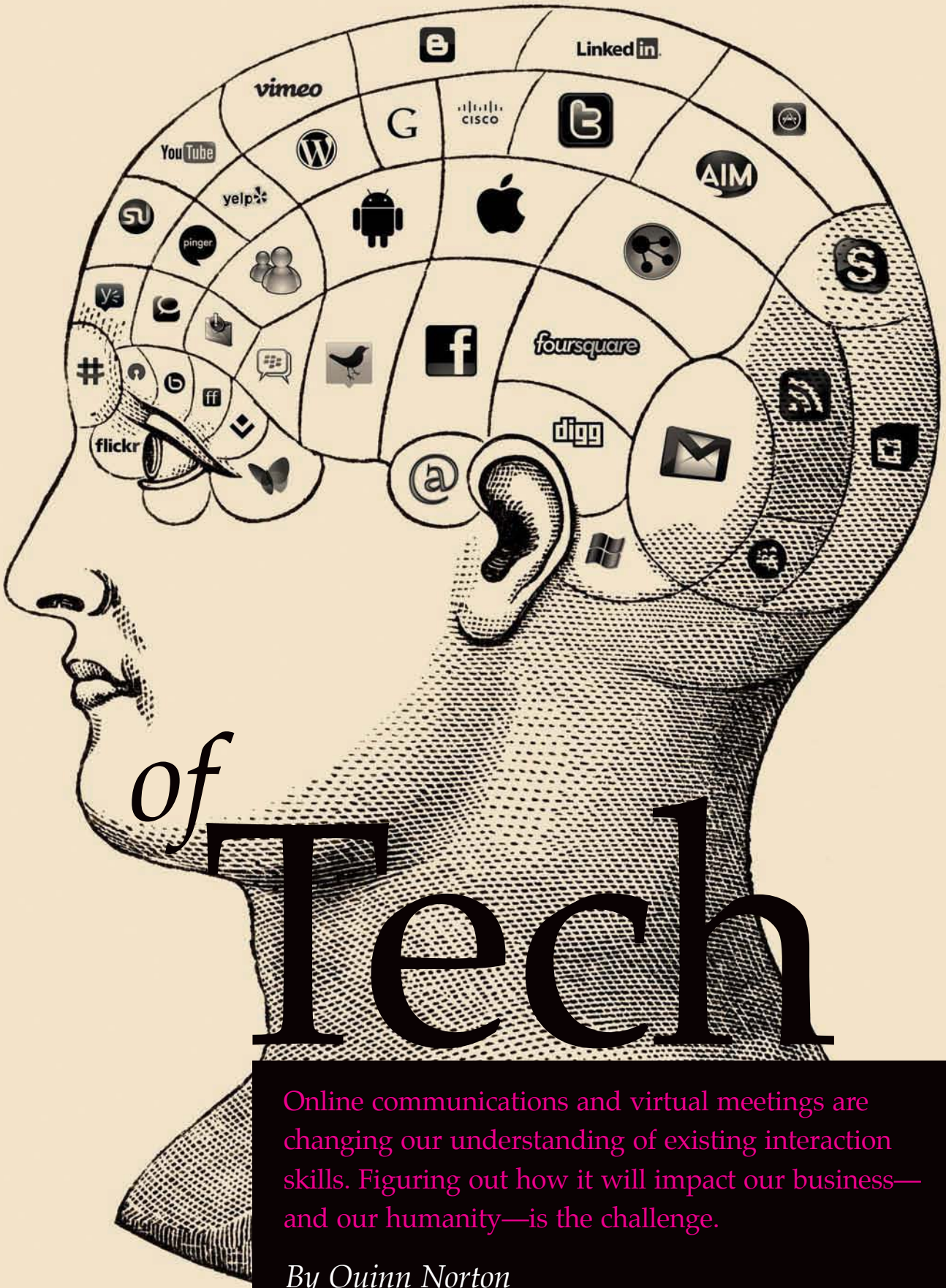
The Truth



# of Tech

Online communications and virtual meetings are changing our understanding of existing interaction skills. Figuring out how it will impact our business—and our humanity—is the challenge.

By Quinn Norton

Our world is being remade by the software and hardware that lets us talk to each other. The numbers are massive, with the incomprehensibility of cosmic distances or national budgets. 190 million tweeters, 500 million facebook users, probably a billion using instant messaging and around 1.5 billion humans with e-mail addresses—all technologies relatively few knew or cared about before the past decade. It's doing something to how we communicate, to the places we live and even how we think, but we don't know *what* yet.

Andrew Sempere, IBM design researcher and organizer of IBM's Place and Space conference, coordinates with me over Twitter direct messages. We make our arrangements, exchanging the 140-character chunks perfect for the brevity that is the soul of logistics. An hour later in a Korean restaurant he tells me, "All [networked communication] is trying to understand computation, and what it does to our thinking." We're nearly alone, a New England winter isolating the restaurant.

Sempere continues, "What computers let us do is run parallel social lives. You can rename yourself, you can regender yourself, you can do whatever you want in the computational space, which is incredibly powerful... At the same time it introduces a whole set of other problems."

Hours later, we leave as the restaurant closes. We both recorded the interview on smart phones. My copy is distorted and useless, but Sempere e-mails me his from his iPhone.

"[Online communication] is neither good nor bad, it just means everything's changed," Sempere continued online some hours later.

Sempere's employer struggles to keep its widely distributed 400,000 employees feeling connected to the IBM mothership, always looking for new ways to socially link them without physically moving anyone. Second Life was touted for a time as a business solution for distributed companies, and it caught their eye.

"In the heyday of Second Life, the reason companies were interested was cost savings. You didn't have to travel and they didn't even have to pay for videoconferencing," Sempere said.

It worked for some people, but not enough to sustain it as a business platform, though eventually IBM developed its own in-house virtual environment.

The common objections to virtual meetings were about the loss of our physical instincts. In a virtual meeting, there's no eye gaze, no facial expressions and all affect is fake. But Sempere points out that for some groups, populated often by artists, designers and people with a background in performance, it worked well.

"If you're comfortable with a couple of things—that people can fake paying attention just as well in real life and [can] operate the software—it turns out to be actually expressive, because you can tell the difference between somebody's automated avatar movement and something they've done deliberately," he said.

In Second Life, when an avatar sits down to listen to your avatar, it's a way of saying the avatar's user is settled in and listening as well.

"There's no good reason for that. It's not like your avatar can get tired," Sempere said. "So the signifiers are still there, they're just different."

But if you couldn't or hadn't yet internalized those signals, the meeting didn't work, and Sempere says it just feels weird.

Mizuko Ito, research director for the University of California Humanities Research Institute, studies youth's relationship with digital media and mobile technology in America and Japan. Her studies of teens and their families, schools and peer groups, while some of the most in-depth ever done, have yet to lead her to any conclusions.

"All of these questions about whether it's helping or hurting depends on what you take to be a valuable social relationship," she said over a Skype video call.

Our call is punctuated by the occasional train just loud enough to muddle Skype's sound leveling software and render the interaction inaudible to one other. In those moments we're stuck waiting, looking at the other's headphone-framed face, or glancing at our own face in the corner of the screen and inevitably readjusting.

"Careful research can tell you what kind of relationships [digital communica-

tion] reinforces and what kind it doesn't, and then you can have the conversation about whether it's good or bad, and for whom," Ito said.

Neither of us is in an office, and the background behind our heads carries the mundane hints of our personal lives. Desks, books, pets walking by.

Kio Stark is even more direct.

"There's no blanket statement of how digital mediation affects relationships—what's interesting is how specific technologies affect specific relationships," she said.

Stark is an author and professor at New York University, teaching about the intersection of relationships, technology and urban space. There she has her students do experiments on strangers and those closest to them. In one experiment, her students must talk to someone they're very close to, using a communication technology the person has never used before.

"Written communication is asynchronous but close to real time and really lets people open up in ways that they don't necessarily in person. That's almost universal, and really striking when parent and child are talking on instant message," Stark said.

I have an audio call over the Net with her, which, like Ito's, is interrupted by different sounds. At times, the stochastic network noise is so heavy that we restart the call. Self-conscious about inconveniencing her, I think of the old reliability of a land line, but neither of us has had one in years. Our talk bounces between audio Skype calls, instant messages and a couple of final clarifications in e-mail where our tone becomes more formal. Explaining her students' results in e-mail, she continues: "If you compare it to speech, I don't think people are saying something they didn't want to say, it's that there's some space built in for contemplation as you're typing. Not seeing the response on someone's face is also a kind of space. Sometimes that's incredibly alienating and frustrating for people when they're talking on instant message, but when it comes to being vulnerable, it's kind of a gift."

"We make decisions about trust and authenticity at a very instinctual level. When you encounter somebody online and you have to decide whether or not to trust them… you don't have any of those cues. You don't smell them, you don't hear the flickering of their voice, you can't see if someone is looking you in the eye. So instead we have to use a different set of criteria."

People select mediums for tasks. Some people like to make plans in e-mail, to raise the value of face time. For others, the possibility of miscommunication online is too frustrating. It's something we negotiate specifically with people.

"It means we have more modes of conversation available to us in our intimate relationships, and more nuances," Stark said.

But every mode comes with tradeoffs.

As a social species, our bodies are equipped to meet people in our environment.

"We make decisions about trust and authenticity at a very instinctual level in a lot of cases," Stark said. "When you encounter somebody online and you have to decide whether or not to trust them…you don't have any of those cues. You don't smell them, you don't hear the flickering of their voice, you can't see if someone is looking you in the eye. So instead we have to use a different set of criteria."

Instead of smelling people, we situate them. We Google them, search Facebook for them and often in a matter of minutes we've matched the labor of a devoted 1990s stalker. But Stark points out part of the social contract of a connected world is to be stalkable ourselves.

"It's possible that we're losing some independence," she said.

We've come to expect instant communication and constant weak awareness of those we care about.

"We're on a closer tether with each other," Stark said.

So we might be exhibiting less emotional independence in our interpersonal relationships. How can I learn to miss you if you never really go away?

For all this focus on the people, Ito's

work is revealing in that the most profound effects might be indirect. Networked life may be doing more to change the living environments of humanity than it's doing to us.

"Where it does become more difficult is when you're thinking about changes to urban space," Ito said. "It started with simple things...[there are no] pay phones in Tokyo anymore. But there are longer term and indirect effects, like the rise of franchises. You don't automatically associate that with the growth of mobile technology, but when you talk to young people…they don't have to have hangouts anymore in the same way earlier generations did."

Instead of a specific place, they have what Sempere refers to as a "digital 3rd space" that travels with them socially. Physical space is fungible, and doesn't require the tenuous and troubled connection teens often have with adult shop owners.

"They tend to prefer generic places they can appropriate," Ito said. "So they go to McDonalds or Starbucks, these chain places where people won't be bothered."

And if those people are bothered, it takes next to nothing to tweet, SMS or post a status update to say everyone's moving on to the next chain store.

"They don't need specific spaces anymore," Sempere later stated. "The same thing happens to most social groups…it's not that we don't care about our old social ties, its that the old structures we required to maintain them are not necessary, and you don't maintain what's not necessary."

He points to the changes at many companies, including IBM, towards more work at home and co-working space and away from discrete offices.

But Internet communication lets social structures get much weirder than co-working spaces and more work-from-home days. The extra-legal activists known as Anonymous are loosely tied together by free speech absolutism and a desire for amusement. It got its start harassing the Church of Scientology, but went on to play a part in assisting and setting up digital infrastructure for pro-democracy activism in the Middle East.

I am on IRC, the oldest form of group chat still used on the Internet. Old enough to have an interface that is user-hostile to most of today's Web 2.0 users. The server is divided into channels. Inside the channels of Anonymous, undifferentiated text chatting from hundreds of users scrolls at a halting and irregular pace. In #opegypt, updates on the protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square flow by. One Anon compares the possible election of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood to that of Hamas, pauses to throw an unprintable racial epithet at someone new and goes back to the analysis. The conversation continues unperturbed. The threads are impossible to follow in total, and after a time one learns to bob up and down on the conversational flow rather like swimming in the swells of the ocean, trading control for impressionistic conversation. I lurk. This is the wrong side of the Internet tracks, a place that didn't exist allowing for that which, be it good or bad (and it's probably both) couldn't have been done.

The reasons to be there aren't new. People go to the edges of the Net to find others like themselves to solve old problems, to get more power, to find purpose, love and wealth. In Ito's research, underlying motivations are persistent.

"I look at the way teenagers sort their friends…the way they look at dating…all that," Ito said. "It's remarkably unchanged, even though these are the people that are supposed to be guiding us to the next mode of being. There's an incredible conservatism to our social structures—I think human social structure is resilient to change at some level, regardless of technology."

Right now, this lack of narrative makes us feel confused, with points of insight, but nothing connecting them yet. It's unsettling, hopeful and scary. The teenager is still a good guide. Society is in a kind of communicative puberty, finding our ways of relating to each other changing, new ones forming and often in ways in which we're not comfortable. Like a universal teenager, we're responding by staying up too late, getting distracted easily and being grouchy. It seems useless to try and stop it, like arguing against jumping off a cliff when one is already in mid-fall.

"We live in a way that's intertwined between online and 'meatspace,'" Stark said.

We seem unlikely to go back. one+

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