Thinking About Computer Culture

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In the first few days of 1998, computers went on trial. Or rather, computer culture became the subject of some searching juridical questions. Unfolding simultaneously, the trial of the accused Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, and the anti-trust action against Bill Gates’s Microsoft raised issues of the relations between computers and the general culture. The Unabomber reasoned that computers were the crucial symbol—and often the actual engine—of all that was worst in advanced industrial capitalism. The targets of his bombs, made with a creepily ironic artisanship, were, on some occasions at least, computer programmers. Gates, on the other hand, was being charged with restricting the competitiveness of his business rivals and thus denying customers their legally protected rights to obtain the best products at the fairest prices.

But as is often the case with newsworthy legal proceedings in America, ironies abound. In the matter of the Unabomber, it was reported that a whole raft of Internet sites had sprung up not only to discuss his case, but to defend his arguments. So the arch-enemy of the computer was being given at the very least the benefit of the doubt through the use of advanced computer technology. With Gates, the spectacle was also resonant with unexpected developments. The claim by Microsoft that its Net browser could not be uncoupled from Windows 95 without damage to the system was quickly and thoroughly demolished by the judge himself—who found out, apparently on his own, that such uncoupling was easily done in a few minutes and with limited computer skills. Should we wish to recast these events in the language of fable, we could say that the evil spirit is aided by
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beneficent elves, and the totalizing master is undone by an innocent inquirer.

But even without the aesthetic formulae of fables and fairy tales, there is a significance in these two trials. What computers have become, are becoming, and might become is an area of great speculation, high analysis, and fanciful epiphenomena. (The shelf dedicated to “Computers and Society” at a large Barnes and Noble will likely rival “Feminism” for space, and may easily outstrip “Poetry.”) The government has, in its insistence on the death penalty for Kaczynski, decided to portray all radical opposition to computers and industrial society as dangerously sick and evil. And, in its somewhat belated and reluctant prosecution of Gates, the government has demonstrated that it no longer has implicit faith in the tendency of markets to be self-correcting and self-regulating. One can see in these two assumptions that the federal government is acting on principles validated by a certain common sense and a self-protection worthy of all statist policies: computers are beneficial and here to stay, but they must be governed as are all other commercial ventures and social services.

People who admire Bill Gates and see his financial success as a sign of the inherent goodness and triumph of market capitalism feel that government regulation is bad, and is itself in need of being sharply controlled. Computers, in this context, are themselves machines built out of—and built toward—the imagination of a better future that is as certain as it is benign. “The Road Ahead,” as Gates entitled his book, is thus almost always clearly visible, and where it isn’t, or where it has unexpected bumps or turnings, the brave and talented will lead the way. So far a virtual absence of government interference has secured the blessings of the computer culture for a maximum number of people—and the future offers more of the same. Cranks and nay-sayers are nothing but latter day Luddites, neurotically (or worse) intent on bemoaning modernization and its thousand ills even as they enjoy its positive benefits. Somehow, these Luddites insist, the instruments of management and control must themselves be brought under the hands and eyes of more humane impulses—before it is too late.

This leads us to the core of the problem. There are two fundamentally different models for envisioning the future interactions between computer culture and social structures: either the computer will
radically restructure the social order, or preexisting (and "overdetermined") social structures will shape the way that computers are developed and used. Many optimists hold the first position, and even if they temper their optimism so that it stops short of utopian dreaming, they usually fall back on a mixture of bad futurist thinking and naive invocations of democratic values, diversity, or other forms of sloganizing. The second position tends to be held by skeptics and others who reject grand narratives and all forms of Marxism and deterministic schemes. Nevertheless, these people still grant credence to the idea that society is formed by a concatenation of forces often invisible and ineluctable, and that technological innovation is only one such force out of many.

To think these problems through in the most thorough way would require several frames of explanation: a history of technology, a depth psychology, some attention to economies of scale (scale being the great unexplored problem in modern sociology), and, of course, political science and theory. Even the casual observer knows that the introduction of the steam engine, say, or the automobile, wrought pervasive changes in both the surface and the deep structures of our social life. But even if we could sort out just which of these changes were attributable to which causes, we would not be justified in simply applying the lessons of a previous example to the calm prediction of a future situation. It is almost a sacred principle of modern thought that change itself has changed, and that linear scientific models of causality should be replaced or at least inflected by new ideas of chaos theory, complexification, entropy, and so on. One way around this boggy marsh is to choose a single phenomenon—like the development of computers and digitalized information systems—and project it, with the help of a governing idea, into the future social order.

We can take a certain comfort in the realization that considerable thought has been expended by scholars in the humanities on the vexed issues of computer culture and what it portends for—to use a vast, embracing term—humanistic understanding. But are these scholars likely to prevail if they continue to use the subtle and nuanced forms of thought usually associated with humanistic understanding? Or will they tend to lose themselves in the rush to embrace the new, fearing to be dismissed as elitist Luddites? Can the products of an aesthetic education or a "life of
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letters" ever come to terms with the digital revolution? Two examples are offered here as a way of thinking through some of the nearly intractable and unthinkable complexities that are generated not only by the forces that shape the future but by the tangle of theories by which we try to clarify it.

Richard Lanham, in his book The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology and the Arts, writes chiefly as an optimist, though a self-conscious one. By placing the "electronic text" in a historical scheme that sees it as the culmination of cultural changes, he advances the idea that we can remodel education and society if we will learn to accept and master the new developments. But though the possibility of change or the certainty of mastery over it is always in an unstable situation, the beneficence of a solidly predictable future often serves to chastise an occluded past and a thoroughly maculate present. His argument displays some of these features when he imagines the replacement of book culture by digitalized texts:

No one knows what electronic "textbooks" will look like; we can hope that great inventions yet impend. Certainly the current textbook publishers, firmly in the book—not the information—business, are guilty of no fresh thinking. The current state of the art is being created in the gigantic world of business and government training programs. There, interactive video-and-text programs based on laser-optical techniques are proliferating, and radically renegotiating the customary alphabetic/iconic ratio.

Notice how the future is sometimes built on reasonable sounding hope and present certainty ("is being created"), usually backed up by economies of scale (that "gigantic world"), while our current shortcomings are pointed to without stopping for analysis (what, after all, are the social forces that retard the intelligence of textbook publishers, and are they amendable?). The other constantly resurfacing idea is that whatever the new techniques are doing, they involve a "radical...renegotiating."

Such talk about the future is always, I would insist, little more than a way of finessing the inconveniences of the present. Personally I mistrust all talk about the next century, the millennium, and so forth, and see it as little more than degraded pseudo-intellectualism. The main problem, of course, is that it is mostly just talk, and treats all the key
questions as unimportant or simply leaves them for another day. Here is one example of Lanham’s notion of how technological changes get acculturated:

Perhaps the most striking instance of desubstantiation is real light holography...Such techniques will first be employed in cost-intensive industrial and military applications, but it is only a matter of time before sculpture gardens will be constructed in the same way....[This] also introduces the issues of possession and pricing, of art as investment-grade specie against which the minimalists, conceptualists, earth artists, and others have waged so notably unsuccessful a war in the last decades.

Just exactly why these wars have been unsuccessful strikes me as a quite important point of inquiry. Otherwise, such observations are little more than journalism: one-day reflections on what the more pressing phenomena might, well, mean. Only if the observer has some sense of history and its hidden forces as well as its large scale manifestations will such speculations be other than epiphenomenal. The danger—and Lanham is aware of this—lies in the alternative, namely that all the news is explicable through some master key.

But Lanham has a master key that stabilizes his discussions about technological innovation. For him the answer is rhetoric, by which he means something quite complex. “The quarrel between the philosophers and the rhetoricians constitutes the quarrel in Western culture,” he argues, with his emphasis. Philosophy (or dialectics) needs to be seen as delusional or overly rigidifying, and rhetoric (with its emphasis on play and process) will in the long run bring us closer to the truths, such truths being all we as limited humans can realistically hope to obtain in a contingent universe. This fundamental quarrel began with Plato and Quintilian, and continues today in almost every discussion of the printed book versus the electronic text, since such arguments are really about models of education and structures of society and citizenship. The “electronic text enfranchises the oral/rhetorical/dramatistic/semiological world in the same way that print did its literate/philosophical/positivist opposite. The real world returns in a hyperliterate form.” Lanham does not demonize print culture (or linearity
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or repressive logic, etc.), but argues instead that we need to recognize the wealth of our civilization as rooted in a bipolar stability that oscillates between rule-governed behavior and play, between order and innovation.

Lanham, however, has a view of the private, centered self that he uses to contrast the good and bad uses of technology or rhetoric. His self is also like a bipolar stability, oscillating between private and social roles. This very oscillation creates inferiority in the first place, and writing uses this new faculty or power of role playing by intensifying that oscillation. Print culture does this skillfully, and a great “rich sense of self” is the end result: “no writer’s role, no transfer of power.” Most humanists fail to defend this sense of self when they lament the onslaught of technological innovation and domination. So the promise of technology—or at least the electronic text—is that it opens the field that print tended to close. And so the optimism of Lanham begins to reveal itself, and though his book ends with a dialogue between himself and a “Curmudgeon” who raises many objections to computer culture and “future talk”, Lanham has the last words: “to lead [the] children out of darkness.” But at least the new world of light is illumined by both old-fashioned linear reasoning and computer culture, though how the mix will be achieved and maintained is not spelt out.

Lanham’s book began life as a series of essays and book reviews, and it gives him a chance to be wide ranging in his survey of the problems associated with computer culture, while his focus on rhetoric serves as a focus of enlightenment for his positions and values. The same is true for Sherry Turkle, with some significant modifications. In her book, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, she is rather less discriminating and self-aware than Lanham is. She has, as he does, a focusing issue, but she doesn’t apply it with the same consistency, and so her optimism takes control of her argument and she makes claims that are not very convincing - claims about how identity itself will become radically altered because of the new technology. She has nothing like Lanham’s sense of bipolar stabilization in terms of personal identity to give a note of caution or critical reflectiveness to what she proposes. Her argument is not simply a gung-ho approval of technologically manipulated models of personal identity, in a sort of New Age jargon of cyber-authenticity. But the lack of a gung-ho approach shouldn’t blind us to just how unsubstantiated—and insubstantial—many of her claims and intimations are.
First, a few words about her focusing idea. For the "Preface" of the second edition of her study of Jacques Lacan, *Psychoanalytic Politics* (1992), Turkle advanced a model of social change that was cogent and convincing. According to this model, a society needs "objects to think with." There are many ideas available to the classes of people most influential in shaping a society's cultural understanding of itself, but only some of these ideas will prevail. Those that do are the "objects" that best satisfy the historical moment's necessity to think through a problem or set of problems. This theory has the advantage that it allows us to explore the internal coherence of the ideas, and then turn to their adaptation and emendation as they are socially accepted. The ideas are not proffered as monocausal explanations of social change. But the difference between the (more or less pure) internal consistency of the ideas—such as Freudianism—and the way they get taken up by the society—in the case of post-1968 France, as Lacanianism—will tell us much about that society's structure and values.

This is good as far as it goes, and in the book about Lacan, Turkle is able to use it skillfully to make sense out of a man many consider a charlatan and a movement often thought to show the worst side of French intellectual life. The shortcoming of the book, and by extension its main methodological idea, is that by withholding a final judgment about Lacan, Turkle fails to see just how ridiculous his behavior and that of his "disciples" was. It is indeed hard to analyze foolishness on the scale of Lacan, but to comprehend fully what the various scandals meant it is required not only to forgive them (in some transcendent sense) but to hold them to account (in some immediate, and even—dare I say—therapeutic way).

What Turkle does in *Life on the Screen* is to accept the notion that a society that is looking for objects to think with will not only develop technological tools, but will then adapt to these tools in ways that "enrich" its sense of reality. More or less fully accepting the ideology of the new—the complex set of ideas that places ultimate value, and virtual ontological validation, in the advent of new ideas, phenomena, etc.—Turkle is able to validate the innovatory aspects of computer culture while ignoring or making light of any of its drawbacks or uncertainties about its "actual" course of development. If our time is spent in conversations in MUDs
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(Multiple User Domains, which are somewhat like “chat rooms”), if we have recourse to a software program (named DEPRESSION 2.0) that offers cognitive-behavioral counseling, if it is true that “We are all dreaming cyborg dreams,” then surely we will have to redefine our sense of selfhood.

What is so striking about Turkle’s sense of this redefinition, however, is not so much the implicit resort to the straw man of an earlier “traditional” self-centered, stable, Victorian (in all the right pejorative senses) antagonist, but the tissue of postmodern cliches used to make the new version seem plausible. Here is a catalog of features, along with some striking qualifications and evasions:

In political terms, talk about moving from centralized to decentralized systems is usually characterized as a change from autocracy to democracy, although the jury is still out on its ultimate effects. It may, for example, be possible to create an illusion of decentralized participation even when power remains closely held. In terms of our views of the self, new images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation dominate current thinking about human identity.

Oh, if only we knew what the members of that jury were thinking! And “closely” held is a nice touch. Who is it that holds power closely? Donald Trump? George Pataki? Bill Gates? Or does the fact these men seem to make such an open display of their power suggest that the real switches and software are in other hands? Of course in a world where “images” “dominate” thinking such questions are going to be especially hard to answer, even to formulate.

The sophistry that all too often characterizes Turkle’s writing is evident in a chapter called “Making a Pass at A Robot.” She begins by invoking the child’s viewpoint: “Today’s children are growing up in the computer culture; all the rest of us are at best its naturalized citizens.” The second half of the sentence uses an absolute (“all”) and a rigid demarcation (naturalized versus born citizens), and thus takes a grain of truth about how people born after certain technological developments appreciate them differently from people born earlier, and erects it into an unshakeable
demonstration ("at best") of radical social change. Choosing a fairly unremarkable fact about present conditions and projecting it into an undefined future makes everything seem as if it will turn out completely different; however, without some sense of what will "certainly" change and what is going to remain the same, and who and what will decide which is which, our sense of the future remains cloudy. Turkle goes on to interview various children, adds some demographic data, invokes Piaget, discusses briefly the Turing Test and Artificial Intelligence, all to lead to her conclusion that people are learning to talk to technology "in fairly intimate ways." Turkle surely knows that Greek poets twenty-five centuries ago talked to the swords of warriors, and even had the swords and tombs of slain heroes speak to the living. It is a commonplace to argue that computer technology will change the boundaries between articulate organisms and inarticulate matter, but unless and until we can say something precise about the "new" boundaries, we are left with childish notions.

Turkle builds on this chapter to press her point that we are all slowly but surely adapting to the new technology, as it provides us "objects to think with," and refers to what she calls the ELIZA effect. First published in 1966, ELIZA was an interactive psychological counseling program that eventually demonstrated that there is a "general tendency to treat responsive computer programs as more intelligent than they really are." Turkle chooses not to explore in any real depth the possible drawbacks of such a tendency. As with the use of children’s adaptability to imaginative play, this tendency on the part of adults is treated as a subtle but positive element in the creation of a new sense of decentered, multiple identity. This new identity is the computer culture’s great gift to civilization. Despite certain vulnerabilities, our computer identity can be, is likely to be, a source of new richness:

Without a deep understanding of the many selves that we express in the virtual we cannot use our experiences there to enrich the real. If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our screen personae, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation.
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The rhetoric here (pace Lanham) reminds me of the self-help therapies associated with California in the 1970's. Under cover of a reasonable tone there are borders and one-way signs being drawn: “we cannot use” and “more likely to succeed” are phrases that suggest the new age is not only dawning, but that some people are already employed there as tour guides.

My distrust of “future talk” is contradictory: on the one hand I think it is simply a way of masking current difficulties, and on the other I think it never really offers anything genuinely new; in short, it is defensive about the present and obsessed with the past. In the passage above Turkle resorts to a watered down version of humanistic bildung, as “personal transformation,” to justify her urgent call to a new order of identity. If we have already achieved multiple selves, however, or if we can shortly achieve them through greater amounts of time on MUDs, then the whole idea of personal transformation loses all meaning. With multiple selves, we cannot speak of “having” them in the same way we spoke about the traditional, unitary self. Movement between selves would be mobile and unmonitored (or else we would simply call the monitoring agent our “real” self), and the idea of possessing selfhood would have to be utterly abandoned. In such a world of kaleidoscopic possibility as Turkle envisions there is no way to tell the one (self) from the many (versions), and so proper names, propriety, personal property, and all the other cognates that subtend our traditional sense of identity would dissolve. She uses the old humanist notion of personal transformation to argue for a situation in which such an act would be meaningless. Her vision becomes either nostalgia for some unitary past (albeit disguised as free play), or a retreat from the present all-too-cumbersome fragmentation and multiplicity that we face every day.

It is difficult to see our present society clearly, and to try and look into the future for even short distances seems foolhardy in the extreme. To attempt such forecasting without any programmatic framework is hopeless, and there is the virtually intractable problem of how to decide on a focus that is neither too recondite nor too general. Lanham’s struggle between philosophy and rhetoric, and Turkle’s notion of “objects to think with,” are intelligently formulated, but when tied to computer culture, their weaknesses become all too evident. Many intellectual analysts will likely themselves be infected with what Andrew Delbanco has referred to as the “self-
acquitting sentimentality of postwar American culture.” To put it another way, the hard questions are hard not only because we can’t answer them clearly, but because we find it increasingly difficult to ask them with a straight face. What can you say about a society where men with stunning limitations of moral intelligence and imagination such as Trump, Pataki, and Gates flourish, where indeed they are encouraged to imagine yet larger domains for their power? If our social system over-awards people like this, or if these examples of self-hood are what result when individuals are given great social power and advantage, don’t we have some serious thinking to do?

The cliché that we cannot analyze a self free of all social structure, or comprehend social structures without understanding the selves that embody and reproduce them, generates a push-pull effect in “future talk.” But the dialectic between self and structure is too complex to set out clearly even as we have it presently in front of us, let alone to imagine a decade or two in the future. One possible rule that might alleviate this muddle is that all who engage in “future talk” should declare their political goals. Another rule would insist that the formulator of models for future selves should give a full and detailed account of what it means to have a self now. And, perhaps most bracing of all, every such essayist should analyze in depth some earlier futurist predictions and show exactly how they turned out to be woefully inadequate. Such standards are, of course, themselves at best suggestive. People need to look ahead, but to modify Robert Frost, neither in too deep nor out too far. At least “future talk” serves one indisputable need: it prevents us from listening to those who ask not what computer culture will be like, but whether we will have a culture at all.