



A Goldfish Bowl as Natural Habitat? Examining the Blurring Boundaries in the Lives of Generation @

BY MARITA MOLL

“The future holds for us a corporate man who will accept the goldfish bowl as a natural habitat — having recognized that electronic espionage has already become an art form.” (McLuhan, Powers. 1989. p.114)

As a youth, I used to spend the summer with my family at a cottage in the Alberta foothills. There was no running water, no electricity, no telephone and of course, no newspaper, television, or radio. That’s an environment few of today’s youth ever get to experience. But I’m not sure I could manage it anymore either.

Denied my daily media fix these days, I quickly begin to get edgy and anxious about what I might be missing. And I don’t even own a cell phone or a Blackberry, so I can only guess what kind of hardship it would be for today’s youth, immersed from birth in an electronic world, to spend the summer on such a severe media diet.

Despite the fact that he died in 1980, Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan had already coined a term for the inhabitants of the 21st century online world: “discarnate man.” Discarnate means having no material form and the electronic world, said McLuhan, would reproduce users as patterns of information. The human body of electronic man, so accustomed to talking to others hundreds of miles away, “absorbed the fact that he could be present, minus his body, in many different places simultaneously, through electronics. His self was no longer his physical body so much as it was an image of a pattern of information, inhabiting a world of other images and other patterns of information” (Marchand, p.238). Having now spent thousands of hours of my own life “online” (such terms were more than metaphors for McLuhan), and having experienced how this is now reflected back to me in a Google search, I’m afraid that this observation hits alarmingly close to home.

At the end of the 19th century, society was changed by the invention of electric light. McLuhan described electric light as a pure information medium – a medium without a message. The message was in the way illumination extended already existing daytime activities into the night. “In a word, the message of the electric light is total change,” said McLuhan. “It is pure information without any content to restrict its

transforming and informing power” (McLuhan, 1964. p.52).

At the end of the 20th century, we saw a new light and it was coming from a computer screen. There was the usual euphoria. The new technologies, it was believed, would give us unlimited access to people and resources and unlimited capacity to share knowledge and resources directly to build a better world. As a new source of instant gratification, a personal publishing medium, information which was not filtered, and even freedom from the tyranny of television, the Internet was the “it” technology of the day.

Off to the side, there were murmurs that we might be accepting technologies with an Orwellian potential for control. The original version of the Internet (ARPANET) was, after all, a project of the U.S. Department of Defense. Unlike the lightbulb, this technology was pure content and, with the onset of the World Wide Web, content that quickly became commercialized. Hand in hand with the commercialization came the collection of information on users in order to better inform commerce. And so, we have all become patterns of information that reside in databases somewhere in cyberspace, just as McLuhan predicted. And those patterns of information, owned and controlled by corporations like Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, and Facebook, will be there long after we have ceased to exist as physical entities. That’s a

rather bizarre thought but as far as we know now, none of these entities are undertaking to delete any of the information collected about us.

Nevertheless, as citizens of the wired world, we are drawn to the online spaces like bugs to light bulbs at night. There is that irresistible quality of intermittent reinforcement that seduces us, reduces us to nocturnal e-mail seeking creatures tapping at keyboards in the warm glow of an LCD screen.

"In the future, everyone will have privacy for 15 minutes!" announced the fortune teller in a *New Yorker* cartoon back in 1997 (Mankoff, 1997). "We don't really care" seems to be the response of

millions of Internet users the world over who appear to have chosen to go for the trade-off — connectivity over privacy — or chosen to ignore it.

Faustian bargains are always made in the shadows. With respect to the current wave of online technologies, thinking about which powers are being offered and which ones are being taken away is an exercise we rarely indulge in. How has the Internet and the many technologies that converge onto it both enhanced and compromised our futures? The articles in this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* focus on the many trade-offs currently being made as the daily life of Generation @ continues to evolve online.

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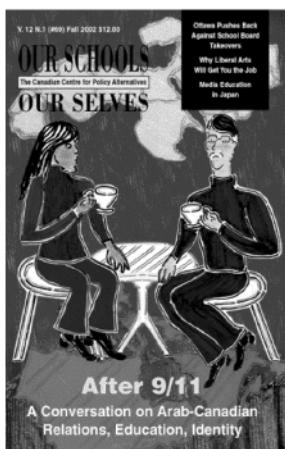
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