

AGAINST THE MACHINE

*Being Human in the Age of
the Electronic Mob*

Lee Siegel

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the Electronic Mob*

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SPIEGEL & GRAU
NEW YORK
2008

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For Julian



Introduction

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT the way the Internet is reshaping our thoughts about ourselves, other people, and the world around us. It's also about the way the Internet itself has grown out of changes in society and culture. I had been wanting to write it for years, yet the book's origins don't lie in the Internet. They lie in a belief that, for better or worse, has guided my life as a writer, and especially as a cultural critic. Things don't have to be the way they are.

Consider the automobile, like the Internet one of the more marvelous inventions of humankind. By the early 1960s, however, fifty thousand people were dying in car accidents every year. Among other reasons for the high rate of fatalities, transmissions were hard to operate, the use of chrome and other brightly reflective materials inside the cars made it hard for drivers to see, and there were no protective restraints to keep passengers from being hurled through the windshield in a crash. Yet the public didn't complain. The rhetoric surrounding the automobile had made it impervious to skepticism. Cars were not just a marvel of convenience, people were told, they were a miracle of social and personal transformation.

Advertising identified the car's power and mobility with the promise of American life itself. The car's speed made any criticism seem fuddy-duddy and reactionary. So did the fact that changing automobile styles functioned as the visual embodiment of a particular year. The "make" of your car was the very definition of your social relevance as its owner. Cars moved so fast and their styles changed so fast that they acquired the illusion of an eternal condition, like the revolving of the seasons.

Such an illusion gave auto manufacturers a pretext for their neglect. They could hide their cost-conscious refusal to make cars safer behind their claim that nothing could be done—the trade-off in human life was inevitable and inexorable. That was the nature of cars. What's more, cars empowered the individual to an unprecedented degree. The increasingly affordable automobile seemed like the ultimate proof and fulfillment of democracy. If people were dying on the road in greater numbers, it was because greater numbers of people were enjoying the freedom, choice, and access provided by the new machines roaring along the open road. Criticize the car and you were criticizing democracy. Anyway, that's just the way things were.

Until 1965. That was the year Ralph Nader published *Unsafe at Any Speed*, his classic exposé of the automobile industry's criminal neglect. The public was horrified. It seemed that auto industry executives had known all along what the problems were. Engineers had pressed them to make changes that would have saved tens of thousands of lives, but the bosses silenced the criticism for the sake of cutting costs and protecting the shareholders and their own jobs.

Not only was the public horrified; it was shocked. What it had accepted as an inevitable condition turned out to be wholly arbitrary. Things should have been very different from the way they were. And gradually, by means of public pressure, the “permanent” condition of the necessarily dangerous car did yield to the new condition of a safety-conscious auto industry. People stopped dying on the road in staggering numbers. Things changed.

Heaven knows, I’m not comparing the Internet to a hurtling death trap. But the Internet has its destructive side just as the automobile does, and both technologies entered the world behind a curtain of triumphalism hiding their dangers from critical view. Like the car, the Internet has been made out to be a miracle of social and personal transformation when it is really a marvel of convenience—and in the case of the Internet, a marvel of convenience that has caused a social and personal upheaval. As with the car, the highly arbitrary way in which the Internet has evolved has been portrayed as inevitable and inexorable. As with the car, criticism of the Internet’s shortcomings, risks, and perils has been silenced, or ignored, or stigmatized as an expression of those two great American taboos, negativity and fear of change. As with the car, a rhetoric of freedom, democracy, choice, and access has covered up the greed and blind self-interest that lie behind what much of the Internet has developed into today.

Now, you would have to be a fool to refuse to acknowledge that the Internet is a marvel of convenience. Google, Amazon, and Nexis saved me months of research and title hunting while writing this book. Recently, the Internet enabled my family and me to find an apartment in perhaps one-fourth the time it would have taken in pre-Internet days. Without some trustworthy medical Web sites, my wife and I would have spent countless more nights worrying over our infant son during the first weeks of his life. Without e-mail, it might even have taken me longer to meet my wife, or to have a career as a writer! I sometimes speak haltingly, and shyly. E-mail made it possible for me to pursue work and love in the medium in which I, as a writer, feel most comfortable.

No one can deny the Internet’s capacity to make life easier, smoother, and more pleasant. But let’s be honest. I would have installed myself at the library and made the rounds of used-book stores, and eventually written this book without the Internet. My family and I would have found an apartment. A few extra trips to the doctor would have spared us anxiety about our little boy. Work and love would not have eluded me even if I had had to rely on the spoken rather than the written word. Without the Internet, all these things would have been accomplished, or they would have ironed themselves out. The Internet made one big difference. Everything worked itself out more quickly and efficiently. More conveniently.

Convenience is an essential part of what most contemporary commercial propositions promise to bring us. Yet commerce and convenience exist not for their

own sake, but to make life more meaningful outside the arena of commerce. No one's epitaph ever read: "Here Lies Mr. Cavanaugh, Who Led a Convenient Life, and Made Life Convenient for Others." And yet in the name of convenience, the Internet has been declared a revolution on a par with the invention of the printing press.

The Internet, however, is completely unlike the printing press. Spreading knowledge through books has nothing to do with buying books online. Spreading knowledge to people who lack it has nothing to do with the Internet's more rapid dispersal of information that is already available. And giving everyone "a voice," as the Internet boosters boast of having done, is not only very different from enabling the most creative, intelligent, or original voices to be heard. It can also be a way to keep the most creative, intelligent, and original voices from being heard.

The sometimes hysterical claims over the past few years that the Internet is an epoch-making revolution in social and personal relations follow the same arc. They always go on to describe the "revolution" in commercial terms of general consumer empowerment. In terms of convenience. But a revolution in convenience cannot possibly be—as precious a quality as convenience is nowadays—anything that can be called a revolution. And yet the Internet has indeed caused a revolution. It's just that the prophets of the Internet don't ever want to talk about what type of revolution it is.

The Internet as technical innovation is the answer to our contemporary condition of hectic, disconnected, fragmented activity. A century of technological change has filled our busy days with near-simultaneous disparate experiences. Being online now allows us to organize these experiences, almost to unify them. (What is "compartmentalization" but a way to keep several "windows" open at the same time?) Despite our lamentations that e-mail is running and ruining our lives, we can keep up, in some type of manageable fashion, with the accelerated rhythms of clashing life spheres.

In the same way, the Internet's social and psychological nature is the answer to a century of social and psychological change. During that time, the individual was gradually elevated above society. Satisfying our own desires has become more important than balancing our relationships with other people.

The age of Freud, the Existential Self, the Therapeutic Self, the Confessional Self, the Performing Self, the age of the memoir, the Me Generation, the Culture of Narcissism—life has become more mentalized, more inward, more directed toward the gratification of personal desire. The collapse of the family and the preponderance of people living alone are aspects of this trend; tragically, so is the shocking frequency of violence, even of mass murder, in public places. We live more in our own heads than any society has at any time, and for some people now the only reality that exists is the one inside their heads.

This is not a condemnation of how we live. Community in the form of pernicious ideologies and destructive tribalisms has created more misery than radical individualism ever did. There's much to be said for our isolated, separate lives, for the greater "access" they provide to a broader array of pleasures and protections. But however our present condition develops, the Internet offers the first cohesive social and psychological framework for this relatively new condition. The Internet is the first social environment to serve the needs of the isolated, elevated, asocial individual.

In the sense that the Internet responds to a set of conditions that have been many decades in the making, it is an inevitable technological development. But the nature of the Internet, once it had been invented, was not, and is not, inevitable. Technology is neutral, value-free, neither inherently good nor bad. Values are what make technology either an aid or an obstacle to human life.

We shop, play, work, love, search for information, seek to communicate with each other and sometimes with the world online. We spend more time alone than ever before. Yet people are not arguing about the effects of this startling new condition.

Occasionally, alarms are sounded about identity theft, addictive behavior, or the sexual exploitation of children online. These are real dangers, especially the online sexual war against children. But they are only the most extreme, and the most visible, hazards of the world of the Internet. They will eventually be brought under control by legislation, courts, and committees. And anyway, such concerns are usually dismissed as hysteria, in the same way that worrying about the high rate of traffic deaths was once dismissed as hysteria. If people are being preyed upon online in greater numbers, we are told, it's because greater numbers of people are enjoying the freedom, choice, and access provided by the new machines propelling us into open, infinite cyberspace. That is the nature of the Internet.

The Internet magnifies these pathological patterns of behavior, but it didn't create them. What cannot be resolved by legislation, courts, and committees are patterns of behavior created by the Internet itself, problems spawned by the Internet's everyday routines. But fundamental questions about the Internet's new conventions almost never get asked. Instead, the public gets panels of like-minded Internet boosters—and investors—outdoing each other in singing the Internet's praises. Anyone who does challenge Internet shibboleths gets called fuddy-duddy or reactionary. Criticize the Internet and you are accused of criticizing democracy. The triumphal, self-congratulating rhetoric surrounding the Internet has made it impervious to criticism.

Strangest of all, although skepticism is journalism's stock-in-trade, newspaper and magazine editors are more reluctant than anyone else to make substantial criticisms of the Internet. This, despite the fact that mainstream journalism is the Internet boosters' most popular target. The financial pressures on the editors of newspapers and magazines, and their fears of being superseded by the new medium, have crippled their skeptical instincts.

Establishment paralysis certainly contributed to the imbroglio I found myself in a

year and a half ago, when as a staff writer at the *New Republic* I encountered anonymous commenters in the Talkback section of the culture blog I had been invited to write for the magazine: “Mr. Siegal [*sic*] came onto many peoples [*sic*] sanctuary, pissed in the urns, farted and then put his dick upon the altar” “Siegel is a retarded mongoloid” “Siegel wanted to fuck a child.” I couldn’t understand how a serious magazine could allow these things to appear, and written by people who were concealing their true identities to boot. Understandably daunted by the “new” media’s insistence on “open discussion,” the *New Republic* had decided against enforcing its new Talkback section’s Rules of Use, which prohibited “posts that are defamatory, libelous, unnecessarily antagonistic...posts that are obscene, abusive, harassing, threatening, off-topic, unintelligible, or inappropriate.” But these were good, sound rules that in fact encouraged open discussion. And my mother was reading this stuff, for goodness’ sake! Worst of all, whatever appears on the Web stays on the Web. Forever.

So after futilely protesting such a ridiculous situation to the editors (and later polemicizing on my blog against what I called “thuggish anonymity” and the practice of deception on the Internet, which was like blowing smoke rings at a firing squad), I decided that since I had fallen through the looking glass into some surreal landscape, I might as well have a little fun, get down in the mud, and give thuggish anonymity a taste of thuggish anonymity. I called myself “sprezzatura” (a term coined during the Italian Renaissance that connotes a deceptive simplicity), celebrated the despicable Mr. Siegel, and attacked his incontinent attackers in their own idiom. That, I naively thought, would show them.

My prank discovered, I was temporarily suspended by a terrified *New Republic*, pilloried by the blogosphere (as a representative example of the Internet’s capacity for thuggish anonymity and deceit!), denounced by the mainstream media, and then, in good American fashion, rewarded with an interview in the *New York Times Magazine* and the opportunity to write the book on Web culture that I’d long wanted to write. In the wake of the scandal, articles that worried about malicious anonymity on the Internet began to appear in the *Guardian*, the *Nation*, *Salon*, the *New York Times*, and the *New Republic* itself. Up to that point, the convention of anonymous attacks in the blogosphere had rarely been challenged. But gradually, the articles for the most part stopped appearing, and the culture of the Internet again went mostly unexamined and unquestioned.

This book is not about my rollicking misadventure in the online world. The deeper I looked at the Internet—where, after all, I thrived professionally as the art critic for Slate.com and as the weekly television critic and then cultural blogger for the *New Republic Online*—the broader and more complex the social and cultural issues raised by it seemed. What was at stake was a question not of “media” but of who all of us were becoming in this new technological context. It was as much a question of investigating the influences on the Web as of thinking about the Web’s influences on us. Goethe once said that the human condition never changes, but that throughout history, different aspects of being human present themselves or recede. Technology is

a catalyst for bringing forth some human traits and suppressing others.

All the consciousness-shaping mass technologies of modern life provoked lively, impassioned arguments about what types of values they encourage and instill. Streams of polemical articles, essays, and books and numerous contentious conferences and public discussions had the effect of improving the quality of radio, television, and film—even as commercial pressures and incentives have intensified their shortcomings. The Internet has penetrated our lives more deeply than any other medium; it has far surpassed even television in its intimacy and immediacy. It deserves to be challenged by the same fundamental questions once posed to other revolutionary media.

This book tries to ask those questions. What interests are being served by the Internet? What values shaped it? What sorts of people dominate it? How is it affecting culture and social life? How is culture influencing the Internet? How are people learning to present themselves online? How are they learning to relate to other people online? What is the psychological and emotional and social cost of high-tech solitude? Are new voices being empowered, or are truly dissenting voices being drowned out in the name of free speech? Is democracy being served? Or are democratic values being perverted by the abuse of democratic principles?

The Internet is now a permanent part of our civilization. We can either passively allow it to obstruct our lives or guide it toward the fulfillment of its human promise. The choice is ours. Things really don't have to be the way they are.



1

“The World Is All That Is the Case”

I GO TO STARBUCKS, sit down, open my laptop, and turn it on. In the old days—ten years ago—I would be sitting with a pen and notebook, partly concentrating on my writing and partly aware of the people in the room around me. Back in that prehistoric time, my attention faced outward. I might see someone I know, or someone I’d like to know. I might passively enjoy trying to figure out why that couple in the middle of the room are speaking so intensely—are they moving closer together to relish their intimacy or because there is a crisis in their intimacy? And who is that guy with the fedora—and why the red sneakers? Is he an original, or the copy of an original? I might be watching everyone, but some people might be watching me, too. My situation is just as permeable as theirs. A stranger could come over to my table at any minute, his sudden physical presence before me unexpected, incalculable, absolutely enigmatic in the seconds before he becomes one kind of situation or another.

But here I am, sitting in the future—I mean the present—in front of my laptop. Just about everyone around me has a laptop open also. The small mass of barely variegated gray panels looks like a scene out of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, but with modems and Danishes. I can hardly see anyone else’s face behind the screens, and no one seems to be doing anything socially or psychologically that might be fun to try to figure out. They are bent into their screens and toward their self-interest. My attention, too, is turned toward my ego. But I am paying attention in a different way from what I do when I read a book or a newspaper. I am opening e-mail sent to me, writing e-mail expressing one or another desire that belongs to me, clicking on Google looking for information to be used by me. Ten years ago, the space in a coffeehouse abounded in experience. Now that social space has been contracted into isolated points of wanting, all locked into separate phases of inwardness.

The new situation doesn’t represent the “lack of community” suddenly produced by the Internet. That is the hackneyed complaint made, again and again, by people who don’t seem to have thought through the unlovely aspects of “community”—its smug provincialism and punitive conventionalism, its stasis and xenophobia—which was in any case jeopardized and transformed by the advent of modernity two hundred years ago. The simple fact is that sometimes you don’t want the quiet conformities induced by “community” sometimes you simply want to be alone, yet together with other people at the same time. The old-fashioned café provided a way to both share and abandon solitude, a fluid, intermediary experience that humans are always trying to create and perfect. The Internet could have been its fulfillment. But sitting absorbed in your screenworld is a whole other story. You are socially and psychologically cut off from your fellow caffeine addicts, but mentally beset by e-mails, commercial “pop-

ups,” and a million temptations that may enchant in the moment—aimed as they are at your specific and immediate interests and desires—but in retrospect are time-wasting ephemera. It’s not community that the laptopization of the coffeehouse has dispelled. It’s the concrete, undeniable, immutable fact of our being in the world.

Before our screens, experience is collapsed into gratifying our desires on the one hand, and on the other either satisfying or refusing to satisfy the soliciting desires of other people—or entities. As the Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said, “The world is all that is the case.” We have been flung into the world whether we like it or not. But the Internet creates a vast illusion that the physical, social world of interacting minds and hearts does not exist. In this new situation, the screen is all that is the case, along with the illusion that the screen projects of a world tamed, digested, abbreviated, rationalized, and ordered into a trillion connected units, called sites. This new world turns the most consequential fact of human life—other people—into seemingly manipulable half presences wholly available to our fantasies. It’s a world controlled by our wrist and finger.

Yet the untamed, undigested, unrationalized, uncontrolled world is still there. People as thinking, feeling beings still exist. What form, then, do we take, in a world where there is—how else can I put it?—no world at all? To put it another way: What kind of idea do we have of the world when, day after day, we sit in front of our screens and enter further and further into the illusion that we ourselves are actually creating our own external reality out of our own internal desires? We become impatient with realities that don’t gratify our impulses or satisfy our picture of reality. We find it harder to accept the immutable limitations imposed by identity, talent, personality. We start to behave in public as if we were acting in private, and we begin to fill our private world with gargantuan public appetites. In other words, we find it hard to bear simply being human.

This situation is not a crisis of technology. Rather, it is a social development that has been embodied in the new technology of the Internet, but not created by the Internet. The sudden onset of Web culture is really a dramatic turn in the timeless question of what it means to be a human being. What a shame that transformative new technologies usually either inspire uncritical celebration or incite bouts of nostalgia for a prelapsarian age that existed before said technology—anything for an uprising against cellphones and a return to the glorious phone booths of yore! The advent of new technologies pretty quickly becomes a pitched battle between the apostles of edge and Luddites wielding alarmist sentiments like pitchforks. Because each side is a caricature of itself, no one takes what is at stake very seriously at all.

And they are caricatures, for anyone who thinks technological innovation is bad in and of itself is an unimaginative crank. (I would rather go live on Pluto than return to the days of the phone booth and the desperate search for change.) But anyone who denies that technology has the potential to damage us if it is not put to good use is either cunning or naive. In the case of the Internet, the question is whether we let this remarkably promising opportunity—which, as we’ll see, has until now largely been

developed in service to commerce and capital—shape us to its needs or put it in the service of our own. Do we keep acquiescing in the myopic glibness and carelessness that characterize how so many of us are using the Internet? Do we keep surrendering to the highly purposeful way vested interests are foisting it upon us?

COMFORTABLE UPHEAVAL

The future, we were once told, shocked. Well, the future is here. But no one is shocked.

The sensational evidence of upheaval is everywhere. You can read about it in the newspaper or see it on the news by the hour. A lonely middle-aged carpenter in Arizona meets a Brazilian woman online, visits her in Rio de Janeiro twice, and then, on his third encounter with her, is murdered by his new girlfriend, her real boyfriend, and a hired assassin. A sting operation sweeps up hundreds of pedophiles luring their prey in Internet chat rooms. Computer hackers use the Internet to nearly bring down the government of Estonia. An anonymous Web site reveals the identities of federally protected witnesses in capital cases. Social-networking sites like MySpace and the videoblog site called YouTube turn the most graphic inhumanity—a Texas policeman puts up photos of a dismembered woman; anonymous users post footage of American soldiers in Iraq being gunned down—into numbing new forms of entertainment.

The Internet's most consequential changes in our lives, however, are the ones woven into our everyday routines. Maybe your teenage son—or daughter—spends hours every day and night corresponding with dozens of new “friends” on MySpace or Facebook; perhaps he's uploading a forty-minute-long video of himself dancing naked, alone in his room, onto YouTube, one of the world's most highly trafficked sites. Maybe your officemate is addicted to political blogs like Little Green Footballs, or Instapundit, or Firedoglake, in which dozens, sometimes hundreds, of people, argue with each other passionately, sometimes abusively, on interminable threads of commenters. Or your other officemate spends all of his time buying merchandise on eBay, or your boss, a high-powered attorney, closes her door on her lunch hour and logs on to JDate, a Jewish dating service, where she fields inquiries from dozens of men.

Perhaps your husband is, at this very moment, shut away in his office somewhere in your home, carrying on several torrid online affairs at the same time under his various aliases: “Caliente,” “Curious,” “ActionMan.” When he emerges from his sequestered lair, red-faced and agitated, is it because he has been arguing for moderation with “KillBush46” on the political blog Daily Kos, has failed in his bid to purchase genuine military-issue infrared night goggles on eBay, or has been masturbating while instant-messaging “Prehistorica12”?

Then again, maybe your husband died four years ago from a rare disease, and thanks to information you discovered on the Web, you were able to find a drug that kept him alive for twice as long as he would have lived without it. An Internet grief

support group helped get you through the pain of your loss and introduced you to people who are now trusted friends. They led you, in turn, to an online dating service where you met your second husband, and began a new life.

Like all significant technologies, the Internet is a blessing and a curse. Or, rather, it is obviously a blessing and obscurely a curse. It would be tedious to recite the Internet's wonders as a tool for research and a medium for connectivity in detail here—in any case, those wonders have been touted far and wide for the last decade by an all-too-willing media. But the transformations are real. For the first time in human history, a person can have romance, friendship, and sex (sort of); be fed, clothed, and entertained; receive medical, legal, and just about every other type of advice; collect all sorts of information, from historical facts to secrets about other people—all without leaving home. For the first time in human history, a technology exists that allows a person to lead as many secret lives, under a pseudonym, as he is able to manage. For the first time in human history, a person can broadcast his opinions, beliefs, and most intimate thoughts—not to mention his face, or any other part of his body—to tens of millions of other people.

The simple fact is that more and more people are able to live in a more comfortable and complete self-enclosure than ever before.

THE BIG LIE

Since the rise of the Internet just ten years ago, the often irrational boosterism behind it has been for the most part met by criticism that is timid, defensive, and unfocused. The Internet is possibly the most radical transformation of private and public life in the history of humankind, but from the way it is publicly discussed, you would think that this gigantic jolt to the status quo had all the consequences of buying a new car. “The Internet,” the *New York Times* casually reports, represents “a revolution in politics and human consciousness.” Online sex is “changing the lives of billions” in Asia, writes *Time* magazine with a shrug, and follows that astounding headline with what amounts to a lifestyle article (“A continent of 3 billion human beings is getting sexy and kicking the guilt...say a sincere hosanna to the Internet, which not only allows wired Asians to hook up but also to find out about whatever may titillate or tantalize them”). Everyone agrees the Internet has the same “epochal” significance that the printing press once did. But after the printing press made its appearance in Europe, three hundred years had to go by before the “revolutionary” new invention began to seep down from the scholar's cloister into everyday life. Even the telephone and television, the most transformative technologies of modern times, took decades to reshape “human consciousness,” to borrow the *Times's* grandiose tone. The Internet has radically changed almost every level of human experience, throughout most of the world, in just a few years. So why can't people be honest about the downside as well as the upside of what's happening to us?

Of course no one wants to stand athwart the future shaking a finger, mocking and scowling and scolding. No one wants to be a wet blanket at the party. Americans don't

like naysayers, and we don't like backward lookers. Ours has got to be the only culture in the world where saying that someone belongs to "history" is a fatal insult. So what you usually get by way of criticism are sunny, facile, corporate-funded gestures toward criticism. A typical example is the Pew Internet & American Life Project. Its September 2006 report on the current state and future of Internet culture has been widely used by anxious or self-interested journalists to forecast, among other things, the death of newspapers and print magazines. According to the Pew Project, "Internet users have become more likely to note big improvements in their ability to shop and the way they pursue their hobbies and interests. A majority of internet users also consistently report that the internet helps them to do their job and improves the way they get information about health care." Pew also notes "addiction problems" for many Web visitors, but quickly concludes that for many respondents to the survey, "'addiction' is an inappropriate notion to attach to people's interest in virtual environments." The report then adds this creepy glance into the future: "Tech 'refuseniks' will emerge as a cultural group characterized by their choice to live off the network. Some will do this as a benign way to limit information overload, while others will commit acts of violence and terror against technology-inspired change."

Maybe one reason why the Pew report is so upbeat about its subject is that eight of the twelve people who wrote it have a financial or professional stake in the Internet. For them, any opposition to the Internet's darker effects is resistance to "technology-inspired change" rather than skepticism that embraces technology but recoils at some of its effects. Naturally, in their eyes, much of the opposition could not possibly be rational. It would have to come in the form of "violence and terror."

Along with Web boosters like the authors of the Pew study, who are motivated by material self-interest, is another type of potent promoter: the utopian technophile. We will meet several different varieties of these along our way. One of the most energetic and persuasive is Kevin Kelly, Internet guru, co-founder of *Wired* magazine, and the author of two hugely influential books on Internet culture—*Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World* and *New Rules for the New Economy: 10 Radical Strategies for a Connected World*. While the Pew report covered general patterns of usage, Kelly has a vision of social and cultural transformation:

What will entertainment technology look like in 20 years? Let's listen to what technology says. First, technology has no preference between real and simulations—(so) neither will our stories. The current distinction between biological actors and virtual actors will cease, just as the distinction between real locations and virtual locations has almost gone. The choice will simply come down to what is less expensive. The blur between real and simulated will continue to blur the line between documentary and fiction. As straight documentaries continue to surge in popularity in the next 20 years, so will hybrids between fiction and nonfiction. We'll see more reality shows that are scripted, scripted shows that run out of control, documentaries that use actors, actors that are robotic creations, news that is staged, stories that become news and

the total collision and marriage between fantasy and the found.

Now, Kelly may well be right. Yet in his feverish devotion to “technology,” he sees nothing wrong with fake documentaries, deceitful “reality” shows, and “news that is staged.” If technology decides that truth and falsehood shall be blurred, then for Kelly their “total collision and marriage”—whatever that means, exactly—is as historically determined, inevitable, and necessary as the Marxist belief in the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Despite the fact that Kelly cheerily predicts the imminent extinction of “old” media, nearly the entire journalistic establishment has embraced, in various degrees, his exuberant view of a dystopic future. For it is dystopic. What sane person wants a culture in which the border between truthfulness and lying is constantly being eroded? Nothing affects our values and perceptions, our thoughts and feelings, like the shows we watch, the movies we see, the books we read—and we watch far more than we read; Americans spend a large amount, if not a majority, of their leisure time being entertained. Kelly sees the engine of the Internet driving these cataclysmic changes in the culture. But journalists and other commentators are so afraid of appearing behind the times, or of being left behind, that the role the Internet plays in the disappearing borders of truth rarely gets talked about in public.

We know where we stand on a politician’s lies; we know how to respond when we feel, for example, that the government’s deceptions and lies led us into the Iraq war. But no one is making a cogent connection between the rise of the Internet and the accelerating blur of truth and falsity in culture—even though culture’s subtle effects on our minds are a lot more profound in the long run than a politician’s lies, which usually get discovered and exposed sooner or later. Instead of crying out against the manipulation of truth by “entertainment technology,” as Kelly chillingly calls what used to be described as “having fun,” we watch the general mendacity get turned into a joke—the comedian Stephen Colbert’s celebrated quip about “truthiness”—and turn back to our various screens with a laugh.

People like the Pew group and Kevin Kelly are in a mad rush to earn profits or to push a fervent idealism. But in their blinkered eagerness to sell their outlooks—to focus our attention on what they are selling as an inevitable future—they rush right past the most obvious questions: How will the Internet affect the boundaries between people? As “information” consists more and more of reports from people’s psyches, how will we be able to express intimate thoughts and feelings without sounding hackneyed and banal? As increasing numbers of people become dependent on the Internet, and the Internet is driven more and more by commerce—the sensational stock prices and sales of Google, MySpace, and YouTube, for example—how do we keep an obsession with the bottom line from overwhelming our lives? How do we carve out a space for a life apart from the Internet, and apart from economics?

UPGRADE AND BE HAPPY

Anyway, who wants to glower at the Internet when it brings such a cornucopia of wonders? Bill Gates describes what he considers the full potential of the Internet's developments:

They will enable equal access to information and instantaneous communication with anyone in the world. They will open up vast markets and opportunities to businesses of any size. They will transcend national borders, making possible a frictionless global economy. They will allow workers to be even more efficient and productive, and will have the potential to make jobs more stimulating and fulfilling. They will give developing nations the ability to leapfrog the industrial era and move straight into the information age. They will help people and businesses in countries with large, dispersed populations to stay in touch, and help the smallest nations participate as equals in the global economy.

Gates says he is not blind to the Internet's pitfalls, either:

As more and more people store personal information on the Internet, how will we ensure that information is kept secure? As our economy becomes more dependent on bits than on atoms, how will we protect these resources from being damaged or devalued by hackers? As the barriers to information come down, how will we protect our children from negative and predatory influences? And as the Internet dissolves national borders, how will we help indigenous cultures coexist with an increasingly homogenous global culture?

Gates's radiant view of the future and his predictions of the problems that might obstruct the Internet's promise are reiterated throughout the media. They are the standard description of the Internet's bright side and its dark side. But there is something dark about Gates's sunniness; there is something rosy about his premonition of difficulties along the way. Consider the bad news first. Are the problems Gates foresees really problems at all? They have a red-herringish quality about them; they are by no means insoluble. Indeed, Gates frames these dilemmas produced by new technology in such a way that their resolution lies exclusively in the invention of newer technology.

For the way to keep information secure is to develop software that will do so. We can protect against hackers by constructing systems that thwart them. Advanced computer programs will shield our children from the dangers unleashed as "the barriers to information come down." (Notice how Gates makes even sexual predators seem like the necessary consequence of an unmitigated good: How could more information ever be anything but a marvelous beneficence? And who would use "negative and predatory influences" on children as an argument against opening the floodgates of information?)

As for the disruptions that the Internet might bring to impoverished, illiterate populations, Gates formulates this conflict as a cultural, not a social, clash. The answer, he implies, is simply to introduce the "indigenous" cultures to the techniques that are making the world "increasingly homogenous." Rather than honestly face the

strange new perils the Internet has created, Gates's "realism" strengthens the impression of the Internet's power, permanence, and necessity. For Gates, the only answer to the Internet's dark side is the Internet itself.

One of the striking characteristics of conversation about the Internet is this circular, hermetic quality. The "key words and phrases," as the search engines like to say, in Gates's rosy picture of the future give you a sense of how he would answer the dilemmas posed by new technology: "access," "markets," "businesses," "economy," "efficient," "productive," "leapfrog the industrial era." Gates doesn't worry that the Internet will upset deep, irrational human needs and desires. For him, deep, irrational human needs and desires don't exist outside the super-rationally ordered universe of the Internet. And since economics is the simplest means of rationalizing human life, Gates believes that being human can be defined strictly in economic terms.

Microsoft, however, had a long arrival. Over thirty years ago, in *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, the sociologist Daniel Bell predicted Bill Gates. Decades before Gates made the computer the means of assimilating human existence to an economic model, Bell saw how the computer would eventually embed everyday life in an economic framework.

Bait and Switch

THE FUTURE, DANIEL BELL wrote in the early 1970s, would be characterized by the application of what he called “intellectual technology.” Bell defined this new technology as “the substitution of algorithms (problem-solving rules) for intuitive judgments.” Life will be rationalized to such a degree that unpredictability will barely exist.

Now, these rational solutions—these “algorithms”—for life’s irrational problems don’t come from nowhere. According to Bell, they are derived from game and decision theory. These theories are modes of problem solving that apply mathematical equations to everyday life, and they are most frequently used in the area of economics. The rise of computers, Bell predicted in 1976, would make such methods of analysis widespread. Bell believed that an economic view of life was the core of a computer-centered culture.

This is precisely the dynamic that drives Gates’s vision of the Internet. When Microsoft’s founder speaks of a “frictionless” global economy, he isn’t just conjuring up a world in which borders, tariffs, and protectionist restrictions no longer apply to streams of information borne instantaneously through virtual space. In Gates’s personal idiom, “frictionless” seems to be an ideal that goes beyond the simple idea of increased efficiency. The odd term seems to reflect a desire to burst through the obstacles of space and time and a yearning to erase the chronic dilemmas that are the consequence of having a heart and a mind. This kind of evangelism invokes a new vision of utopia, a world where the enigmas of being human are solved, through the giant dazzling tool of the Internet, in the same way that economic problems are solved.

Which is why the Internet’s most important boosters almost always end up speaking about the Internet in the language of economics. For all their visionary-like rhetoric about radically overhauling consciousness and culture, the revolution that they are really describing is the overthrow of disinterested existence by the ethos and priorities of business. Gates speaks primarily of markets and businesses. Kevin Kelly’s two most influential “futuristic” books, as some people refer to them, both concern themselves with the Internet’s relationship to business and the economy. Not for nothing did Kelly team up in the early 1990s with George Gilder, the right-wing ideologue, to work out in the pages of *Wired* a synthesis between “digital networks” and the free market.

The Internet’s assimilation to a familiar economic idiom is why its more disorienting and destructive side has been so obscured. We use economic language—the ordinary language of buying and selling—every day. So when people like Gates and Kelly talk about the new medium almost exclusively in economic terms, even its