

II. PLACE



Live in Person

Digital networks are decentralized technologies. They work from far away, exchanging intimacy for distance. This makes them terrifically suitable for long-distance communication and activities, but rather awful for engaging with what—or who—is right in front of us. By using a dislocating technology for local connection, we lose our sense of place, as well as our home field advantage.

Where's Gina?

The popular urban high school senior has over five hundred followers on Twitter (most of them real people) reading her every post to find out where the action is tonight. I'm trailing her, along with a youth culture trendspotter, to see what she does on a typical Friday night: how she makes her decisions, and how she communicates them to her ever-growing posse of followers. Gina is a trendsetter, a social leader, and a creature of the moment—in more ways than one.

She's at a club on the Upper East Side, but seems oblivious to the boys and the music. Instead of engaging with those around her, she's scrolling through text messages on her phone, from friends at other parties, bars, and clubs throughout New York. She needs to know if the event she's at is "the event to be at," or whether something better is happening at that very moment, somewhere else. Sure enough, a blip on display catches her interest, and in what seems like seconds we're in a cab headed for the East Village.

We arrive at a seemingly identical party, but it's the one that Gina has decided is "the place to be" tonight. Instead of turning the phone off and enjoying herself, however, she turns her phone around, activates the camera, and proceeds to take pictures of herself and her friends—instantly uploading them to her Facebook page for the world to see. She does this for about an hour, until a message comes through one of her

networks and she's off to the next location for the cycle to begin all over again.

Gina is the girl who is everywhere at once, yet—ultimately—nowhere at all. She is already violating the first command by maintaining an "always on" relationship to her devices and networks. This has in turn fostered her manic, compulsive need to keep tabs on everything everyone else is doing at all times. It has not only removed her from linear time, however, but also from physical place. She relates to her friends through the network, while practically ignoring whomever she is with at the moment. She relates to the places and people she is actually with only insofar as they are suitable for transmission to others in remote locations. The most social girl in her class doesn't really socialize in the real world at all.

While the intent of digital networks was not to disconnect a high school girl from her real world friendships, the bias of the networks were absolutely intended to favor decentralized activity. After all, the net was developed as a communications platform capable of withstanding nuclear attack. Messages—whether text, audio, or video—move through the network as "packets," each taking different routes from node to node until they find their destination. The network is still controlled centrally by an authority (we'll get to this later), but it functions in a decentralized way.

As a result, **digital media are biased away from the local, and toward dislocation.** Just as television is better at

broadcasting a soccer game occurring on the other side of the world than it is at broadcasting the pillow talk of the person next to you in bed, the net is better at creating simulations and approximations of human interaction from a great distance than it is at fostering interactions between people in the same place.

For the bias of media has always been toward distance—that's part of what media are for. Text allowed a person in one place (usually a king with a messenger running on foot) to send a message to a person in another place. To those with the power of the written word, what was happening far away became actionable, or even changeable. Similarly, broadcast media gave the newly minted national brands of the industrial age a way to communicate their value across great distances. Where a customer may have once depended on a personal relationship with a local merchant, now he could relate instead to the messaging of a nationally advertised product.

As the promoters of distance over the local, media have also promoted the agendas of long-distance interests over those of people in localities. Sometimes this is a great thing. It allows an entire nation to rally around an issue or idea, forces everyone to notice an injustice that might be happening far away, and even shows how all people are on some level the same. This bias toward non-local thinking can be threatening to parochial interests, and explains much of the origins of resentment for the Judeo-Christian tradition and its text-

inspired emphasis on a universal deity and ethics over the local gods and laws of particular regions.

Likewise, big media and the corporations paying them became the enemy of local companies and their workers. Technology and media traditionally worked to make commerce more global, favoring big business over local interests. Mass production distanced workers from the value they were creating. Instead of making a product from beginning to end, each worker on an assembly line completed one small task in the overall process. The product moves from person to person—or even nation to nation—as it is assembled. Each person means less to the production cycle. One's skill level becomes less important as repeatable processes replace craftsmanship and expertise. Workers become cheaper and replaceable, while corporate pricing power puts local companies out of business. Towns become ever more dependent on foreign-owned factories for employment.

Mass-produced products require mass marketing to sell them. Instead of buying oats from Bob the miller, people—now “consumers”—were to purchase them from a big company a thousand miles away in Ohio. The face of a Quaker on the package helped to re-create the kind of bond people used to enjoy with the fellow community members with whom they previously exchanged goods. Finally, a mass media arose to promote these long-distance brand images to an entire nation. Through radio and television, non-local companies could

seed a market with their brands and mythologies before the package even made it to the shelf.

Mass media became the non-local brand's way of competing against the people with whom we actually worked and lived. Local businesses competed against both national brands and retail chains for local dollars—and mass media favored mass production and mass marketing over local production and community relationships. The value of transactions became limited to what could be measured in dollars, and ended at the moment of sale. All of the social value of the exchange was lost—and the money itself left the community. This trend reinforced itself as people—embarrassed to have abandoned a local business for the big box store—began to spend less time on Main Street or at local functions where they might run into local merchants. Local bonds deteriorated, and formerly productive towns turned into bedroom communities of commuters.

While cable television and, now, Internet marketing give smaller businesses a way to peddle their wares in the same media as their corporate counterparts, it may actually work against their real strength as real world, local companies. The power of a local business—or any local enterprise—is its connection to a particular region and people. Its locality is its strength. By turning to a decentralized medium to engage with people right around the corner, a local business loses its home field advantage. Its

banner ads will never look as good as those coming out of a marketing agency anyway.

To be sure, one can use the net to organize a local group, schedule a meet-up, or get parents to a school board meeting. But in each of these cases, the non-local bias of the net is accepted as a means to an end: We go online in order to communicate with people who are not with us at that moment, and hopefully to arrange a time and place to meet for real. Further, for people who already know each other well in real life to engage online is very different than engaging with strangers we know only online. The net can reinforce real world relationships when those relationships already exist.

Interactive technology has also allowed for conversations to take place in a media landscape that formerly promoted only one-way broadcast. For those of us living in a world already disconnected by mass marketing and media, these little pings can be very real, and very compelling. A mediaspace that used to make us feel utterly alone now connects us to anyone, anywhere. For some, this means finding other people like themselves for the very first time. Survivors of rare cancers can find support groups, gay kids can find people who have lived through being the only “out” student in a high school, and fans of esoteric books or music can find global communities willing to discuss what no one else in their lives even knows exists.

But those back-and-forth exchanges are occurring at a

distance. They are better than nothing—particularly for people in unique situations—but they are not a replacement for real interaction. In fact, the ease with which a simulated, digital connection is made can often make us more distant. The homebound geriatric now has an easy way to connect to her church “virtually” every Sunday morning—and parishioners don’t have to worry about who is going to her home to transport her and her wheelchair that week. It takes less effort, but it’s also less beneficial for everybody concerned. Giving and accepting kindness used to be part of package.

Similarly, digital technologies can bring news and pictures to us from far away, instantaneously and constantly. We can watch live feed of the oil from an underwater well leaking into the ocean, or a cell phone video of an activist getting murdered in the street by a dictator’s police. But with little more to do about than blog from the safety of our bedrooms, such imagery tends to disconnect and desensitize us rather than engage us fully. Besides, it’s “over there” somewhere.

Meanwhile, what is happening just outside our window is devalued. As we come to depend on the net for our sense of connection to each other and the world, we end up fetishizing the tools through which all this happens. We associate our computer screens and email accounts with our most profound experiences of community and connection, and mistake blog comments sections for our most significant conversations.

And so we begin to use long-distance technologies by default, even in local situations where face-to-face contact would be easier. I’ll never forget being proudly escorted by a college administrator to a classroom that had been used for a model United Nations for the past ten years. This year, however, they were doing things differently: Instead of having the students re-create the General Assembly in their classroom, they would do it in an online simulation called *Second Life*. When I got to the room, I saw forty students sitting at desks outfitted with high-resolution computer screens. Although the students were all in the same place at the same time, they were not looking at one another, but at the monitors on their desks. On the monitors was an approximation of a room very much like the one they were in—but without the computers.

A simulation like this might be great for students of an online university to engage more fully with one another, or for students from around the world to experience something like the United Nations without having to travel. But for students and a school who have already spent the time, money, and energy to get to a real classroom at a real college, why throw all that away for video game version of engagement?

Similarly, I very often find the hosts of my talks flabbergasted when they learn I will be presenting without the aid of a computer slide show. Some have even been brought to the brink of canceling an event for fear of how their audiences

might react to a speaker who presents without computer-generated visuals. What they can't seem to grasp is that I could just as easily deliver a digital slide show live from the comfort of my home via broadband Internet. There's no need to fly a human body two thousand miles for that. No, the reason to spend the jet fuel to bring a human body across a country or an ocean is for the full-spectrum communication that occurs between human beings in real spaces with one another. The digital slideshow, in most cases, is a distraction—distancing people from one another by mediating their interaction with electronic data.

This misguided tendency to depend on long-distance technology to enhance up-close encounters is completely understandable and forgivable. The more connected we feel in digital spaces, the less securely connected many of us feel in real ones. After days or weeks connecting with people through video chats, the sensation of someone's eyes actually looking into our own in real life can be overwhelming and disorienting.

Similarly, after years of understanding our businesses as brands whose values can be communicated entirely in an ad, it's only natural for us to lose sight of what it means to run an enterprise in a particular place. It's as if the whole notion of place has been surrendered to the digital realm's non-local reality. Wherever you might be, it's just another set of GPS coordinates.

By recognizing digital media's bias for dislocation, we are enabled to exploit its strength delivering interactivity over long distances, while preserving our ability to engage without its interference when we want to connect locally. Many businesses—particularly the biggest ones—already exist in a non-local reality. The entire history of industrial corporatism, from colonial empires to the railroad barons of the nineteenth century, depended on disconnecting people from their local strength and commanding them from afar. For them, it is just as ridiculous to use the net to feign that they are local enterprises as it is for local enterprises to use it to act in the manner of national brands. Powerful global companies become weak local ones, while promising local companies become weak global players.

The digital age offers us all the opportunity to recognize the dislocating bias of our interactive media. With that knowledge, we may choose when we wish to live and work in real places, with one another and—unique to living humans—in person.