

# McLuhan's Pendulum

## Reading Dialectics of Technological Distance

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It seems a perpetual human characteristic that we continually exert our collective selves ever outward in space. While outer space, cyberspace, web space, personal space, quiet space are examples of metaphors through which we endeavour to explore 'space', I wish to address a relationship between geographic and social spaces manifest in discourses of distance – separation in space and time<sup>1</sup> – using primarily Marshall McLuhan's (1964) controversial probing of media. Distance (Latin: *distantia*, *distare*: stand apart, be different)<sup>2</sup> may be expressed as an interval, separating any two instances in time or place (place, I take to be the intersection of time and space). It is expressed as a point far away, aloofness, measurement,<sup>3</sup> the property, terrain (or attitude) of the space between two objects (or ideas), remoteness or the impression of remoteness, the condition of being apart.

In the network of river, bridge, cities and surrounding environment nothing remains unchanged. Social and technical actively interact, exchange properties and negotiate identities, thus shaping one another. Technologies, then, are not neutral tools, or passive containers, but environments that shape and hold together a set of social dynamics that are simultaneously a consequence of their existence and necessary for their survival. The introduction of the new bridge does not result in two cities plus a bridge, but in a qualitatively different urban landscape composed by distinct social relationships.

Reflexively, we may also declare, humans have forever been obsessed with moving outward to control both geographic (physical) and cognitive distance. From our earliest forms of communication to the most current – from gestures and grunts to speech to currency, art, the alphabet, writing, mechanical printing, electric, electronic to digital wireless and deep space – we continue to express ourselves through a desire to understand and command distance. As communication is the chief operative here, we may say that distance is space which diminishes communication. At the same time, communication diminishes various frictions of distance (i.e. terrestrial, geographical distance), which may be measured in time or in the cost of overcoming it (Harvey 1990). The achievements of social communication to affect social organisation are what we must name technologies – tools intelligently created in response to visceral needs and intellectual curiosity.

I would suggest, in fact, that all technological developments are related to our obsession with distance. Language brought once-isolated families and tribes together and organised them into cultures. Culture accumulated knowledge and technique and created territory: horticulture allowed people to be more stationary. Likewise currency, which also per-

mitted property and profit from afar. The wheel, ships, print – the list of distance controlling innovations is endless. Language expresses distance. Aristotle defined ‘verbs’ as significant sounds marking time, present or past, and ‘nouns’ as sounds not marking time – something named and static in a space.<sup>4</sup> We frequently misspeak expressions of occurrences happening ‘over’ a period of time, as through a physical space (distance).

Marshall McLuhan (1964) called communication technologies extensions of our human selves. Each medium of communication represents an acceleration over the last (I’ll refrain from calling it a ‘forward’ movement or the ‘progress’ of communication) and, as such, each has increased the sense of human power over distance (and sometimes over whatever lies in the interval). Expressions of this empowerment have been caught up in the acceleration as well, so that in our contemporary communication environment we practically beat our breasts ape-like while proclaiming that we are indeed lords of the jungle – finally. Cheerleaders and prophets tout new systems of communication as the effective annihilation of distance, an implosion of space and time, of topography, and they foresee a new era of neutral, barrier-free access to information, ideas and material things.

Communication enables us to keep our distances too. We humans have an ironically inverse relationship with distance, of which urbanisation serves as a straightforward example. As people move closer together physically they do not necessarily move closer together communicatively. Kern, in Harvey (1990), says proximity generates anxiety and apprehension. We know people across town better than our next-door neighbours, while people who live within walking distance of one another, or work in the next cubicle, will communicate by telephone and e-mail – concomitantly bridging and preserving their distance, their physical space.

As such, electronic communications technologies do not remove boundaries, as is imagined by many proponents of the Internet and its World Wide Web of services. At best, I suggest, technology simply rearticulates communicative distance. I will try to avoid the rocky road of technological determinism,<sup>5</sup> by focussing instead on the discursive terrain of the so-called borderless society and propose that, in practice, information and communication technologies (ICTs) cannot change such boundaries, other than to rearticulate them.

Space, time and distance are integral to our everyday existence. We know instinctively what they are and our relationship with them, as evidenced by their metaphoric ubiquity in language, and nowhere is that more evident than in communication technology which permeates the contemporary lexicon. Wireless telephones keep us in constant touch with each other; automated tellers mean we don’t have to visit the bank, while Internet shopping, video movies on demand and many more examples promise us that distance doesn’t matter anymore.



Remote and rural communities are told they are no longer disadvantaged by geography, by the friction of distance. Some are told by proponents of ICT that they live on nodes, not islands (assuming sufficient bandwidth) – that they can take advantage of the global economy because communication makes participation possible irrespective of locale. Personal experiences, however, tell us that this is not always so – that, despite getting the jump on geography, communication technologies sometimes hamper efforts/needs to communicate. Later in this essay I will offer several anecdotes that illustrate the point. Suffice it to say here that there is an acknowledged ambivalence towards technology regardless of distance. We at once embrace its promise of bigger, better, faster but remain suspicious of its effects. While communications media connect us over distance, many people, as I shall outline, believe technology disconnects us from our ‘natural selves’ – what I like to call a kind of *anomiedia*.

McLuhan taught us that these polemics of technological discourse are predictable contestations, and that by examining the discourse of the discontinuities between established and intervening modes of communication we learn how changes are bound to affect us socially. McLuhan's probing of the discontinuities between the Age of Print and the Age of Television serve as an example of such a discussion, and I explore some of them as a means of working out competing discourses of communication technology and distance. One demographic, frequently addressed by both sides of this discourse, is youth; and McLuhan's observations about the behaviour and social communication of young people of the TV generation are a good place to begin.

### Understanding Media

On the cusp between the established and the future, youth may be seen as a bellwether of attitudes, problems and change. From the writings of the so-called Beat Generation in the 1950s, through the Baby Boomers who were adolescent in the 1960-80s, to Generation X and now the Net-Generation (Tapscott 1998), youth has always embodied the spirit of innovation, of acceleration – which helps to overcome barriers (Harvey 1990) – of communication and social change, especially since the Second World War. They have also been the focus of consternation for adults; in the West the youth has the affectations of a society liberalised by mass media. Radically different tastes in music, attitudes toward sexuality and political activism are concomitant with the aforementioned acceleration.

McLuhan attributed these shifts to television. He theorised that in TV was a completely new form of technology, that involved communicants in ways the telephone, radio and books could not, because TV required greater sensorial participation than its predecessors (although he did not regard TV as an extension of them). Television involved visual as well as audile senses, and he said it had a tactile quality as well. TV reception is effectively the sequential electronic beaming of thousands of points of light on a screen in a luminous mosaic from which the brain must make sense. It is with no small degree of cognitive ability that the brain, with the help of culture, deduces what the audio-visual mosaic conveys, assembles it and processes it as an image fully formed. McLuhan called this sensorial experience audile-tactile, and believed that it more closely reflected the social communication experience than any form of mass communication had since the advent of the mechanized word.

This he called “re-tribalisation” (1964), a return to the “allatonceness” (Horrocks 2001) of pre-literate society, when humans relied on all their senses for communication. It was from the idea of the re-tribalisation of the mass audience that McLuhan coined his famous term, “global village”. He attributed the social disruptions of the 1960s to the TV generation – a generation spurred to more visceral participation and experimentation in part by audile-tactile participation in a society whose dominant medium was so. The “radio and gramophone and tape recorder gave us back the poet’s voice... TV caused young poets suddenly to present their poems in cafés, in public parks, anywhere. After TV, they suddenly felt the need for personal contact with the public” (McLuhan 1964, p. 53).

McLuhan saw in television a simultaneity which figuratively brought people together because they shared the same information – like the gathering of parishioners around the town crier – broadcast at the same time through the same medium. Therefore, at least insofar as communicating information was concerned, distance would be gradually less inhibiting, he predicted. This is in contrast, he suggested, with earlier forms of mass communication, specifically the mass-produced book which effectively isolates each communicant by ‘cutting off’ the use of all but visual senses as they concentrate on what is before them.

As the dominant medium of its day, McLuhan suggested, the book cut people off from the tactile world, distancing them from the communicative environment which makes them human. McLuhan allows that through the Age of Print, partly as a result of the predominance of print structure, reproducibility and linearity, Western society in particular became both intellectually and kinaesthetically distant from their natural allatonceness, transformed into a narrow-minded, mechanistic, scientific and individualistic society. Printing from moveable type was a major discontinuity in the history of literacy, “just as the phonetic alphabet had been... between tribal and individualist...” (*Ibid.* p. 39). The re-tribalisation of social communication in TV disrupted those tendencies, brought us closer to our human selves, as I have said, and thus closer together as a community of humans. In McLuhan’s probing we see evidence of ideas of the technological mediation of both cognitive distance (e.g. creation of, by mechanised print) and physical distance (e.g. annihilation of, by TV).

In contrast, he also spent no small amount of time expressing ideas of media from which we might gather almost the opposite. He suggests there is a numbness that comes with the successive extensions of our human selves. “Thus the age of [discontinuity] and of electric media is also the age of the unconscious and of apathy” (*Ibid.* p. 47).

Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) agrees with McLuhan’s synopsis of the Age of Print, but sees the visceral behaviour of the TV generation in a less positive light, suggesting (having twenty more years of TV maturation to consider than had McLuhan) that the behaviour of young people from the 1960s to the 1980s was symptomatic of a cognitive dissonance, a



distancing of their "sense of place" (Meyrowitz 1985). Whereas McLuhan theorised television as something entirely new, Meyrowitz recognises it as an extension and subversion of the linearity of social thought and behaviour shaped by print literacy. McLuhan stuck to the sensorial, audile-tactile aspects of the new medium, whereas Meyrowitz concentrated on the interpersonal and intergenerational aspects, suggesting that electronic media have removed barriers of significance, loosening ties with old spaces.

"Electronic media affect social behaviour – not through the power of their messages but by reorganising the social settings in which people interact and by weakening the once strong relationship between physical space and social 'place'" (Meyrowitz 1985, p. ix). As we gain new exposure to (if not appreciation for or appropriation of) other behaviours, we lose our "sense of place". Media "are not simply channels for conveying information between two or more environments, but rather shapers of new social environments themselves". For Meyrowitz, media reshapes situational geography – distances (Meyrowitz 1994, p. 51).

Orality requires physical presence. As such, change is slow because survival depends on memory and tradition – creativity and newness are discouraged as potentially destructive. The fixity of writing began the breakdown of social cohesion by allowing people to distance themselves from tradition – symbolic communities competing with practical communities. Critical to Meyrowitz's sense of this social change is that unlike hearing and speech, reading and writing are less natural means of communication and acquiring them will have full effect only when they are learned at a young age. There is a discontinuity when succeeding generations are alienated from their forbears because of new forms of communication.

Print divides people into separate communication systems, distancing them from sound, touch and face-to-face response, allowing them to become more introspective and individualistically rational. In turn, individualistic, linear thinking distances people from natural cycles and substitutes new logics. Following McLuhan, Meyrowitz says electronic media recall simultaneity, a key aspect of oral societies – action, perception and reaction again become prime forms of communication. Only this electronic aurality is far different from that of olde; it is not limited physically to time and space. The impression of experiencing distant events fosters a decline in power-instigated, print-supported, implicit hierarchies, thus imploding social structures.

The TV generation rejected traditional roles and discourses for young and old, breaking long-standing connections between where one is and what one experiences. It blurred the distance between public and private and lifted many of the old veils of secrecy between children and adults. "As we move forward [sic] our society spirals backwards" with middle and upper-class people acting out behaviours of the lower classes (e.g. less restrained sexuality, drug use, civil disobedience), supporting a view that we are moving from literate to oral forms of behaviour (Meyrowitz 1994, p. 68).

McLuhan's vision of the global village is predicated upon people's access to and sharing of the same information, thanks to electronic media. Meyrowitz suggests that the mere sharing of opinion and life options is too weak a bond to hold some people together – that one cannot realistically consider the whole world as one village. If our contemporary world at times seems senseless and erratic, it may be because electronic media have untethered

us from place, from roots and time, from distinctions between here and there, live and mediated, personal and public. We are distanced from our place.

Neil Postman (1993) highlights the discontinuity between print and TV generations by suggesting that children are required to circulate in multiple perspectives. On the one hand is their world of television – in which, from a young age, we are all so thoroughly immersed – and its “emphasis on imagery, narrative, presentness, simultaneity, intimacy”, immediacy and emotion, not to mention commercialism. On the other hand, we send them off to school and the pedagogical world of print, “with its emphasis on logic, sequence, history, exposition, objectivity, detachment and discipline” (Postman 1993, p. 16). The classroom exemplifies what he calls a centuries-old “truce” between orality and print – into which we send our children, long weaned on TV, and expect them to sit still for it.

Like McLuhan, Meyrowitz finds importance in social relations on the cusp of change and allows that relations are often hostile to change during an initial period of disruption, only later settling into separate but equal roles and status – succeeding generations having bypassed the distance of previous generations’ constraints of mediated knowledges. He suggests, and many agree, that electronic media facilitate greater awareness than they do understanding. “Being smart”, he says, is a command of knowledge that “plays well” in everyday discourse (Meyrowitz 1999, p. 115).

Don Tapscott’s *Growing Up Digital* (1998) “plays well” in contemporary discourses surrounding youth and new media culture. McLuhan, Meyrowitz and Postman focussed on generational discontinuities between the Ages of print and TV while only speculating on what it will all mean in an age of digital communication. Although they recognised aspects of print and television in new media, they didn’t seriously articulate what, if any, disruptions were likely from its adoption. McLuhan, we remember, treated TV as something new, as a break from print. Meyrowitz treated it as an extension of print and radio, but noted the kinds of social change it facilitated. Postman doesn’t like what he sees in our technological society, dominated as it is by television, but is nostalgic for the logic and tradition of print. Tapscott sees computers and the Internet not as extensions of either print or television, but as a break from both. The “Net-Generation” (N-Gen) distances itself by its command over a new manner of communication that barely resembles the earlier, he says. Tapscott is an unabashed cheerleader for new media and the manner in which young people interact with and use it. In doing so, he doesn’t mince words about TV and print social histories. He suggests that N-Geners are more “alert, aware, focussed, and certainly in control” (Tapscott 1998, p. 85) of their information media than were previous generations, and argues this is a result of leaving behind the broadcast world which distanced producer and viewer. Their interactive media elicit “intensely heightened curiosity” (*ibid.* p. 87) – they are more com-



fortable, knowledgeable and literate than their parents and "through... digital media... will develop and superimpose [their] culture on the rest of society" (*Ibid.* p. 1-2).

Tapscott says digital media are different from previous media paradigms because they offer many-to-many communication as opposed to the one-to-many communication of broadcast, and he sees TV's only future in being incorporated into the Internet. N-Geners want to be users, "not just viewers or listeners" (*Ibid.* p. 3). They are using digital media for entertainment, for communication, for shopping and for learning. "Kids use computers for activities that seem to go hand in hand with our understanding of what constitutes childhood... they use the technology to play, learn, communicate and form relationships as children have always done" (*Ibid.* p. 7). It involves the development of logic, thinking, personality and autonomy, all of which are enhanced in an interactive world. "When children control their media, rather than passively observe, they develop faster" (*Ibid.* p. 7).

He admits, however, that issues of imbalance in childhood development, such as too much computer time, TV time, and lack of fitness needed for healthy development, require parental intervention, but that most children "correct such imbalances themselves". Importantly, Tapscott states: "What we know for certain is that children without access to the new media will be developmentally disadvantaged" (*Ibid.* p. 7), distanced from their peers and an education system that is bent on computers.

Unlike television, which "robbed children of hours of play each day", digital media is restoring precious play time – it is not the end of childhood but a brave new world of play, he proclaims. Time on the Net "is not passive time, it's active time. It's reading time. It's investigative time. It's skill development and problem-solving time. It's time analysing, evaluating. It's composing your thoughts time. It's writing time" (*Ibid.* p. 8). But whose time is it and what does it cost?

McLuhan would, I think, have reminded Tapscott that a computer is the medium, while the Internet, WWW, chat rooms and games are content and therefore play a lesser role in the uses of time. The modestly tactile interactivity of the computer (i.e. keystroking) is different from the sedentary activity of television watching and far and away greater than the isolating activity of silent reading, with which McLuhan and Meyrowitz had so many problems for its "enclosure" of thought (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995, p. 138). Although I don't think McLuhan saw it, computer and TV screens are enclosures too, confined to their screens and conventions, distorting what they strive to represent (Harvey 1990). Time in front of the computer is surely as disorienting and distancing from the real as TV – story and image are biased against space/place and against time/memory despite being in motion (*Ibid.*).

In a momentary and characteristic leap from known electric media (he was writing in the 1960s remember) McLuhan makes reference to the data-isation of human endeavour through the overwhelming expansion of communication technology. Our every action, he reports, is "noted by some computer that translates our least gesture... Our private and corporate lives have become information processes..." (McLuhan 1964, p. 52). Our physical selves, like physical distance, can disappear in information. Digital graphics, for instance, communicate in visual perspective, but ultimately are an applied perspective of algebra and geometry. Computer generated and mediated images are mathematically perfect but do not satisfy our desire for reality (Bolter and Grusin 1999).

Even the latest in virtual reality, or immersive media, while they may nominally disorient the body's multi-sensorial mechanisms for balance, require varying degrees of cybernetic peripherals which mediate the experience. It is important, therefore, as McLuhan and Meyrowitz have shown, that we continue to ask questions, to probe the varied affectations and effects of digital media, particularly in this contemporary period of discontinuity. We will need to know where new media will affect social organisation. Perhaps some of the following anecdotes will resonate.

### Experiencing Technological Distance

It is too soon to state categorically the long-lasting effects of new media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century on social organisation in wider (Western) society. A future generation of critics face making that judgement of us, but many observers would suggest that we are seeing a few, at least, today. I suggest that many of our day-to-day interactions with communication media and other digital devices provide some hints, and in this section I will share some anecdotal observations and explain how I believe they relate to technological distance. Later, I will return to McLuhan, Meyrowitz and Tapscott to contextualise relations of distance in their key points, thus condensing the discourse so that we may observe its dialectics.<sup>6</sup>

The consumer-level world of electronic appliances has many products which articulate what I have already called 'anomiedia'. TEAC, a Japanese maker of consumer electronics now carries a line of nostalgia-inducing stereo systems – their radios, for instance, have knobs for analogue-like tuning and come complete with the sounds of static between station frequencies, a tacit signification of the 'distance' between stations represented by their numerical spectrum frequency. This is not to be mistaken for static, mind you, it's the *sound* of static provided electronically just for effect. Apparently the throwback products are selling well, perhaps as people become increasingly anxious with the array of sophisticated devices that permeate their lives (Hafner 2002). Communication technologies may fool us, are sometimes startling and confusing and therefore make us feel, but experientially we remain distanced.

Not only are stores well stocked with digital devices for sale, they are well equipped with them. My favourite example is the customer-accessible scanning device strategically located in popular department stores. The device works the same way as scanners at the check-out counter: an infrared laser 'reads' the UPC (bar code) label on the product and displays the price as it has been programmed into the store's database. At a store near my home, the installation of these devices seems to have coincided with fewer and fewer items on the shelf displaying a price. Whereas they were intended to assist customers in anomalous situations when a tag has fallen off, or the prices are confusing, they seem to have



been adopted as a labour-saving device and shifted the onus on to the consumer to do the work of store clerks. The installation of technology seems often not only to distance people from each other, but sometimes from their responsibilities as well.

In early 2000, a Canadian national bookstore chain severed their shared online (WWW) presence with a national newspaper, through which (after a long semi-Luddite period of reluctance) I periodically ordered books. It concerned me that they had not notified their customers of the change and confounded me when I tried to find out what they did with the personal financial information on my file. I attempted to contact them by telephone, but of course telephone systems are highly automated now as well, so one has to be aware and creative just to reach someone to speak with. When I did get through, no one could answer my question: What happened to the confidential client information in their database, including credit card numbers? For weeks I attempted to reach customer service representatives who did not return my calls or e-mails, so I telephoned the main switchboard and asked for the street address of customer service so I could make my inquiry in person – the receptionist didn't know.

Eventually, after three months and several visits to their physical offices to resolve an online problem, I was mailed a letter of apology and some coupons (neither of which I had sought) for my next online purchase. Ironically, they didn't work and I had to go into a store, physically, to take advantage of the coupons. Further, my question was never answered. The ability of technology to mediate customer interaction has distanced service from transaction, despite the rhetoric of being in the relationship business (whether terrestrial or electronic). It is true that this is an evolving use of technology, but one which has caused a devolution of common courtesy and reasonable business practices.

For about twenty-five years, Canada's national postal service, like the chartered banks, has been closing storefront services in small and rural communities in favour of group mailbox sites and the licensing of local retailers to sell postage stamps. As part of the effort, terrestrial mail delivery addresses changed, all but erasing the names of many roads and communities. In more recent years, centralised and computerised dispatch has caused the reappearance of community names to facilitate the delivery of emergency workers, such as ambulance and fire personnel, who may be unfamiliar with local place names and landmarks. Reductions in labour costs precipitated the disappearance of places. Their reappearance, while welcomed on both counts (sense of belonging and sense of security) has been to suit technology; databases are also used to manage taxation and demographics. Person-to-person communication facilitated the obliteration of place and distance; technological communication restored them.

Electronic mail has, for many people, lessened the degree to which they use conventional surface mail (which might explain the radical improvement in mail service and customer service at Canada Post) because they feel they are able to communicate more often. It's easier to keep in touch if you can type out a few words on a whim, rather than plan out a legible letter. I never communicated so much with my own family as when all got e-mail; it reduced the frictions of communication distance between us. For a long time, we would also share photos and the visual humour that so permeates the Internet. Not any more. The frequency and threat of e-mail borne computer viruses has not only stopped us from open-

ing attachments, it has actually curbed the frequency of communication. For a time, technology improved our communication over distance, but it later instilled a paranoia that has supplanted that distance.

As part of the planning for a Saturday conference in the Spring of 2000, I had occasion to request equipment from a university's audio-visual department. Because the conference was outside the institution's network of connected buildings I would have to pick it up and return it. Further, it being a Saturday, and despite the fact that there would be employees about picking up other equipment in nearby buildings until 4:30 pm, I had to return mine before the counter closed at 12:30 pm – four hours before I would be finished with it. For a few minutes I had the clerk agreeing with me that perhaps we could find a way around this, until he went to fill out the requisition on his computer. No alternative arrangements could be made because the computer could not, as it were, think outside the box. On a person-to-person level, we were able to negotiate, to communicate, and the computer was supposed to facilitate this. Instead, it distanced us from our goal.

Computer mediated transactions merely cut out communication with salespeople, the goods still have to cover the distance. Automated bank teller machines let us communicate with our virtual money, but distance us from the institution. (In fact, as clients we now perform functions formerly required of bank employees – and pay for the privilege). Personal digital devices hold our attention on public transport and sidewalks while distancing us from the sounds and smells of the people around us. In sum, while these communications technologies mean we can buy what we want without stressed, rude, unhelpful or pushy salespeople, while they mean we can access our money without lining up in an understaffed bank listening to impatient children haranguing parents to go home, and while they allow us to be in touch with friends and lovers at all times, they exchange distance for distance.

### Conclusion

Information and communication technologies are often held up as portending greater democracy – they are supposed to bring us all closer together in a neutral, egalitarian space – and in many instances and examples this has been true. There are some remarkable stories about the use of ICT to call attention to people's plights, to provide alternative information and news sources, and to coalesce groups of like-minded individuals. Proponents of the 'information highway' have always said that it would facilitate progress, democracy, solutions to environmental issues and greater awareness of the world (cf. Robins and Webster 1999). These, however, are examples of improved communication between like-minded individuals for whom intellectual distance is already somewhat diminished by what they have in common.



There have been countless ruminations on the decentralising possibilities of ICT, as I mentioned much earlier in this essay, sometimes borrowing from the urban longing for connections with simpler times often heightened by continual interaction with the plastic – “ruralism”, Robins and Webster call it – by suggesting that ICTs may “effect a return to a lost way of life” (Robins and Webster 1999, p. 70), a search for “more secure moorings... in a shifting world” (Harvey 1990). McLuhan and Meyrowitz both wrote about the implosion of centre and margin, as a result of the outward accelerating dynamics of electronic communications, both implying that distance was less relevant. Yet their academic predecessor Harold Innis (1952) showed that communication technologies centralise power, at the expense of the peripheries – information distance vs. distance from power.

In this essay I have discussed, however briefly, a number of ways we express and experience distance and highlighted the ways in which this important but abstract aspect of our communication ecology pushes us to command it. We are driven to fool ourselves (and allow ourselves to be fooled) that we can. McLuhan showed us how the technologies of alphabet and printing, as the dominant media, distanced us from our humanness by the virtual amputation of some senses (and some sense) through concentration by one sense. He attempted to suggest that TV, as the dominant medium, reactivated those senses and put us in touch with our humanness, breaking down those barriers. Yet he recognised the distances in expressions of discontinuity – distance between generations, for instance. Meyrowitz acknowledged the distancing tendencies of print, as well as a subsequent weakening by electronic media. At the same time, we have seen, media exacerbates the discontinuity of place – a cognitive distancing. Tapscott claims that new media are creating new spheres of communication among young people, yet they are being distanced from the previous generation by an even wider learning curve than that which separated their parents from *their* parents. Children have access to more communication devices, but these do not collapse distance.

It is clear, then, in these theories and anecdotes presented, that communicative distance is not easily overcome, and here lies the dialectical discourse of communication technology in relation to distance. While technologies may mediate the friction of terrestrial, physical distance, the mediation itself subverts it, masks it, re-presents it. Harvey says distance is “both a barrier to, and a defence against, human interaction” (Harvey 1990, p. 219). Communication, as Peters (1999) following Locke suggests, is not merely information, not the emanation or the transmission, or even the reception of information; it is the digestion and understanding (even misunderstanding) of what is communicated. Distance, while measurable between places and across space and time, must also be regarded as the space between understanding and not.

An example of this may be in the fact that, despite numerous previous lessons, the world has never been more torn up by terrestrial conflicts than it is today – a result of conflicts over economics and over place. One of the great ironies of communication is that world war became possible only after the world had become highly united (Kern, in Harvey 1990). While Western-centric economic and financial communications empires tell us that place is less important for communication, it is becoming *more* important to people – the reduction of barriers, as illustrated above, requires productions of new, and often con-

tested, spaces (Harvey, 1990). The collapsing of spatial barriers does not mean that social distance is decreasing.

Very early in this essay I highlighted that our obsession with distance emanates from our most basic communicative selves; we pursue the control and continuity of distance instinctively. In discontinuity we also have a natural tendency, it seems, to pull back – not just because we become anxious and resistant to change, but perhaps because we understand the consequences. So, what pushes us onward, we must ask. Who/what are the beneficiaries of the acceleration of information and the perpetuation of the myths of the annihilation of distance?

To answer that question we might more closely examine the dialectic to learn what language is being spoken and who is speaking it. Clearly all the above examples and theories demonstrate that what is being privileged in this discourse is commerce. I suggest that the discourse of technological distance is articulated in the language of Capital, new “light capitalism” (Harvey 1990, p. 193) now predominantly concerned with the production of signs, images and information. New media of communication have collapsed distance in order to allow the free flow of capital into the space evacuated. Communication technology and social organisation is about commodity, not social communication, connecting economic forces, not people. If there is an annihilation of distance, it’s an economic distance. Our consuming selves and our asset selves are drawn closer to those forces which relieve the former of the latter.

## NOTES

1. *The American Heritage Concise Dictionary (Microsoft Encarta 97 Encyclopedia)*.
2. Whitaker, William *Download Words* (<http://lysy2.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/words.exe?distantia>).
3. *Op. cit.* 1.
4. Aristotle, trans. Butler, S.H. *Poetics* c. 350 B.C.E. (Hill and Wang, 1961, New York).
5. Called by some a crude theory of social change, technological determinism asserts that most social changes are the *result* of changes in technology, in technique. A problem with this causal view is that it regards technology as neutral, or of having properties that are outside the social. *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1988).
6. ‘Dialectic’: detection and interpretations of contradictions, even opposites, and collision of ideas through debate and disputation. *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1988); Brooker, P. *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory* (Arnold, 1999 London).



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