
Rick's Place

Notes, Thoughts, and Random Musings on the Online Experience
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Where, thirty years ago we used to start up rock bands, we now start start-ups and experiment with new ways of communicating with each other and playing with the information we exchange, and when one idea fails, there's another, better one right behind it, and another and another, cascading out as fast as rock albums did in the sixties.

Douglas Adams
The Salmon of Doubt

Welcome back! By now, for most of us the shock of the new is all too real. We find ourselves in the classroom, with the materials still in boxes, and the new students pouring through the doors just as fast as news of the old students whereabouts percolates through the school. We look through the files and find music composed hundreds of years ago as well as music written in the past decade, if not the past year.

The quote above appears in a posthumous collection of speeches, articles, ideas for articles which were gleaned from Douglas Adams' computers after his untimely and unexpected death. Luckily, his secretaries, associates, and friends knew him well enough to eventually unscramble his passwords, or the computers would have remained mocking mute memorials to a man who loved technology, communication, and playing with the information exchanged. How can we forget his creations: A detective who does not use logic to solve his cases but rather approaches them holistically - what ever he does will, eventually, lead him to the resolution of the case undertaken; Marvin, the paranoid android in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, and the inspired surrealistic humour of a trilogy, the aforementioned *Guide*, which was finally delivered in five volumes.

Let's examine one major new way of communication: given sufficiently deep pockets, using a cell phone only, one can now can receive radio, take and transmit pictures, send and receive E-mail as well as text messages, save voice messages, use voice recognition to dial a call, and open a web browser to surf the Internet. Oh yes, it still can be used as a telephone. It may also carry your collection of .mp3 music as well as a few back up files for your computer. If you invest sufficiently, an object the size of a slightly large pack of cards can accomplish all of the above tasks as well as contain a complete IBM compatible computer which, as an added bonus, also recognises your handwriting and converts it to editable text files. All of this in one small device and without wires linking you to any network.

The current phrase in the world of technology is "pervasive" computing. Objects can communicate with other objects, pass messages or issue commands. Your cell phone object can push the thermostat object up if you are too cold, provided they both have been enabled to "talk and listen". By now you may have found some students in your classes you wish had also been enabled to be remotely controlled in a similar manner.

Orwell was right in many ways. Today it can be truly said that if you use technology, Big Brother does indeed know who you are, where you are, what you are saying, and what you are reading. They haven't completely locked in to observing all of us at once, but be assured that using the latest tools a government agency could assemble quite a dossier on you without your knowledge. Passport, visas, driving licence, insurance, social security, Internet service provider, mobile phone, pager, bank accounts, software registration...and those are without a great many obvious forms where we are captured and identified on a card or bit of computer tape or hard drive.

In the rush for us to play with the information exchanged by utilising global positioning satellites so we are never lost, mobile phones so we are never out of contact, and web sites so we always are up to date let us not forget the glimmering eye of authority salivating over the digital trail we leave behind us like so many bread crumbs.

What can one expect from this page this year? Mr. Adams will no doubt be reappearing, as will other commentators on the current state of the world, both as reflected in fiction and essay. Look also for a preview of life at the controls of the digital hub. Sony and Apple are making great strides itowards ensuring your computer is central to the enjoyment of your professional and leisure activities. Many of us are still, albeit in an educational setting, starting up rock bands: we have all of the thrill of communicating with our fellow band members the love and excitement generated by sharing lives creating music. We also glimpse the lives of those who made music before us, and share all of that energy and excitement amongst ourselves and with an audience. All involved will carry memories of the music we make into a future whose richness and variety we cannot begin to imagine.