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tethering

In the mid-1990s, a group of young researchers at the MIT Media Lab carried computers and radio transmitters in their backpacks, keyboards in their pockets, and wore digital displays embedded in their eyeglass frames. Always on the Internet, they called themselves "cyborgs." The cyborgs seemed at a remove from their bodies. When their burdensome technology cut into their skin, causing lesions and then scar tissue, they were indifferent. When their encumbrances led them to be taken for the physically disabled, they patiently provided explanations. They were learning to walk and talk as new creatures, learning to inhabit their own bodies all over again, and yet in a way, they were fading away, bleeding out onto the Net. Their experiment was both a re-embodiment (prosthetic consummation), and a disembodiment (disappearance of their bodies into still-nascent computational spaces).

Within a few years, the cyborgs had a new institutional identity as the Media Lab's "Wearable Computing Group." In only a short time, what was novel in their practice had been reduced to how the cyborgs were harbingers of the "cool" clothing of embedded technologies while the rest of us clumsily juggled cell phones, laptops, and PDAs. Yet the legacy of the cyborgs goes beyond the idea that communications technologies might be wearable

(or totable). Core elements of their experience have become generalized in global culture: the experience of living on the Net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked and tethered in others.

Today, the near-ubiquity of handheld and palm-size computing and cellular technologies (including voice, text-messaging, e-mail, and Web access) have made connectivity a new commonplace. The marketplace boasts of bicycle helmets through which one can take cell calls and ski jackets equipped with interactive GPS (Global Positioning Systems). When digital technologies first came onto the consumer market in the form of personal computers, they could be understood as objects onto which one could project personality. The technology—in large part because it was programmable, plastic—constituted a "second self."[1] In the early twenty-first century, such language does not go far enough; our new intimacy with machines, and in particular, communications technologies, compels us to speak of a new state of the self, itself.

For the most part, our everyday language for talking about technology's effects assumes a life both on and off the screen; it assumes the existence of separate worlds, plugged and unplugged. ("Wearable" computers can be donned and doffed, although they anticipate, like training wheels, the prosthetics and implants that may make us more fully cyborg.) But some of today's locutions suggest a new placement of the subject, such as when we say, "I'll be on my cell," by which we mean, "You can reach me; my cell phone will be on, and I will be wired into (social) existence through it." On my cell, online, on the Web, on instant messaging—these phrases suggest a *tethered* self. Tethering refers to how we connect to always-on communications devices and to the people and things we reach through them, who/which in a certain sense now live through them, always ready-to-mind and hand.

Already, tethering retrains the body. The gestures of privacy one learned when intimacies were shared in face-to-face conversations protected the face itself. In a café, one leaned in toward the person with whom one was speaking, lending an ear while veiling the shared gaze. With always-on cell phones come new behaviors. Each speaker talks out loud, often when walking, behaving as though no one around is listening. What sustains a sense of intimacy when people have personal cell phone conversations in public spaces is this presumption, perhaps the sustaining myth, that they are operating in a social environment that not only treats them as anonymous, but as disembodied, privileged with a certain suggested absence. Holding a cell phone (or the behavior of "speaking into air" that indicates a cell phone with an earphone microphone) marks them as tethered. They are transported to the space of the new ether, "T"-ethered, virtualized.

The tethered self and the social fact of the call set the stage for new relationships and draw the curtain on others. A train station is no longer a communal public space, but a space of social collection: tethered selves come together, but do not speak to each other. In the sociology of social collection each person in the station is more likely to be having an encounter with someone miles away than with the person in the next chair. Each inhabits a private media bubble. Increasingly, what people want out of public spaces is a place to be private with technology. People speak aloud into invisible microphones; they appear to talk to themselves, share intimacies with the air, seemingly unconcerned by their physical surroundings. Of course they are not alone. They are

with their cell phones and all that the phones connect them to. We are witnessing a new form of sociality in which the isolation of our physical bodies does not indicate our state of connectedness but may be its precondition. Our state of connectedness is determined by our proximity to available communications technology, and we display our cell phones as a signal that we may need to be left undisturbed. Our devices become a badge of our networks, a sign that we indeed have networks, have places to go and people to see. Whether or not our devices are in use, without them we feel disconnected, adrift.

The tethered self is already split and compartmentalized when the call comes in. New body gestures (the phone flipped open, brought to the ear, the head tossed back or bent over the phone to hear the incoming signal) make the self ready to become who the call requires it to be. A hand motion (a finger placed in the ear not at the phone to better wall off the sounds of physical reality) can signal an identity shift. Our multiple social roles existed prior to the technology. The technology makes them more visible, makes it possible for us to rapidly "cycle through" our various roles and to do so in the presence of new social actors and audiences. So, in the past, I did not have to perform my role as mother in the presence of my professional colleagues. Now an important call from my fourteen-year-old daughter instantaneously produces me as mother. What the tethering of selves changes is not my several roles but the social location of their display and the fact that I cycle through their performance so quickly that they become almost simultaneous. But compartmentalization had its comforts; with its demise comes new psychological challenges, in particular, the erosion of the boundary between work and personal life.

The expression "phoning it in" used to be a pejorative. Now, as pure description, it is a measure of status; it suggests you are important enough to deliver your work remotely. The location of the working body is symbolically significant, but with high status and connectivity come multiple patterns for its deployment, most of which feature travel. In one pattern, the traveling body is in intensive contact with others, but spreads itself around the world. In another pattern, the traveling body is in retreat, fleeing face-to-face contact to maximize privacy and creativity. However the traveling body chooses to use its time, the mobile self is always tethered, always kept in touch through technical means. The new glamour that technology confers is the luxury of bringing your community with you wherever you

are. You, your clients, your boss, your loved ones are potentially always together "on your cell." Advertisements for wireless technology typically feature a handsome man with a sleek computer sitting on a beach. The ad copy makes it clear that he is important and he is working. The new disembodiment does not ask you to deny your body its pleasures but to love your body, indeed, to put it somewhere beautiful, warm, and exotic while it works.

Our tethering devices provide us with much that is useful: addresses and phone links, access to family, friends, and professional acquaintances, a place to keep our calendar, to-do lists, mail, music, photographs, financial records, and documents. More than the sum of their parts, these constitute a subjectivity, a projection of self in digital space. They enable us to store, display, perform, and manipulate aspects of identity. Powerful, evocative objects for adults, they are even more intense and compelling for adolescents, located at that point in development when identity play is at the center of life.

Teenagers define themselves though music, and handheld digital technology now puts them in communication with hitherto unimagined libraries of sound. Creating and manipulating personal music playlists is a new mode of personal expression. The playlist itself becomes a way of capturing one of one's variable personae at a particular moment in time. Music is now shared actively, virally; songs proliferate by being copied onto discs or by the reinscription of their code in the memory of MP3 players. The bonds teens forge through music are not only generational but local in the new, virtual sense—bonds to people all over the world who have copied their songs. Devices that connect teens to their music—and those that connect them to their friends—are experienced less as objects than as portals.

Telephones have always made an offer that adolescence cannot refuse, the offer to be in contact with peers. Today, cell phones take what telephones have offered teens for half a century and raise it to a higher power. Cell phones can send text and photographs; they enable the volley of instant messaging; contact can be continual. Cells are to teens what Blackberries are to businessmen: an identity accessory. In Japan, adolescent desires to express individual differences are perhaps behind the mania to elaborately decorate and dress one's cell phone—with a special carrying case, charms, tokens, jewelry, as well as personalized displays and ring tones—that is finding its way across the Pacific. The experiences of today's adolescents with always-on communication devices provide our first view of tethering in developmental terms.

One of the classic conflicts of adolescence is that it is a time when one wants both to be part of the group and to assert individual identity. The adolescent feels both sustained and constrained by peers. Certainly, the norms of always-on communication support the demands of the group: the mores among urban teens have it that within a group of friends, one stays available by cell. Confidences are shared; likewise moments of triumph and anxiety. But it is part of the social contract that one needs good cause to claim time "offline." The pressure to be always-on can be a burden. Teenagers who need uninterrupted time for schoolwork sometimes resort to using their parents' Internet accounts to hide out from their friends. Other fallout for teenagers from the always-on communications culture may be more enduring and less easily managed.

The process of separation in which adolescents work out their identity for themselves was mythologized by Mark

Twain as the Huck Finn experience, the on-the-Mississippi moment of escape from an adult world. This moment, really the ongoing drama of a rite of passage, is now transformed by technology. In the mythic archetype, the adults in the child's world were internalized before the threshold of independence was crossed. In the tethered variant, the past may not need to be brought within in quite the same way but can be brought along in an intermediate space; everyone is on speed dial. By definition, the mobile phone is with you whenever you have a feeling, enabling a new coupling of: "I have a feeling. / Get me my friend." One is left to speculate about a possible emotional corollary: "I need to have a feeling. / Get me my friend." In either case, what is not being cultivated is the ability to be alone and to manage and contain one's emotions. Someone is always on call: friend or parent.

Children are usually given cell phones by their parents in early adolescence. In return, they make a promise to answer their parents' calls. On the one hand, this arrangement gives the child permission to have experiences—trips to the museum, to movies, to the beach—that would not be permitted without the phone-tethering to parents. On the other, the child does not have the experience of being alone, with only him or herself to count on. There is a point for an urban child, usually between the ages of eleven and fourteen, when there is a "first time" to navigate the city alone. It is a rite of passage that communicates, "You are on your own and responsible. If you are frightened, you have to experience those feelings." The cell phone buffers this moment; the parent is "on tap." With the parent-on-tap, tethered children think differently about themselves. They are not quite alone.

Always-on connectivity removes the urgency for teenagers to manage their emotions. Parents-on-tap can make it hard to assess a teenager's level of maturity. The tethered teenager looks confident, but knows there is a backup and a check-in. When a parent checks in with a child, the call can be just that, dispensing with all preliminaries. Moreover, in cell culture, the "check-in call" has become a universal genre. It is how we have learned to talk to each other on our cells, partly in deference to the fact that one often takes a call while doing other things. Similarly, the text message with emoticons is almost by nature a check-in, but ambiguous in destination, sometimes meant for one, but acknowledging in its design that it perhaps will be seen by many. Emoticons are a performance art of the virtual body, meant

to communicate an emotional state quickly. They are not meant to open a dialogue about complexity of feeling. Although the culture that grows up around the cell is a talk culture (in shopping malls, supermarkets, city streets, cafés, playgrounds, and parks, cells are out and people are talking into them), it is not necessarily a culture in which talk contributes to self-reflection. A culture of shared self-reflection depends on having an emotion, experiencing it, electing to share it with another person, and struggling with the difficulties that this entails. It does not thrive easily in the world of check-ins, emoticons, and rapid response.

Today's adolescents have no less need than previous generations to learn empathic skills, to define identities, to manage and express feelings, to handle being lonely and sad. But technology has changed the rules of engagement with these developmental tasks and perhaps their resolution. When the interchanges to develop empathy are reduced to the shorthand of emoticon-emotions, questions such as, "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" are reformatted for the small screen, flattened and disambiguated in the process. High technology, with all of its potential range and richness, has been put at the service of telegraphic speed and brevity.

Adult ambivalence about cell culture takes the form of devotion to the devices paired with complaints, some born of their grown-up memories of life in a sometimes-on (rather than always-on) communications culture. They feel stressed by new responsibilities to e-mail, a nagging sense of always being behind, the inability to take a vacation without bringing the office with them, the feeling that they are being asked to respond immediately to situations at work, even when no response might be preferable or when wise response requires taking time, time that is no longer available. Teens growing up with always-on communications technology are primed to receive a quick message to which they are expected to give a rapid response. They may never know another way. Their experience raises the question for all of us: Are we leaving enough time to take one's time?

Our technology is generated by our values but also comes to shape them. If we think of a telephone call as a quick response system enabled by always-on technology, we can forget that there is a difference between a scheduled call and the call you make in reaction to a fleeting emotion or because someone crossed your mind or left you a message. The self that is shaped by this world of rapid response cultivates what we already acknowledge as multitasking. This self measures success by calls made, e-mails answered, contacts reached. This self is calibrated on the basis of what the technology proposes, by what it makes possible, by what it makes easy. But in the buzz of activity, there are losses that we are perhaps not ready to sustain.

We insist that our world is increasingly complex; yet we have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think, uninterrupted. To make more time means turning off our devices, disengaging from the always-on culture. But this is not a simple proposition since our devices have become more closely coupled to our sense of our bodies and increasingly feel like extensions of our minds.

In the 1990s, as the Internet became part of everyday life, people began to create multiple online avatars and used them to shift gender, age, race, and class. The effort was to create richly rendered virtual selves through which one could experiment with identity by playing out parallel lives in constructed worlds. The world of avatars and games continues for

some, but now, increasingly comfortable with being virtual and always-on, we are content to play ourselves. The way we are being shaped by today's communications technology is far subtler than what came before. Now it follows from our always-on, increasingly intimate connection to our devices. They provide a social and psychological GPS, a navigation system for tethered selves. One television producer, accustomed to being linked to the world via her cell and Palm Pilot, revealed that for her, the Palm's inner spaces were where her self resides: "When my Palm crashed it was like a death. It was more than I could handle. I felt as though I had lost my mind."[2]

NOTES

1. Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* [1984] 2nd ed., with new introduction, epilogue, and notes (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

2. Presentation at MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, October 2001.

sensorium

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