarie* (1586), which relied heavily on Erasmus' formulations, the rhetorical strategy gained in popularity and, though broadened and softened during the seventeenth-century to appeal to the needs of an emergent mercantile class, it remained the foundation of many works of epistolary instruction.

The question of the extent and nature of the influence of these manuals upon epistolary practice remains open, however. While some believe that manuals provided "a single standard language, method and culture of polite communication" which "created common ground for ... written commerce" (Bannet 2005: x; cf. Deane 2003: 401), others believe that their significance is too often overstated (Brant 2006: 10; Chartier 1997: 5; Whyman 2009: 45). Their impact undoubtedly differed according to social factors such as levels of education, social rank and gender. The ideal picture of the Erasmian rhetorician might be true of those privileged boys who, via grammar school and university, had learned Latin and formal rhetoric and imitated the letters of Cicero. However, it is likely not so apt a picture for girls, excluded from the universities and whose letter-writing literature, when it arrived, often subordinated their role as writers to their social function as mothers, wives and daughters (Brant 2006: 40). It is even less likely true of those lower down the social scale, for whom the courtly language and manners of the letter-writing manuals would likely have marked them out as fakes to their friends. Susan Whyman, in her exhaustive examination of the lives and letters of lower-order folk, finds that the prescriptions and models of the manuals bear scant resemblance to the mass of plain, informal letters she discovered. She says: "The writing master and his copybooks, not Cicero and his epistles, haunted the pages of lower- and middling-sort letters" (Whyman 2009: 45).

The relationship between theory and practice is never simple, and in addition to these links to gender and class differences, we should also keep in mind that many probably learnt much of their letter-writing craft, such as it was, from the increasingly popular epistolary

novels, and perhaps even more, by observing the manners and mannerisms of each others' letters. While it is true to say that epistolary choices were conditioned by the rank, gender, and strength of the bond between writer and reader, we must not assume that polished conventions determined polite practice. As Clare Brant says, "the definition of a good letter was ultimately one gave its reader pleasure, "and the simplest, crudest, most spontaneous letter could do that as effectively as the most polished and arguably more sincerely" (Brant 2006: 44). In everyday familiar correspondence between equals, such as that of Jessy and Agnes, we often find the informality and lack of deference that confirms real closeness. Jessy Harden's journals allowed no room for any "honoured margins" – blank space was too precious, and every page was filled from top to bottom. Her love and respect for her sister was too readily apparent to need rehearsal through epistolary convention. We should also remember, so as not to over-idealise epistolary practice, that any online practice today no sooner creates a little buzz than it spawns a range of 'how to' manuals. A quick search on *Amazon.co.uk* using the exact phrase "how to blog" returns 361 books, for example, all published in the last ten years. These books may not reach back to Cicero (although this may just indicate a gap in the market), but they seek to define clear rules and normative standards for this still emergent practice, setting forth prescriptions for form, content and style.

As Samuel Johnson argued in his article on epistolarity for *The Rambler* in 1751, "letters are written on all subjects, in all states of mind," and so cannot be reduced to universal rules or essential characteristics: "a letter has no peculiarity but its form" (Johnson 1816: 71). But in an anxious world of correctness and manners, writers still yearned for direction. Erasmus formulated his strategy in 1522. The writer was to consider carefully their subject matter, and give it voice and shape by watchful examination of their relationship to their addressee:

> [The letter-writer] should first consider very carefully the topics on which they have decided to write, then be well acquainted with the nature, character, and moods of the person to whom the letter is being written and their own standing with him in favour, influence, or services rendered. From the accurate examination of these things they should derive, so to speak, the living model of the letter. (Erasmus 1985: 74)

Erasmus' emphasis upon the writer's own sense of propriety as the final judge of correctness hardly leaves the fretful scribbler any better off though, and hence anxieties over the acceptability of letters remained high. Even missives between friends would often have "uncertain beginnings and apologetic ends," as Clare Brant puts it (Brant 2006: 35).

Jessy Harden manages to seem both apologetic and unashamed when she calls her writing: "a mere statement of facts without any decorations of Style, which I never study at all as you know" (27.01.07). Worrying over "sameness" in her letters (07.05.03), she took ironic pride in offering "at least quantity for quality" (early 11.03). Nonetheless, while filling her letters with lengthy recitations of the comings and goings of her friends and neighbours, she fretted: "as you know none of the party except our own Family, writing about strangers cannot be interesting which indeed is the fault of all my Journals but what else could I fill them with [?]" (10.05.05). Jessy's self-effacing acknowledgement of her letters' deficiencies often came alongside complaints about her lack of the time and space needed to write well. She often wrote late at night, and regretted never finding "time enough to scribble" (12.10.06). Life always seemed to get in the way: "I think this is the fourth attempt I have made to-day, so frequent are my interruptions, what with Children, Callers & domestic vocations" (27.01.07), while the distractions of young motherhood sometimes made for errors, her letters being "written in a hurry & frequently with the child sucking" (23.07.07).

The quotidian registers of local gossip, passing fancies and family business which make up Jessy's letters, and the distracted and weary circumstances under which they were often written, speak not of some ideal rhetorical strategy, but of a woman who desperately wanted to maintain a link with her distant sister, and did so by the ritual exchange of personal writings which were often written just for the sake of the gesture. The ideal rhetoric of the letter-writing manuals might resemble some real-life cases—the letters of Samuel Johnson or Cicero for example—but most letters did not strive for art, and still less reached it. Arguing the rank of Romantic era correspondence as a focal practice, we must nonetheless be careful not to idealise it or overlook the distractions and happenstances of the lives within which it blossomed. Things cannot always go well. We have off-days, and just as some dinner parties will be boring or boorish, some letters will be dashed off for the sake of it. Mere contact with "focal" things does not guarantee their being able to gather and light up the web of contextual relations we inhabit. But such misfires only contribute to the magical feeling we get on those days when things do go well, when the commanding presence of focal things centres and illuminates our lives, gathering our minds to the ways we are intimately and intricately tethered to our world and its people, nature, culture and traditions. On such occasions, focal things give us a glimpse of what is meaningful in our lives. Jessy Harden did, at times, experience this centring power through her letters. She obviously valued propriety and reflective detachment in her letters, as is shown by her railing against a Mrs Shannon, who had written a "very melancholy account" of some

unsaid event which had upset a friend: "it is very thoughtless in people to write when their feelings are so strongly affected, as it always distresses those their letters are addressed to without being of any possible use" (14.12.06). More tellingly, in the midst of some of the most stressful events of her young life, Jessy Harden sought refuge at her writing desk. In November 1803, overcome by a litany of fears, including unrest in Ireland, the resumption of hostilities with France, concerns for her absent sister, and her own newlywed worries about making a home, she sat to "dedicate this Eve[nin]g to my book, & hope to have my thoughts more settled before tomorrow" (06.11.03). A few months later, in "the midst of confusion," packing her possessions to move from Edinburgh to her new family home at Brathay Hall in the English Lakes, addressing her sister is both succour and sanctuary: "I shall go down to Queen St. as soon as I look over all the things to see how much breakage I have to pay for, but I just sat down to write a letter on purpose to rest myself a little before I proceed, having been on foot since 7 this mor[nin]g – packing &c – & not in Bed till past one" (21.04.04). She even sat to write a letter to Agnes on the very morning of her wedding, thinking her sister should "allow me <u>some</u> credit for writing you at such a moment, indeed I was excessively surprised at my own composure all the Mor[nin]g" (02.01.03). On such occasions, I would argue that letter-writing functioned as a classic example of a focal practice for Jessy, centring her life and unifying ends and means, achievement and enjoyment, competence and consummation, and rewarding her bodily and social engagement by illuminating and affirming the manifold relationships which bound her to her world.

4.7 Patience in the Wait for Words

Compared to today's speed-of-light communication systems, letters move at a languid pace deserving of the epithet 'snail-mail'. At the turn of the nineteenth-century, while carriage was relatively fast on the Coach roads, it was much less so to more off-the-way destinations where the mail travelled country lanes by mail-cart, or in the boxes of post boys on foot or horse, an inequality lamented by the English religious writer Hannah More in a letter sent in 1787 to the art historian Horace Walpole: "of ... the annihilation of space, I cannot partake; mail-coaches, which come to others, come not to me. Letters and newspapers, now that they travel in coaches like gentlemen and ladies, come not within ten miles of my hermitage" (W. Roberts 1834: 270). Getting letters overseas took much longer. Jessy Allen's letter-journals would be given over to someone going to London, to be dropped in at the India House for carriage across the seas aboard one of the East Indiamen merchant ships, a long and arduous voyage that took between three and nine

months. While Jessy sent each letter knowing it would be a "Lazy Traveller" (12.08.02), she also knew it might not arrive at all, "in consequence of Storms and Wars" (24.01.08). A compelling example of the former is the loss of a journal aboard the wrecked *Earl of Abergavenny* in 1805, which ran aground and sank fewer than three kilometres off the Dorset coast in heavy weather. This loss is made particularly poignant since the Captain of the wreck, among the more than 250 dead, was John Wordsworth, younger brother of the poet; the Hardens were among those who visited the Wordsworths to pay their respects in the dismal days after the incident. Letters were also lost when ships were sunk or taken by privateers, such as with *Lord Nelson*, captured and then recovered in 1803, whose letters were nonetheless gone (27.09.03). Despite the uncertainties of wind, waves and war, Jessy was thankful and somewhat amazed that so much of her correspondence did get through: "I think with you that many of our letters must be lost as so many accidents have happened to ships both outward and homeward bound but on the whole I think we are lucky in getting so many" (18.12.10). Such losses as did happen were not incidental though: a lost letter from John Harden to his unmet sister-in-law was mistaken for omission by Agnes, leaving Jessy straining to explain her husband's "sincere regard" (04.05.04). There were more than just feelings at stake, but money too, since Robert Allan was charged with investing the spoils of George Ranken's colonial adventure. The risks of loss and delays in transmission, with their attendant potentials for misunderstandings or slights, required a keeping track of the flow of messages. Jessy would mention letters sent and received in her journals, but this duty fell more frequently to the patriarch, Robert Allan, who would faithfully record all letters sent, summarise their contents and advise how they travelled.

The time it took for messages to reach took its toll. Jessy complained of letters being "stale" by the time they were received, though "still pleasant to receive in spite of that" (05.05.06). The worries of war were never far, and Jessy fretted for the safety of her sister and her husband. On the 5th April 1805, she wrote of "shocking accounts from India. I hope in GOD my brother is safe ... but we need not hope for letters from you soon to relieve our anxiety as yours never arrive till long after public news." Knowing of calamities long before her sister's letters could set her mind at rest left Jessy helplessly anticipating each fleet of Indian ships. Her disappointment is palpable when she records, on 20th February 1805, the fact that no letters have arrived despite "a good many ships ... arrived from Bengal". Worse, news—when it did arrive—sometimes only amplified her anxiety: "We often don't know what we wish for, I at last got a letter from you on Sunday night, but such a sad one, the perusal of it was quite distressing ... return home if you can't get some permanent situation immediately, to live in such a dreadful state of suspense &

Ranken suffering so many hardships is paying too dear for any fortune" (28.02.05). On one occasion, following the resumption of hostilities with the French after the breakdown of the Peace of Amiens, Jessy and her family did not hear from Agnes for over a year. On New Year's Day of 1804, Jessy had sadly noted that it was eleven months since the date of Agnes' last letter, and over the course of the next five months her anxiety and anticipation built feverishly. Jessy's troubled dreams became dominated by her absent sister (26.01.04), she kept up her ritual of writing the letter-journals, although "not with much spirit for want of letters from you" (11.03.04), and was frequently agitated and disappointed by the arrival of a ship or news of army engagements in Bengal. It was not just Jessy, the whole family suffered similarly and together, as is shown by Robert Allan (21.02.04) and Jessy's sister Catherine (21.04.04) both recording their own helpless apprehension in the journal. Then, on 28th April 1804: "At last, letters from my dearest Nancy." The following day, a Sunday, "a great bundle more letters" is delivered, and Jessy records her elation: "how delightful, I am quite happy" and tells of how their excited poring over the precious letters of her and her sisters even stopped them going to church.

As Robert Allan calculated, the family had not heard from Agnes for a total of 14 months and 10 days (03.05.04). Letters from this backlog would continue to trickle through for the rest of that year, with one letter dated July 1803 arriving a full seventeen months after it had been sent (05.12.04). Such a huge delay in the receipt of correspondence is extraordinary, of course, but people's psychological and social dependence on the post was not only confined to such extreme examples. Letters were the only way to communicate over distance, and people of all ranks were hence heavily reliant on them. Susan Whyman gives several examples of the "intensely felt language" used by people awaiting mail, and argues that the "psychological upset caused by not receiving mail was a sign of how much it was valued" (Whyman 2009: 60). As she says in an earlier passage of her book: "[I]ntense demands for more letters disclose an overwhelming dependence upon mail. When, people asked, would their letters arrive? Why had they been delayed? Had the writer forgotten the person who desperately waited for mail? The reason for this intense focus was that letter-writing was important to both senders and receivers" (Whyman 2009: 18). Such emotional dependence is a recurrent motif in Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journals, with her frequent exclamations of "No letters!" At times this reliance comes close to the comical, for instance in her melodramatic cry, "Oh! that I had a letter from William!," mere hours after the poet's departure for Yorkshire (D. Wordsworth 2002: 2). Such affective reliance mirrors modern-day concerns about compulsive checking of email and social networking sites (Hair *et al*. 2007; T. Jackson *et al*. 2001; Mazmanian *et al*.

2006), but are qualitatively different not only in the fact that the post would be delivered no more than four times per week, while Internet communications arrive continuously, but also because it took a much longer time for familiar letters to get through – days or even months (outside the cities at least), instead of seconds. Can we make a case for saying that this protracted transmission time contributed to an appreciation of familiar letters as focal things, which is diminished by the speed of modern communications?

In his admirable little book *On Waiting* (2008), Harold Schweizer points out that we commonly malign waiting as something at best merely "boring" (1), and at worst an indignity associated with the "weak and powerless" (6). Contra this equation of waiting with wasting time, Schweizer argues that the anticipation and agitation of waiting can bring into a new light quotidian things that have sunk invisibly into the background of the "habitual context" of our lives, thus making us also appreciate ourselves anew: "the person who waits sees objects – and in them herself – in their eerie specificity, as the strange thing that a thing is when it is 'cut out' of the whole" (39). Waiting is always a waiting for something, and its duration allows us to concentrate on the object of our desire, giving us time to think on what we are waiting for, to mull over what is meaningful to us, and to examine why. Such meditative temporal space helps us truly value the object when it finally arrives. The light-speed logic of our wired world demands "everything, now," but this immediate fulfilment of desire only begets more desire and dulls the reward of gratification, bringing us close to the nihilistic will-to-power of the later Heidegger's *Gestell.* We become so consumed in consuming that we never have time to wonder why we want these things in the first place. As Peter Brooks (1992: 111) says in relation to narrative fiction, "fulfilment must be delayed so that we can understand it in relation to origin and to desire."

Returning to our opening image of the little prince and the aviator walking the desert in search of water, we can see that the joy and depth of feeling they experience when at last a well is discovered was—at least in part—a product of the desire nurtured in them by each angst-filled minute and hour of walking through the sands. As Borgmann says, "the reward of patience is vigor when, having endured the duress of reality, our strength is graced and confirmed by real splendour" (Borgmann 1992: 125-26). With this 'patience is a virtue' moral in mind, we could claim that the time people spent waiting for letters imbued them with some greater affective power when they at last arrived. Waiting for mail was part of its ritual, a time in which to look forward to the response, to wonder what the other would say, to build anticipation which would be rewarded by emotional release when at last the

letter came. To an extent, this is correct—I certainly have no doubt that when Agnes' India letters did finally get through after fourteen months, the spiritual release was something awesome in the lives of Jessy and her family—but I would question whether this joy could have made up for the agony of not knowing for so long. Jessy Harden was not just waiting, she was suffering. The alleviation of misery is something Albert Borgmann welcomes, of course, but nonetheless he maintains that overt misery is just being replaced by wretchedness of a more insidious kind:

> [W]hile information technology is alleviating overt misery, it is aggravating a hidden sort of suffering that follows from the slow obliteration of human substance. It is the misery of persons who lose their well-being not to violence or oblivion, but to the dilation and attenuation they suffer when the moral gravity and material density of things is overlaid by the lightness of information. People are losing their character and definition in the levity of cyberspace. (Borgmann 1999b: 232)

Borgmann's concern is that in our *everything-now* culture, things lack the robustness to challenge us, to make us earn our rewards through patience and perseverance. "A hyperreal setting," he says, "fails to provide the tasks and blessings that call forth patience and vigor in people. Its insubstantial and disconnected glamour provokes disorientation and distraction" (Borgmann 1992: 96). Sherry Turkle (2011: 163) comments wisely: "When media are always there, waiting to be wanted, people lose a sense of choosing to communicate." As messages flow swiftly and easily into our email and mobile phone inboxes, to be checked intermittently and distractedly, they command a less focal place in our lives, we are less grateful and attentive when they arrive. Letters moved at a more measured pace, and were more naturally conducive to care and consideration. They were an *event*. The misfortune of the device paradigm is that it tends to displace practices which incorporate these qualities with ones which lack them.

4.8 Effort, Collusion and the Costs of Carriage

In the Romantic era, postal costs were high and got higher. The wars with France saw the costs of carriage double over the fifteen years from 1797-1812, to the highest England had ever seen (Milne 2010: 42). This while wages remained more or less stable for many workers (E. H. Hunt 1986: 965-66). Dorothy's Grasmere journal notes of payments made for letters in 1801-02 suggest that the Wordsworths were paying only slightly less for their letters each year than they were the rent on their home, Dove Cottage.[11] Until the "penny

[11] The rent on Dove Cottage was £8 per year. [David Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York, NY: Methuen & Co, 1987) at 155.] On 27th January 1802, Dorothy records having "Paid £1-3-3 for letters come since December 1st". That she does not comment on this being

post" reforms of 1840, delivery cost was usually paid by the recipient and charged by the sheet. If more than one sheet was suspected, letters would be checked by being held up to the light of a candle and charged at double or triple rates. Letters with multiple sheets were accordingly taboo (Whyman 2009: 63), and if a writer overran they would often just turn the completed pages sideways and continue writing, a practice known as 'crossing' or 'cross-writing,' whose obscure result Keats (2002: 123) thought resembled a "rat-trap," and which remains no less cryptic to the modern eye than for the character in Jane Austen's *Emma* who chides another that they "will be put to it to make out all that checker-work" (Austen 2006: 118). Encumbering the recipient with the cost of postage gave correspondence a financial bottom line. The simple test of a letter's worth was whether it gave its reader information or pleasure enough to justify paying for it, and this fact goes partly to explain writers' anxieties. A hilarious letter from William Wordsworth requesting a refund from his postmaster shows how the recipient's paying for postage placed a demand for relevance upon the writer. In Wordsworth's absence, a "preposterous" letter had arrived from "some foolish Person in America" which Wordsworth thought unworthy of his money. He entreated the unnamed postmaster: "I am inclined to think you will not deem it right that a Man should be compelled to pay at this rate for the senseless impudence of others" (De Selincourt and Moorman 1969: 575). While the ire of the poet made pay for the banalities of others may seem merely quaint, the recipient's burden of expense could have grave consequences for the impoverished. Milne (2010: 48) tells of the less well-off pawning possessions to pay for letters and of people who were unable to pay being left unaware of family bereavements. This demand for relevance seems lessened today now that talk has become, in the most literal way, cheap. We can rattle off some unexamined words on any subject we know nothing about and post them immediately, at seemingly no cost, to a public space. Email messages can be cross-posted and forwarded to hundreds or thousands at a stroke. Junk-mail and circulars litter our letter-boxes, ringing telephones herald telemarketers, and our email inboxes overflow with spam invitations to share the riches of Nigerian kings. All these facts speak of a diminished concern that the recipient of a message should actually be interested in what we have to say.

High tariffs meant that all ranks developed strategies to reduce or avoid postal costs, often relying on their networks of friends and acquaintances, or "social capital". Before Rowland Hill's mid nineteenth-century postal reforms, MPs enjoyed free postage through franking

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an unusually large amount for two months letters, and that 21st November 1801 shows payment of a similar amount ("payed one pound & 4d for letters"), suggests their annual expenditure on letters was somewhere in the region of six or seven pounds. See: Dorothy Wordsworth, 'The Grasmere Journal, 1800-1803', in Pamela Woof (ed.), *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-140 at 39, 59.

privileges, and this benefit was habitually extended to friends and family. Access to parliamentary franking reached down to all but the lowest orders, and was so widespread that in 1777, 46 percent of all postal traffic was being carried for free, estimated to have cost the crown £84,000 in lost revenue (Milne 2010: 47). Letters would often wait till a frank could be had and people might bundle many letters within a franked sheet. The inventor William Strutt summed the general attitude: "A letter sent by post is a subject of apology, a relative's frank a rare gift" (qtd. Whyman 2009: 65). The familial connections of the then-unmarried Jessy Allan, whose father was a prominent Edinburgh banker and newspaper proprietor, evidently gave her such access, though it was not always reliable. Having completed a journal, she laments: "there is no franking at present so it must lay till I hear of some person going to London" (30.06.02). As this comment suggests, where franks were not available, friends and others—from servants to hawkers—were frequently co-opted as couriers. Jessy's journals are peppered with the names of acquaintances she had courier her journals to the India House in London: a Dr Hare, a Mr McDowall, her Uncle Sandy, a Captain Smith, a Mr Knox's "Hindoo" servant, and so on. The reciprocal and communal nature of such carriage is shown by the Harden family's own carrying of letters from the Wordsworths in the Lakes to the Laings, booksellers in Edinburgh. On October 10th 1823, Dorothy Wordsworth writes: "A neighbour of ours is going to Edinburgh next week, and as I know you are always pleased at hearing of us I shall trouble her with a letter, to be put into the post office at E[dinburgh], and, unless you write to me before Mrs Harden leaves your neighbourhood, I hope you will send me a letter by her, with a full account of yourself" (Hill and De Selincourt 1978: 222-24). Twelve years later, Jessy's son Allan carries a letter to Edinburgh from Mary Wordsworth, requesting the delivery of "two little books" procured from John Wilson ("Christopher North") by the return carriage of Agnes Ranken: "Mr Allen Harden, who is the Bearer of this, will I hope give you Mrs Rankin's address and mention the time of her departure so that you may send the parcel whither he directs" (Hill and De Selincourt 1982: 111-12).

Familiar letters acted as focal things by demanding close social networks; the sending of letters necessitated strong contacts and acted to bring people together. Whether with postmasters, MPs, neighbours, or even hawkers, communities of people had to cooperate to move these documents around. This is simply not the situation today. To send an SMS or an email, I need only the proper technology and a connection with a telecommunications company. We have delegated the effort and engagement of having to collude in the transmission of messages to multinational corporations, whose technological infrastructure channels our messages anonymously, easily and instantly to their addressee. Letters had

what we might call a *secondary sociality* – the loss of which is certainly one way in which our "connected" society has become paradoxically disconnected.

4.9 Involvement, Orientation, and the Postal Service

Today, with wireless Internet, I do not even have to leave my armchair to check my email or social networking messages, but in the Romantic era people actually had to faithfully follow the postal schedules, leave their houses and speak to people to send messages. Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere journals, kept from 1800-1803, beautifully capture her immersion in the Lakes landscape and her interactions within its community as she faithfully walked the scenic miles to Rydale or Ambleside to collect her post two or three times each week. The tidal rhythms of the postal service, necessitating effortful engagement and community involvement, helped to orient people's lives. All ranks and orders would write on specific days, closely following the postal schedules to maximise their chances to communicate (Whyman 2009: 59). Often the day would be devoted only to letters, as Jessy was one Saturday having obtained a parliamentary frank: "Saturday I was employed almost the whole day writing as I had a frank to fill for Dublin which is rather a rare opportunity therefore I like to take advantage of it by not sending any blank paper" (15.11.11). We can gain some appreciation of the depth of people's knowledge of the postal service from a prodigious letter from Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Daniel Stuart, editor of the *Morning Post* newspaper, in January 1809:

> Tho' I trust as well as hope, that I shall receive a letter from you by to night's post, yet we cannot get it till ten o/clock at night—and then only by walking to Rydale (8 miles from our house); and can answer it so as to leave Kendal by the Tuesday's Post (for all Monday the Post loiters at Hawkshead) only by writing, as many lines as we can persuade the man to stay minutes, in the cottage at which he leaves the Letters. We receive Letters four times a week—the Letters of one post on Tuesday, of one post on Wednesday, of one on Friday, and of three posts on Sunday Night—so that a Letter written from London on Friday reaches us as soon as one written on Wednesday or Thursday. Therefore if you are writing to us by Wednesday's Post, and could recollect to direct that Letter to Keswick (Greta Hall) we should receive it by the Carrier with our Newspapers on Saturday instead of Sunday Night—and save a day in the answering. (S. T. Coleridge 1959: 162-63)

Albert Borgmann argues that there is "a problem of orientation in the technologically advanced countries," due to "the loss of the traditional points of reference" (Borgmann 1984: 79). Where in the Romantic era getting the post was a discrete ritual which commanded a presence in people's lives by the fact of its hegemony and its fixed schedule, these days our communiqués trickle through incessantly. Always on call, we find ourselves

distractedly and compulsively checking our mobile phones, email, *Facebook*, and all the other many avenues of communication we leave open, just in case there is something there waiting for us. As I sit writing at my computer, I often find myself drifting onto *Facebook* and email almost reflexively. It is certainly not a focal practice – I would liken it more to looking out of the window, done for the sake of distraction, a fleeting diversion from the flow of work. It is this sort of indistinct, distracted browsing that Borgmann attacks when he denounces modern technology for its "debilitating tendency" to "scatter our attention" (Borgmann 1984: 208).

Borgmann believes that the seeming connection fostered by modern telecommunications is merely superficial, and that such devices in fact disconnect us from each other: " If everyone is indifferently present regardless of where one is located on the globe, no one is commandingly present" (Borgmann 1992: 105). As said in the previous Chapter, in our wired world people become increasingly available anywhere, anytime, without need for ritual, ceremony, or effort. The commanding presence of correspondence is diminished because it is so easily accomplished. Without the investment of time and effort in keeping in touch, our social ties come to mean less to us. On this, Borgmann surely overstates the case. In the Romantic age, the post commanded a presence in people's lives simply by the fact of its being the only means of communicating over distance. We now have many more channels of communication before us, and perhaps the effort we would have invested in letter writing is now fractured and spread out over a range of media—SMS, the telephone, social networking, blogs, etc. This may indeed mean that there has been a diminution of the value and attention we assign to individual acts of communication, but when we consider all the benefits of being able to be in touch so easily, in so many ways, we might think this is a price worth paying. As this issue will be examined in detail in the next Chapter, I will not labour it here, moving on to our final section which examines some of the ways in which familiar letters acted as focal things to gather people together.

4.10 Togetherness and Community in the Commerce of Letters

If we conjure the archetypal image of the letter-writer, we might come close to Gabriel Metsu's painting "Man Writing a Letter" (1662-1665), where a handsome young gentleman sits solitary at his writing desk, poised over his page in quiet deliberation. But this picture is not complete—not only because letters were very often written in less serene surrounds, as discussed earlier—but because letter-writing could also be a close collaborative activity. Academic interest about Dorothy Wordsworth creative role in the

writing of William's poetry has grown over the years, but in their letters we have solid evidence to suggest that the two actively collaborated. On Monday 31st May 1802, William Wordsworth received a "complementary & critical" letter of introduction and admiration from John Wilson, perhaps his first letter from a literary devotee. Over the course of three Dove Cottage days, a lengthy response of around 2650 words was drafted and crafted. The letter is signed by William, and yet Dorothy twice refers in her journal to its writing as a mutual enterprise: "*We* began the letter to John Wilson"; "*We* were writing the letter" (D. Wordsworth 2002: 106, my emphasis). Since the only extant copy of the letter, from which all transcriptions derive, is a draft in Wordsworth's own hand, it is plain that Dorothy was not involved in any merely secretarial capacity. I regard Dorothy's description of the writing as mutual as good grounds for agreeing with the judgment of William Knight that the letter was "a joint production," with at least "some parts being suggested by Dorothy" (Knight 1907: 435n). Given that this letter is rightly regarded as among the most important to bear Wordsworth's signature (Hayden 1987: 33), this (if true) is no slim fact. That it was not a singular event is shown by other references in Dorothy Wordsworth's journals to joint authorship, e.g., "We wrote to Calvert" (D. Wordsworth 2002: 64).

When not actively collaborating, family members might still work the pen for each other as a sign of affection. In June 1803, as a pregnant Jessy Harden sat stitching for her unborn child, John Harden started to write a little something in the letter-journal for Agnes: "As Jess is now resting ... I cannot do better than sit beside her, and whilst she is plying her needle for <u>some body</u> she never saw, I may ply my pen for one I have never seen." Soon though, it seems Jessy wants to talk and John Harden sighs: "So much for self. I shall now give you her own words by dictation" (05.06.03). Wordsworth made fulsome use of the women in his life as his amanuenses, particularly during his later years when his eyesight ailed. His daughter Dora considered it her honour to act in such capacity, but her mediation in the writing process was not unproblematic. In a letter written to his friend (and Dora's future husband) Edward Quillinan in 1830, Wordworth dictates to his daughter, who objects when the words she is writing begin to concern her own illnesses ("yellow as a gipsy and as thin as a Lath"), interjecting: "Is it not too bad to *insist* upon *my* writing this" (Hill and De Selincourt 1979: 203, original emphasis).

Even where letter-writing did not bring people physically together, they united more than just sender and receiver. Although the Harden letter-journals were mainly Jessy's work, many other members of the family would add to them as the inclination and opportunity befell them, weaving a rich and family narrative. Picking up the journal, her father,

husband and sisters would read over what had gone before and respond or comment. The final page would usually be respectfully left for the patriarch, Robert Allan. Reading over the whole, he would add small notes, corrections and annotations. Such familial practice seems not atypical. Susan Whyman mentions that the Follows, a family of Quakers writing in the late eighteenth-century, passed family letters by hand, each adding their news along the way (Whyman 2009: 65). Similarly, Earle advises of cases of familiar letters passed around family members for the addition of codas and postscripts prior to posting (Earle 1999: 7). Such documents were family conversations; they were a material focal point which, through circulation, brought dispersed kin together. This unification was only possible through letters, and when we listen to the words of Jessy Harden mourning the distance which separated her family, we can get some sense of the affective power these documents must have held:

> How we are scattered today my dear Nan, I wonder what you are about although not what the subject of your thoughts are. It is I know exactly what all the family though distant from each other are thinking of, I mean, <u>each other</u>. My father has only Kate at home, you in India, Tom & Helen in Ireland & I here, how happy should we all be to collect together again, well that day <u>will</u> come I hope before long ... (01.01.05)

Just as letters often circulated prior to reaching the hand of their addressee, their arrival did not always mark the end of their travels. It was common practice to pass letters on to those who might be interested, usually without the advanced consent of their author. Such is made explicit by Jessy Harden: "As to your letters I am quite of the opinion that they ought to be equally open to all the family, & allow them to open mine whenever I happen to be absent" (04.05.04), and indeed, Jessy's journals abound with letters received second- or third-hand: "I was very much pleased by the perusal of a letter Helen had got from Kate of yours" (11.07.07). Such circulation was even made virtue of, like in the winter months of 1810/11, when John Harden left his family in the Lakes to take up a post as editor of his father-in-law's newspaper the *Caledonian Mercury*. Harden would write about his Edinburgh adventures in letters addressed to both Jessy and Agnes, sending each letter first to Jessy in the Lakes, who would then slip them into the journals for Agnes (10.12.10). Dorothy Wordsworth even reused a letter received from Thomas De Quincey that she thought otherwise "not worth sending," cross-writing over it to William in London. In addition to saving paper, she thought, this practice might save her brother "the trouble of enquiring after the writer" (De Selincourt and Moorman 1969: 4).

As such practices indicate, letters were largely viewed as communal property and this is further revealed in their public performance. Letter reading was not just a solitary activity. In an austere age before the easy amusements of radio, television or the Internet, people turned to each other for entertainment, and in addition to rounds of parlour games, crafts and music-making, it was common for family and friends to come together to read aloud. The Hardens would often read a novel aloud by turns for entertainment (05.12.06), and Jessy notes deriving particular pleasure from entertaining her friends by reading aloud Agnes' travel-journal kept aboard her India voyage (27.01.07), and Charles Lloyd's reading from a manuscript copy of Coleridge's yet unstaged play "Osorio" (01.12.04). In the Wordsworth household, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton and the proud poet's own work were given frequent airings (D. Wordsworth 2002). Given that communal reading was common, and that letters were such a focus of people's lives, it seems natural that the reading of letters should be a focal thing of family communion, and so they were. Rebecca Earle (1999: 7) perhaps overstates the case when she claims that "[l]etter reading ... was until quite recently an entirely social affair," but nonetheless, the extent to which these documents were written with their pubic performance in mind should not be underestimated. It was more usual for letter-writers to specify what was *not* for public consumption, as seen in the breathless disclaimer which starts off a lengthy and confidential letter from a youthful Dorothy Wordsworth to her cousin: "None of this is to be read aloud, so be upon your guard!" (De Selincourt 1935: 93). At Dove Cottage, letters were given voice in touching moments of unity: William's tenderly reading a letter at a stricken Dorothy's bedside; Dorothy reading to William from a letter she has just written to Mary Hutchinson before sending; William's rushing Dorothy outside to read letters by the moonlight (D. Wordsworth 2002: 109, 10, 19). In the Harden house, Agnes' India letters were prized for their foreign intrigue and were similarly communal, to the extent that Agnes was concerned who saw them (04.05.04). We do not indulge in this practice so much anymore, which is to be regretted. Today, as Albert Borgmann observes, "reading is overwhelmingly silent and private" – though we might still read to our children or quote sections of the newspaper, television and radio have diminished the kinds of regular episodes of communal reading we find in the Harden household. Borgmann mourns this disappearance, and quotes sympathetically from the author Norman Maclean's recollections of his childhood to give a sense of what is lost:

> After breakfast and again after what was called supper, my father read to us from the Bible or from some religious poet such as Wordsworth; then we knelt by our chairs while my father prayed. My father read beautifully. He avoided the homiletic singsong most ministers fall into when they look inside the Bible or edge up to

> poetry, but my father overread poetry a little so that none of us, including him, could miss the music.... I need hardly tell you ... that families no longer read to each other. I am sure it leaves a sound-gap in family life. (Qtd. Borgmann 1999b: 90-91)

4.11 Conclusion

Focal practices derive from tradition and call for our patience, skill, effort and involvement in the activities which challenge our bodies and our minds. They require our commitment and attention, and reward us with meaningful engagement with our world, our society, our culture and ourselves. They command a presence in our lives, but give our lives meaning by orienting and anchoring us, forging and illuminating the bonds between us, our world and its people. On page 202 of *Technology and the Character of Everyday Life*, Borgmann says that "to elaborate the context of focal events is to grant them their proper eloquence." Such has been the aim of this Chapter in relation to the practice of letter-writing in the Romantic age. This Chapter has shown the ways in which the practice of exchanging familiar letters was an effortful, bodily activity, which required skill, sensibility, and knowledge of tradition in their authorship, demanding respect and relevance of the writer; called for patience, vigour and attention in the wait for words but rewarded it by making their arrival an *event*; necessitated rich and meaningful community involvements in their transmission; commanded a presence which oriented the rhythm of people's lives; and acted as a material focus for the gathering of people in meaningful communion through the course of their writing, reading, and circulation. Compared to our contemporary, device-led constellation of easy means of communicating, the familiar letter was a recalcitrant ambassador. Made of far sterner stuff, both literally and figuratively, familiar letters commanded a presence in people's lives both by the fact of their monopoly on talk at distance and their material demands for greater effort, skill, attention and patience from correspondents.

Of course, people did not write letters with the aim of giving their lives shape or meaning – the post was an "obligatory passage point" that friends and family were compelled to negotiate in order to communicate over distance. But nonetheless, as we have seen, the particular complications and affordances of writing words on little pieces of paper and then moving them around the world did help shape, orient and grace Romantic life. By making communication easier, quicker and cheaper, digital ICTs diminish this shaping force. Although we might celebrate this fact in the light of predominant contemporary values like freedom and autonomy, as Barry Schwartz has convincingly argued in *The Paradox of Choice* (2004) such freedom does not necessarily increase human happiness, and often

diminishes it through the anxiety, stress and dissatisfaction that can often attend the profusion of options. In pre-modern times, as Albert Borgmann (2000b: 95-96) has said, "what [was] present in space and time ha[d] prominence since a resort to elsewhere or elsewhen [was] slow or laborious" and to this "prominence of presence correspond[ed] a focal area of nearness that [was] centered on [the] body." Compared to today's ubiquitous communications, the relative scarceness of letters and the difficulties of transmission meant that when the post arrived it was an *event.* The digital diffusion of people and things diminishes such commanding presence. As it becomes ever less the case that "[b]eing is synonymous with being situated" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 294), as we can quickly and easily de-sever ever increasing sections of the social world, bringing commodiously available re-presentations of each other into view with executive ease, there is a case for thinking that the value we derive from those communications becomes diminished, that they become, in a sense, less "sacred." In using this word, I echo Steve Almond, who in a thoughtful recent piece in the *Los Angeles Times* reflects on the differences between listening to music on long playing vinyl and digital MP3. He says there: "The ease with which we can hear any song at any moment we want no matter where we are (and often for free) has diluted the very act of listening, rendering it just another channel on our ever-expanding dial of distractions" (Almond 2010). I believe, and in this Chapter have sought to show, that the same is true of our mediated communications. In the next two Chapters we will build upon this analysis, to examine the differing ways these technologies shape sociality more generally (Chapter Five) and our ways of public and private (Chapter Six).

5 Talking to Strangers: Communion and Alienation in Social Networks

"My friendship it is not in my power to give: this is a gift which no man can make, it is not in our own power: a sound and healthy friendship is the growth of time and circumstance, it will spring up and thrive like a wild-flower when these favour, and when they do not, it is in vain to look for it."

— William Wordsworth

5.1 Introduction

Wordsworth's words of gentle rebuke to the fan-club earnestness of a teenage Thomas De Quincey's epistolary appeal for friendship are entirely correct. Friendship is no cultivated product of the potting-shed, no commodity to be sought or gifted. It not fashioned but found, and very often in the most unlikely of places. It grows rare and wild, from those few seeds fortunate enough to find nurturing soil. Such seeds are, to be sure, shaken loose in our every new encounter, yet only the very least of them will ever take root and flourish. Still less will mature into the wizened oaks of strongest friendship. As Jeffrey Lewis sings, "new old friends take time"; they also need, as Wordsworth knew, the right circumstances: shared spaces, common experiences, sympathetic dealings, the occasional forging fire of adversity and, more often than not, a good deal of good fortune. Such acknowledgment that friendships are, in part, products of circumstance prompts the themes of this Chapter. For how does the enormous connective potential of the Internet hinder or favour such circumstance? Are "online communities" like *Facebook* and *Second Life* an appropriate seedbed for the wildflower of friendship to "spring and thrive"? In what ways does such interaction differ from mediated dealings in the early nineteenth-century commerce of letters? And, remembering that we cannot be friends with everybody, how are the rest of our relationships affected: how does the Internet affect our ways of *being with* others, whether in our homes, our neighbourhoods, our towns and cities, or nation states? Most bluntly, does it enrich or impoverish our interpersonal relations, and in what ways?

Questions of this kind sometimes get reduced to the rather narrow and controversial question of whether groups which form and correspond online can legitimately be called 'communities'. The notion of community is very nebulous, though – as was famously shown by George Hillery (1955: 113), who examined ninety-four separate definitions of the word to find sixteen core ideas variously at work, with the concept of 'people' the only one common to all. Still, it is also almost universally thought a "good thing," a "hooray" word as Allison Cavanagh (2007: 105) calls it, which is never used in a negative sense. As Maria Bakardjieva convincingly argues, early Internet enthusiasts employed the notion of community "to legitimate their project and to demonstrate its significance and nobility," something which soon mobilised opponents ardently to defend "an idealized notion of 'real' community signifying a state of immediacy and locality of human relationships that resists technological mediation" (Bakardjieva 2003: 293). The resulting storm was such that by 2000, Howard Rheingold—whose hugely influential *The Virtual Community* (1993) had done so much to coin that term—was left wishing he had "saved us all a decade of debate" by eschewing the word 'community' altogether (Rheingold 2000: 359). Wishing to avoid collapsing into more of the ideologically-loaded same, we will in this Chapter prefer to talk of communion rather than community, and differentiate relationships by the strength or weakness of their bonds (terms we will define as we go). Nevertheless, a few opening words on perceptions of the current state of community will help orient our discussion and historicise what follows.

5.2 In Search of Community

It seems a persistent concern that 'community' is something we lack in the industrialised, metropolised West. Sherry Turkle has recently captured the general tenor of this angst:

> Research portrays Americans as increasingly insecure, isolated, and lonely. We work more hours than ever before, often at several jobs.... We have moved away, often far away, from the communities of our birth. We struggle to raise families without the support of extended families. Many have left behind the religious and civic associations that once bound us together. (Turkle 2011: 157)

This tale of social-fragmentation and alienation—of confused and lonely people cut off from each other and from an idealised agrarian past—is a red thread in the narrative of modernity. We have already encountered it in the vivid versions of Ellul, Heidegger, Borgmann and McLuhan. It is, indeed, written into the very foundation-stones of late nineteenth-century sociology: found in both Ferdinand Tönnies' (2002) famous distinction between closely-knit, agrarian *Gemeinschaft* (community) and urban, industrialised

Gesellschaft (society), and in Émile Durkheim's (1997) similar conception of "mechanical" and "organic" solidarity. Tönnies and Durkheim unite in opposing a socially cohesive past of closely interconnected, homogenous communities based on shared beliefs and traditions, to an isolated, heterogeneous, rationalistic and alienated modern world in which the division of labour increasingly reduces relationships to means-ends calculations. On a more recent reading, Robert Putnam (1995, 2000) has pointed to declines in everything from the numbers spending social evenings with neighbours to labour union membership, volunteering, religious affiliations, and even bowling league memberships, to conclude there has been a slow but steady and significant erosion of social connectedness and civic engagement in America in the latter half of the twentieth-century.

As Putnam himself acknowledges, though, small-town life should not be romanticised. Close social strictures bring a certain small-mindedness, and recent history has seen very welcome declines in intolerance and discrimination. Moreover, the closely interrelated community is one where power and privilege can tend to serve themselves a little too readily. As Putnam (1995: 76) says, "closely knit social, economic, and political organizations are prone to inefficient cartelization and to what political economists term "rent seeking" and ordinary men and women call corruption." Such objections undergird the Marxist interpretation of history, in which pre-modern communities were cohesive but confining and hierarchical:

> We must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive as they appear, had always been the solid foundation of ... despotism, that they had restrained the mind within the smallest compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules.... We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by caste and slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstance instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of circumstance ... (Marx 2007: 218-19)

For Marx and his followers, true community is something to be won rather than regained, an ongoing project which will reach completion only with the achievement of classless self-determination and the demise of the state. The Marxist view tends to be marginalised in our contemporary nostalgia for pre-modern cohesion, though. Where the profundity of interaction is concerned, the dominant narrative imposes a binary opposition in which the past is privileged to present a broad picture of community in decline, or at least radical and worrying reconfiguration. It is in this context of this broader narrative of modernity that discourse surrounding the effects of the Internet upon association must be considered. For as Parks and Floyd (1996: 81) so astutely note, and as we shall see, debates about the

Internet often tend to merely reflect these wider arguments about the nature of modernity and industrialisation in general. Enthusiasts like Howard Rheingold see Internet interaction as a welcome corrective, satisfying a "hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives" (Rheingold 1993: 6). Others such as Hubert Dreyfus—whose arguments we discuss in depth in the latter half of this Chapter—seem to think it will just make a bad situation worse. Hence the Internet can seem something of a Rorschach, a cipher for the projections of optimists or pessimists. In this Chapter, we will examine both the utopian and dystopian arguments for the changes that the Internet brings to our ways of associating, and though finding more reasons to be sympathetic to the latter than the former, we will ultimately conclude that the claims of both are too often overstated. In conclusion, we will link such overstatement to tendencies to overstate the "virtual" nature of online interaction, overlook the social construction of the Internet, and focus too much attention on niche concerns at the expense of more mainstream, and less seemingly radical, behaviours. To get there, though, we will start by discussing the potentially very profound structural differences that the Internet introduces into our everyday possibilities for association.

What is novel in this regard can be seen in the rather tender testimony of David Bennahum, who in the mid-1990s delved into the nascent world of online interaction to research life in the then popular text-based, on-line chat-rooms known as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and MOOs (MUD, Object Oriented; the dated terminology is part of the territory in such a discussion). Bennahum's guide to this brave new world was a fellow researcher named Jennifer, who prior to his online immersion was known to him only very faintly through a few very perfunctory telephone conversations. Bennahum had this to say of his experience:

> MOOspace exists only as text flowing down your computer screen. Sometimes I spend eight hours at a time staring at the moving words, typing back at the people typing at me. My mind has accepted that this is real. As Jennifer warned, the "research" took over my life -- for a few weeks I logged on every day. It also brought me closer to Jennifer. The nerd on the phone became an alluring woman named amazin (as in amazin Grace) in Lambda. Ours became my first MOO friendship. Now I spend several nights a week with her. She has become a confidante. That's the strange thing about MOOs – they pop up like trapdoors in your life and connect you to people you would otherwise have nothing to do with. All the context that separates two people like Jennifer and me disappears, leaving an illusion of intimacy: an intimacy devoid of life's accessories, the baggage that we carry around with us. (Bennahum 1994: 26)

We can identify two major differences between David's online experience and, say, face-to-face communication. Firstly, in MOOspace, David and Jennifer's conditions of

appearance were changed: they became *different* online. Their presence to each other was attenuated to "text flowing down [a] computer screen," their bodies and faces could not be seen, and all the other "context" of life was diminished. Bennahum seems to suggest that this led to changes in their behaviour – the pair related differently than they did in their offline lives. Secondly, the Internet changed their conditions of connection: the very fact of their meeting was a consequence of this online space. While in this case the two were united by David's seeking a guide to this new world, it is quite usual that the people who bump up against each other in such environments have no knowledge of each other beforehand. With the Internet, we might say, it has never been easier to talk to strangers. Let us look at each of these changes, of our new possibilities of appearance and connection, in turn.

5.3 Altered Appearances

The term 'cyberspace' comes from William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer.* Gibson's cyberspace, a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions," was (and remains) science-fiction. Yet in describing one character's experience—"the cyberspace matrix was actually a drastic simplification of the human sensorium, at least in terms of presentation ... Smooth, he thought, but not smooth enough" (W. Gibson 1993: 71)—Gibson spoke equally for our own contemporary science-factual version. The "cues filtered-out" theory of computer mediated communication (CMC) describes it in terms of what it lacks in comparison to face-to-face interaction (Culnan and Markus 1987; Daft and Lengel 1984, 1986; Kiesler *et al*. 1984; L. Sproull and Kiesler 1986). Kiesler *et al*. identify four factors:

- An absence of regulating feedback (e.g., gesture, eye contact, facial expression, bodily posture, interpersonal distance and other non-linguistic behaviours) which face-to-face interlocutors use, pre-thematically, to help guide, regulate and modify exchanges.

- Dramaturgical weakness, or diminution of the richness and range of emotional communicative cues (e.g., staring, touching, speaking loudly) which face-to-face interlocutors use to heighten the impact of communication.

- Diminution of social status cues, including contextual cues (e.g., clothing, possessions, the wider environment) and dynamic cues (e.g., gaze, touch, posture), which the authors suggest can weaken the influence of charismatic or high-status individuals, making for more equal communication.

- Greater social anonymity, deriving from the uniformity and impersonality of on-screen text. In Internet environments such as MUDs, of course, anonymity can seem almost total. (Kiesler *et al*. 1984: 1125-26)

Although CMC has long since transcended the merely textual, these observations still apply. Even if we think of video conferencing—currently the height of communicative richness via the Internet—each point still holds to some degree. Regulating feedback and status cues are limited to what fits within the frame of the webcam, we are dramaturgically weakened by not being able to reach out and touch each other and, with a site like *Chat Roulette* which links random webcam users, we can be anonymous even if visible.

These changed conditions of appearance seem to result in changes in behaviour. There is a growing recognition among psychologists that people often act differently on the Internet than they do in their offline lives (Joinson 2006; Lea and Spears 1995; Suler 2004; Turkle 1995), exhibiting behaviours, including verbal expressions, which show "an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and the judgment of others" (Joinson 2006: 75). Such people, it is suggested, are "disinhibited" or experiencing "deindividuation" – a state in which individuals tend to act impulsively and emotionally, experiencing a weakened capacity to regulate behaviour and engage in long-term planning, and having less care for, and awareness of, the possible outcomes of their actions (McKenna and Bargh 2000: 61). Such disinhibition can work to good or ill. What John Suler (2004: 321) calls "benign disinhibition" can allow people to open up to each other and share stories or otherwise interact with strangers in ways which are thought to promote self-awareness, sociability and well-being. To take an example from the blogosphere, *Marn's Big Adventure* is the gentle record of a Canadian baby-boomer's log-cabin life with her husband and her cats. 'Marn' at one stage reveals that it has been many years since she has formed a friendship, explaining that she "couldn't muster the courage or energy to share the stories" new friendships required. Yet in the disinhibited half-light of her online journal, it seems, such courage and energy is in ready supply:

> Have you ever been on a long bus trip at night, knowing that you're going to be hours on that bus, knowing that you won't sleep? I've done that, sat there in the dark beside a stranger, and begun a casual conversation to pass the time. Sometimes it evolves into something else and an incredibly personal story is told. The bus becomes a cocoon for a soft voice murmuring in the dark, features illuminated for a split second by an odd flash of light from passing traffic, a sliver of a spirit in transit. When the trip is done you part ways, each to slip back into a life the other will never know, again a stranger without a name. That's how Diaryland feels to me. (Qtd. Keren 2007: 133)

Negative or "toxic disinhibition" (Suler 2004: 321), meanwhile, can lead people to act in extremely negative ways – the paradigmatic example being 'flaming,' the making of unwarranted or disproportionate verbal attacks which employ profanity, name calling, and "general negative affect" (Joinson 2006: 79). The sight of language of the most colourful and calumniatory kinds hurled with impunity by strangers rushing to slander each other is one of the less edifying of Internet spectacles – though it is perhaps less common than is often perceived (Castellá *et al*. 2000; Joinson 2006: 80-81). Sometimes such negative reactions are explicitly sought, a practice known as 'trolling' in which inflammatory comments are posted for the sole purpose of garnering outraged responses (Hardaker 2010). The ways in which online interaction can easily tip over into indignation and anger is perhaps best illustrated by Mike Godwin's tongue-in-cheek (but nonetheless insightful) "Law of Nazi Analogies" which notes: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one" (Godwin 1994).

Such behaviour, it is argued, results in large part from the ways in which the Internet attenuates interactional and contextual cues. Diminution of regulating feedback, dramaturgical weakness, reduced social cues and degrees of social anonymity mean that misunderstandings and hostility are more likely to occur on the Internet than in face-to-face interactions (Culnan and Markus 1987; Dubrovsky *et al*. 1991), and some studies suggest CMC can diminish task focus and the ability to forge group consensus (Siegel *et al*. 1986). Research has consistently shown that people tend to respond in more extreme and less socially desirable ways when communicating by way of computer than either face-to-face or by pen and paper (Joinson 1999; Kiesler *et al*. 1984; Kiesler *et al*. 1985; Kiesler and Sproull 1986; L. S. Sproull 1986). John Suler (2004) identifies six main causes of what he terms the "online disinhibition effect," namely: dissociative anonymity, dissociative imagination, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, and minimization of authority. Dissociative anonymity, Suler argues, allows people to avoid responsibility for actions by compartmentalizing behaviours:

> When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self. (Suler 2004: 322)

This, along with "dissociative imagination"—wherein online actions are imagined "a kind of game with rules and norms that don't apply to everyday living" (323)—shields people

from offline accountability. They can act without having to take ownership of their actions, convincing themselves that "those online behaviors 'aren't me at all'" (322). Such suggestions are supported by landmark psychological studies which strongly link social anonymity to deindividuation (Diener *et al*. 1976; Zimbardo 1969), and more recent research which suggests this correlation persists online, where anonymity has been found to lead an increased likelihood of 'flaming' (Castellá *et al*. 2000; Douglas and McGarty 2001; Kiesler *et al*. 1985) and higher levels of self-disclosure (Chiou 2006; Joinson 2001; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Parks and Floyd 1996).

Anonymity, Suler suggests, is among the most important of the factors that contribute to online disinhibition, but it is not necessary for disinhibition to occur (Siegel *et al*. 1986: 167). Empathy and responsibility are eroded by the attenuation of regulatory, dramaturgical, and contextual cues in purely textual communication. Being invisible to each other, hidden behind computer screens, individuals must neither look people in the eye nor witness their full embodied responses as they speak and act; this, Suler argues, diminishes concern for social censure and consequence. The asynchronicity of much textual communication via email and message boards further frees users to make statements and actions without needing to deal with their immediate consequences, allowing them to engage in what Suler calls "emotional hit and run" (323). Next, Suler argues that a diminution of social status cues levels power relationships, making online interaction seem more egalitarian and thus further disinhibiting behaviour: "People are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. A fear of disapproval and punishment from on high dampens the spirit. But online, in what feels more like a peer relationship—with the appearances of authority minimized—people are much more willing to speak out and misbehave" (324). Finally, Suler speculates that textual communication can lead to "solipsistic introjection," where interpretations are overly influenced by the introspective imaginings of the reader. This latter point is acknowledged by Sherry Turkle (1995: 207) in her otherwise sympathetic interpretation of anonymous online environments: "MUDs encourage projection and the development of transferences ... In MUDs the lack of information about the real person to whom one is talking, the silence into which one types, the absence of visual cues, all these encourage projection. This situation leads to exaggerated likes and dislikes, to idealization and demonization." Turkle links such projection to the kinds of disappointments which can befall those who meet online partners in person, quoting Peter, a lecturer whose online love for a MUDding partner soon evaporated once they met offline. On the MUD, said Peter: "I saw in her what I wanted to see. Real life gave me too much information."

To sum up, then. The Internet changes the ways in which we appear to each other, and these altered conditions of appearance seem to be linked to changed ways of behaving. With less information to provide context and aid interpretation, we can become disinhibited and open up in ways we normally would not—for both good and ill—and can tend to project our own feelings and interpretations onto that information we do receive to a greater extent than in face-to-face interaction. But we must set limits on such observations. Firstly, in any discussion of the communicative attenuations of CMC, it is important to restate the point made in Chapter Three, that while the amount of semiotic information available in face-to-face interactions may perhaps be much richer than in CMC, face-to-face interaction remains a hermeneutic activity. Which is to say: things still get lost in translation and misunderstandings still occur. We must not overly idealise face-to-face interaction. Secondly, we are usually talking about degrees of attenuation rather than complete elimination. Text can contain regulatory feedback in the form of textual abbreviations (e.g., "lol" for "laugh out loud") and so-called "emoticons" which mimic facial expression :-). Dramaturgical force is simulated by punctuation (!), and status cues can be conveyed by, for example, the tone of a person's writing or contextual information embedded in personal profiles. In comparison to face-to-face interaction, CMC may be somewhat impoverished but it is by no means penniless. Thirdly, the cues filtered-out theory applies not only to CMC, but to writing itself and, indeed, to mediating technologies generally. Accusations of absence of regulating feedback, dramaturgical weakness and so on can just as well be levelled at letters, after all. That letter writers indeed did very often feel this frustration can be easily shown. For example, when responding on April 14th 1780 to an anonymous correspondent of contrary opinion, the Hardens' friend and near neighbour, Richard Watson, the Bishop of Llandaff, admitted: "an hour's conversation would bring us better acquainted with each other's sentiments, than a month's correspondence can do" (Watson 1817: 74). Similarly, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, amidst another of his semi-regular personal crises, remarked in a letter of 9th October 1809 to Daniel Stuart: "Would to God I could but *talk* with you though only for an hour ! for letters do little more than multiply misunderstandings" (Stuart 1889: 187). Our final caveat on what we have said about the altered appearances of cyberspace is, in light of our earlier discussion of the dangers of determinism (§2.5), especially important. Linking altered appearances to altered actions does not necessarily imply the former causes the latter. As Adam Joinson says: "behavior online does not occur in a vacuum—people have a variety of media to choose from much of the time, and the choice of an online alternative may be due to the expectation that its attributes can be appropriated to satisfy their own needs. So, what looks at first glance to be a disinhibition effect of a media may, in fact, be a strategic

choice by the user" (Joinson 2006: 76). With all this said, let us now move on to look at the ways in which the Internet extends the ways in which we can connect to each other.

5.4 Extended Connectivity

Reflecting on my closest personal relationships, I find disconcerting the degree to which they are founded on luck: our having been in this particular place at that particular time; our having known this or that common acquaintance. The American travel writer William Least Heat-Moon estimates we might each meet 100,000 people in our lifetime (Heat-Moon 2008: 62). What of the other close to seven billion people animating this world? How many soul-mates might I never meet? Reflecting on the vagaries of fate in such a manner might seem wholly idle were it not for the fact that technologies like the Internet seem to alter the preconditions of connection. Social Network Analysis (SNA) reveals two very persistent principles of human association, *homophily* and *propinquity*. Homophily states that we are more likely to form ties with people with whom we share socio-demographic attributes or cultural attitudes, i.e., that "birds of a feather flock together" (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; McPherson *et al*. 2001); propinquity, meanwhile, says that we are more likely to form ties with those to whom we are spatially proximate (Feld and Carter 1998; Festinger *et al*. 1950; Latané *et al*. 1995). As Howard Rheingold argues, the Internet seems to offer new opportunities to build social networks on the basis of common interest (homophily) rather than the contingency of bodily location (propinquity):

> Before writing letters became commonplace, social networks were confined to those people who saw each other face to face. Writing, public postal systems, telegraph, telephone and the Internet each brought new means of extending one's social network to include people who are not in the immediate geographical vicinity, who share an interest rather than a location. (Rheingold 2000: 360)

Cyberspace, as a place which is no place, is freed from the strictures of geography (see §3.3) and opens what David Bennahum, cited earlier, called "trap-doors" in the social structure. There have always been public spaces in which people could meet new people, of course—town squares, village greens, coffee houses, public houses and so on—and new connections have been fostered by technological mediation in the past too, by 'party-line' telephone services or organisations which support 'pen-pal' friendships, for example. But such mediated relationships have never been easier to pursue nor so prolific. Regardless of location and with no need for prior introduction, people of like mind can join online, coalescing around online social network applications such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, in "virtual" worlds like *Second Life* and MUDs, and on blogs, electronic mailing lists,

message boards, chat rooms and news groups which act as a clearinghouse for new connections. In Jessy Harden's world, where interpersonal communication over distance was possible solely through the exchange of letters, making new relationships in such a manner was almost impossible for the simple fact that in order to communicate by post you first had to know a person's address, and therefore had to at least be aware of the person and have some reason for troubling them with the cost of a letter. Hence, letters were primarily a means of interaction between people *already known to each other*, who for one reason or another could not meet to talk face-to-face. Most often this was because of physical distance, as was the case with Jessy Harden and her scattered family, but it could also be because of factors such as illness, as was the case with Mary Mitford and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose relationship was formed in person but conducted very largely through a massive correspondence which saw the exchange of over 700 letters between 1836 and 1854 (Milne 2010: 55).

Certainly, letters could facilitate introductions. The first Wordsworth knew of De Quincey, for example, was by a letter sent by the latter care of the former's publishers in 1803. This is, though, not the same as two people bumping into each other on an Internet romantic poetry forum and starting chatting, for it was De Quincey's prior awareness of Wordsworth (and huge admiration for his poetry) that made him want to make contact in the first place. Letters could also be the basis of what *Facebook* users would recognise as a 'friend recommendation,' in the form of the well-known "letter of introduction," written by a third party to vouch for and unite two otherwise unlinked acquaintances. As Brant says, "A letter of introduction opened doors ... People on the move found such letters essential as a means of proving their respectability and securing invitation.... [T]he letter of introduction made connections between people, enlarging acquaintance and deploying power." [12] Yet, again, the letter was not itself the initial meeting ground in the way that the Web can be – where I might accidently stumble upon the blog of someone utterly unknown to me, link to it or comment on it and thus potentially start, from scratch as it were, a reciprocal

[12] In the Harden/Allan collection we have a beautiful instance of such an introduction in the form of the only surviving letter from Agnes to Jessy, dated 9th Jan 1806 from Fort Allahabad (MS8864/2). This long letter ends with Agnes enthusing about a friend, Mrs Humfrays, who of all the women she had met in India "is the one I most revere, esteem, and love". Agnes goes on to say "I would give worlds you could but know her" and knowing Mrs Humfrays' family might have cause to visit the lakes, entreats Jessy: "keep this scrawl it will serve as an introduction". It is some five years until Mrs Humfrays arrives, but Jessy is nonetheless captivated: "[O]n Tuesday Eve[nin]g Mrs Humfries [*sic*], Eliza & Emma arrived here ... I cannot tell you how much I am charmed with the former; she is truly an amiable woman ... indeed I have not seen anyone for many a day that I feel such regard for; true, I was certainly prejudiced in her favour by you, but she far surpasses my expectation. Indeed I hardly expected to find a Lady from India so agreeable: they are in general seemingly so discontented with this country, they make themselves unpleasant to the inhabitants of it" (21.07.11).

relationship. Letters of introduction were a gateway to face-to-face interaction rather than the sites of interaction themselves. Moreover, such recommendations obviously depended upon existing contacts acting as intermediaries, and hence the scope for possible expansion of social circles remained constrictive and selective, with notions of fashion and reputation defining who was to be included and excluded.[13] In contrast to such cases, the Web—with its message boards, chat rooms, social networking sites, and so on—can itself act as an intermediary in the fostering of quick and easy new links between people. No existing interpersonal connections or introduction through shared third parties are needed. We need only use a search engine to find a newsgroup, blog or message-board which fits our interests (say, as single parents, or model train enthusiasts, or lovers of Romantic poetry) and with only a few mouse-clicks or keystrokes can begin corresponding. We can reach out directly to strangers who share our interests. The Internet thus seems to offer the opportunity to reweight the balance of friendship formation in favour of choice rather than chance. This, *prima facie*, seems a positive thing, playing as it does to those twin pillars of the modern self, freedom and individualism (Taylor 1992: ix). For if, as Charles Taylor (1991: 28-29) says, the modern narrative of selfhood instructs us that there is "a certain way of being human that is *my* way" and that "I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's," then greater powers of choice in the matters of association surely chime with modern selfhood. As Georg Simmel noted of urbanisation in the early twentieth-century:

> In general, this type of development tends to enlarge the sphere of freedom ... because it has become a matter of choice with whom one affiliates and upon whom one is dependent. Any association, which is based on local relationships or is otherwise brought about without the individual's participation, differs from affiliations which are freely chosen, because as a rule the latter will make it possible for the individual to make his beliefs and desires felt. Hence, such groupings may be based upon relationships which grow out of the individuals concerned. (Simmel 1964: 130)

Our question is, though, what kinds of kinds of ties are made via the Internet? Does the quickness and ease with which they can be made mean they can dissolve just as quickly and easily? Do anonymity and attenuations of appearance mean that Internet relationships necessarily lack the richness and depth of relationships formed face-to-face? Is it always, or even usually, the case that (other things being equal) it is easier to communicate with, to

[13] Jessy Harden, for example, notes of a visiting Italian named Di Nigro, whose musical skill much impressed the family, "if he was well known here, he would not be much disengaged, but except ourselves no one seems to pay him any attention, his letters indeed were only to some of the Professors who seldom trouble themselves much about those people." (10.07.02)

understand, to trust each other if we are in the same room than it is if we are separated by the screens of our technology? Do such relationships remain shallow, discontinuous, casual or uncommitted ties of limited liability, prone to break at the first sign of stress? Before we set about addressing such questions, we will end this section by introducing some typology by which to categorise differing kinds of relationships and help determine their respective values, namely Mark Granovetter's seminal distinction between strong and weak ties.

All relationships are not equal; they lie along a spectrum of closeness ranging from our dearest friends to the most perfect strangers. To differentiate such relationships, Granovetter introduces the notion of tie-strength, which he says derives from four intra-correlated factors: "the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter 1973: 1361). Our strongest ties are tightly overlapping, with many shared acquaintances, sturdy bonds of trust and a long history of mutual experiences. Weak ties, meanwhile, are mere acquaintances, people we perhaps know by name or to speak to but do not really *know* – the next door neighbour we might ask to borrow a cup of sugar but would not ask to borrow £20, the old school friend we still bump into occasionally but whose children's names we do not know, and so on. Granovetter thus divides social-ties into three categories: strong, weak and absent (the latter meaning that two strangers are just people whose potential for tie-formation has yet to be realised). We should not think of strong- and weak-ties as merely good and bad ties, though – something the title of Granovetter's original article, "The Strength of Weak Ties" makes clear. Both are necessary. Strong ties provide emotional support, reinforcing our sense of identity and belonging in the world, and are widely accepted to play a significant role in levels of general health and well-being (Schaefer *et al*. 1981). To know you can depend on certain people makes the world a less fearful place; shared confidences can lessen the anxieties of living. Weak ties, meanwhile, help the flow of novel information, bridging the gaps between homogenous networks of close friends and bolstering life opportunities and the generation of creative ideas. Granovetter, for example, studied job hunters and found that many more people found employment through information gleaned from "weak" acquaintances than they did from close friends and family. Hence, "weak ties, often denounced as generative of alienation ... are here seen as indispensable to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities" (Granovetter 1973: 1378). Such discussion leads to a fairly obvious conclusion. The healthy, happy and rewarding life requires a balanced portfolio of social capital (to use that reductive economic metaphor), with mixed investments in both strong and weak ties. As Schopenhauer (1897: 123) says, "the man who is everyone's friend is no

one's friend"; our strong ties are necessarily selective and scarce, and all the more important because they are so. Still, our weaker ties help us find new information, and are also important for general well-being and intellectual growth. With this typology in place, we can now reformulate our questions: are ties formed via the Internet necessarily, or usually, weaker for it? If so, what is the effect of the Internet upon our overall mix of strong and weak ties? Does the time invested in such weak ties displace time which would otherwise be invested in strengthening our more committed bonds? And what does all this do to our sense of ourselves, our friends, and our place in the world? We now turn to address these questions.

5.5 Bliss that Dawn: Utopian Dreams, Unrealistic Expectations

In the late 1980s, as use of the Internet sprawled outside its militaristic and academic institutional origins, the first groups to report back on its new social possibilities were, naturally, those involved in building and inhabiting them. Such early adopters were unsurprisingly enthusiastic about the possibilities of such novel gathering places. Howard Rheingold's hugely influential *Virtual Communities*, discussed earlier, was a journalistic account of life on this "electronic frontier" which argued that online networks such as "the WELL" (short for "Whole Earth Electronic Link") held out a liberating potential which could bring "enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost – intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage" (Rheingold 1993: 4). Enough discussion, with enough "feeling," in these environments helped people form "webs of personal relationships," creating "virtual communities" (5). Cyberspace's peculiar blend of altered appearances and extended connectivity could, it was hoped, help human flourishing. Emancipating and egalitarian, online communities would diminish inhibition, support collaboration in research, encourage inclusion and active participation in political matters and bring greater economic prosperity and social cohesion to their inhabitants.

Such rhetorical visions of techno-utopia found strong support in the pages of *Wired*—a McLuhanist, futurist, cyberpunk magazine hyperlinked to hyperbole that launched in early 1993 with the express aim of documenting the "social changes so profound their only parallel is probably the discovery of fire" which were sure to attend "the Digital Revolution" (*Wired* managing editor Louis Rossetto, qtd. Flichy 2007: 99)—and in the *Electronic Frontier Foundation,* a political pressure group formed in 1990 that aimed to defend the Internet from outside (governmental) interference. A flavour of the latter's

optimism about the kinds of change possible because of online communication can be given by the following quote from a piece entitled *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* written by one of its founders, John Perry Barlow, and circulated widely via email and the Web in 1996:

> Our world is different. Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.... Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge. (Barlow 1996)

The wild-eyed optimism of such utopian dreams cannot now seem anything but somewhat quaint. For the last fifteen years have seen the Web unfold as a place where indeed identities and reputations very often do matter, where privilege and prejudice remain in somewhat altered forms, and where vested interests and corporations still have a heavy hand in shaping technological development and setting the bounds for association.[14] As Patrice Flichy's *The Internet Imaginaire* documents so well, however, such rhetoric—of the Internet as an egalitarian electronic frontier which would radically reshape community for the better, giving all an equal voice in unrestricted, rational dialogue—although since shown frequently to be a utopian fantasy, still persists as an ideology useful in masking the reality of the situation while helping to mobilise actors in public debate (Flichy 2007: 88).

This clamour of excited chattering about the new social possibilities of the Internet was given a new dimension by the MIT socio-psychologist Sherry Turkle, who—along with others like Mark Poster (1990: 6) and Allucquère Stone (1996: 36)—argued that the Internet would reshape identity itself. In her book *Life on the Screen* (1995), Turkle presented the results of her years of sometimes very personal ethnographic research in MUDs and MOOs and argued that anonymity and the other attenuations of appearance in such environments meant they often functioned as "laboratories for the construction of identity" (184). Users could experiment with their identities through role-play, test-driving a multiplicity of possible selves and trying out various social roles like so many hats, in a relatively risk-free environment (192). As one interviewee put it, "You can be whoever

[14] This is not to say, of course, that the Internet does not hold great potential to reshape the public sphere (see §7.3 for examples of the kinds of questions we might ask), but merely that such cheerleading hyperbole was (and is) unrealistically utopian.

you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want.... You don't need to worry about the slots other people put you in" (184). Men could pretend to be women, overweight people could be slender and bank clerks could play at being rock stars – all experimenting safe in the knowledge that if this 'identity' proved problematic, they need merely delete it and start again anew. Writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, Turkle saw in this technology an unparalleled opportunity to decentre and subvert humanist notions of authentic selfhood: "In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go on... [creating] an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion" (10, 12). MUDs, in Turkle's estimation, were not just an extension of play, but a new reality so rich that it did not merely *supplement* 'real life,' but provided an *alternative* to it. The unitary self dissolves into "multiple windows and parallel lives" (Turkle 1997: 72). She enthusiastically quotes one MUD player who even goes so far as to ask: "why grant such superior status to the self that has the body when the selves that don't have bodies are able to have different kinds of experiences?" (Turkle 1995: 14).

For my part, while seeing the potential benefits of online experimentation, I must say that I find such talk of parallel lives, even of parity between offline and online 'selves,' unconvincing. The on-screen construction is not a 'self' that has 'experiences'; it is merely the aggregated communicative traces of the embodied, experiential agent sat typing the words (Wynn and Katz 1997: 305). The 'real life' bank clerk will continue to exist if he gets bored and decides to erase the MUD rock star character; the MUD rock star, on the other hand, has no equivalent privilege. The human body is, as Albert Borgmann (1999b: 190) rightly says, the "origin of the coordinate space we inhabit", the "inescapable pivot" around which all of our worldly interactions and dealings turn and indeed, as Turkle begins to articulate the possible benefits of such role-play, the talk of parallel or multiple selves seems to come unstuck. For it is the potential positive impact such experimentation can have upon users' offline lives that signals its therapeutic boon: "Having literally written our online personae into existence, they can be a kind of Rorschach test. We can use them to become more aware of what we project into everyday life. We can use the virtual to reflect constructively on the real" (Turkle 1999: 647). Thus, to have any meaning, the "parallel lives" lived through on-screen constructions in cyberspace must still refer back to the *one* life: that of the embodied person sitting in front of the computer screen. And this hints at the ultimate problem for the rhetoric of decentred selves: as Albert Borgmann argues, in order for MUDs to seem like parallel worlds, "the veil of virtual ambiguity" must be kept "dense and thick" in "an enclosure [which] excludes the commanding

presence of reality." Which is to say that if the people I interact with know that I am not really a rock star but a bank clerk, the game (such as it is) does not really work. Yet keeping myself walled off in such a manner, and being able to walk away at any moment, means actions lack depth, consequence and ultimately meaning. Without some measure of risk and commitment, games will remain games. These are points developed below, but in ending this section, I find it instructive to note that Sherry Turkle herself seems to have recently come to this position. Her latest book, *Alone Together*, has an altogether less optimistic tone, and questions the good that can be derived from the uncommitted shallows of cyberspace. Recalling a prior assertion that online environments enabled new forms of community, she retracts:

> I think I spoke too quickly. I used the word "community" for worlds of weak ties. Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities. Its members help each other in the most practical ways.... What do we owe to each other in simulation? ... What real-life responsibilities do we have for those we meet in games? Am I my avatar's keeper? (Turkle 2011: 239)

More interesting still, Howard Rheingold (2000: 360-61) has reached similar conclusions: "It has been argued that these increasingly mediated relationships are, for the most part, increasingly superficial. As I look at the way more and more of our social communication is migrating to e-mail and cell phone, instant message and online greeting card, I tend to agree.... Like all technologies, communication tools come with a price: alienation might be the cost of the power of abstraction." Hence, perhaps the two most totemic early advocates of the new possibilities of Internet interaction have shifted towards an altogether more pessimistic view. We now turn to discuss whether such concerns are justified.

5.6 The Internet Alienation Thesis (1): Is Online Interaction Deficient?

Claims that the Internet ultimately alienates rather than connects its users must generally make two steps. The first is to claim that factors such as anonymity, diminution of risk and commitment, and lack of communicative richness mean that the Internet tends to serve only very shallow kinds of interaction and hence merely weak-tie formation. The second step argues that the Internet displaces face-to-face encounters, thus diminishing the strong-ties that are so important for our health and well-being. We will examine the evidence to support this second claim in the following section. For now we will discuss the arguments to support the first claim, and to do so will draw heavily upon Hubert Dreyfus' sharp-toothed critique, as presented in *On the Internet* (2nd edition, 2009). For Dreyfus, the

Web's central problem is its lack of embodiment, which he sees as exemplified by far-out groups like the 'Extropians' who view the body as a mere "chrysalis" which "restrain[s] our capacities" (qtd. Dreyfus 2009: 1). Dreyfus' arguments (derived variously from Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Kierkegaard) converge upon the central point that while we might sometimes perceive our bodies—in all their vulnerability, spatio-temporal limitation, and susceptibility to emotion—to be a drawback to our reaching some ideal state of omniscient rationality in which we can "rejoice" in becoming "disembodied, detached, ubiquitous minds" (Dreyfus 2009: 121), in fact it is our bodies which imbue our world with significance. Our bodies are, as Merleau-Ponty (2002: 169) says, "our general medium for having a world". Thus, Dreyfus sees groups like the Extropians as misguided latter-day Cartesians who, having imagined the world can be carved up into two distinct substances (minds and bodies, *cogitans* and *extensa*), misguidedly think that the way forward for humanity is to get rid of our reliance on bodies altogether and instead plug ourselves into some kind of pure-mind, science-fiction matrix. Now, it should be immediately obvious that although Dreyfus is not in his book attacking a straw-man, since some dreamers really did say this stuff in the early to mid-1990s,[15] he is not really arguing against the mainstream view as it is in 2011 (or, indeed, as it probably was anywhere much outside of the offices of *Wired* magazine in the 1990s). Most of us, using the Internet, do not want to upload our minds or discard our bodies; we just want to use email, check the news, do some shopping, and so on. Nevertheless, there is legitimacy to Dreyfus' fear. In using email instead of the post, reading a website instead of walking to the newsagent to buy a newspaper, or visiting *Amazon.co.uk* instead of driving into town to a high street bookstore, we are implicitly acknowledging a will to overcome our bodily limitations. Utopian hopes that diminution of social context cues might make for more equal discourse can similarly be seen as an attempt to eliminate the body, for nothing tells you I am a white male quite as readily as my white male face. However, it stretches credibility to infer that common attributes like basic laziness and the wish to save time, or general aims such as the wish that people could be valued more for the content of their character than the colour of their skin, suggest that we are all anxiously awaiting the arrival of some science-fiction future where we can junk our bodies and upload our minds.

[15] Indeed, we have already encountered one such voice in John-Perry Barlow, who saw cyberspace as "thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave," a world which is "not where bodies live," where the happenstances of race, sex, and economic and social status are rendered unimportant, and where people can live in a harmonious brave new world based which needed no more governance than "ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal". See: John Perry Barlow, 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace', <https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>, accessed 01 Jun 2011

Against the backdrop of this admittedly overwrought characterisation of an Internet ruled by a lust for disembodiment, Dreyfus advances several related arguments which place the body centre stage. We will run through these arguments in turn before considering their limitations. Firstly, Dreyfus attacks the diminution of risk that the distance of the screen affords. Put bluntly, you cannot hit or hug someone through the Internet and for Dreyfus this loss of vulnerability means the Internet diminishes trust, since "[y]ou have to be in the same room with someone who could physically hurt or publicly humiliate you and observe that they do not do so, in order to trust them and make yourself vulnerable to them in other ways" (Dreyfus 2009: 69). This lack of vulnerability, he suggests, even affects our sense of experiential reality, since alertness to risk—our readiness for "dangerous surprises"—is part of what keeps us engaged with the world (54). Next, following Kierkegaard, he argues that the possibility for anonymity produces a "nihilistic levelling" in discourse (88). Hidden by computer screens, we do not have to take ownership of our actions: "all the drama is like a game in that it has no real-world consequences and there is no real-world risk. Individuals can enter or leave a virtual community much more easily than they can move out of a town they dislike" (139-40). This lack of commitment diminishes meaning, for imaginary risks lacking long-term consequence cannot reward us in the same way as can taking a principled and impassioned stand on an issue of importance. Such anonymous, uncommitted interaction via the Internet compromises our potential to take an existential stand on our lives by tempting us "to live in a world of stimulating images and simulated commitments and thus to lead a simulated life" (88). Finally, Dreyfus calls attention to the ways in which our attenuated appearances on the Internet restrict our interpretative opportunities, focussing on mood as an exemplar of what goes missing. Following Heidegger's theory of the constitutive hermeneutic role our being attuned to the world by way of a pre-given mood or state-of-mind plays in our being at all open to experience (Heidegger 1962: §29), Dreyfus argues that "most of the time and most basically people are attuned to each other by being always already attuned to a shared situation" (Dreyfus 2009: 116). He then questions the extent to which a mood can be shared by people communicating online (in this case in the "virtual world" *Second Life*), identifying two problems:

> [T]o be programmed, the gestures used have to be generic while in the real world our communication is normally specific to each specific situation. Moreover, and more importantly, in our world the communication of moods is *direct*, while in *Second Life* it is *indirect*. That is, in the real world our bodies *spontaneously* express our moods and others *directly* pick them up, while in *Second Life* one has to select an appropriate gesture and then *command* one's avatar to make that movement while the other person has to *figure out* what the gesture means.... [This]

> distorts both the situation-specific moods we normally express and our spontaneous, direct, embodied, way of expressing them. (Dreyfus 2009: 113)

Taking up a point made earlier (§3.4), in face-to-face interaction we spontaneously recognise and respond to, embodied interactional cues. In an encounter mediated by avatars, such cues become neither spontaneous nor embodied, becoming instead indirect and restricted to a pre-given set of generic movements. For Dreyfus, this limits the extent to which such interaction can be felt as immediate, with moods unable to flow in shared, excited contagion in quite the same way as they can in face-to-face encounters. In a closely related critique, Cocking and Matthews (2000) make the strong claim that friendship is in fact impossible to achieve through Internet interaction alone since people interacting in such a manner have far too much control over the kinds of information they give away about themselves, and the kind of personality they construct. Distinguishing between voluntary and non-voluntary disclosure (cf. Goffman 1990), they argue that the Internet "is perhaps unique in its facilitating personal relations primarily on the basis of voluntary self-disclosure, and eliminating many significant aspects of non-voluntary self-disclosure'' (Cocking and Matthews 2000: 227), and offering too much scope for us "to construct a highly chosen and controlled self-presentation" (231). From avatars that resemble Johnny Depp to *Facebook* photos which only show us in our best light, Cocking and Matthews argue that our online personae are constructions which suffer for their idealised character. Things we might not wish to share or things we might not even realise about ourselves, can be hidden or disguised much more easily online than they can when we confront each other in the harsh light of face-to-face interaction. Friendship comes, argue Cocking and Matthews, from our being seen at our worst as well as our best, and thus "within a purely virtual context the establishment of close friendship is simply psychologically impossible" (Cocking and Matthews 2000: 224).

Although sympathetic to such critique, I think it goes too far and too fast. Dreyfus' arguments about trust, for example, presuppose a certain privileged (male) social status which assumes that purposely being at risk of physical harm is preferable in each and every case, and neglects the extent to which online interaction is itself often fraught with risk of disapprobation or insult (Burbules 2002: 392). Moreover, while some studies do suggest that deception detection and hence trust development can be more problematic in computer-mediated negotiations than in those conducted face-to-face (Giordano *et al*. 2007), it overestimates our capacities to imagine that looking people in the eye is any kind of fail-safe lie detector. In fact, we commonly overestimate our abilities to detect

expressions which betray attempts at deception (Donath 2000: 307). Also, as Ridingsa *et al*. (2002: 275) point out, the often esoteric shared interests which define many Internet groupings can form an immediate basis of trust—I might be (and am!) immediately more inclined to trust someone who shares my love of the singer Morrissey, for example—and such trust will develop as relationships build over time and with repeated interactions. Where meaningful commitment is concerned, it is simply wrong to take anonymity as the totem of Web interaction in the way Dreyfus does. Zeynep Tufekci's study (2008b: 26) found that nineteen in every twenty *Facebook* users sampled used their real name on that site. Many bloggers prominently display their names, email addresses, and even pictures of themselves on their blogs. Even where a user's proper name is hidden, we should still distinguish between anonymity and pseudonymity, since in the latter case although users are not known by their given name, they still recursively build reputation through repeated activity.[16] Many message boards, for example, give indications of how long someone has been a member, the overall ratings other users have given their previous posts, and their rank within the community from "newbie" up to senior member.[17] The time and effort required to build such reputations—as well as get to grips with the various nuanced norms of each grouping—mean that the kinds of fleeting and uncommitted involvements Dreyfus fears cannot be said to be representative of all Internet interaction, even when anonymous. Indeed, Dreyfus at no point provides evidence to indicate how prevalent such anonymity is, and as we shall see later, there is reason to doubt that it is at all representative of the majority of Internet interaction. Hence, there is less reason than Dreyfus perceives to worry about nihilism or lack of commitment, and the growth of the Internet does seem to bear out the prediction of *Wired* publisher Louis Rossetto that ultimately, "reputation, reliability, reality—those will dominate the virtual world, as they rule the real" (qtd. Wolf 2003: 127). Nonetheless, it is true to say that although risk, accountability, identity, and so on are not eliminated online, they are often much attenuated or at the very least blurred or obscured by cloaks of anonymity and the safety of communicating at distance. Dreyfus is entirely right to say that "[i]ndividuals can enter or leave a virtual community much more easily than they can move out of a town they dislike" (Dreyfus 2009: 139-40). Often it is when we would rather leave but must stay in some situation that we 'build character,' and sometimes when we make a home for ourselves despite less than ideal surroundings we

[16] I am extremely grateful to my friend, and fellow student at HATII, David Macknet for pointing out this distinction.

[17] As Andrea Ciffolilli points out, *Wikipedia* users depend heavily upon reputations built as trusted contributions amass over time, to the point where they can apply for administrator privileges. See: Andrea Ciffolilli, 'Phantom Authority, Self-Selective Recruitment and Retention of Members in Virtual Communities: The Case of Wikipedia', *First Monday* (12, 2003).

can feel most rewarded. I therefore tend to agree with Dreyfus, although question the extent of his concern, when he says:

> [W]e should remain open to the possibility that, when we enter cyberspace and leave behind our emotional, intuitive, situated, vulnerable, embodied selves, and thereby gain a remarkable new freedom never before available to human beings, we might, at the same time, necessarily lose some of our crucial capacities: our ability to make sense of things so as to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, our sense of the seriousness of success and failure that is necessary for learning, and our need to get a maximum grip on the world that gives us our sense of the reality of things. Furthermore, we would be tempted to avoid the risk of genuine commitment, and so lose our sense of what gives meaning to our lives. (Dreyfus 2009: 6-7)

On the possibility of co-creating and sharing a mood via mediating technologies, I also agree with Dreyfus that in most cases it is much preferable to be in the same room with someone, conversing face-to-face, and that something of the magic of interaction tends to get lost in transit. But this is not at all a new observation. It can be (and surely has been) said of every tele-technology from writing to radio and the telegraph to the telephone, and as we saw in the words of the Bishop of Llandaff and Samuel Taylor Coleridge above, was a common criticism of letter-writing. Indeed, when we think of the communicative attenuations of letters, in which responses were days or weeks in transit and where dramaturgical cues were heavily reliant on mere text, then it must seem somewhat ungrateful to blame the Internet for what it cannot do when, in so many ways, it is such a blatant improvement—with synchronous conversation, webcams able to show live images of faces, microphones able to carry the "living voice," and so on—over the relative paucity of what went before. Moreover, Dreyfus understates the extent to which a mood *can* be conveyed through mediating technologies, even just basic text. Esther Milne (2010: chapter 2), for example, identifies the ways in which letter-writers conjured a sense of intimacy and shared presence by making repeated use of "I" and "you" and alluding to shared experiences and cultural references, while lending their writing immediacy by recursive allusion to the situation of writing and the embodied presence of the writer. Although writing attenuates embodied presence, many other cues can help our addressees tune into our state-of-mind and help them respond. As Adam Briggle (2008: 77) says, processes of writing and reading are always far more "dynamic, open-ended, and surprising" than critics like Dreyfus, Cocking and Matthews seem to allow. Style of writing, timing of responses, and use of certain words or tones of phrase can all be interpreted for meaning, and all indicate that mediated contacts are not bereft of interactional dynamics. While the relative lack of such cues might often make it more

difficult to establish the sense of immediacy and understanding felt when face-to-face, it does not make it impossible. Admittedly, this will likely be much easier if we are already familiar with the person with whom we are speaking. Discerning ironic humour from insult, for example, is greatly aided by familiarity with a person's sense of humour, the tone of voice they might use to say something, and having joked or argued in a similar fashion in the past. The disinhibition and projection to which online correspondence is prone is, in this respect, no doubt exacerbated by such lack of familiarity. Often with little more than bare text (and perhaps some emoticons) to interpret, it is much more difficult to make a rounded assessment of someone we encounter for the first time. Difficult, but not impossible however. And anyway, if such encounters are to flourish into long-term, strong-tie friendships, they will necessarily be recursive and reciprocal. They will require time, contact and intimacy, as all good friendships do. Adam Briggle (2008: 73) comments of Cocking and Matthews' paper that it presents an ultimately "implausible deterministic thesis, because the fate of online friendships depends at least as much on the people involved as it does on the tools used. Establishing close online friendships requires serious and dedicated people, but the same is of course true about the offline world." Briggle is right, but we can go further. Cocking and Matthews argument is very narrowly formed against relationships which are formed in cyberspace and stay there exclusively. But such an argument is entirely self-selecting, since its sample will very largely include only those 'friendships' not strong enough to merit contact by any other means. As our friendships develop, it is of course increasingly likely that we will begin to use other means of communicating – the exchange of pictures, telephone conversations, or meeting in person, for example. We will see that this is, indeed, often the case. In making such observations, we begin to resolve the question of whether online or offline interaction should be privileged. Or rather, we dissolve it: there is no dichotomy. We do not lead online and offline lives. We each lead one life, whether we are walking about in the world or sitting before computer screens gazing at the Web.

5.7 The Internet Alienation Thesis (2): Does Online Displace Offline Interaction?

Summing what we have said thus far, we can say that we do have reason to believe that online interaction is often, on the whole, less rewarding, meaningful and beneficial than face-to-face contact, although such diminutions are almost certainly less severe than critics like Dreyfus believe. We now come, though, to the second step in the Internet alienation thesis. For, on its own, the admission that mediated interaction via the Internet can often be

less rich and rewarding than unmediated, face-to-face interaction is hardly earth-shattering. As we have said, letters would surely fail the same test. Hence, if the Internet alienation thesis is to have any teeth, it must be shown that online interaction detracts from face-to-face contact in some way or ways. In Chapter Four we saw one way in which this can be argued to be so. The spatio-temporal singularity of letters, we saw, meant that they often necessitated a "secondary sociality," as people came together to collaborate and interact in their writing, reading and transmission. We must now ask whether the Internet also leeches time we would usually spend together in other ways? That it does is the fear of Dreyfus, who frets that the "risk-free nature" of online spaces like *Second Life* can make them "more attractive than the dangerous real world, and so drains off the time and energy that citizens could have given to actual community concerns" (Dreyfus 2009: 140). Sherry Turkle similarly worries that we have gone from seeing mediated encounters as "better than nothing," to now thinking them "simply better". She says:

> We may begin by thinking that e-mails, texts, and Facebook messaging are thin gruel but useful if the alternative is sparse communication with the people we care about. Then, we become accustomed to their special pleasures—we can have connection when and where we want or need it, and we can easily make it go away. In only a few more steps, you have people describing life on Facebook as better than anything they have ever known. (Turkle 2011: 160-61)

Such concerns are eloquently echoed, finally, by Gervase Markham, a programmer for the Mozilla Foundation, who was quoted in a recent *Pew Internet* report:

> Social networking encourages people to have a greater number of much shallower friendships. Insofar as online interaction replaces real-world interaction, the internet is a negative force in the social world. I know what 15 of my friends had for breakfast, but I don't know whether any of them is struggling with major life issues. If this trend continues, people in 2020 will have hundreds of acquaintances but very few friends. However, acquaintancebook.com doesn't quite have the same ring to it. (Qtd. Anderson and Rainie 2010: 11)

Whether online interaction actually does displace face-to-face contact in the way such commentators fear is an empirical question. Yet a lack of careful attention to the now significant body of sociological data on the subject can sometimes weaken such accounts. Dreyfus, for example, is highly selective in citing two studies—which made international newspaper headlines around the turn of the century—that suggested that the Internet negatively impacts upon social involvement. The first of these, the infamous "Internet Paradox" paper from researchers at Carnegie-Mellon University, reported that "greater use of the Internet was associated with declines in participants' communication with family

members in the household, declines in the size of their social circle, and increases in their depression and loneliness" (Kraut *et al*. 1998: 1017). Dreyfus prominently cites this report (on page 3 of his introduction), and later uses it to support his suggestion that by relating "to the world and other people through the Net we will become isolated and depressed" (Dreyfus 2009: 49). He then goes on to cite a similar study from Stanford (Nie and Erbring 2000), whose survey director was reported by *The New York Times* as asserting that "the Internet was creating a broad new wave of social isolation in the United States, raising the spectre of an atomised world without human contact or emotion" (qtd. Dreyfus 2009: 50). Such early negative findings, however, have been much disputed for the simple reason that they tended to deal with people just getting to grips with the Internet. Manuel Castells, for example, cites studies show that novice users of the Internet tend to experience overload, stress and "high levels of frustration"—but that these symptoms diminish over time—to suggest that negative observed effects may be "linked to inexperience with Internet use, rather than use of the Internet itself" (Castells 2001: 124). And indeed, when the Carnegie-Mellon researchers revisited the subjects of their initial study some years later, this is exactly what they found: "Our follow-up of participants ... showed that most of the negative outcomes initially associated with use of the Internet dissipated" to statistical insignificance (Kraut *et al*. 2002: 67). Moreover, the same follow-up paper reports findings from another study the authors had undertaken in which "more use of the Internet was associated with positive outcomes over a broad range of dependent variables measuring social involvement and psychological well-being: local and distant social circles, face-to-face communication, community involvement, trust in people, [and] positive affect" (67). That Dreyfus fails to mention this extremely instructive second study, or any of the many other studies conducted since, in the otherwise heavily updated 2009 second edition of his book, is to be much regretted.

Studies conducted since those early negative assessments have produced a mixed picture. While some have found negative (though often not statistically significant) correlations between Internet interaction and general levels of life satisfaction (Carden and Rettew 2006), loneliness (Amichai-Hamburger and Ben-Artzi 2003) and perceptions of life quality (Lee *et al*. 2011), others have equally found that the opposite can often be the case (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Carpenter and Buday 2007; DiMaggio *et al*. 2001; Wellman 2004). One meta-analysis of the effect of the Internet upon psychological well-being did find it to have "a small detrimental effect" (Huang 2010: 241), but this already muted finding is further tempered by the author's admission that it is difficult to draw general conclusions since 'well-being' (a notoriously slippery concept) is often measured in very different ways

by differing researchers. Shklovski *et al*.'s meta-analysis of 16 studies run between 1995 and 2006, meanwhile, found "few consistent effects across people, relationships, and settings". Overall, they say, "the Internet has not had any broad effect on social interaction" (Shklovski *et al*. 2006: 262). Such results, though offering no conclusive answer, at least converge to dispel Dreyfus' more profound and immediate worries that in relating "to the world and other people through the Net we will become isolated and depressed" (Dreyfus 2009: 49). As Shklovski *et al*. conclude, our most basic social habits seem much less vulnerable to broad and sweeping change than deterministic theories of the Internet allow:

> The number of insignificant effects in the literature suggest that some of the most important parts of life—how people use major blocks of time, their closest relationships, and their emotional lives—are comparatively stable over time and resist change. Thus, even though the Internet may have changed many habits, the effects of those changes on fundamental relationships and psychological well-being would likely be small, or at least, slow in emerging. (Shklovski *et al*. 2006: 262)

Hence, we should be inclined towards agreement with Manuel Castells' early appraisal from 2001 that although the Internet might substitute for social activities in some circumstances, nevertheless, "overall, the body of evidence does not support the thesis that Internet use leads to lower social interaction and greater social isolation" (Castells 2001: 124). In other words, the second step in the alienation thesis seems largely unsupported by the evidence. Furthermore, such results place in doubt the high-claims made for the change to patterns of sociality that the Internet would bring. Both the optimistic and pessimistic projections seem to have been much overinflated. In the final section of this Chapter, we will examine the common roots of such utopian and dystopian overestimations, arguing that they derive from common tendencies to overstate (and sometimes entirely misrepresent) the 'virtual' nature of online communication, neglect the socially constructed nature of the Internet, and habitually focus on extreme or outlying cases which are only partially representative of the vast majority of Internet users, for whom the Internet is simply a rather dull but dependable part of everyday life. We begin by reflecting on what we mean when we say that Internet interaction is 'virtual'.

5.8 'Real' Versus 'Virtual': A False Dichotomy

The virtual is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, that which "is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually," which admits of "being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned." Not so *in fact*, then. When I was growing up in the

1980s, "virtual reality" was big news: all you had to do was put on head-mounted video displays, data-gloves and other equipment to enter immersive other-worlds, shaped in garish, clunky polygons. Now, it seems the word "virtual" has broadened to encompass more or less everything digital – we can think, for example, of our word processing documents as "virtual" in the sense that they are subject to the kinds of ontological ambiguity we discussed earlier (§3.7): documents in *effect* but not in *actuality*. All this is fair enough. Problems begin to arise, however, when we use this sense of the virtuality of the Internet *qua* medium to suggest that our interactions via the Internet are themselves virtual. They aren't. When we interact online, we are really are, *in fact,* interacting with other actual, living, breathing human beings, although admittedly this fact can sometimes be obscured or wilfully forgotten (a point to which we return at the end). I make this point forcibly because the rhetoric of virtuality tends to be misused to somehow carve up interaction into two unequal categories, the "virtual" (artificial, simulated, online interaction) and the "real" (actual, "real world", "real life" interaction). This sharp division between what happens on and offline is, I believe, responsible for many of the overestimations of the broad-scale effects of the Internet that we have thus far seen made by commentators from both sides of the utopian/dystopian divide. For these opposing interpretations of cyberspace share a common origin in their (deficient) presentation of the Internet as an "anything goes" neo-wild-west, a lawless, revolutionary world of levelled distinctions where the normal social rules are turned upside down. Trust, risk, status, identity, value – all these things still matter online, just as they do offline. Both the utopians and dystopians seem to have been caught up in the fever of the early deterministic imaginary which told us that the Web would change *everything.* The cheerleaders on the one side and the naysayers on the other merely spun their respective hopes and fears from the same basic misapprehension that the Internet is somehow fundamentally divorced, inalienably different from all the other places in which we live our lives.

The utopians and futurists, of course, lauded the Web for its 'virtual' differences: "In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual", said Sherry Turkle (1995: 10) in her early enthusiasm. The excitement of inhabiting this new frontier, this world in which traditional social rules and structures seemed meaningless—"Our world is different," as John Perry Barlow (1996) said—meant sober assessment suffered. The "virtual community," with its altered appearances and extended connectivity offered new opportunities for egalitarian discourse, apolitical governance and even postmodern, decentred selfhood. All that seemed to be necessary to make all this happen, suggested the *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, was that vested

interests were kept from interference. The dystopians took up the same basic sharp division between offline and online life, 'real' and 'virtual', but gave it a pessimistic spin. The negative connotations of 'virtuality'—i.e., 'not as good as the real thing'—were played out in fears for a "simulated life" (Dreyfus 2009: 88). "On the Internet," averred Dreyfus, "commitments are at best virtual commitments" (81). Negative estimations of "virtuality" played similarly on Albert Borgmann's dismal appraisal of cyberspace, which he believed to indeed centre "on the norm of virtual reality" (Borgmann 1999b: 187). MUDs in particular, he thought, have the "characteristic self-containment of a virtual reality, "since their users remain largely anonymous to each other (188). Borgmann thought MUDs "impure" virtual realities, however, for the fact that in the absence of suitably engaging and articulate artificial intelligences, players must interact with other actual people to keep the game interesting: "One might consider it a mere technological imperfection that intelligence needs to be imported into virtual reality and threatens to contaminate and spoil its glamour" (189). Such a characterisation is indicative of the errors of the rhetoric of virtuality. Put bluntly, it mischaracterises and unnecessarily overcomplicates our understanding of such online environments to call them "impure" virtual realities. Firstly, because anonymity or role-play does not necessarily imply virtuality: such interaction is only "virtual" in the same sense that people who gather together to take part in re-enactments of famous historical battles take part in "virtual" wars. Those people *really* are still interacting, and so are people in MUDs. Secondly, because to characterise them in such a manner implies that interaction with other people is incidental, or secondary, to their attraction. In fact, it is central, as is evidenced by David Bennahum's account of their development:

> The first MUDs were built around 1978.... At first, players played alone, against the machine, going from room to room collecting treasure, killing monsters, until they eventually won the game. After a while it got boring. Computers are predictable. So a few programmers decided to network several games and let people play together, simultaneously. Then, something unexpected happened. People no longer played to win the game; they played to be with other people. A virtual community began to form.... The point was not to play a game but to build a social space in a permanent state of evolution. (Bennahum 1994: 22)

This history serves Borgmann's interpretation to a certain extent. It is true to say that other humans were initially drafted in to make the game more stimulating. But in so doing, as Bennahum describes, they redefined the purpose of these environments: the aim was no longer to merely play games, but now to inhabit a social space. Redefinition by users shifted the significance of the technology in a process of social construction which mirrors

that recounted in his justifiably lauded account of the Minitel in France.[18] Just as in that case user-led reconfiguration unexpectedly resulted in a technology of social encounter, a site of *being-with-others.* This might be *being-with* of a strange and unusual kind—one where, as Feenberg said of the Minitel, "the magic play of presence and absence, of disembodied voice or text, generates unexpected social possibilities"(Feenberg 1995: 165)—but it is *being-with* nonetheless. To think, therefore, that online environments such as MUDs or successors like *Second Life* are "impure" virtual realities is to miss their significance as social systems. People were not just drafted in to make the game interesting; the game became really interesting when it morphed into a social space. MUDs, MOOs and *Second Life* are not virtual reality. They are simply somewhat novel corners of contemporary reality itself.

Furthermore, anonymous role-playing of the kind often embarked upon in such environments is but one genre of online interaction, and one which is by no means representative of the whole. Text-only environments like MUDs and MOOs are today largely obsolete, but graphically sophisticated environments like *Second Life* are natural successors. In comparison to some other genres of Internet interaction, though, *Second Life* is a decidedly niche concern. Fewer than 800,000 people worldwide log in to *Second Life* more than once per month (Cremorne 2011), user-figures which must seem utterly insubstantial next to *Facebook's* reports of more than 800 million active users, 50 per cent

[18] Feenberg has written widely on this subject, believing it "emblematic of the democratic transformation of technical networks by the human actors they enrol, innovating novel social forms" (Feenberg, 2002: 118-9). Aiming to improve information infrastructure and open new channels for data dissemination, in the early 1980s *France Telecom* and the French government began distributing free terminals called *Minitel* to millions of telephone subscribers. More than five million terminals were distributed between in the ten years following its first introduction in 1981 (Feenberg, 1995: 148-9). Using *Videotex* software, the networked *Minitel* terminals were primarily designed to give users access to centrally-held data like transport schedules and legal information, but were also capable of serving certain communicative functions for banking, telemarketing, advertising and interaction with system operators. As a result of these projected system functions, both the system hardware and software were biased against human-to-human communication, although it remained technically possible. In the strongly oppositional political culture of France, the introduction of these machines into the home opened a new space for social experimentation. Soon hackers had enabled largely anonymous personal communication within the network, and this rapidly, and unexpectedly, became one of its main functions – so much so that by 1987 40 per cent of the hours of domestic traffic on the packet-switching network were spent on such messaging (Feenberg, 1995: 151), with much of that traffic taken up by "pink" sex-chat services. Heated public debate ensued over the purpose of this new system, with French public officials infuriated at what was perceived to be a misappropriation of its original technocratic intentions. Such debate soon became moot, however, as swarms of users embraced the system's social potential; in effect, the users had defied the centrally created meaning of *Teletel*, redesigning its technology and redefining its purpose – from information supply to interpersonal communication network. As Feenberg says: "it was mainly nonprofessionals (or professionals not associated with the design and management of systems) who pioneered these unexpected uses of the new technologies. And they succeeded because ordinary people want computers to serve personal goals and not just the official functions emphasized by experts. In the process they refuted widespread deterministic assumptions about the rationalizing implications of the computer and revealed its communicative potential." (Feenberg, 2002: 117-18)

of whom log on in any given day (Facebook 2011). And what do people primarily use *Facebook* for? Confirming previous findings (Subrahmanyama *et al*. 2008: 426), the most recent statistics from the PEW *Internet & American Life Project* show unequivocally that online social networking applications like *Facebook* and *Myspace* are used above all to maintain existing (i.e., offline) relationships, with very nearly nine out of ten users using them for this purpose, and fewer than half of respondents using them to make new friends (Lenhart 2009: 6). Social networking sites are supremely popular for a very simple reason: our friends are there. As Danah Boyd says:

> When I ask teenagers why they joined MySpace, the answer is simple: "Cuz that's where my friends are." Their explanation of what they do on the site is much more vague: "I don't know. . . I just hang out." Beneath these vague explanations is a clear message: the popularity of MySpace is deeply rooted in how the site supports sociality amongst preexisting friend groups. Teens join MySpace to maintain connections with their friends. (Boyd 2008: 126)

The injudicious rhetoric of virtuality edges further into error as it is used to characterise such online communications in which people are primarily known and identified by their real names or where their interactions are primarily with those already known to them through other contexts. One thinks here of Sherry Turkle's recent reference to *MySpace* and *Facebook* as mere "simulation" (Turkle 2011: 239), and (perhaps most egregiously) of Cocking and Matthews' (224, n2) use of the term "virtual" to cover *every* kind of interaction which "may substitute for face-to-face communication". Such definitions—which suggest that any interaction which is in some sense mediated, whether via email, letters, or smoke signals, is virtual—stretch the term too far, compromising any descriptive purchase it has left. For, as we said in Chapter Three, all interactions can be said to be mediated in some sense, including when we stand face-to-face. Moreover, it begs the question of what conditions face-to-face communication must meet in order to qualify as 'real.' If I call out to my partner in the next room, for example, is that a 'virtual' speech act? What if I am at a fancy-dress party where identities are concealed? Or what of people with sensory disabilities such as blindness or deafness, for whom the supposed fullness of face-to-face encounters must always deficient by such criteria, do such people live 'virtual' lives? My answer in all these cases would be of course not; all are examples of real interaction, though ones in which appearances are attenuated in certain respects. The same is true of mediated communication, whether by means of letters or on the Internet. The fact of mediation does not make interaction 'virtual.' As Peter-Paul Verbeek has said in a slightly different context:

> Hyperrealities do not estrange humans from reality. They are a detour, but always have actual reality as their final destination. 'Information as reality' does not constitute a reality humans can or even want to live in. It changes our relationship with reality, like any other technology. But it does not offer an alternative to it. (Verbeek 2002: 90)

Breaking down the false dichotomy of virtuality in such a way allows us to appreciate the ways in which our online lives are intractably enmeshed with our offline lives. For even where we do use the Internet to make new connections, there is no reason to assume that those relationships will simply stay there. As Hampton and Wellman (1999: 489) found, "[r]elationships are rarely maintained through computer-mediated communication alone, but are sustained through a combination of online and offline interactions." Parks and Floyd's study of Internet newsgroup users found that more than 60 per cent of those sampled had formed a personal relationship with someone they had first encountered via a newsgroup, and that almost two-thirds of that number went on to develop these relationships through other communication channels, including email, telephone and face-to-face meetings. As they say: "for most of our respondents, cyberspace is simply another place to meet.... They do not appear to draw a sharp boundary between relationships in cyberspace and those in real life" (Parks and Floyd 1996: 94). Maria Barkardjieva's study of the Internet in everyday life found respondents integrating their online and offline activities in similarly seamless ways. As she concludes: "As much as these banal everyday activities may contrast with the exotic aura of some virtual community accounts, they powerfully demonstrate the artificiality of the split between 'virtual' and 'real'" (Bakardjieva 2003: 304). The Internet is not some parallel world where we are primarily engaged in anonymous, fantasy role-play intentionally divorced from our offline lives. It is a new, socially-constructed social space which becomes ever more embedded in our everyday lives. As Phil Agre says:

> So long as we persist in opposing so-called virtual communities to the face-to-face communities of the mythical opposite extreme, we miss the ways in which real communities of practice employ a whole ecology of media as they think together about the matters that concern them. And so long as we focus on the limited areas of the Internet where people engage in fantasy play that is intentionally disconnected from their real-world identities, we miss how social and professional identities are continuous across several media, and how people use those several media to develop their identities in ways that carry over to other settings.... Just as most people don't define their activities in terms of computers, most people using Internet services are mainly concerned with the real-world matters to which their discussions and activities in the use of those services pertain. (Agre 1999: 2-3)

This is not to say that there are no differences between online and offline interaction, but that those differences will be more subtle than the radical revision of personhood, or sociality, or democracy. *Facebook* is not fantasy, no parallel world. It is merely, and quite mundanely, part of this one.

5.9 Conclusion

We have asked whether the Internet is a suitable seedbed within which human relationships might flourish, and have noted that as social networks move online, our appearances alter and connectivity is extended. As argued by the 'cues filtered-out' theory of CMC, by reducing regulating feedback, dramaturgical impact and social status cues, and by opening the prospect of greater social anonymity, these factors, in combination, can have the effect of disinhibiting action online, loosening us up, minimising social norms and thus encouraging impulsive behaviours, for both good and ill. While some find in these conditions a place to open up, others find a place to vent. We have, though, discussed the ways in which letters, too, filtered out communicative cues, though noted that the Internet certainly makes them more prevalent. This is especially so since, as seen through our discussion of social network theory, the Internet also extends connectivity, making it ever easier to talk to strangers. Extended connectivity increases the scope of our weak-ties, and this is a boon for the dissemination of information and the cross-pollination of ideas between social groups. Seeking to predict the widescale effects of these altered appearances and extended connectivity online, we have seen that two factions, of utopians and dystopians, emerged. For the utopians and early Internet cheerleaders, diminution of status and the potential to pretend meant that the Internet would decentre the self and remake democracy. Such claims seem wild-eyed and optimistic now, hype and hope rather than reasoned accounting. Similarly, dystopian claims of the kind made by Hubert Dreyfus seem a little overwrought also. While Dreyfus is perhaps right that in many instances the Internet is an imperfect medium by which to achieve committed and trustful interaction, it extinguishes neither trust nor commitment. As Adam Briggle has said, "the fate of online friendships depends at least as much on the people involved as it does on the tools used. Establishing close online friendships requires serious and dedicated people, but the same is of course true about the offline world" (Briggle 2008: 73). In closing, I have suggested that both the utopian and dystopian camps claims' go too far in estimating the large-scale effects the Internet would bring, and that this stems from an unnecessary dichotomising of online and offline life. Online interaction is not virtual, though its medium may be. We do

not lead online and offline lives. We each lead one life, whether we are walking about in the world or sitting before computer screens gazing at the Web.

Such findings support this thesis' methodological approach, as outlined in Chapter One, in two ways. Firstly, the importance of understanding technology in its historical context can be seen in the ways in which argument about the Internet often reflects larger concerns about the nature of modernity and industrialisation in general. As Patrice Flichy (2007) has shown so well, the Internet is not just a network of technologies but also an *imaginaire*, a bundle of hopes and dreams and fears and suspicions about what we might become. As Putnam has said, the Internet cannot possibly be linked to the loss of social connectedness, since "[v]oting, giving, trusting, meeting, visiting and so on had all begun to decline while Bill Gates was still in grade school" (Putnam 2000: 170). If social connection really is in decline, then as Adam Briggle (2008: 78) says, the problem "lies less in the technology considered in isolation than in the wider socio-technical dynamics and cultural values of a hyper-paced world, where efficiency is a chief virtue and, as Nietzsche noted, one even eats lunch with a watch in one hand." Secondly, in highlighting the rhetoric of "virtuality" as an ampliative force that heightened expectations about the large-scale effects the Internet would have upon association, we have further shown the drawbacks of an approach centred on radical novelty. Even where a technology opens up radically novel possibilities—as it perhaps does in the dramatically altered appearances and extended connectivity of "virtual worlds" like *Second Life*—we cannot, *a priori*, draw deterministic conclusions about the kinds of radical change that will follow. People must still take up this technology, incorporating it into their everyday lives. As they have done so over the last fifteen years, they have helped shape the social Web, and demonstrated that rather than wanting to experiment with anonymous, uncommitted fantasy role-play, the epistolary aims of most are really not so profoundly different to those in the Romantic era who circulated familiar letters. The millions who log in to *Facebook* every day do so primarily to maintain contact with their existing friends and acquaintances. This is not to say that such online social networks do not still potentially shape interactions in new and unexpected ways, but only that such changes will be more subtle than those expected by many of the utopian and dystopian voices we have encountered here. In the next Chapter, we will examine one area in which such subtle effects might be most immediately observed, by way of a discussion of our changing conditions of privacy and publicity.

6 Problems of Proximity: On Privacy and Publicity (and Porcupines)

"A number of porcupines huddled together for warmth on a cold day in winter; but, as they began to prick one another with their quills, they were obliged to disperse. However the cold drove them together again, when just the same thing happened. At last, after many turns of huddling and dispersing, they discovered that they would be best off by remaining at a little distance from one another."

— Arthur Schopenhauer

6.1 Introduction

As Schopenhauer (1964: 226) knew, we humans are a lot like porcupines. We too struggle to balance our conflicting desires for closeness and distance. On the one hand, we are social creatures: friendship is, as Aristotle (2000: 143/1155a) says, "an absolute necessity to life". *Being-with* is a basic precondition for human life (Heidegger 1962: §26); as Hannah Arendt (1998: 22) has said, "No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature's wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings." For humans, lacking the speed, wings, teeth or claws of some of the more solitary creatures, a life without society certainly would be "poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1994: 76). Without a shared language and the mirror of other people by which to articulate our being, moreover, we would not even know ourselves.[19] Our greatest human achievements—language, scholarship, art, architecture, technology—are always shared, collaborative achievements, building upon interaction and discourse with others, and occurring within a rich history of tradition. We depend on one another for

[19] As Adam Smith has said: "Were it possible that a human creature could grow up to manhood in some solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face." Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments,* ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) at 129.

companionship, warmth, security, love, validation, to share our miseries and joys, and to help idle the hours of our duller days. So, we need each other then. But we also do not need each other, at least not all of the time. Indeed, often others are often a distinct nuisance. We have certain limits beyond which social contact becomes an irritation for all concerned (Schwartz 1968: 741); we need our own space, both literal and figurative. What Wordsworth calls in *The Prelude* "the deformities of crowded life," with its "ensuing laughters and contempts" can stifle and grate. We can lose our sense of self when immersed in the anonymity of the herd, and sometimes need to retreat, "away from the numbers" as Paul Weller sang. We need to maintain some distance, too, for the very sake of our relationships, which suffer excessive familiarity. As Nietzsche (1996: 158) said in *Human, All Too Human*: "If we live together with another person too closely, what happens is similar to when we repeatedly handle a good engraving with our bare hands: one day all we have left is a piece of dirty paper. The soul of a human being too can finally become tattered by being handled continually". Even when we are together physically, in the same room, there is (as said in §3.5) still an interplay of absence and presence. We are never fully and immediately present to each other – we do not plug ourselves into each other's minds. Our encounters, mediated by signs, are always a revealing and concealing. We cannot say *everything* we think and feel, even with our most valued friends (and usually even less so to mere acquaintances). Humans are fragile creatures. We worry about what others will think of us, and in turn—for the most part—try not to upset them by talking out of turn. We have conflicting views and, knowing this, often try to avoid getting into conversations (on politics or religion, for example) which would probably lead to nowhere but argument or bad feeling. Hence, the pragmatics of human interaction always require a certain amount of double dealing, as Blaise Pascal (1995: 239) observed when he wryly noted that "if everyone knew what others said about him, there would not be four friends in the world". And just as we are probably better off not knowing what people say about us in our absence, we are surely spared much mutual embarrassment by remaining oblivious to everything else that they get up to when we are not around. As Auden says in *The Orators*, "Private faces in public places / Are wiser and nicer / Than public faces in private places". All this, I suggest, demonstrates a fundamental fissure in social life, a problem of proximity. We want closeness, but we need apartness too; we want to talk but we do not want to talk about *everything*, nor to *everybody* about the *same* things, and we are definitely better off not knowing *everything* about *everybody*! To quote Schopenhauer again:

> [T]he need of society drives the human porcupines together, only to be mutually repelled by the many prickly and disagreeable qualities of their nature. The moderate distance which they at last discover to be the only tolerable condition of intercourse, is the code of politeness and fine manners; and those who transgress it are roughly told—in the English phrase—*to keep their distance*. By this arrangement the mutual need of warmth is only very moderately satisfied; but then people do not get pricked. (Schopenhauer 1964: 226, original emphasis)

Schopenhauer's wonderful little allegory is deficient in one important respect, however. He overlooks the role of technology. What if, for example, we gave those porcupines cosy little blankets, or dulled the ends of their quills with cork stoppers? Would they then be able to relax: warm *and* apart, or close *and* unprickled? Or might they merely become yet more restless – wondering what on earth these strange new blanket and cork things were? I strain the analogy to make the point that where interaction is concerned, we humans have many more choices available to us than do Schopenhauer's refrigerated rodents, and that (in part) this increased choice is technologically-enabled.

The novelist Chuck Palahniuk points towards the kinds of ways technologies can help in this regard when he says satirically: "People used what they called a telephone because they hated being close together and they were too scared of being alone" (Palahniuk 2003: 15). But the telephone—as an actant to which we delegate the role of mediating our interrelations—does not do so without pushing responsibilities back onto us and reshaping our actions. Scarcely had the it been invented before it was listed by Ambrose Bierce (2002: 225) in his *Devil's Dictionary* as: "Telephone*, n*. An invention of the devil which abrogates some of the advantages of making a disagreeable person keep his distance." The now ubiquitous mobile phone that sits in every pocket and lies in every handbag carries with it a sense of constant anticipation. It may, at any moment, begin beeping or vibrating, shouting to us: "Somebody wants you! Over here, quick!" We increasingly find ourselves standing in readiness for this electronic squeal of approbation – "was that my phone I just heard?" In company, it is now permissible to turn away mid-sentence to answer the phone or reply to a text – to put people to whom we are face-to-face "on hold," as it were. The untethered telephone can, moreover, transform public and personal spaces, creating an uncomfortable hybrid: a crowded train carriage becomes the site of an incredibly intimate conversation in which only one party is present, while all the other passengers must pretend to be absent. Sherry Turkle relates just such a tale: "There was some comfort in the fact that he was not complaining to me, but I did wish I could disappear. Perhaps there was no need. I was already being treated as if I was not there" (Turkle 2011: 155). Such examples suggest that there is at least a question to be asked of the ways in which, in

helping us overcome our problems of proximity, such technologies merely complicate matters by creating new problems.

To come then, to the theme of this Chapter: how does the Internet change the ways we are together and alone, seen and unseen, public and private? Does it erode (or perhaps even abolish) such distinctions? And what is the net result of any such changes? Such questions are increasingly common in both academic and popular discourse. Grouped with cognate concerns about crime, data security, and fears for the surveillance society, the extent to which people, especially young people, are voluntarily putting information about themselves into the public domain (via blogs, social networking sites and so on) without due consideration of possible consequences has become a subject of intense debate. In recent years such anxieties seem to have become particularly fevered, with a raft of recent press headlines decrying the "end of privacy." Even the usually level-headed BBC ended 2010—a year that had seen the continued rise of the "whistle-blowing" website *Wikileaks,* both *Google* and *Facebook* embroiled in public outcries over their privacy policies, government efforts to crackdown on piracy, and so on—with an article titled *2010, The Year That Privacy Died?* The short answer to such a silly question is, of course, "no," but the long answer (which this Chapter attempts to provide) must acknowledge some potentially fundamental shifts in the ways we can be publicly private and privately public, as Patricia Lange (2008) so intriguingly puts it. In this Chapter, then, we will build on our foregoing examinations of the ways in which the redrawing of our proximal boundaries of de-severance, the differing materialities of (and hence differing modes of engagements with) the communication technologies of paper and the Internet, and the changed conditions of appearance and connection these technologies interpose, all interplay to reshape the meaning and boundaries of our conceptions of publicity and privacy.

6.2 Defining Privacy and Publicity

We will be discussing the ways in which the Internet reconfigures our potential ways of being public and private. These terms require initial clarification, particularly since notions of public and private can mean very different things in different domains (Weintraub 1997: 7). We talk, for instance, of the public and the private sectors to make an economic distinction between state and market administrations. We talk too of a "public sphere" of political interaction and citizenship, which is (or should be), by definition, distinct from both state and market (Habermas 1992). And we also talk about the public realm of sociability, as distinct from "private" domains of solitude, intimacy and domesticity. As

should be clear, in this Chapter we are concerned with the latter of these meanings, which we will call the social meaning of privacy (as opposed to its economic and civic meanings). This only begins our process of disambiguation though. For Luciano Floridi, following Judee Burgoon (1982), distinguishes four kinds of social privacy: physical, mental, decisional and informational. These are defined as:

- "a person S' physical privacy = def: S' freedom from sensory interference or intrusion, achieved thanks to a restriction on others' ability to have bodily interactions with S

- S' mental privacy = def: S' freedom from psychological interference or intrusion, achieved thanks to a restriction on others' ability to access and manipulate S' mind

- S' decisional privacy = def: S' freedom from procedural interference or intrusion, achieved thanks to the exclusion of others from decisions (concerning e.g. education, health care, career, work, marriage, faith) taken by S and S' group of intimates

- S' informational privacy = def: S' freedom from epistemic interference or intrusion, achieved thanks to a restriction on facts about S that are unknown or unknowable" (Floridi 1999b: 53)

Dealing as we are with matters concerning mediated communications, we will in what follows be largely discussing informational privacy. To point forward to an argument developed later, however, I suggest that any such discussion cannot remain limited to informational privacy alone, for the simple reason that people often make trade-offs between these differing kinds of privacy – accepting a lessened level of informational privacy in exchange for heightened physical privacy, for example.

Next, we should be clear about whether we are talking of privacy as a right or entitlement ("the right to be let alone" for example), as a state or condition of limited access (to be "in private"), or as a descriptive measure. On this latter distinction, Ferdinand Schoeman (1984: 199) formulates privacy as: "the measure of control an individual has over: (a) information about himself; (b) intimacies of personal identity; or (c) who has sensory access to himself." Schoeman's definition usefully links physical, mental, decisional and informational privacy. Dealing first with points (a) and (c), we can say that privacy is, on

this reckoning, decided by the extent of a person's power to allow or limit perceptual access to them or information about them. Privacy lies at one end of a spectrum which has publicity as its opposite pole; degrees along that spectrum are decided by the extent to which the individual (or information about the person) is subject to the intentional gaze of others. This is right, although not sufficient. For those who define privacy in terms of control (cf. I. Altman 1977: 68; Fried 1990: 54; Westin 1968: 7) are often criticised for suggesting that it is reasonable or even possible for a person to have perfect control over privacy thus defined, and for leaving vague the amount of control needed for privacy to emerge. Tavani (2007: 7) gives the example of your being seen by an acquaintance in a shop and argues that although in that situation you have no control over that acquaintance's gaining the information of your whereabouts, most people would not consider it a breach of privacy. Hence we need point (b) of Schoeman's definition, "intimacies of personal identity". For it matters what *kinds* of access people have. We might not care if an acquaintance were to see us in the newsagent's shop, but might well care if they saw us entering a sex shop, for example. Or we might willingly give a stranger our name, but would baulk if they asked for our banking details. Both these cases are still a matter of control, however. Even if for some reason we did not want to be seen at the newsagent's, we knew that going there was to risk being seen and made some kind of pragmatic cost/benefit analysis before deciding to go. Movie stars who bemoan the paparazzi camped in their bushes are not rejecting the idea of publicity in general—they live to be seen on screens, after all—but what they deem unethical intrusions into areas of their lives they consider off-limits.[20]

Just as it matters what kind of access people have, it also matters who those people are, i.e. who is doing the gazing. The 19th century jurist James Fitzjames Stephen rightly said: "All the more intimate and delicate relations of life are of such a nature that to submit them to *unsympathetic observation, or to observation which is sympathetic in the wrong way*, inflicts great pain, and may inflict lasting moral injury" (Stephen 2010: 160, my emphasis). In other words, privacy matters because I cannot be sure that certain details of my life will be treated in a sympathetic fashion. With some people, though, I can be sure. As Adam Smith says: "We expect less sympathy from a common acquaintance than from a friend: we cannot open to the former all those little circumstances which we can unfold to the latter" (Smith 2002: 28). Hence, I can consider myself to be "in private" when sharing a room with five people (if that group consists of my closest family or firmest friends), while

[20] This example comes from Prof. Michael Moss.

sharing an elevator with even a single stranger feels like being "in public." Privacy is context-specific, what constitutes it will differ depending on where we are and who we are with. When my favourite song comes on my iPod as I walk down the high-street, for example, I will not start singing along as I would at home. And even when at home, I will start singing in the presence of some people (e.g. my girlfriend), but not in front of others (e.g. the plumber). John Harden, when boating on Lake Windermere, preferred to take the oars himself rather than have his staff row for him, in order to be "free of the presence of our servants & consequently of some restraint of conversation" (21.09.04). We have different faces for different occasions. Domains of discourse are both opened and closed by the presence of other people. There are times when, to a greater or lesser extent, we can kick loose and "be ourselves," and other times when we must more rigidly observe social niceties or particular codes of practice.

Like our cold porcupines caught between the need to be alone and apart, our lives are lived in a constant tension caused by our conflicting obligations to ourselves and to others. Richard Rorty has captured this tension best in his ironist's attempt to love and value all his philosophical heroes despite the fundamental incommensurability of their views. On the one hand he groups Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Nabokov, Heidegger and others, as people who talk in terms of things like Dasein's need for authenticity or "becoming what one is." Against such individualists, Rorty pits "fellow citizens" like Mill, Marx, Habermas and Rawls, people who engaged in a "shared, social effort ... to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel". Rorty's response to this seeming opposition is to argue that 'private' and 'public' thinkers are in fact engaged in two entirely different language games. He proposes a two-state solution in which we give both vocabularies "equal weight and then use them for different purposes":

> We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as opposed if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision. There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us do that. The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time - causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged. There are practical measures to be taken to accomplish this practical goal. But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange. (Rorty 1989: xiv)

For Rorty, these two vocabularies must necessarily co-exist. The ironist must be bilingual, speaking the languages of both self-creation and social-justice. But despite Rorty's dreams of a "liberal utopia" (Rorty 1989: 61), there will never be peace. We porcupines' need for warmth will always clash with our essential spikiness. The conflict will flare every time there is an opposition between what I want and what you want. Privacy derives its importance from the fact that it forms an interface between these warring states. It is their ambassador.

6.3 Altman and the Dynamics of the Private/Public Boundary

How do we negotiate between the private and public in our everyday encounters? How do we decide how much privacy and publicity we want from one moment to the next, and how do we go about getting it? To answer such questions we turn to the social psychologist Irwin Altman's ecology model of privacy (1975, 1977). Altman conceives of privacy as a "boundary control" process in which "people sometimes make themselves open and accessible to others and sometimes close themselves off," the conditions for which change over time and with circumstances (I. Altman 1977: 67). He characterises this process in four ways. Firstly, it is a dynamic, dialectic process. As Altman (67) points out, privacy has traditionally been seen as "a one-way 'keepout' or withdrawal process by which people attempt to avoid interaction with others." His "boundary" model, though, sees privacy and publicity as two conflicting needs, always in tension and negotiated dynamically by our opening ourselves up and closing ourselves off to interaction as circumstances change. This seems right. As Palen and Dourish (2003: 131) point out, we do not only seek to limit people's informational access to us, we also explicitly or implicitly seek to give certain impressions or make ourselves known in certain ways: "Bumper stickers, designer clothing, and 'letters to the editor' deliberately disclose information about who we are. We sit in sidewalk cafes to 'see and be seen.' We seek to maintain not just a personal life, but also a public face. Managing privacy means paying attention to both of these desires." Secondly, it is an optimisation process. Rather than aiming at some fixed goal-state ("in private," "in public"), privacy is a "nonmonotonic process, with departures from some optimum level of interaction in either a 'too much' or 'too little' direction being unsatisfactory." For Altman, then, we are always geared towards striking the right balance: too much privacy and we become socially isolated; too little and we feel crowded. What constitutes "too much" or "too little"—i.e., where on the private-public continuum the optimum lies—will shift over time with changes in an individual's mood, goals and interactional partners, as well as with alterations in physical, social, and cultural

circumstances.[21] Thirdly, privacy is achieved by many mechanisms which can compensate for, compliment, or amplify each other:

> As a self-other boundary control process, privacy is viewed as a network of behavioral mechanisms that people use to achieve desired levels of social interaction. These mechanisms include verbal and paraverbal behaviors such as personal space and territoriality, and culturally defined styles of responding.... Furthermore, these behavioral mechanisms operate as a system. As such, they include properties of interdependence and of compensatory and substitutable action. That is, a person may use different mixes of behaviors to achieve a desired level of privacy, depending upon circumstances. Or different people and cultures may have unique blends of mechanisms to regulate privacy. (I. Altman 1977: 67-68)

Finally, Altman argues that privacy is a culturally universal *process* but a culturally specific *phenomenon*, "a generic process that occurs in all cultures ... [but which] also differs among cultures in terms of the behavioural mechanisms used to regulate desired levels of privacy" (I. Altman 1977: 66). In support of this thesis he cites cases such as Clifford Geertz' anthropological account of certain groups in Japan, who though appearing to have minimal physical privacy—living in bamboo homes without fences, with thin walls were thin and often no doors, where outsiders would freely walk in and out, etc.—in fact made use of a variety of behavioural mechanisms to regulate social exchange: "For example, social contacts were restrained, people hid their emotional feelings, decorum was elaborate, people spoke softly, and, as Geertz put it, 'Javanese shut people out with a wall of etiquette'" (I. Altman 1977: 74). In another example, Altman cites the reindeer herding Lapps of Northern Europe, where visitors could arrive unannounced and enter a tent without preliminaries and where decorum was such that visitors could not be refused. Yet even in this case of a seeming lack of privacy, people had novel mechanisms for fending off unwanted contact: "The occupant who felt negatively about the visitor typically feigned falling asleep, which served as a signal that the visitor was unwanted. Thus, by virtue of

[21] In speaking of an optimum in this manner, Altman seems to conceive of privacy in a way which much parallels Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on how our bodies are pre-thematically geared towards gaining an optimal grip on the world: "For each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimum distance from which it requires to be seen ... at a shorter or greater distance we have a perception blurred through excess or deficiency, and seek a better focus as with a microscope.... The distance from me to an object is not a size which increases or decreases, but a tension which fluctuates around a norm." [Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2002) at 352.] As Wordsworth says in his poem *Personal Talk,* the "sweetest melodies / Are those that are by distance made more sweet". There is always a middle ground in which our perception of something becomes most clear, i.e., is optimised. This optimum is fluid depending on our aims. When looking at an artwork such as a painted portrait, for example, I will move around it, inwards to concentrate on a particular feature, or even closer to gain an appreciation of the brush-strokes and the way the paint was applied, and back out to take in the whole picture "in the round," as it were. Altman's conception of the optimum level of privacy is similarly fluid. Just as we move around the painting to gain the optimal grip, we are always negotiating to find an optimal balance between our conflicting needs for togetherness and withdrawal, publicity and privacy.

their peculiar cultural circumstances, the Lapps closed themselves off from others in situations where cultural norms specified some initial mandatory openness" (I. Altman 1977: 77-78). As Altman himself admits, the question of whether privacy is universal is controversial, though this controversy might merely boil down to use of terms. Certainly, the "right to privacy" might be considered a relatively recent phenomenon, while (to some) a culture in which neighbours could wander freely into their house might indeed seem to utterly lack privacy. Nevertheless, it seems difficult to disagree with the universality of privacy as Altman conceives it—as the "selective control of access to the self, involving dialectic, optimization, and multimodal processes" (I. Altman 1977: 67)—, especially if, as Alan Westin argues, a similar need is found even among the animals: "One basic finding of animal studies is that virtually all animals seek periods of individual seclusion of small-group intimacy ... in which an organism lays private claim to an area of land, water, or air and defends it against intrusion by members of its own species" (Westin 1968: 8).

6.4 A Brief History of Western Privacy

If privacy is culturally-contingent then it is, of course, historically-contingent too. Hence it will serve to say something of its historical development. The history of privacy in the West[22] is one which can, and does, fill volumes. We will have to make do with a brief sketch. Floridi (2006: 112-13) notes that "it has become fashionable to state that privacy is a Western invention of the 18th-century," citing Fernand Braudel as one who has said just that.[23] I would argue that such a notion is true of our perceptions of the *right* to privacy, as we currently understand it (freedom from 'public' interference), but from the perspective of Altman's theory it is simply wrong. Indeed, references to the protection of personal privacy occur in many of our most foundational texts: in the Torah (Rackman 1995: 114-17), Quran (Hayat 2007: 137) and Bible (Hixson 1987: 3), for example, or in the famous oath attributed to Hippocrates (c.460—c.380 BCE) still observed by physicians (Keenan 2005: 5). Stretching back at least to Aristotle, as Hannah Arendt has observed, "the household and the political realms ... have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state" (Arendt 1998: 28). As George Duby, co-series editor with

[22] It is one of the greater regrets of this thesis that it has such a Western bias, but this is a necessary limitation imposed by the need to restrict its focus to something manageable. For excellent work on privacy and intercultural differences, see the work of Westin already cited. For investigation of such differences as they relate to informational privacy, see the special issue of *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2005, 7(1), edited by Charles Ess.

[23] "Privacy was an eighteenth-century innovation". Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century: The Structure of Everyday Life* (Berekley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1992) at 308. Floridi is perhaps a little unfair here, since Braudel makes this assertion in the specific context of a discussion of changes in the layout of the houses of the well-to-do around this time, noting that till this time all rooms of a Parisian townhouse "opened off each other and were sometimes hard to tell apart. Everyone, including the servants on domestic errands, had to go through them to reach the stairs."

Phillippe Ariès of the monumental (five volume) *History of Private Life*, says in his foreword to the first volume of that work:

> [A]t all times and in all places a clear, commonsensical distinction has been made between the public—that which is open to the community and subject to the authority of its magistrates—and the private. In other words, a clearly defined realm is set aside for that part of existence for which every language has a word equivalent to "private," a zone of immunity to which we may fall back or retreat, a place where we may set aside arms and armor needed in the public place, relax, take our ease, and lie about unshielded ... This is the place where the family thrives, the realm of domesticity; it is also a realm of secrecy. (Veyne 1987: vii)

Nonetheless, for most this was probably not a privacy we would recognise as such. As Burke (2000: 32) advises, space (and hence privacy), was largely the preserve of the rich in ancient Greece, where people "were adapted to lives far less private than ours where seclusion could only be possible for a few hours at a time.... [S]mall house space constantly occupied by people would have provided little or practically no occasion for the loneliness of abandonment". This figurative and literal lack of space is mirrored in the late medieval period, as Phillippe Ariès describes:

> [W]e find the individual enmeshed in feudal and communal solidarities ... As part of a seigneurial community or a clan or bound by ties of vassalage, he (or she) and his family moved within the limits of a world that was neither public nor private as those terms are understood today ... Simply stated, private was confounded with public, "chamber" with exchequer.... [M]any acts of daily life were, and would continue to be, performed in public.... [T]he community that defined the boundaries within which the individual moved—whether rural village, town, or urban neighbourhood—was a familiar world in which everyone knew and kept an eye on everyone else. Outside lay a *terra incognita* peopled by figures of legend. The only inhabited space, the only space subject to the rule of law, was communal space. (Ariès 1989: 1)

Ariès influential characterisation of a middle-ages lacking differentiation between public and private spheres has come under some criticism from, for instance, Linda Pollock, who presents persuasive evidence from the letters of the early-modern elite to argue that for that group, at least, the "problem lay not in the arena of conceptualisation but in that of attainment" (Pollock 1993: 85). In other words, people wanted privacy it was just difficult to get any. In this vein, others have looked to places ranging from the macro (e.g., the outdoors, Crane 2009: 16-17) to the micro (e.g., the pocket, Fennetaux 2008: 307) to reveal the places where privacy was secured in such times – and in fairness to Ariès himself, he also concedes that "there were places in the community where a precarious intimacy flourished ... a corner by a window or in a hallway, a quiet spot beyond the orchard, a

forest clearing or hut" (Ariès 1989: 1). Such marginal places of respite notwithstanding, however, the close and constant presence of other people, whether servants, children, or lodgers, made privacy in this time scarce and fleeting. This was, as Fennetaux (2008: 307) describes, especially so for women, for whom a "locked writing desk, let alone a room of one's own, was a luxury that few ... enjoyed." Such a public existence, thinks Charles Taylor, meant there "was no space, not just physically but psycho-socially, to withdraw into the privacy of one's own self-estimate, or the opinions of a circle based on affinity" (Taylor 1985: 261).

Fast-forward to the nineteenth-century and much has changed: "Society is far vaster and more anonymous. People no longer know one another. Work, leisure, and home life are separate, compartmentalized activities. Men and women seek privacy. To obtain it, they insist on greater freedom to choose (or to feel that they are choosing) their own way of life, and they withdraw into the family which becomes a refuge, a focus of private life" (Ariès 1989: 1-2). As Ariès understands it, the expansion of the state, rises in literacy levels, and the development of new religious practices have seen the ebbing of the intensely close, medieval *Gemeinschaft*, and the foregrounding of the nuclear family as the principal unit of sociability: "Ultimately the family became the focus of private life ... It became something it had never been: a refuge, to which people fled in order to escape the scrutiny of outsiders, an emotional center" (Ariès 1989: 8). The importance of the growth of domestic affection for the evolution of the modern sense of privacy is widely acknowledged. In Habermas' account, as given in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the eighteenth-century mercantile bourgeois gained a new self-image of the "conjugal family" as a "sphere of humanity-generating closeness" based upon "freedom, love, and cultivation of the person" (Habermas 1992: 48). Habermas is not saying here that before the rise of modernity people did not love their children or marry for love, but rather that these concerns, now linked to neo-humanist ideas of freedom and self-cultivation, came to occupy a new place in people's self-estimation, came "to be seen as a crucial part of what makes life worthy and significant" as Charles Taylor (1992: 292) puts it. With this new conception in mind, architectural developments divided up homes more firmly into public (societal) and private (familial & individual) space, solitude and intimacy came to be valued in more definite terms, and people began to explore new ideas of manners and modesty: "The old code of manners was an art of living in public and together. The new code of manners emphasized the need to respect the privacy of others" (Ariès 1962: 399). As Ariès describes, quoting Sèbastian Mercier, the letter helped create and maintain a societal distance: "It was no longer good form in the late eighteenth century to call on a

friend or acquaintance at any time of day and without warning. Either one had days when one was 'at home', or else 'people send each other cards by their servants.' 'The post also took care of visits ... The letter-box delivered cards; nothing is easier, nobody is visible, everyone has the decency to close his door'" (Ariès 1962: 399). For Habermas, the letter was even more central to this growth of modern subjectivity:

> In the intimate sphere of the conjugal family privatized individuals viewed themselves as ... persons capable of entering into "purely human" relations with one another.... It is no surprise that the eighteenth century became the century of the letter: through letter writing the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity.... In the age of sentimentality letters were containers for the "outpourings of the heart ... In the jargon of the time ... the letter was considered as "imprint of the soul," a visit of the soul"; letters were to be written in the heart's blood, they were practically to be wept. From the beginning, the psychological interest increased in the dual relation to both one's self and the other: self-observation entered a union partly curious, partly sympathetic with the emotional stirrings of the other I. The diary became a letter addressed to the sender, and the first-person narrative became a conversation with one's self addressed to another person. These were experiments with the subjectivity discovered in the close relationships of the conjugal family. (Habermas 1992: 48-49)

Habermas, then, sees the real depths of subjectivity as being discovered through the process of publicity, of talking to the "other I": "Subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience (*Publikum*)" (49); "the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself" (51). In a post-Kantian world which emphasised the creative, unitary power of the imagination, and in a revolutionary age which put every tradition to scrutiny, there began to emerge from this self-conscious subjectivity the idiom of Romanticism: self-creation, freedom, autonomy, introspection, spontaneity and, above all, imagination, now defined by Percy Shelly (2002: 642) as "the great instrument of moral good". For such imaginative self-creation to blossom, though, protection is needed from the conformist pressures of outside intrusion. To quote Charles Taylor again:

> [T]he subject with a modern identity is looking for fulfilment. What this amounts to, he will discover in himself. This requires privacy, not, of course, the life of a man alone, but a life of relations founded largely on affinity; it is through our affinities that we come to know ourselves. And this life cannot be subject to the constant scrutiny and judgement of the whole, nor submitted to the structure of a fixed pattern, without being inhibited and stifled. The modern man must be to this degree autonomous, that he can find himself; and autonomy for this end requires privacy. (Taylor 1985: 261)

If Habermas is right in thinking that the modern, private subject emerged from its encounter with the new bourgeois public sphere—which almost before it was recognisable as such had already outgrown the "golden age" face-to-face interactions of the salons and coffee houses, finding wider realisation in periodical criticism (Habermas 1992: 41)—then it is somewhat ironic that the periodical press was itself so quickly seen as a major threat to selfhood. Critics like Coleridge railed against "this AGE OF PERSONALITY, this age of literary and political GOSSIPING ... in a generation so transformed from the characteristic reserve of Britons" (S. T. Coleridge 1985: 41, original emphasis); periodical articles like John Wilson's *Letters from the Lakes* in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* were charged with "dragging the peculiarities, the conversation, and domestic habits of distinguished individuals into public view, to gratify a diseased curiosity", and warned that if "the enshading sanctities of life are to be cut away ... its joys will speedily perish" (*New Monthly Magazine*, 14, Sep 1820, qtd. Higgins 2002: 133). Maria Edgeworth was one of many to echo such conservative critique:

> The general rage for the practice upheld by venality and vanity leagued together on one hand and depraved curiosity and malice on the other threatens to destroy private friendship and all human confidence and to leave no privacy in this world, no true feeling—Every high or delicate sentiment which in their very natures cannot bear display are now dragged to light—blasted, withered by that horrid, garish eye of curiosity. (Qtd. Hart 1975: 308)

By the turn of the twentieth-century, privacy was widely acknowledged as a legal right. Its universally-recognised moment of emergence as such, a seminal article entitled *The Right to Privacy*, famously defined privacy as "the right to be let alone"; its breach a trespass upon an "inviolate personality" (Warren and Brandeis 1890: 193, 205). As Rosen and Santesso (2011) have shown in a wonderfully rich recent paper, the roots of this critique derive directly from the early nineteenth-century Romantic concept of privacy created by the confrontation between a new modern concept of subjectivity which found itself faced with the intrusions of a technologically-empowered press which, as the organ of mass publicity, frenzied to meet a growing consumer appetite for the cult of personality. Consider this passage from Warren and Brandeis' paper, which as Rosen and Santesso (2011: 5) say shows "the sentiments—not to mention the stirring cadences—that one would expect not from a lawyer but a poet":

> Instantaneous photographs and news-paper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that "what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops" ... The intensity and complexity of life, attendant upon

> advancing civilization, have rendered necessary some retreat from the world, and man, under the refining influence of culture, has become more sensitive to publicity, so that solitude and privacy have become more essential to the individual; but modern enterprise and invention have, through invasions upon his privacy, subjected him to mental pain and distress, far greater than could be inflicted by mere bodily injury. (Warren and Brandeis 1890: 195-96)

Rosen and Santesso identify Wordsworth—for whom, they say, the question of privacy was one in which "the *origins* and nurturing of selfhood might be at stake"—as the main ideological force behind this passage. They quote from the *Preface* to *Lyrical Ballads* and the Prospectus for *The Recluse* to demonstrate a conscious or unconscious link in the shaping of Warren and Brandeis' claims for privacy: "From Wordsworth's 'certain inherent and indestructible qualities,' from his 'Mind that keeps her own / Inviolate retirement,' it is only the shortest of steps to Warren and Brandeis's principle of an 'inviolate personality.'" (Rosen and Santesso 2011: 16). As Rosen and Santesso discuss, privacy law in the twentieth-century has struggled to operationalise Warren and Brandeis' hugely influential, yet dubiously metaphysical, account of the right to privacy – to draw down torts for specific protections, distinguish between genuine intrusions and mere annoyances, etc. But despite twentieth-century attempts at redefinition from scholars like William Prosser (1960), and despite the incompatibility of this spiritual notion of the "right to privacy" with our modern secular legal system, individualistic society and increasingly social-constructionist self-image, Warren and Brandeis' conception of privacy as an inviolate right persists in much contemporary discourse on the subject. In short, privacy has moved from being an often unobtainable luxury to something thought sacrosanct, an end in itself upon which depends the integrity of the soul and the very possibility of modern personhood, vital for "autonomy, emotional release, self-evaluation and protected communication" (Westin 1968: 32). This conception comes to light in the individual's encounter with its public—to which it at once belongs and must remain distinct—in the very same movement which threatens it through the technologically-enabled intrusions of the mass-society. This is the sense of privacy whose death is now feared. It is a historically-contingent phenomenon arising from the massification of society. It is as if our prickle of porcupines must adapt to an ever-increasing group, and in the process learn new rules of etiquette to avoid the prickles and pains of needing to be close but yet far from their peers. Upon an ever more crowded terrain, that space each does have will become the more precious, more valued, and more dearly protected and fought for. As James Moor says:

> A small, intimate society may have minimal or no privacy needs or rights. As societies grow, the need for privacy and the right to privacy will grow as well. Privacy is a kind of shield that protects individuals from the harmful demands and idiosyncrasies of other members of society and in some cases protects other members of society from individuals.... Such privacy rights protect individuals and foster social cohesion. As societies grow still larger, the need for privacy rights is likely to expand. In large, informationally rich societies privacy rights are crucial for the protection of individuals. (Moor 1999: 260)

6.5 Epistolary Privacy and Publicity (1): Blurring Distinctions

Having sketched this history we now turn to the particular issue of epistolary privacy, and to questions of the extent to which letter-writers expected such privacy and the means by which they maintained it. As Rebecca Earle has rightly said, "the illicit reading of supposedly private correspondence became a central device in eighteenth-century fiction," but the extent to which letter-writers of that period actually thought their correspondence secret is open to question (Earle 1999: 7). Certainly we moderns tend to more or less automatically assume a close association between confidentiality and letter-writing, and would intuitively accept characterisations of the sort given by Brewer (1995: 11): "Expressive of private thoughts or intimacies, written in the private study or closet away from the gaze of others, concerned to reveal the private character of their author as well as the special character of the relationship between the author and his or her correspondent, they embody those features ... of a new sense of individuality and intimacy." Yet, as we saw in Chapter Four, the flow of familiar letters was often a distinctly communal affair – letters were authored by more than one person, passed around like newspapers, and read aloud among a group. Such circulation occurred rather matter-of-factly and usually without the prior permission of the author, as is nicely illustrated by Anthony Trollope in *The Three Clerks,* where the arrival of a letter from Gertrude to her mother is seized upon "with eager avidity" by the whole family, since "in such a production they had a joint property, and it was hardly possible to say who first mastered its contents" (Trollope 1860: 487). In the Harden/Allen letter-journals, whose manifest aim was to unite a scattered family, there was certainly an assumption of communality. Letters circulated as a matter of course, were opened by those to whom they are not addressed ("A letter came from my Father to Tom on Friday which I opened as he wont be here now it contained as (I supposed) no secrets," 27.01.04), and even letters from those outside the immediate family were deemed common, as shown by Jessy's including, in an 1810 dispatch to Agnes, a part of a letter from a favoured servant, "as a specimen of what he is".

We further problematize the pre-critical assumption of epistolary privacy when we consider correspondence which either originally aimed at, or by some circuitous route ended up in, the public sphere. The "letter to the editor," for example, came into being about the same time as the editor himself; the first series of the *Spectator* (1711-1712) contained 250 of them (Brewer 1995: 12). Even if not written explicitly for publication, the epistolary commerce which linked-up the 'Republic of Letters' were 'public' in that letters were written for reading amongst groups of the like-minded engaged in critical and political matters of common interest. That such lines were blurred long before the eighteenth-century is shown by Stowers (1986: 19), who calls the distinction between private and public "not very helpful" in considering Greco-Roman letters. He cites the case of the Apostle Paul, whose letters "were addressed to specific communities based in households, were meant to be read to any who were in attendance at the community assembly, and were perhaps copied and circulated to communities in other cities even before Paul's death." Indeed, Cicero—thought the first to plan his letters for publication (De Pretis 2004: 35)—would alter his voice depending on his intended audience: "I have one way of writing what I think will be read by those only to whom I address my letter, and another way of writing what I think will be read by many" (qtd. Westfall 2010: 223). The list of those who sought to publish their letters is long, but Habermas (1992: 49) notes in particular the intentions of Gellert, Gleim, and Goethe in Germany to do so; Goethe it was who in 1828-29 published the over one thousand letters that had passed between himself and Schiller between 1794 and 1805 (Daley 2003: 2). A final example might come from the Bishop of Llandaff, Richard Watson, who in the early nineteenth-century was by no means unusual in seeking to make public his epistolary past:

> The body and mind, I begin to perceive, are both of them losing their activity; the evil days are coming on ... may I not be allowed, then, without incurring the imputation of vanity, to live ... over again, by collecting and arranging some of the detached papers which I have written at different periods: By this means my children, when I am in my grave, may be gratified with knowing the character of their father; and the world, if it has any curiosity concerning him, will have an opportunity of perusing authentic, if not interesting, Memoirs of the Bishop of Landaff. (Watson 1817: 1-2)

Nor was this ambiguity between the public and private confined to letters. Describing our modern misconception of the privacy of letter, Ylva Hasselberg says that the "notion that somebody would read one's letters is about as appealing as the notion that somebody would read one's diary" (Hasselberg 1999: 103). Yet the diary itself—that padlocked totem of modern confessional secrecy—often had a communal, even an epistolary

function. Dorothy Wordsworth's (2002: 1) treasured Grasmere journal famously begins on 14th May 1800: "I resolved to write a journal ... because I shall give W[illia]m Pleasure by it when he comes home again." As Margo Culley advises: "It is only very recently (roughly in the last one hundred years) that the content of the diary has been a record of private thoughts and feelings to be kept hidden from others' eyes. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century diaries were semi-public documents intended to be read by an audience" (Culley 1985: 3). Indeed, Jessy Harden seemed often not to make the distinction, referring interchangeably to her writings to Agnes as both diary and epistle (e.g., 21.01.05; 04.04.05), and becoming increasingly aware over time that she was writing not only to Agnes, but also to her own future self: "I am sure they [the letter-journals] are very gratifying to you & may be to me again after we meet, should that happy event ever take place" (18.12.10). Agnes Ranken's journal of her journey out to India—which documented some incredibly traumatic episodes (including the stillbirth of a child)—was, as we saw in Chapter Four, sent back home to Jessy, who would on occasion read it aloud to her friends. Noting such a history of sharedness, some modern-day scholars think the privacy of diary-keeping a misleading myth. Jose van Dijck writes well when she calls even modern-day diary-writing a "peculiarly hybrid act of communication, always intended for private use, yet often betraying an awareness of its potential to be read by others" (Dijck 2006: 116). She continues:

> [N]o one ever kept a diary just for himself ... Of all the varieties within the genre, some diaries are written with a reader in mind more than others, but an essential feature of all diaries is their addressee. Whereas some authors directed their diaries to an imagined friend (like Anne Frank's 'Kitty', or André Gide's mysterious addressee), to God, or to the world-at-large, the notion of addressing is crucial to the recognition of diary writing as an *act of communication.* (Dijck 2006: 121)

Habermas makes the same point when he refers to "the directly or indirectly audience-oriented subjectivity of the letter exchange or diary" (Habermas 1992: 49). We might go further, for as Wittgenstein (2001: §§244–71) has argued, there can be no private language, no system of signs which is not necessarily communal. Hence, whenever we speak, no matter how secret we might want that speaking to be, the act itself already refers to the wider group of speakers and is made in a language that they can, in principle, understand. The writing or saying of anything is, as Derrida (e.g., 1988a: 62) has at length assured us, an act liable to future reiteration – of being later repeated in new situations, which cannot be strictly tethered to the context of its creation. Any act of writing, however private its intention, leaves open the possibility of publicity:

> This implies that there is no such thing as a code—organon of iterability—which could be structurally secret. The possibility of repeating and thus of identifying the marks is implicit in every code, making it into a network [*une grille*] that is communicable, transmittable, decipherable, iterable for a third, and hence for every user in general. (Derrida 1988b: 8)

Upon writing a personal letter, I entrust it to the hand of a third party for conveyance – will they look inside? I write my diary in an idiosyncratic cipher known only to me; I keep it padlocked in my desk drawer – yet no matter how strict the precautions I take, there always remains the possibility, however slight, that someone might break the lock and crack the code, that the diary might 'go public' and spill my secrets to whoever is looking. If any act of speaking or writing implies an addressee, real or imagined, and is made in a language which remains in principle understandable by the wider group, then no act of speaking or writing can be considered perfectly private. That is to say, no act of letter-writing or diary-keeping can occur that does not imply the possibility of wider (mis)appropriation, of its possible future publicness.

Blurring distinctions does not erase them, of course. Hence Michael Warner makes the commonsense contrast between writing that has a "a definite addressee who can be known in advance" but which can nonetheless "go astray" in some way, and that writing which aims originally for a public of strangers, which "cannot go astray in the same way because reaching strangers is its primary orientation" (Warner 2002: 55-56). Dorothy Wordsworth's journal might have been written (in part) for William, but not for everyone. Llandaff, looking back on his life, might have wished *some* of his letters published – but not all of them, nor perchance would he have welcomed their publication at an earlier stage. Some diary-writers perhaps aimed for a public, but even in the early-modern period some kept these documents solely for themselves and were horrified at the thought of their publication (Mullan 2003: 12-13). And Rebecca Earle (1999: 7) over-reaches when she states that "letter-writers expected their missives to be read by more than one person", for sometimes they did not. We saw in our earlier discussion of Altman's ecology model that privacy is always a moveable boundary, aiming at an optimum which will change with conditions, and over which our control is only ever partial. The same is true of our informational privacy. The degree to which we wish our documents to be more or less public or private will vary over time and across circumstances, according to what we want to achieve. Our aim here, then, is not to classify these documents, to carve them up into two sets marked 'private' and 'public'; rather we are examining the tensions between publicity and privacy inherent within any communicative act. As John Brewer rightly says,

our attention should not be directed to the "polar ends of public and private but to the space in between – those areas, borders or boundaries which repeatedly shift and which are repeatedly crossed"(Brewer 1995: 10). Specifically, we are looking for the ways in the materiality and culture of letter-writing helped or hindered the negotiation of these boundaries, to enquire as to what norms persisted at this time, and the ways in which the technology of the epistle worked with or against these norms to both enable and endanger privacy. Let us say, then, *per* Altman, that letter-writers aimed at some dynamically negotiated optimal amount of privacy in their writings, and that aiming at such an optimum entailed modulating tone and content according to the degree of publicity anticipated (as we saw with Cicero, above). Our question then becomes one of control: knowing that the already audience-orientated writing contained in their documents always held the possibility of going astray, how did letter-writers go about achieving the optimum level of privacy and publicity at which they aimed and for which their words were crafted? How did correspondents ensure their writings met only those eyes they intended, and what were the limits of their control over such flow?

6.6 Epistolary Privacy and Publicity (2): Keeping Control

Informational privacy, as we saw earlier, has been defined by Floridi (1999b: 53) as a subject's "freedom from epistemic interference or intrusion, achieved thanks to a restriction on facts about [the subject]". When applied to letters and diaries, this roughly translates as the subject's right to control who gets to see their documents. Such control is usually achieved through the restriction of access – if you can't get to the information, you can't read it. Since letters are designed to leave their author and travel into the world, however, this immediately opens a problem. How will we ensure access is restricted to those to whom we allow access while a document is out of our sight? I next describe three ways in which this is achieved: through physical constraints, legislation, and adherence to norms of "discretion."

Physical constraints

Just as Latour's (1999: 186ff.) speed-bump inscribes the moral imperative "slow down!" into a lump of asphalt which physically constrains a driver's action by blocking their path in a very concrete fashion, so the materiality of the letter means that certain "programmes of action," certain potentials for privacy, are inscribed into the thing itself. Firstly, it can be kept shut: folded and sealed with wax (or, from the mid nineteenth-century onwards, *enveloped*), the information is kept somewhat safe since, although wax or glue are not

impenetrable defences, they would at least usually bear signs of tampering should such take place.[24] But this is only one way in which the materiality of the letter defended privacy. For the letter, as a singular spatio-temporal object, also protected itself from wider broadcast by the simple fact that if you wanted to read it you had to be near it. It could be locked up in desk-drawers or kept safe inside the home, and even if passed around, only a limited number of people could ever read it at one time. This fact alone was enough to restrict the extent of its publicity. The words were intimately bound to, inscribed upon, a little piece of paper: the only way to broadcast them more widely was to copy them onto other pieces of paper, either through laborious hand-copying or via the expense of the press. We'll examine the relationship between the letter and the press below, but for now we should merely note that the cost and difficulty of printing and disseminating information via the press in the early nineteenth-century was a significant barrier to such broadcasting, especially when compared with the ease and all but negligible cost of putting information up on the Web.

Legislation

The second way in which we can protect the privacy of the letter is through the law – legislating to protect the sanctity of our communications and promising to punish those who breach it. As early as 1663 in England it was written into the postmaster's grant that no person except the author or addressee could open any letter unless ordered by an express warrant from a Secretary of State (Hemmeon 1912: 26). As this latter caveat suggests, though, the law does not always provide our best protection from lawmakers themselves. The subversive potential of the post was recognised early; it was for this reason that Henry VIII and Elizabeth I did not allow private carriage of letters (Robinson 1948: 7). In the wake of the French Revolution, Pitt's government enacted legislation which further heightened powers to scrutinize and restrict correspondence entering and leaving the country, and made ever greater use of government warrants to inspect inland letters. Nichola Deane advises that "between 1799 and 1844, three times as many warrants were issued than had been granted between 1712 and 1799" – a fact she uses to underscore her claim that "while privacy and secrecy might be prerogatives of government, they did not exist for the British subject" (Deane 2003: 396). For those in whom the state might

[24] While such measures might put off the casual intruder, it was not perfect. William Tegg, for example, describes the studied craft of letter-opening at the Post Office's "Secret Office": "Before him lie the implements of his craft—a range of seals bearing upon them the ordinary mottoes, and a piece of tobacco pipe. If none of the seals will fit the impressions upon the letters, he carefully takes copies in bread; and now the more serious operation commences. The tobacco pipe red-hot pours a burning blast upon the yielding wax; the letter is opened, copied, resealed, and returned to the bag, and reaches the person to whom it is directed, apparently unviolated." William Tegg, *Posts & Telegraphs, Past and Present: With an Account of the Telephone and Phonograph* (London: William Tegg & Co., 1878) at 69.

take an interest, communications were often curtailed: the retired Whig statesman Charles Townshend (1674-1738), for instance, wrote to one correspondent: "I never write anything, but what I desire the ministry may see" (Black 2007: 375). As Susan Whyman points out, for the most part ordinary people were usually unaffected by such surveillance, and may have been in large part unaware of what went on at the "Secret Office." When the opening of letters was discussed in Parliament in 1844, for example, *The Sun* newspaper reacted with shock and anger: "When a man puts a letter into the post-office here, he confidently believes... [it] will not be read either by Postmaster-General, or penny postman, or Secretary of State, and that no human being will venture to break a seal which has hitherto, in this free country, been regarded as sacred as the door of his own private residence" (Whyman 2009: 68).

Discretion

In contrast to the first two brute ways of *making* people be moral, the third is more subtle, reliant on trust in each other's discretion. I take this term from Habermas (1992: 49), who has said that the "intimateness" of familiar letters is better contrasted with indiscretion than publicity. By this I take him to mean that people have a duty of care in their handling of intimate information, and that the "privacy" of such a letter fails when some party is negligent in this duty. Such a duty falls on all parties: author, addressee, carrier, etc. In rough terms, we can sum these responsibilities as: the discretion of the author to know the limits of what they can say to whom, the discretion of the addressee to recognise what the author would wish done with that information and adhere to it, and the discretion of everybody else to generally mind their own business.[25] How did such discretion work in practice? First, there was the need to obtain the services of a trustworthy carrier, something which was of no less concern to Cicero ("I won't commit them [private worries] to this letter and an unknown courier", qtd. Nicholson 1994: 40) than to Jessy and Agnes ("I think you desired we would never intrust any small packets to private Hands," 15.02.07). Next, there was the negotiation between author and addressee over the scope of the letter's dissemination. This could be more or less explicit. Assumptions of communality were often tempered by explicit instruction. As Brewer (1995: 11) notes, correspondents would often indicate "the intended ambit and scope of a letter—its degree of privacy and its

[25] So, for instance, I can fail to be discreet with my own information if I send a letter containing all my secrets to Billy, the town blabbermouth. If Billy then goes on to blab, he might (with some justification) claim that the fault is largely my own for sending him the letter in the first place – I knew that he was a leaky vessel, after all, and he had never given me any reason to trust in his discretion. But if I sent that letter instead to Linda—my life-long, closest, most trusted friend—and she too raced to tell all, I would feel she had failed me, since she had heretofore given me every reason to rely on her discretion. Finally, suppose that my letter to Linda is accidentally delivered to Billy who happens to live next door. If Billy (thirsty for gossip) opens the letter, then the indiscretion is most certainly his – since he knew the letter was *none of his business.*

intended audience". We saw earlier (§4.10), for example, the young Dorothy Wordsworth's instructions to her cousin: "None of this is to be read aloud, so be upon your guard!" (De Selincourt 1935: 93). Such instructions were sometimes decidedly specific, with differing sections of the same letter designated as secret or fit for wider circulation (Brewer 1995: 11). At other times such instruction was more tacit, as in Cicero's gentle coaching of Atticus: "I don't feel that I am bragging offensively when I talk about myself in your hearing, especially in a letter which I don't wish to be read by other people" (Nicholson 1994: 59). And sometimes the issue would go entirely unspoken, or only later become of issue. Agnes Ranken, for example, had been absent almost five years when Jessy felt it necessary to announce: "As to your letters I am quite of the opinion that they ought to be equally open to all the family, & allow them to open mine whenever I happen to be absent" (04.05.04). This assurance came at a time when it seems Agnes had become worried over exactly whose eyes were privy to her letters, with Jessy forced to respond to some enquiry on the matter:

> I don't think your letters are shewn to any one you w[oul]d object to, but parts of them are frequently read to your friends, at any rate (without flattery), I think none ever you write could have any but a good effect to the hearer; I can at least answer for two people who although not personally acquainted with you admire or rather respect you extremely from them, my dear spouse and his Mother. (20.05.04)

What these soothing words do, though, is assure Agnes of Jessy's discretion in such matters. The letters would not be "shewn to any one you would object to," only "to your friends". To send a letter was to send it to a definite addressee, and thus to have some grounds on which to base a solid judgement of the amount of discretion which could be expected of them. Such judgements could certainly be wrong, of course, as in the case of Mary Russell Mitford, who recounted to one correspondent:

> A friend, to whom I have long been in the habit of writing very frequently, had a most whimsical trick of sending my careless letters round to half her acquaintance—much in the same way as the county newspaper visits in rotation every house in a country village where the inhabitants have any pretension to learning ... In this manner travelled my unlucky epistles; and I, quite unsuspicious, wrote on as carelessly as ever, till at length one of my letters, written to Miss R—in London, actually returned to me here, by the hands of a mutual friend to whom she had lent it. (Qtd. Milne 2010: 117) [26]

[26] This potential for the breakdown of discretion was familiar to Cicero too: "I sent that letter to Calvus with no more idea that it would get into circulation than the one you are reading at this moment" John Nicholson, 'The Delivery and Confidentiality of Cicero's Letters', *The Classical Journal,* 90/1 (1994), 33-63 at 59..

Mitford's response is conspicuous for the way such news of breakdown is greeted. She seems more amused than upset, and this perhaps hints at the degree to which an assumption of communality ruled. But some could be less sanguine – and this was especially so when a particular kind of agent, whose respect for discretion was compromised by a greater respect for pecuniary advantage, entered the frame, namely the publisher. As early as Alexander Pope, notables wrote knowing they ran the risk of inadvertently providing content for publishers. In the mercantile frenzy of eighteenth-century London, booksellers had no qualms in seeking out private letters to put to print (Brewer 1995: 14). Pope, indeed, famously took one such, Edmund Curll, to the courts, winning a landmark case in which his (Pope's) right to control publication of his own letters was decided on the basis of privacy rights (Rosen and Santesso 2011: 14). Such worries could consume the luminary: Aeron Hunt (2007: 1) describes how "the early 1840s found Harriet Martineau preoccupied by the problem of letters. Consumed with worry that letters to her friends would be hustled into publication upon her death, Martineau embarked on a campaign requesting that her correspondents agree to burn or return the letters they received from her."

As we segue into discussing privacy and publicity in the digital, we can sum by saying that information is essentially iterable, and hence (*per* Derrida) always includes the prospect of going astray or being otherwise misappropriated. In the commerce of letters we noted three regulatory factors—physical constraints, legislation and discretion—which acted as brakes and buffers to keep information 'on track,' as it were, stopping it slipping beyond intended bounds, and thus maintaining informational privacy. Luciano Floridi (2005, 2006) has coined the term "ontological friction" to describe such regulatory factors. In Floridi's view, it is the ontological make-up of the entire informational environment ("infosphere") that determines the degree of ontological friction, that is, the degree to which information can flow more or less freely within the system. He specifies three determining factors: "the nature of the specific agents, of the specific environment in which they are embedded and of the specific interactions implementable in that environment by those agents" (Floridi 2006: 110). We have seen these factors in the commerce of letters, where the maintenance of privacy depended on the nature of human agents (as people who respected discretion), the nature of the information environment (i.e., the physical constraints to which the letter *qua* physical thing was subject) and the range of implementable interactions (governed, in part, by legislation). In our final sections, we will first lay out in the abstract the ways in which the digital tends to reduce ontological friction by altering environment, agents and interactions (discussing them in that order), before going on to redescribe these phenomena

in terms of what Jonathan Grudin (2001: 279) has called the "steady erosion of clearly situated action".

6.7 The Digital Environment

Information in the digital environment is, on the whole, more fluid, potent, prolific, and persistent than in the physical environment, and hence the digital environment tends more readily towards openness and transparency. Where letters were subject to very definite physical constraints, digital objects (being immaterial) are much less so. As Floridi says, digital technologies engineer their own environments which are "'wrapped' and tailored" to the capacities of digital objects, into which users can enter: "a computer interface is a gate through which a user can be telepresent in the [digital] infosphere" (Floridi 2005: 189). The "re-ontologized infosphere" is, as Floridi says, "populated by ontologically equal entities and agents" (189). Because digital objects are made of the same stuff as their environment, ontological friction is reduced. Information is made much more *fluid* and *potent*: as we have said throughout this thesis, bits flow further, faster, more easily, and more cheaply than do physical things like letters, and digital objects can be viewed in many locations at the same time and be perfectly replicable at minimal cost. As James Moor puts it: "When information is computerized, it is greased to slide easily and quickly ... it moves like lightning and is hard to hold on to" (Moor 1997: 27). High transmission speeds and low storage and replication costs also mean that information *thrives* in digital environments. Based on current rates of growth, Gantz and Reinsel (2010: 1) predict that the amount of digital information created and replicated in the world, which in 2009 already stood at around 0.8 trillion gigabytes, will increase by a factor of 44 by 2020, to 35 trillion gigabytes. Each month the average *Facebook* user posts 70 new pieces of information (e.g., personal information, status updates, photos, event details and comments), while a total of 25 billion discrete pieces of information are shared across the network in the same time (Oltmann 2010: 2). Much of this new digital information is not intentionally created by users, but recorded by the technology as a matter of course. Internet traffic, for example, might be tracked by Internet Service Providers, cached by *Google* or the *Internet Archive*, and documented in Web histories and cookies; as Michael Froomkin (2000: 1461) says: "Increasing portions of our social, communicative, and commercial acts now take place in this digital world of effortless, habitual, involuntary persistence. What was once ephemeral ... is increasingly enacted online, where it leaves a potentially lasting imprint." While in the commerce of letters, records were often kept of the time and place of a letter's receipt at each stage of its journey by postmasters (Brayshay

et al. 1998), copies of the letter's contents were obviously not. Yet each time we send an email, exact replicas can remain on the mailhost's servers in perpetuity, even after both sender and receiver have pressed 'delete.'

Such fluidity, potency and proliferation are all enabled by the rendering machine-readable of information, its translation into the language of 1s and 0s. The fact that every digital thing is made of this same fundamental binary 'stuff' means that in digital environments, "there is no longer any substantial difference between the processor and the processed and the digital deals effortlessly and seamlessly with the digital" (Floridi 2005: 188). This basic similitude, taken in combination with the increasingly networked nature of computing and the migration of information storage from discrete devices to the 'cloud,' means that the digital environment is ever less naturally bounded. Where physical constraints built into the materiality of things ensured that making analogue information public was usually a very difficult and costly business, with spatio-physical features of the world like walls and hills and oceans and gravity preventing it from being too mobile, the digital world is much more readily accessible. Openness and transparency are tendencies in the digital in ways unknown in the analogue. Where before, as A.J. Leibling famously quipped, the freedom of the press was limited to those who own one, on the Internet the public is (in principle) only ever a mouse-click away. Blog hosting services like *Blogger* provide the kinds of free, user-friendly, "push-button publishing" software which allows our words to become instantly available to almost everyone with an Internet connection. Through their "electronic drop box," the whistle-blowing website *Wikileaks* promises a "secure and anonymous ... *universal way* for the revealing of suppressed and censored injustices" (WikiLeaks 2011, my emphasis); full transcripts of hundreds of thousands of confidential US State Department diplomatic cables are dragged into the public light, made available for all to see (Ball 2011). In the open and fluid digital infosphere, private information is only ever one step from 'going public': an unintentionally hilarious email from an embittered soon-to-be mother-in-law to her son's fiancé, listing the latter's (apparently many) failings, goes "viral" via email forward and makes the national press (Batty 2011); bullying takes on a new dimension as a private video made by an overweight child of themselves acting out fight scenes from *Star Wars* is found, shared and laughed at by first his school peers and then by the entire Internet (Solove 2007: 44-48). This lack of physical constraint means that new limitations must be intentionally imposed – ontological friction put back into an increasingly frictionless environment. One way of doing so is through legislation like the UK's Data Protection Act (1998) which provides "for the regulation of the processing of information relating to individuals, including the obtaining, holding, use

or disclosure of such information." The difficulties of prescribing such activities, however, are reflected in the incredible complexity of such legislation (P. Carey 2009: 9); moreover, as we saw in the analogue—and as the 2001 PATRIOT Act in the US has again proved (Rackow 2002)—legislation does not provide best protection from legislators. With ever more complex legal hoops through which to jump, companies in turn seek to set informational contracts with users; yet the labyrinthine terms of service (TOS) agreements or privacy policies, which are necessary when signing up to a service, are rarely read and probably even less often properly understood by users.[27] Another way of ensuring informational privacy is to build artificial barriers into systems through encryption, fire-walling, password protection and allocation of account privileges, thus restricting informational access to certain people in certain domains. But the fact that these walls are themselves made out of the same digital stuff as the information they protect makes them uniquely vulnerable to attack from hackers, with even prestigious companies like Sony prone to embarrassing and potentially very costly security breaches.[28] As we will examine below, this need to make relationships of trust explicit also has deep implications for the usability and efficacy of online social networks.

6.8 Agents and Agency in the Digital Infosphere

The digital introduces new institutional and technological agencies into the epistolary process and, as we saw in the last Chapter (§5.3), its material conditions of interaction can also alter human behaviours. We will discuss these different agents in turn. Firstly, because of the incredible complexity of the code often needed to support email or social network functionality, many of us have come to rely upon countless companies to host our online activities (*Microsoft's Hotmail, Google's Blogger* or *Facebook,* for example). Where the letter was 'stored' on its own substrate—and thus to be in possession of the letter itself was usually to be in control of its content—our messages, photos, documents, and so on, are increasingly stored on company servers, somewhere in the nowhere of cyberspace. We saw how the introduction of a new kind of agent into the culture of letter-writing caused disruptions in the commerce of letters, as the publisher's monetary motives conflicted with

[27] McDonald et al., for example, advise that "only 26% read privacy policies during a recent study and readership outside of laboratory conditions is believed to be far lower". See: Aleecia M. Mcdonald et al., 'A Comparative Study of Online Privacy Policies and Formats', in Ian Goldberg and Mikhail J. Atallah (eds.), *Privacy Enhancing Technologies: 9th International Symposium, Pets 2009* (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 37-55 at 38.

[28] In April 2011 hackers obtained the personal details of an estimated 77 million members of Sony's Playstation Network, including "name, address, e-mail address, [and] login details ... Also, said Sony, although credit card data was encrypted and there was no evidence it was stolen, the theft of the data could not be ruled out." See: BBC, 'Sony Faces Legal Action over Attack on Playstation Network', *BBC News Website*, 28 Apr 2011. Available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-13192359>, accessed 25 Sep 2011.

the culture of discretion, and now, in the same way, the intermediary institutions to which we have willingly, though often unwittingly, given over our content do not always have our best interests at heart. As Strandburg (2006: 45) says, it is increaingly clear that "commercial entities may prefer to collect more information and to be less careful about its security than is socially optimal for a variety of reasons" – profit being the most obvious.[29] This commodification of personal information leads, for example, to troubling practices like *Google's Gmail* scanning people's mail to place content specific advertisements (Milne 2010: 157). *Facebook*, which began as a 'walled-garden' at Harvard, has been heavily criticised for the implementation of successive policies in line with its mission to "make the world more open and connected" (Facebook 2010). As Acquisti and Gross (2006: 37) argue, security settings in such systems are usually "weak by design - to leverage their value as network goods and enhance their growth by making registration, access, and sharing of information uncomplicated." But such concerns can conflict with the complex nuances of privacy management in social interaction. Default privacy settings are set "usually at the lowest, most open level", while "burdensome and convoluted" opt-out procedures ensure a high level of user proactivity is needed to effectively maintain privacy (Debatin 2011: 55). The way in which small mistakes in ascribing privacy settings can be amplified in the digital world is well illustrated by the case of Rebecca Javeleau, a Hertforshire schoolgirl, whose failure to set the *Facebook* 'event' page she created to help organise her 15th birthday party as 'private' enabled 21,000 people to RSVP (Jamieson 2010).

Next, the interactivity and autonomy of digital objects and tools mean that they themselves attain a quasi-agential status. In Latour's (2005: 72) sense, of course, the letter was already an agent (since most everything is), but not a very active one: mostly it would just sit there, where it was placed, waiting to be moved or manipulated by humans; if a copy was required, human intermediaries, whether scribes or type-setters, were needed. Computational programmes play a much more proactive role; digital tools themselves manipulate and process digital information. As Luciano Floridi (2005: 189) says, such tools are "new artificial agents [which] share the same ontology with their environment and [hence] can operate in it with much more freedom and control." Floridi is surely right

[29] Such mercantile motives for wishing greater transparency of information cannot but compromise the seemingly ideological proclamations of many Silicon Valley luminaries, e.g.: "You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it" (Scott McNealy of *Sun Microsystems*, 1999); "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place." (Eric Schmidt of *Google*, 2009); "People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that's evolved over time." (Mark Zuckerberg of *Facebook*, 2010).

in speculating that "the infosphere will be progressively populated by artificial or hybrid agents, to which other (not necessarily human) agents will be able to delegate tasks and decisions", and in noting that "the moral status of such agents will become an ever more challenging issue." Such digital quasi-agents reduce ontological friction by making information ever more malleable and manipulable. As Helen Nissenbaum (1998: 577) says, "information that was once scattered and transient may now be ordered, systematized, and made permanent. We can do things with the information, such as merge and compare realtime observations with past records, compare those with the records of others, and communicate any of this, at lightning speed, across networks." *Google's* web crawlers trawl and index the Web daily to provide almost instant ranked results for any keyword search. Deep analysis of consumer information through data-mining becomes its own business model. The human-computer hybrid has an extensive power to index, archive and otherwise manipulate information that seems potentially limitless.

Finally, we must consider what kinds of agents we ourselves are as we interact online. For, as we saw in the last Chapter, we often behave differently on the Internet; diminution of physical social context seems to deindividuate people and disinhibit action. Under such conditions, people can act impulsively and emotionally, experiencing a weakened capacity to regulate behaviour and engage in long-term planning, and having less care for, and awareness of, the possible outcomes of their actions (McKenna and Bargh 2000: 61). Alan Westin (1968: 31) already noted the way in which anonymity and immersion in the "situational landscape" can allow people to open up to strangers; we saw in the words of the blogger Marn (cited in §5.3) the way in which the online situational landscape can foster a similar openness. Such effects are achieved by the sense of distance opened up by the technology, and are no doubt exacerbated by the fact that the Internet allows us to be publicly-facing, to talk to potentially the whole world, while simultaneously occupying our most private and intimate of spaces. We need not leave our beds, let alone our houses, to talk to a global audience of strangers. Moreover, as John Suler has observed, the Internet very often makes us invisible to each other, especially as we communicate textually. Being hidden from the interrogative gaze of our interlocutor, and often able to weave our way through the Web all but undetectably, we give a modern twist to the contention of Glaucon in Plato's *Republic* that offered the absence of social censure engendered by the wearing of a ring of invisibility, most people would behave unethically (Plato 2000: 40/360b). Anonymous and invisible, on the Internet people are given "the courage to go places and do things that they otherwise wouldn't" (Suler 2004: 322). Such an effect has obvious implications for potentially embarrassing activities like pornography use (Joinson 2006:

81-84) or criminal activities like intellectual property theft (M. Williams 2006: 144), but it also affects us in our respect for *discretion*. Consider, for example, the covert monitoring of others' *Facebook* activity, commonly known as '*Facebook* stalking.' Ilana Gershon (2010: 147) found this an oft-raised topic in interviews for her ethnographic study, and advises that although people might spend hours per day engaging in such activity, they would nonetheless "talk with horror" of the possibility of their snooping being found out, indicating that such people are aware of the norm of discretion even as they transgress it. Such breakdowns in discretion are exacerbated by our current confusion over the private or public status of these documents. Consider this complaint from one young blogger: "My mom always uses the excuse about the internet being 'public' when she defends herself [for reading my blog]. It's not like I do anything to be ashamed of, but a girl needs her privacy. I do online journals so I can communicate with my friends. Not so my mother could catch up on the latest gossip of my life" (qtd. Boyd 2008: 131). Another person's blog or *Facebook* page might be publicly available on the Web, but this does not mean that they themselves do not consider it a private space. The intimacy fostered by addressing invisible audiences from our most homely of places creates a false feeling of privacy. As Hull *et al*. (forthcoming: 6) say, "the abstraction involved in asynchronous, online social networking encourages a gap between a user's perceived audience and actual audience", with users tending to view their audiences in terms of peer groups rather than parents or officials. As we come later to discuss the kinds of dynamic, complex decision-making processes by which optimal privacy is managed, such disinhibition will be seen to have deep consequences.

6.9 Digital Interactions

There is much we could say here, but I will focus upon two of the most pertinent issues, the ways mediating technologies affect differing kinds of privacy and the way they tend to level social distinctions. Firstly, we must say that information technologies do not only reduce privacy. Consider an example given by Palen and Dourish (2003: 131), who note that the practice of lecturers making their academic papers available online (i.e., a form of informational disclosure which at first seems merely a loss of control over access) is actually designed to limit requests and inquiries from students and colleagues, i.e., "ironically ... *limit*, rather than *increase*, accessibility." Here it is necessary to be clear what kind of privacy—informational, physical, decisional or mental —we are talking about. For while the authors are correct that informational disclosure might result in this case in a net increase in overall privacy (we can think of ways it might not, of course), they do not

demonstrate an increase in informational privacy, defined as "freedom from epistemic interference or intrusion" achieved through "a restriction on facts about [us]" (Floridi 1999b: 53). In fact, these lecturers have ceded informational privacy, for once that information is out there and openly available on the Internet, control over who has access to it and how it might be used in the future is lost. What is gained, rather, is a mixture of physical privacy (freedom from sensory intrusion) and mental privacy (freedom from psychological intrusion): fewer knocks at the door and emails received requesting that information. This somewhat specific case can be seen to stand for a larger trend in our use of information technologies: the increase of physical and mental privacy at the expense of a diminished informational privacy. In the last Chapter and this, we have discussed ways in which the technology distances us from each other by reducing social context cues. Psychologists Trepte and Reinecke argue that textual CMC allows us greater control over our "cognitive output" by providing a means of "limited and protected communication"—being able to re-read and edit utterances before posting and eliminating the emotional cues evident through facial expression—and that such factors contribute to our feeling "psychologically private" when online (Trepte and Reinecke 2011: 69-70). In other words the shieldedness of CMC allows us more time to think through responses and is less subject to the performative flow of face-to-face encounters; it "loosens the links of daily life and softens the gaze" as Adam Briggle (2008: 75) says. Or, as one interviewee told Sherry Turkle (2011: 190), "[in CMC] there is a lot less *boundness* to the person ... Nothing will get spat at you." The price of such limited and protected communication, though, is further proliferation of information, and hence an increase in the amount of information we have to worry about protecting.

Secondly, on the levelling of social distinctions, we noted earlier that digital information tends towards openness and transparency because processor and processed (digital tools and digital objects) are made of the same fluid, potent and prolific stuff, and because these properties diminish the kinds of physical constraints that helped maintain analogue informational privacy. We said, as a result, there was often a need to reintroduce ontological friction into the digital infosphere, and that this was usually achieved through password protection and allocation of account privileges. In an online social network like *Facebook*, users control who has access to their information through the reciprocal designation of "friends," to whom differing levels of access can then be allocated. At the highest level of granularity, beyond which many never delve (Joinson *et al*. 2011: 40), users must choose to share their content with just their friends, friends and friends of friends, friends and members of institutional or geographic networks to which they belong,

or everyone (i.e. 800 million+ people). Making social bonds publicly explicit in this manner invokes a certain networked performativity. As Jill Rettberg (2008: 76) says, in the case of *LinkedIn*, “having influential or well-known connections is as important as having an impressive CV”; similarly, the accumulation of *Facebook* friends can become an aim in itself. It is not unusual to see (especially younger people) with in excess of 1000 friends. This blind rush to declare bonds of trust and friendship which in many cases do not actually exist means the ceding of control over informational privacy, especially for those users with a lax attitude to privacy settings.

Computers do not understand the nuances of human relationships; they do not know (and much less do they care) what a friend is. Hence, the making explicit of levels of trust and acquaintance in human relationships in a language computers can process inevitably injures nuance. Where in the commerce of letters relationships were implicitly understood and an often unspoken code of discretion between peers ruled over what was said when and to whom, online social networks require that information to be made explicit in a binary language: is this person a friend? Yes or no? The problem in answering such a blunt question is, of course, that we have many different kinds of ‘friends’—childhood friends, workmates, members of our football team, that guy we have known for years but whose name we never quite remember—and we usually tailor our talk to them. As we said earlier, domains of discourse are both opened and closed by the presence of other people. Chris Peterson has commented that: "In the physical world, people differentiate disclosure with the precision of a surgeon‘s scalpel, but on *Facebook* they are given only a hatchet” (qtd. Oltmann 2010: 2). Yet this is not quite fair. *Facebook* does enable users to articulate in depth what kinds of privileges, over what sorts of content, are to extend to which people. The problem seems rather one of utility. People want to use the system to talk to their friends, not spend their time explaining their friendships to the system. The more we need to reintroduce ontological friction through the explicit declaration of gradations of friendship, the less immediately usable and enjoyable the system becomes. We next turn to examine ways in which this levelling leads to problems of contextual integrity.

6.10 The Digital Diffusion of Situated Action

We have seen (via Altman) that getting an optimal grip on privacy is a dynamic process in which the various privacy mechanisms are culturally and individually mutable, varying with the social and environmental conditions of time and place. In unmediated, face-to-face encounters, management of privacy relies heavily upon the spatial composition of the

environment, our relative distance to other people and interactional behavioural norms which regulate things like eye contact, physical contact, and personal space (Palen and Dourish 2003: 130). If we want to talk to people, they must be within 'ear-shot,' and if we want to be alone, or to talk 'in private' to specific persons, we can look around to monitor who is listening and move either far enough away or behind big enough barriers so that they can no longer see or hear us. In a world without writing, the reach of my words is limited to the audience I can assemble before me in the present moment: those words will wither upon the air as soon as I have said them, or live on only in the memories of those who heard them. Those words, to the extent that they remain faithfully remembered by those who heard them, can be repeated, retold, or recited, but again such oral transmission is limited to the proximal assemblage of persons. Communicative technologies radically alter this situation precisely because they are used to extend our scope of action and perception beyond the face-to-face and here-and-now. They exchange bodily presence for informational re-presentation—'me' for 'information about me'—and so overcome bodily, spatio-temporal limits; but in so doing, they radically alter the kinds of strategic, contextual considerations that must be taken into account.

Our talk is governed by the presence of people. Self-presentation is, as Tufekci (2008b: 22) says, "a conscious, interactive act that requires both an awareness of and participation from the audience." Different people open different domains of discourse; like Cicero, we have different voices for different occasions and different people. As we communicate online, however, the invisibility of our audience means that we can never be sure how many people it composes and who those people are. Where in a face-to-face environment we can look around to see who is listening (friends, colleagues, parents, strangers) and shape our words accordingly, online this is not the case: as Danah Boyd says, "it is virtually impossible to ascertain all those who might run across our expressions in networked publics" (Boyd 2008: 126). Letters networked a public too, of course, but while the cases of letters gone astray seen in the lives of Cicero, Pope and Mitford, demonstrate that our inability to predict the nature and constitution of the audience was also a factor in epistolary culture, nonetheless we have seen—in our discussion of physical constraints and discretion—the kinds of factors which largely maintained a higher level of ontological friction in the epistolary infosphere. In the digital infosphere, as we have said, respect for discretion is diminished by the disinhibiting effects of the Internet and physical constraints are lessened by the essential fluidity and potency of digital information. Such effects are further amplified by the kinds of levelling of social nuance that the machine-readable articulation of relationships in online social networks must imply. The differing social

spheres we each inhabit—as friends, acquaintances, workmates, bosses, parents, children, and so on—tend to get lumped together. Where we might well take great cathartic pleasure in whinging about our bosses to our friends, to do so in our blogs opens us to the possibility of termination of employment (Rettberg 2008: 79); where our negative view of the Church of Scientology might be fine to express while in a private capacity, it is perhaps not so if we are acting as a public official – yet our *Twitter* accounts can make it unclear in which role we speak (L. Roberts 2010); and while the photographs from last week's marathon party someone has uploaded to *Facebook,* which show you drunk or worse, might be a great talking point among friends, they will be less so in a job interview (Tufekci 2008b: 22). The ability of digital agents to search and synthesise this information causes further problems: in frustration a man makes a "silly joke" to his girlfriend that he will blow up a closed airport which threatens the cancellation of their holiday, but does so publicly on *Twitter* so that officials searching the Web for terrorist threats find it and he is arrested and convicted of "menace" (Chambers 2010). Such confusion of context is not only in the now, but—with the persistence and proliferation of information—extends also into the future. As we go about our business online, we leave an increasingly lengthy data shadow, fragments of our activities recorded knowingly or unknowingly by a variety of agents. Where a conversation between friends over lunch would usually leave no record except in their own memories, this ephemerality of speech is lost as digital information systems tend increasingly to record everything. This is of particular concern in those chat messaging systems whose simultaneity and familiarity encourage a "casual, informal, and friendly" tone (Bonnie A. Nardi *et al*. 2000: 81), such as *Skype, ICQ* and *Facebook*, yet whose default settings tend to archive everything. This tension is caught very well by one of Sherry Turkle's recent interviewees, a student named Brad:

> Brad was unaware that there was such a thing [as 'chat logs'] until a conversation with a friend brought him up short. At the time, they were both high school juniors, and she mentioned something he had said during freshman year. She had been using chat logs all through high school. Brad says, "I was shocked that this was how she was spending her time ... going through conversations like that." Now, he is torn between feeling upset that he had been unknowingly "recorded" and feeling angry at himself for being surprised. "After all," he says "I know how IM conversations work.... I think I had heard of this but forgot it. I know there's a very good chance ... that I know certain [people] who have chat logs turned on." (Turkle 2011: 257)

As Turkle says, most of the time Brad does not think about such matters, but when he does he finds the thought of his "sophomore year ramblings" returning to haunt him in future life "intolerable": "Brad doesn't have a clear image of what bad things might happen, but

his anxiety is real. He says that data capture is "awful." His words could show up anywhere" (Turkle 2011: 257). Brad's reaction—a mixture of unthinking immersion in the technology combined with a general uneasiness about its implications when questioned—seems typical. Although usually not explicitly thought, anxious questions remain: what if? What if we fall out with our sophomore friend and they exact revenge through a making public of those youthful conversations? How might the trail of digital footprints left every time we go online be used (or abused) in the future? In how many ways might we be taken *out of context*? Employers, insurers, government agencies, marketing companies and more are all increasingly ready and willing to utilise this information; warnings to young people of the dangers of online disclosure have come even from the president of the United States, Barack Obama (Reuters 2009). Yet as social life is increasingly enacted online, being there is not a choice but a social necessity.

Jonathan Grudin (2001: 279) rightly sums this diffusion of context as a loss of control: "We are losing control and knowledge of the consequences of our actions, because if what we do is represented digitally, it can appear anywhere and at any time in the future. We no longer control access to anything we disclose." The conditions under which people hand over this control, moreover, are often sub-optimal. Acquisti and Grossklags (2006: 17-18) specify three factors which complicate the rationality of privacy decision-making: (1) incomplete information about what other information is out there, how the information will be used, levels of risk (always somewhat indeterminate) and uncertainties about the likelihood of payoffs; (2) an inability to think through and act optimally when faced with such vast amounts of data and "complex, ramified consequences," and hence over-reliance on "simplified mental models, approximate strategies, and heuristics"; and (3) the enduring possibility that even with complete information and full thinking through of optimal strategies, humans (being human) might anyway deviate from the rational choice due to factors like misjudgements about future desires, altruism, or self-control problems. Combined with what we have said of the disinhibiting effects of the Internet, and furthered by the fact that the effective power of the Internet means that we can post things and have them appear online before we have given any thought to their possible consequences,[30] the sheer complexity of such decisional choices itself constitutes a loss of control. Such losses were, of course, already implied by the letter *qua* technology of informational re-

[30] At the start of chapter one, I dismissed the instrumental view of technology by saying that person with a gun is clearly different from the person with a stick, with very different potentialities for action "in the heat of the moment." Similarly, the person with an Internet-enabled smart-phone differs from the person armed only with a sheet of letter-writing paper. The Internet abounds with regretful tales of angry emails sent in the midst of madness.

presentation, but as we have seen, in the commerce of letters, the physical constraints to which letters, as material things, were subject, as well as a culture of discretion sustained by the directedness of letters, meant boundaries were more restricted and variables less diverse.

6.11 Conclusion

The Internet is not the death of privacy. As Altman has convincingly argued, privacy is "a generic process that occurs in all cultures ... [but which] also differs among cultures in terms of the behavioural mechanisms used to regulate desired levels of privacy" (I. Altman 1977: 66). Just as privacy mechanisms occur even in contemporary societies where privacy appears minimal, so we have seen that in the intensely close pre-modern *Gemeinschaft*, "there were places in the community where a precarious intimacy flourished" (Ariès 1989: 1). Even in Bentham's planned panopticon, some privacy would have remained – confined in such cells, it was not the case that "every motion of the limbs, and every muscle of the face [of the prisoner would be] exposed to view" (Bentham 1791: 37). A prisoner need merely turn their back to the "Inspection house," for example. Every viewpoint has a blind-spot, and no matter how intense the scrutiny of an inspectorate, such blind-spots will always be the equivalent of the cracks in the concrete through which weeds grow free in urban environments. Privacy will not die because it is a basic mechanism by which we regulate the boundary between ourselves and everyone else. The question is, though, what sort of privacy will remain once the Internet as an agent of change has run its course? For although the Internet is not the death of privacy, it is a definite threat to the contingent (and hence fragile) notion of the "right to privacy" advanced by the Romantics and secured in the nineteenth-century that now underpins western individualism, demarcating the space in which the individual is free to become most fully what they can be. As Irwin Altman says so well:

> Privacy mechanisms define the limits and boundaries of the self. When the permeability of these boundaries is under the control of a person, a sense of individuality develops. But it is not the inclusion or exclusion of others that is vital to self definition; it is the ability to regulate contact when desired. If I can control what is me and what is not me, if I can define what is me and not me, and if I can observe the limits and scope of my control, then I have taken major steps toward understanding and defining what I am. Thus, privacy mechanisms serve to help me define me. (I. Altman 1975: 50)[31]

[31] While it is out with the scope of this present discussion to give the deserved, full justification of the value of this definition of self *qua* something worth saving, I cannot help but echo Hannah Arendt's (1998: 39)

What will life be like in a "glassy infosphere" (Floridi 2005: 191), where diminished ontological friction means that our words and actions occur with increasing regularity in 'public' *fora*, or are always under greater risk of ending up there? As our little history of privacy has shown, we are very good at adapting to varying degrees of ontological friction, even those environments with very low levels like the pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* where everyone knew everyone else's business. Some, like David Brin (1998), anticipate and to some extent celebrate the 'transparent society' as one in which, since we all know everyone else's secrets, there will be nothing to fear from disclosure and the disinfectant of sunlight will eliminate hypocrisy and double-dealing. There is something to this: faced with photographs of their own college parties, politicians might be less hypocritical on subjects like drug use, for instance (Tufekci 2008b: 35). Yet we must beware the levelling effects of the erosion of situated action, the potential for self-expressive behaviours to become inhibited for fear of future consequences, the dangers of the kinds of psychological dissimulation engendered by the intense scrutiny of communistic regimes (Wydra 2007: 179), and the loss of individualistic autonomy marked by the erosion of a person's power to control the extent to which they are the subject of the gaze of others.

The relationship between technology and privacy is, as Rosen and Santesso (2011: 4-5) say, "inherently dialectical, with new means of violation necessitating new protections, and new forms of concealment spurring new means of disclosure." Warren and Brandeis' seminal article was, in part, a response to the invasion of "the sacred precincts of private and domestic life" by "photographs and news-paper enterprise" (Warren and Brandeis 1890: 195). It was in its encounter with the abyss of the mass public that modern individualism was born; there is no reason not to think that further threats from new technologies will make us think harder about why privacy is valuable to us and fight harder to retain its advantages. Seen in this light, contemporary rumours of the possible "death of privacy" are less eulogy and more a call to arms. We are not powerless to shape these developments. The Internet, though a place where ontological friction is much diminished, is nevertheless not a public stage: password protections and privileges wall off informational gardens in which privacy can still flourish. We must protect and cultivate such gardens. It is thus gratifying to witness the strength of user responses to questionable privacy policies, as seen in the case of *Facebook*. In September 2006, for example, the

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remarks upon the "astonishing flowering" of poetry, music and literature witnessed from the mid eighteenth-century onwards, which was born of the "modern individual and his endless conflicts, his inability either to be at home in society or to live outside it altogether, his ever-changing moods and the radical subjectivism of his emotional life". This romantic vision of a self who must rebel against the essential yet resented levelling effects of social life is what is at stake in the debate on privacy.

company introduced the "News Feed," a feature that aggregated content about friend's activities in main page, and in November 2007 it launched the advertising platform "Beacon," which informed users about their friend's shopping habits. Both initiatives invoked storms of protest—not least on *Facebook* itself—and forced the company to introduce specific controls and opt-out features (Debatin 2011: 56). Users determine the success of digital technologies; their voices have consequence. Through individual usage episodes, communications co-ordinated via message boards and blogs, or the use of Web discussion platforms, users provide direct or indirect feedback to developers and help shape the technology. Indeed, many software products are now released in their early stages of development, with the specific aim of soliciting user feedback to assist with further improvement, a process which can be seemingly unending – hence the phrase "perpetual beta" (Schmidt, 2007: 1418). The fluidity and potency of digital information can help protect privacy in other ways too. Privacy enhancing technologies (PETs) including anonymisers, encryption services and fire walls help protect information at its point of entry and service infrastructures can allow users to inspect, regulate and correct their own data or tell users which other agents have accessed that data (Floridi 2005: 190). Initiatives like the World Wide Web Consortium's (WC3) 'Platform for Privacy Preferences' (http://www.w3.org/P3P/) allow websites to express their privacy policies in a machine- and human-readable formats which can inform or even automate decision-making processes regarding privacy. Like Schopenhauer's porcupines, our norms are being tested as we experience changing conditions. The rules of privacy are shifting as information and interaction become digital – played out in a more fluid, transparent and expansive infosphere. While privacy was maintained in the commerce of letters largely through physical constraints and discretion, in the digital we must build constraints back in to the system and adjust our norms to fit this new environment. This process will take time, and though plenty of porcupines will overstep their bounds in the interim, eventually new boundaries will be discovered, a new "moderate distance" at which to stand, and a renewed "code of politeness and fine manners" which suits this new environment (Schopenhauer 1964: 226).

7 Conclusion: What For? Where To? What Then?

"The now high-technology texture of the lifeworld is one in which the proliferation of the possible is diverse, multistable, and often both confusing and dangerous. It remains the task of the inhabitants to cultivate the right weight and lightness of movement to maintain a balance within that world. We have not yet done that ..."

— Don Ihde

In this final Chapter I will provide a summary of the key elements of the thesis, provide a way forward for future research through a reflection on the main limitations of this study, before ending with some final reflections upon the current scale and pace of technological change.

7.1 Methodological Contributions

To the extent of its success, this thesis affirms three fundamental methodological assertions:

Technology studies needs philosophy. We began Chapter Two with a quote from Jeffrey Kranzberg (1986: 545): "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral." This simple but profound sentence sums the need for philosophy of technology. A more detailed explanation was given in the rest of that Chapter, where first the non-neutrality of technologies was demonstrated through engagement with the phenomenological work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Ihde, which established the role of mediating tools as means of experience, and hence their ontologically constitutional role in the interrelation of humans and world. From Ihde, we saw that mediating technologies always simultaneously amplify some aspects of experience and diminish others; in this sense they cannot be considered neutral but neither can we assume they are only good or bad. "Some things better, some things worse" should always be the lens through which technology is viewed.

Nonetheless, we still required some theoretical framework within which to judge the relative merits of individual technologies, and hence in the latter half of Chapter One took a wider focus. We discussed Heidegger's substantivist view of technology as *Gestell*, a cultural force which fosters a new and reductive mode of world-disclosure, revealing everything only as standing reserve, mere resources to be made readily optimisable for human activity. However, through a discussion of the deficiencies of any approach which leans too heavily towards either social- or technological-determinism, we established the need to think of the social and the technological as co-emergent. Technologies incline us towards forms of living, certain 'programmes of action,' but those technologies are shaped to be what they are through ongoing processes of social construction. These insights were concretised through explication of some of the key concepts from Latour's actor-network theory, including the notions of 'black-boxing' and 'delegation'. In sum, we are not powerless in the face of technology but it does have a substantive impact upon the ways we live and the people we are. Technologies shape historical lifeworlds. In our own time, their ever-increasing intrusion into almost every corner of human activity demands that we pay due heed to this fact, be alert to the dangers of a technological mind-set such as Heidegger and Borgmann describe, and always ask of our technologies in which ways they help and in which ways they may impede the possibilities of living the good life.

Philosophy of technology needs an empirical approach. Technologies do not determine society, but they do have a heavy hand in shaping it, inclining humans towards certain forms of life. As Hans Achterhuis (2001b: 4) has said, the most important breakthrough achieved by the 'classical' approach to philosophy of technology, as seen in the work of Heidegger, Ellul *et al*., was the discovery of the fundamentally challenging nature of the "technological approach to reality" manifested in modern life. The empirical turn in philosophy of technology, however, diverges from the 'classical' approach in three ways: (1) it does not approach technologies as pre-given things, but as black-boxes whose contingent development into stable artefacts was the result of the activities of a manifold of social and material actors, the understanding of which has much to tell us about their social significance; (2) it takes as its subject not 'Technology,' defined as some monolithic, essentialised and abstract force, but 'technologies,' the variety of whose artefactual properties and individual multi-stabilities (Ihde 1990: 144) demand local and independent analysis; and (3) it eschews both technological- and social-determinism, speaking rather of the co-evolutionary nature of technology and society (Achterhuis 2001b: 6). This study, by undertaking original archival research and making use of the most recent findings from the fields of sociology, psychology and cognitive science works within this new empirical

approach; it also, though, suggests a new sub-disciplinary avenue for exploration – sustained historical comparison of individual tools as a dialectic device by which to articulate anew the significance of particular, localised technological changes.

Philosophy of technology needs a historical approach. Technologies cannot be understood in an ahistorical manner and radical novelty cannot, and should not, be assumed. To understand what has changed we must understand what has stayed the same. Technologies do not drop from the clear blue sky. Historically and culturally constituted, they evolve and build on antecedent forms. Accordingly, an empirical-historical approach to the philosophy of technology such as this thesis has adopted has much to contribute towards our understanding of the significance of individual technologies. Chapter One provided justification for such claims by arguing that theses of radical novelty risk prejudging the issue (i.e., they might simply be wrong) and confusing analysis by elevating all features to novelty (i.e., even if some features are radically novel not all need be), and that an ahistorical approach risks deterministic thinking and might miss the recurrent nature of many of the hopes and fears new technologies provoke.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

Distilling (and slightly re-ordering) what has gone before, we can make the following statements:

Digital technologies diffuse the presence of documents. As said in Chapter Three, while material things have a singular spatio-temporal location, digital objects are ontologically ambiguous. In as much as they exist, they do so in two places – as the on-screen representations with which we interact and the imperceptible bit-pattern which ghost the circuits of storage devices. This key difference is what makes the digital realm so fluid and potent. Communication over distance has never been easier, faster, or cheaper. But this increase in our effective power comes at the cost of a diminution of the affective power of the messages carried. While the familiar letter was a singular spatio-temporal object which travelled as "scene ... of [its own] fate" (Benjamin 1999: 62), from the hand of the signatory to that of the addressee, carrying with it what Benjamin called the aura and there presenting ('first-hand,' as it were) the author's handwriting, with all the personality, individuality and authenticity that implies, emails and such present merely impersonal typescript and, being insubstantial, deliver no substrate around which aura can accrue.

This diffusion of presence can negatively impact on the ability of digital things to serve as focal things. In Chapter Four argued the place of letter-writing as an example of what Albert Borgmann terms a "focal practice". Focal practices derive from tradition and call for our patience, skill, effort and involvement in activities which challenge our bodies and our minds. They require our commitment and attention, but reward us with meaningful engagement with our world, our society, our culture and ourselves. They command a presence in our lives, and give our lives meaning by orienting and anchoring us, forging and illuminating the bonds between us, our world and its people. The sacredness of our worldly interactions, the value we derive from them, is shaped in part by the effort and attention we invest in them. In a world of easy, ubiquitous communications, some of this investment is diminished. Typescript diminishes handwriting's more 'personal touch'; digitally ambiguous, sent in haste and distraction, our messages become more fragmentary, and lose something of the letter's status as a "life's monument" (Borgmann 1992: 105). The exchange of familiar letters was an effortful, bodily activity, which required skill, sensibility, and knowledge of tradition in their authorship, demanding respect and relevance of the writer; called for patience, vigour and attention in the wait for words but rewarded it by making their arrival an event; necessitated rich and meaningful community involvements in their transmission; commanded a presence which oriented the rhythm of people's lives; and acted as a material focus for the gathering of people in meaningful communion through the course of their writing, reading, and circulation. Compared to our contemporary, device-led constellation of easy means of communicating, the familiar letter was a recalcitrant ambassador. Made of far sterner stuff, both literally and figuratively, familiar letters commanded a presence in people's lives both by the fact of their monopoly on talk at distance and their material demands for greater effort, skill, attention and patience from correspondents.

Digital technologies diffuse the presence of human beings. Extending our perceptual and actional reach, digital technologies help us overcome distance and de-sever what would otherwise remain remote. But in so doing, as said in Chapter Three, they diminish the importance of bodily, geographic location. They do not create this phenomenon—transportation and communication technologies from the alphabet to the aeroplane have always aimed in this direction—yet, with the connective power and minimal cost of the digital, there nonetheless seems something of a step-change in the magnitude, if not the quality, of the effect. With Internet-enabled smart-phones, we can be continually coupled to a communicative network which allows our attention to wander the globe. As such, our own worldly presence gets diffused into the network. Our face-to-face communicative

partners are also diminished in their presence in as much as their attention might at any point be called elsewhere or they idly browse their mobile-phone messages as we talk, half-listening to what we have to say. More importantly, though, the presence of others over such networks is radically simplified. As Andrew Feenberg (1999: 191) has said, "the pragmatics of personal encounter are radically simplified" on communicative networks, "reduced to the protocols of technical connection", which make it "easy to pass from one social contact to another, following the logic of the technical network that supports ever more rapid communication." As we saw in Chapter Five, even the richest forms of CMC filter out many of the cues which help us understand each other in face-to-face interaction, reducing regulating feedback, dramaturgical impact, the inherent prosody, and social status cues, and widening the prospect of greater social anonymity. Though not without parallel in letters, these factors (which as we saw can change behaviour) are often more pronounced online, especially when taken in combination with the way the Internet also extends our connectivity, making it ever easier to talk to strangers.

Digital diffusion need not harm authenticity, but it does challenge authenticity. When Heidegger spoke of the "homelessness" wrought by technologies like TV and radio, he was anxious about what he viewed as the migration of the attention from the local to the global and the fact that everything becomes "lumped together into uniform distancelessness" (Heidegger 1971: 166). Such fears were grounded, in part, in Heidegger's concerns for the levelling, normative effects of *das Man* upon individuals' opportunities to live authentically. As we said in §3.3 and §5.2, however, in as much as communicative networks have helped shift us from culturally conservative, insular pre-modern communities towards more tolerant, networked modern societies, they can be welcomed as forces which potentially aid authentic life by facilitating intercultural understanding, freedom of expression and personal experimentation. Nonetheless, the technological diffusion of bodily, situated context and the re-presentational telepresence of mediated interlocutors in cyberspace can have potentially negative effects. In addition to fears for 'cyberbalkanisation' and the negative consequences of online disinhibition, in Chapter Five we engaged at length with Dreyfus' somewhat dystopian arguments to show that in the limited and protected sphere of the Internet, altered appearances and extended connectivity can result in the diminution of things like risk, trust, commitment and shared mood, factors which help make everyday life meaningful and rewarding. Nonetheless, as we discussed, Dreyfus' arguments are too often overwrought. Risk, commitment, trust and shared mood are not absent online, they exist in different forms. Broadening a cognate point made by Adam Briggle (2008: 73), we can say that factors like commitment and trust

depend "at least as much on the people involved as ... on the tools used" and that although the establishment of close ties online "requires serious and dedicated people, ... the same is of course true about the offline world."

Online interaction is not virtual; cyberspace is not another world. Towards the end of Chapter Five we ascribed the consistent overestimation of the large-scale effects of the Internet to a tendency to take the most extreme ways in which CMC diminishes social context cues to be typical of the Web itself. Too much focus upon "virtual worlds" like MUDs, MOOs in the 1990s and *Second Life* in the 2000s—whose fantasy role-play is the boundary case of altered appearances and extended connectivity but whose user-numbers pale in comparison to those of *Facebook*, where real names and interaction with offline friends are typical—meant that cybercultural theorists could talk up the nature of the Internet as a different place where the rules which govern offline social interaction did not apply: "Our world is different", as John Perry Barlow (1996) insisted. Dystopian theorists, too, bought into this characterisation but merely focussed upon the negative effects which must follow. We ascribed this tendency, in part, to an overemphasis on the 'virtual' nature of the Internet. Interaction, where it occurs between two humans, should not be considered virtual no matter how extreme the impact of the mediating technologies. Even fantasy role-play interactions have real world affective and effective results; they are no more "virtual" than is writing a letter or interacting at a fancy dress party. Such misunderstandings, we said, encouraged early commentary to overstate the differences between online and offline life and unnecessarily dichotomise their relation. Online interaction is not virtual, though its medium may be. We do not lead online and offline lives. We each lead one life, whether we are walking about in the world or sitting before computer screens gazing at the Web. Focussing upon the more extreme ways in which the Internet can alter appearances and extend connectivity distracts attention from the more subtle ways in which people incorporate the Internet into their everyday lives, to *augment* rather than *transform* their social networks.

The Internet is not the death of privacy, but by diffusing situational context it does radically (and potentially harmfully) reshape our ways of being public and private. Chapter Six examined privacy and publicity in letters and online. By way of Schopenhauer's analogy of the porcupines, we started by proposing that need for closeness and distance, privacy and publicity is a fundamental fissure in human existence. Technology is important because it changes the strategic options by which we can negotiate such difficulties. Via Altman we conceived privacy as a dynamic, dialectic

process of optimisation achieved through many mechanisms, both culturally universal and specific. Discussing the history of privacy in the West we noted the crowdedness of pre-modern life but saw, nonetheless, the marginal places where privacy could be found. We then expounded Habermas' theory that the eighteenth-century saw a fundamental shift towards a new self-image of the conjugal family as the prime social unit, and in this domestic privacy began to flourish a new kind of modern subjectivity, built on Romantic ideas of individualism and imagination. Considering the specific Altmanian strategies by which epistolary privacy and publicity were achieved, we noted three: physical constraints of the medium, legislation and discretion. Contrasting this with the digital situation, we argued that low levels of ontological friction in the digital infosphere mean that information there is more fluid, potent, prolific and persistent, and that digital technologies erode the boundaries of clearly situated action. Invisible audiences and the replicability of information confuse perceptions of situation, and complicate privacy strategies by increasing the variables that must be accounted for as we speak.

7.3 Study Limitations and Future Directions

One of the more melancholic aspects of nearing completion of a project of this scale is just how much even 90,000 words must leave unsaid. My original intentions were, I have found, wildly over-ambitious. The difficulty of balancing, on the one hand, achieving a sufficient level of abstraction such that I could get some purchase on the larger issues, whilst, on the other hand, not becoming so abstract that the study became devoid of reference to real world people and things and thus emptied of relevance, has left many questions not only unanswered, but as yet unasked. There are two main directions in which I had hoped to develop this study, but these must now become the basis for future research.

The first tranche of issues centre on the public sphere, politics and knowledge. In Habermas' (1992) seminal study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he claims that uni-directional, broadcast media has made an atrophied, mass-marketing sham of public sphere interaction. How do the connective possibilities of digital technologies effect change in people's opportunities for participation in democracy? Do features like the UK government's new e-*Petitions* website[32] allow the public a direct line to democracy, or do they just facilitate 'astro-turfing', that is, the artificial creation of the appearance of 'grassroots' support for a product or cause? Does the reduction of social-status cues aid enlightened, disinterested discourse of the kind seen in Habermas' idealised image of the

[32] See: <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/>

eighteenth-century coffee-house, or does it just encourage anonymous and uncommitted "echo chamber" kibbutzing of the kind feared, for example, by Hubert Dreyfus (2009: chap. 4)? What power laws manifest themselves in the analogue and digital? What of the digital divide? Will it be overcome? And what of the flow of knowledge? In Chapter Five we identified the strength of weak ties to lie in their ability to help information flow more freely between discrete social groups. Do digital technologies change processes of the dissemination and appreciation of ideas as it was formerly accomplished through analogue media? How does "invisible college" epistolary contact of the kind made by Hume and Rousseau differ from modern-day blog scholarship communities like those associated with the "object-oriented philosophy" of Graham Harman?[33] How do the difficulties of getting ideas into print through books, periodicals and pamphlets in the early nineteenth-century—as seen in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's manifold troubles in self-publishing his journal *The Friend* (Coleman 1988)—illustrate the technological differences between then and our own time? In short, how do blogs, social networks and other such new communicative media change public, political and epistemic interaction?

Secondly, there are issues of time, memory and preservation. The Harden/Allan collection was, before its eventual accession into the NLS archives, passed down through the generations, beloved and treasured amongst the family. Will emails, blogs and such be treasured in the same way? How do analogue and digital media differ as sites of narrative self-representation and of personal and public memory? What are the problems and potential benefits of creation, curation and transmission of personal and cultural heritage in the digital age? That mediating technologies alter processes of remembering has been obvious since Plato fretted in *The Phaedrus* that writing would "create forgetfulness in the souls of those who learn it, because they will not use their memories" (Plato 2001: 189/275a). How do de-severant digital technologies change experience of memory? How are projects like Gordon Bell's *MyLifeBits*,[34] which aim to create a "lifetime store of everything," challenged by Nietzsche's (1997) insistence on the importance of forgetting? If every moment is photographed, catalogued, made to stand ready for future inspection, will mediated memories be ultimately diminished in value by their overwhelming ubiquity? What are the implications of Clark and Chalmers' (1998) "extended mind" thesis—in which delegation of memory and belief to external material supports stretches the concept of mind out beyond the boundaries of the skull —for thinking about the nature of mediated memory? If we keep information outside the head, for example on Wikipedia,

[33] See Harman's blog, Object-Oriented Philosophy: <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/>
[34] See: <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/projects/mylifebits/>

always just a *Google* search on our smart phones away, how does this affect thought, memory and the synthesis of ideas? In the widest terms, how do digital technologies, ubiquitous communications and twenty-four hour news cycles change our experience of time?

7.4 Closing Words: Novelty, Nostalgia and Technological Life

We live cocooned by technics. From waking through working to resting once more, an endless supporting cast of man-made artefacts ease or propel us through our daily routine: radio-alarm clocks, coffee percolators, electric power stations, printing presses, clothes, front doors, retail receipts, automobiles, elevators, desks, pencils, coins, computers, central heating systems, running shoes, roof slates, rubber bands, dinner plates, and so on, and so on, and so on. All things made *by us*, to do things *for us*, and all of them, for most of the time, dwelling only in the periphery of our perception, working or standing ready to do so, helping us get on with life. As we said briefly earlier (§4.4), we have never been without technology. Bernard Stiegler (1998) makes a provocative case, indeed, that technology and humanity are co-emergent, that the two co-evolve and co-constitute each other; "worldness is," he claims, "always already technicity, technical power, activity" (Stiegler 1998: 91). Whether by flint axes or electronic messages, the human species has always lived through exteriorisation; for Stiegler, the making and using of technological artefacts has, in both evolutionary and cultural terms, made us what we are. Whether or not Stiegler is right, we are certainly the most adaptable of animals, able to transform our environments to make them habitable, to take from and shape the earth to our needs. As seen in Chapter Two, we have a deep neural plasticity which allows us to take up our tools such that they blur the boundaries of body and mind (Clark 2003: 6-7). This plasticity means that for much of the time our tools are not perceptible to us even at their moment of use. Like Heidegger's carpenter in his tool-shed, we just get on with the work at hand, the hammers or nails, or laptops or letters, just everyday bits of equipment – unthought things we use to do other things, boring old stuff. This withdrawal of technologies from perception can tend to blind us to their significance and the central role they play in our existential engagement with the world (cf. §2.2). For Heidegger it is only at the moment of breakdown—when something is broken or missing—that we glimpse our tools in their uncanny specificity, as their larger referential context is suddenly lit up and we see anew their essential place in our lives.

There is, however, another time when things show up as unready-to-hand, when they obtrude upon our perception not as tools ready to be used but as strange objects calling

attention to themselves: when they are new. A shiny new gadget merits fascination: "Wow, I can carry my whole record collection in my back pocket!", "My mobile phone is also a camera!" and so on. Like children at Christmas, we get to know the new MP3 player or smart phone through play and experimentation—some might even read the manual—, learning its limits and getting to grips with it through intrigued absorption. But this charm all too quickly evaporates and what was novel and foregrounded becomes simply more background stuff, unthinkingly relied upon. Boredom sets in and we long for the next novelty, the next glimpse of a science-fiction future we can live now. This breathless covetous consumerism, hooked on the buzz of the new, demands ever more technological advances: gadgetry is fetishised and innovation relentless. In the present time, iPhones, iPads and iPods have made each new Apple Inc. press launch a world-news event. Sites like *Twitter* and *Facebook* capture the world's attention, seeming to define our time. Earlier electronics, if they escape the junk-heap, are rapidly recycled as retro, vintage, or classic: melancholy remembrances of technological worlds past. We buy mobile phones that twenty years ago would have looked like something from the first *Star Trek*, knowing that it will look laughably out of date in just a few years. Albert Borgmann thinks of our age as typified by a restless hyperactivity, our society suffering a form of 'Attention Deficit Disorder'; there is "a nervous restlessness in the cultural type," he says, which "exhibits an extremely narrowed focus on the world and its variety" (Borgmann 1992: 13). The endlessly increasing ubiquity of technology makes it ever less possible to ignore questions of the kind posed by Heidegger: where exactly is this "hopeless frenzy of unchained technology" leading us?

> When the farthest corner of the globe has been conquered technologically and can be exploited economically; when any incident you like, in any place you like it, at any time you like, becomes accessible as fast as you like; when you can simultaneously "experience" an assassination attempt against a king in France and a symphony concert in Tokyo; when time is nothing but speed, instantaneity, and simultaneity, and time as history has vanished from all Dasein of all peoples; ... then, yes then, there still looms like a specter over all this uproar the question: what for?—where to?—and what then? (Heidegger 2000: 40)

Such questions can seem passé in contemporary culture, the product of an outdated and reactionary cultural conservatism irrationally opposed to change, tainted by rose-tinted nostalgia for a simpler, less explicitly technological way of doing things. There is, no doubt, a deal of truth to affirmations such as that made by the author Douglas Adams in a 1999 article for the *Sunday Times* entitled 'How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Internet':

> [Y]ou would think we would learn the way these things work, which is this: 1) everything that's already in the world when you're born is just normal; 2) anything that gets invented between then and before you turn thirty is incredibly exciting and creative and with any luck you can make a career out of it; 3) anything that gets invented after you're thirty is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilisation as we know it until it's been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really. Apply this list to movies, rock music, word processors and mobile phones to work out how old you are. (Adams 1999)

No doubt we have always been technological, and faced with technological change some 'Cassandras' will always find fault with even the most unobjectionable of technologies. But the problem is more elaborate than the mere case of old dogs and new tricks. If nothing else, the pace of technological change over the last two hundred years or so is unrivalled. Contemporary technology develops so rapidly that upheaval seems always inevitable; we stumble daily into the future. Where letters served as the prime mode of communication over distance for a thousands of years—we saw in §6.6 how similar were the problems faced by both Cicero and Jessy Harden, for example—, the last two centuries have, in short order, seen the telegraph, telephone, fax, mobile phone, SMS, and Internet all invented, some of which are already obsolete. Thinking back to those porcupines we encountered at the start of Chapter Six, we can say that no doubt after some haphazard period of excitement and experimentation we will settle down again, finding new ways of working and a new optimal common distance in a reconfigured social sphere. But how long will it be until the next major technological disruption to these learned ways of working? Today, more than ever, we seem to live in anticipation of technological upheaval – like communities who live beside active volcanoes, the question is when, and not if. This torrent of technological activity comes so fast that it sometimes seems to take place for its own sake, to bear out Heidegger's warning that we have been afflicted in our essence by the rule of enframing, the nihilism of a will to power that views the world as nothing but a well of resources which must be ordered and optimised. In such circumstances, stopping to ask questions like "what for?", "where to?", and "what then"?, is not merely the product of a nostalgic Romanticism, but flows from a primordial care and concern for humanity. As the quote from Don Ihde with which we began this Chapter reminds us, we have yet to find what Heidegger called *Gelassenheit*, releasement from the thrall of technological thinking, a way to "affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us," a way of comporting ourselves in which we "let technical devices enter our daily life, and at the same time leave them outside, that is, let them alone, as things which are nothing absolute but remain dependent upon something higher" (Heidegger 1966: 54)

Such reflections should not evoke the dystopic visions of classical philosophy of technology. We are the technological animal, and we have many reasons to be thankful for that fact. Technology can release us from toil and misery. Describing the pain and misery of Jessy Harden and her family as they waited in vain for letters from India which never came, for example, I cannot imagine they would but feel thankful to live in our connected world. For many others in that time, such distances meant not just difficulties in communicating but the loss of communication altogether. Technologies enable us to do things we could not do otherwise. In opening up and connecting us to the world, they facilitate intercultural contact, allow for freer expression and social experimentation. Furthermore, we are not powerless in the face of technology – it is not an autonomous force divorced from human will. The web of forces whereby technologies are brought into being always has human activity as its centre. In this thesis we have discussed for example, the actions and interventions of users which resulted in the reshaping of MUDs and MOOs from a gaming technology to a social technology (§5.8) and the violent reactions of users to the questionable privacy policies of *Facebook* (§6.11). Every time a user takes up a service they give it their implicit support and bolster its business model; every time they give feedback via formal or informal channels, they add their voices to the list of those the developers must take into account; the Open Source movement, of course, gives new meaning to the social shaping of technology. Part of this social shaping is the dialogue that goes on around technology, in the mainstream media, in blogs and online social networks, and within academia. This dialogue must attend not only to potential benefits like those just stated, but also the losses we incur as we undergo technological change.

For we really do have reasons to mourn the passing of technological worlds. Where technology is concerned our maxim must always be "some things better, some things worse." 'Progress,' if the march of technology might thus be named, is certainly not linear, and advances according to nothing like the 'Whig version of history'. We are not on an inevitable course towards ever greater liberty, equality and enlightenment. New solutions make new problems. In our own time we face new and huge ethical quandaries over biotechnologies, transhumanist ethics, climate change, and the next advance on nuclear weapons, for example. The particular conflux of technologies with which we live lays down a pattern for our lives and inclines us to some ways of acting rather than others. In this thesis we have described the way in which letter-writing helped shape the solid contours of the world of the Romantics, a skilled activity which required patience and attention but rewarded people through the curious affective power of these personally inscribed little pieces of paper which had travelled the globe, and which brought people

together to collaborate in their writing, their reading and their dissemination. The Internet changes this situation. In delivering up words from the other side of the world stripped of the need for the contextual involvements implied by focal things, people can seem increasingly ubiquitously present to us – but this is most often a much diminished presence served up to a scattered attention. Where the arrival of the post was an *event* which helped shape the rhythms of people's lives, we now live with the slow, steady trickle-through of fragmentary messages deprived of aura. Rather than communing with other people to collaborate in the transmission of these messages, huge and impersonal tele-communications infrastructures take over, commodifying our messages as the technological complexity of online social networks necessitates some loss of control over our content to companies like *Facebook*, for whom information is an exploitable resource and hence whose interests can conflict with our own. Digital diffusion of presence makes our social walls permeable in a way previously unimagined, challenging authenticity by diminishing risk and commitment, confusing the situated contexts of our actions and challenging the notion of privacy established in the nineteenth-century.

* * * * *

As I reflect on my time in the archives of the National Library of Scotland, reading and re-reading the Harden/Allan journals for this research, one passage plays prominently upon my memory. It is from an entry dated the 1st January 1808, where Jessy Harden uses the blank page of the New Year to reflect upon her family located variously in Scotland, England, Ireland and India: "How we are scattered today my dear Nan, I wonder what you are about although not what the subject of your thoughts are. It is I know exactly what all the family though distant from each other are thinking of, I mean, <u>each other</u>." We use epistolary technologies, whether analogue or digital, for the purpose of communing over distance – because although scattered we wish to be *in touch*, to let people know we are thinking of them and to find out how they are doing. We can counter the tendencies of devices to diminish skill, attention, patience and effort through the affirmation and protection of focal practices, something as simple as the realisation that while *Facebook* is a great means by which to arrange to meet friends or share jokes about *YouTube* clips, it is less so for the exchange of love notes. We need to be thinking of each other, not just know what each other are thinking. We must respect and assert the importance of commitment and trust in human relationships, and so to be wary of those ways in which the relational abstraction of the altered appearances and extended connectivity of cyberspace threaten them. We should only use those Internet applications which add something to our lives—

whose costs do not outweigh their benefits—and so be ready to raise our voices in protest against those services and companies play fast and loose with our right to privacy. The Internet is a social construction; the shape it assumes, and hence the way it shapes human activity, will be governed by how we use it.

Appendix

Manuscript Numbers of the Harden/Allan Collection at the NLS

The Harden/Allan journals were written in small books of around 4" by 6", and sent out to India at roughly four month intervals by Jessy Harden to her sister Agnes in India, who brought them back when she returned to Scotland in 1812. A note in transcript copies of the journals at Abbott Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, presents this history of their preservation and archival accession written by a descendent named A.S. Clay in 1955:

> The Journals became the property of Jessy's youngest daughter, Mrs. Jessie Clay, who died in 1908. About 50 years ago the journals were transcribed into notebooks by Mrs. Jessie Clay's daughter, Mrs. Jessie Mather. Both journals and transcripts passed to the latter's daughter, Miss Lilian Mather. In 1951 Miss Lilian Mather presented the transcripts to Roger Quirk and the original journals to me.... The original journals have been presented by me to the National Library of Scotland, together with 32 drawings of Scottish subjects by John Harden ...

The manuscript numbers, along with the dates of coverage of each journal are as follows:

MS8832	16th September 1801	to	14th November 1801
MS8833	30th June 1802	to	13th July 1802
MS8834	21st August 1802	to	3rd September 1802
MS8835	1st January 1803	to	17th January 1803
MS8836	7th May 1803	to	12th June 1803
MS8837	4th July 1803	to	4th September 1803
MS8838	2nd September 1803	to	Early/Mid November 1803
MS8839	1st January 1804	to	21st February 1804
MS8840	11th March 1804	to	22nd April 1804
MS8841	25th April 1804	to	23rd May 1804
MS8842	20th May 1804	to	17th August 1804
MS8843	18th July 1804	to	21st September 1804
MS8844	27th November 1804	to	13th January 1805
MS8845	21st January 1805	to	6th April 1805
MS8846	3rd April 1805	to	1st June 1805

MS8847	25th July 1805	to	18th November 1805
MS8848	24th November 1805	to	26th December 1805
MS8849	2nd March 1806	to	9th May 1806
MS8850	7th September 1806	to	1st December 1806
MS8851	23rd November 1806	to	1st February 1807
MS8852	1st February 1807	to	29th April 1807
MS8853	7th May 1807	to	23rd July 1807
MS8854	26th July 1807	to	26th November 1807
MS8855	24th January 1808	to	1st April 1808
MS8856	7th August 1808	to	21st November 1808
MS8857	4th February 1809	to	17th April 1809
MS8858	25th May 1809	to	4th August 1809
MS8859	26th October 1809	to	4th January 1810
MS8860	14th January 1810	to	14th April 1810
MS8861	12th December 1810	to	14th January 1811
MS8862	19th May 1811	to	12th August 1811
MS8863	6th October 1811	to	5th December 1812

Also included in the NLS' collection are:

- MS8864/1-4, four letters (two from Agnes and two from Jessy).
- MS8865, a travel journal kept by John Harden dating from 7th October 1802 to 15th October 1802.
- MS8866-8868, a series of sketches of the Harden/Allan family by John Harden.
- MS8870/1-3, three typed manuscripts which include genealogical notes and historical material about the Allan family and (incomplete and sometimes incorrect) transcripts of the journals.

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