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Hear Tell:
Invisibility, Invasiveness, and the Cell Phone

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Alexander Graham Bell is my ancestor. My brother is named after him: Alexander Bell Glendinning. We grew up hearing tell of that notorious moment in invention history - March 6, 1876 - when Bell set up his infamous gadgetry in Boston and called out via electricity to his assistant in the next room, "Watson! Come here!"

We were then regaled with the tale of the lone inventor's tragedy: loss of rights over his creation "for the good of humanity" - and the banks accounts of the already wealthy. It's true. Bell was corraled and quartered by zealous American entrepreneurs and never even received a free phone card for what has since become the most invisible and, at the same time, most invasive instrument introduced into modern life.

You may be surprised to hear that: the most invisible, the most invasive. Your surprise is testimony to the degree to which the artifact, plus its massive supporting technologies, have become part of us: our bodies, our homes, our workplaces, our landscapes, our assumptions.

Comparative literature professor Avital Ronell wrote a rather astounding book on the subject called, of course, The Telephone Book. Touted as a political deconstruction of technology, the book penetrates our deaf acceptance of telephony, exploring and revealing three areas of concern:

1. How much the machinery defines our every thought and act
2. How its existence furthers the schizophrenia of mind/body and human/nature inherent to technological society
3. How it lays the base for the technology-constituted state

Lending our ears to the rock anthem "Meet The New Boss, Same As The Old Boss," we are reminded that what has been invisible and invasive in the past only becomes more invisible and more invasive in the present. Amid a fanfare of glamour and fantasy, enter: the new telephone. Or better put: the digital wireless phone-pilot. In order words, telecommunications with all its satellites, microwave antennas, dishes, and towers and their electromagnetic emissions; its supercomputers; machinery of propaganda; pyramid of CEOs, scientists, engineers, technicians, marketers, sales people, producers, directors, actors, artists, film crew, chemical clean-up crew, secretaries, janitors; and ... its cricket-chirping cell phone. To understand this "new boss" we might ask the same questions Ronell asked the "old".

How does the new wireless technology define our every thought and act?

For survival, the human psyche is built to mirror its environs. We are made to think and act in harmony with what surrounds us, and for 99 percent of our evolution, what surrounds us has been wilderness and its human component, nature-based community. We see this mirroring in the fluid, non-ego-based personality of indigenous peoples and in their worldviews which give shape to human possibility in terms of nature's unfolding. We find a parallel mirroring in the technological world. Mental disorders from dissociation, anxiety, and narcissism to post-traumatic stress, schizophrenia, and multiple personalities provide disturbing reflections of an environment erected beyond the realm of human scale and ecological sustainability to the fragmented shape of cyber-mechanization.

The reflection is everywhere. Here's Jamie Lee Curtis popping a discrete wireless out of her gown at dinner parties. Hers is an artifact that encourages you to believe that at any time you can hook up with anyone and have a presence anywhere. And indeed you can. Kind of. At least you can make a stock trade at Merrill Lynch headquarters in New York from a rainforest in Brazil. The promise of such seemingly limitless possibility, against the profundity of the fragmentation that permeates our very thought and act in techno-corporate society, is seductive indeed.

The pain that lies behind the seduction is driven deep into our shared unconscious. In its place denial or, if you will, deafness appears. There is

deafness to the very connection and rootedness our psyches, and our ecologies, expect. There is deafness to the lack of connection and rootedness we endure. There is deafness to the rampant social and psychological problems that result.

And there is deafness to the biological effects of the technology. The truth is ear-splitting. You and I, along with all the other living beings on the planet, now exist within a planetary microwave oven. It turns out that the non-ionizing radiation emitted to produce wireless telecommunications causes far more bioreaction in living beings than do, say, television waves or household electrical wires. Studies published by government, corporate, military, and independent researchers link an array of illnesses with the electromagnetic frequencies that emanate from both handsets and towers: immunological deficiencies, brain tumours, cancers, high blood pressure, deterioration of the blood-brain barrier that protects the body from bacteria and viruses, leukemia, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's, sleep disturbances, fatigue, miscarriage, infertility, and, curiously, deafness. Research also shows illness, infertility, and death among farm animals, wildlife, and plants living within the sphere of microwave towers.

Acceptance of such an outrageous predicament comes down to banality: if you use a cell phone, you think it's normal; if you think it's normal, you use it. Our every thought and act are then defined by the mundaneness of wireless telephony - while its inherent alienation, dreams of grandiosity, and biological effects are refused. Instead of listening for the sources of this tragedy, we fashion our dreams from the images on TV and revel in a corporate culture loud with a violence that mirrors the apocalyptic terror we harbor deep down. Our everywhere-nowhere telephones not only symbolize our disconnection. By their existence they add to the possibility of our extinction.

How do wireless communications further the mind/body, human/nature split?

If we approach this question with anything close to the phenomenal sharpness Avital Ronell brings to her analysis of the pre-wireless telephone, we will note that the fragmentation of consciousness created by the disembodied voice on the old black box is only amplified by the cell phone. We no longer have conversations with phantom voices merely in the TV room or at the office. This new experience of non-visual, non-sensual, and non-located relationships leads us to a heightened state of disembodiment. And a crucial question emerges: what might this condition of chronic dissociation by preparing us for?

I got an ear-full on the subject during a Public Radio International interview I shared with Marvin Minsky, Massachusetts Institute of Technology's inventor of artificial intelligence. As he was expounding on the social benefits of computers, Minksy informed me - with pride and certainty - that the final disconnect will be the removal of all life from Earth and replacement of sentient beings by "thinking" machines, genetically-engineered life forms, and nanotechnology.

Minsky is himself a fine example of mind/body dissociation, and his vision for the future is a fine mirroring of the separation of human from nature foisted upon us by technological society. Flying down ten-lane freeways in our computer-guided conveyances, plugged into devices spouting disembodied voices, asking our hand-held pilots what the weather is may feel like power. But doing it, Minsky seems to have dialed a schizoid area code concerning what life on this planet could be.

Doing it, you and I may hardly notice that the terrain to the side of the freeway is torn to unrecognizable shreds by earthmovers to provide the metals that construct the cell phone. Flying down the highway, with our minds so removed from earthly knowledge and our lives so disconnected from the natural world, we may not notice that the sky itself is splintered by the appearance of microwave towers spewing non-ionizing radiation right into our bones.

How does the telecommunications industry feed the post-modern political process?

To answer this question, it is essential to realise that the words we have been taught for describing contemporary political and economic forms prevent us from perceiving their nature. After World War II, when hundreds of decolonization movements challenged the most predominant form at that time, it became awkward to continue using words which described it: the language of imperialism. Sociology stepped in, and we got terms like "mass society" and "developed world". But such titles speak only of bigness and complexity, conveniently skipping over the power relations inherent to both yesterday's classical imperialism and today's newer form of global hegemony, the corporate economy.

In describing our world, let us reclaim words of political power and add to them the language of technological development. Ronell does. Drawing links between politics and technology, she pins the success of that renowned fascist state, Nazi Germany, on the telephone. In the Third Reich, the telephone was not a neutral device safely functioning in a context of relativity. Its purpose was the centralization of power, and in service to this goal it became a weapon, a means of state surveillance,

"an open accomplice to lies" clinching the totalitarian control sought by the regime.

Others have echoed the relationship between technology and political expansionism. In The Tools Of Empire, social scientist Daniel Headrick traces the give-and-take between 19th century European land accumulation and technologies such as iron boats, guns, underwater cables, and railroads. In his most recent work, The Fire Of His Genius, historian Kirkpatrick Sale shows how the steamboat brought the industrial revolution to the United States, opened up the continent's interior to settlement, and facilitated the aggression against indigenous peoples that was necessary for complete take-over.

Telecommunications is likewise a technology that serves the encroachment of a political and economic system. Today's system, though, is not limited by state ownership. It is post-state, pan-corporate, and boundariless. The unique offering of telecommunications is that it offers its purveyors nearly instantaneous contact to nearly every location in the world. In a few years the microwave towers we are only now coming to understand are slated to be replaced by corporate-sponsored satellite technologies. Talk about invisible and invasive. At that time, no place on this Earth will be immune from the political and economic effects of globalisation - and the health and environmental effects of electromagnetic radiation. Corporations are pursuing this latest means of dissemination because, for efficient functioning, they require instant co-ordination of their global web of resource exploitation, goods and service distribution, and social control. In the US, the platform for such operation is the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which, echoing the legal structure of the World Trade Organisation, disallows local, "market"-impeding regulations and bans based on health or environmental effects.

As a descendant of the inventor of the telephone, I am listening to these pained echoes with a sharp ear. On my journey to the cafe where I penned this essay, I was startled to find that the passionately-disputed microwave tower along New Mexico Highway 285/84 had been erected overnight. My friend Camila Trujillo lives immediately beneath its umbrella of emissions.

I am saddened.

The corporate rip-off of the telephone from Bell's hands is a rip-off that persists.

Due to the strangehold corporations have on the media, though, little is known about actions against the wireless industry in various parts of the

world. The news is that the movement is not in its infancy. In 2000, hundreds of scientists, researchers, doctors, technicians, elected officials, and representatives from environmental, health, and civil rights organisations met in Salzburg, Austria. Hailing from New Zealand, China, Canada, Russia, Sweden, England, and other countries, they founded an international network called the Global Electromagnetic Awareness and Safety Alliance. (The city of Salzburg, by the way, allows only emissions 100 times less potent than those permitted in the US and in many countries around the world.) Meanwhile the United Nations World Health Organisation has formed the International Committee on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection. Conferences on the health effects of cell-phone transmitters have convened in Belgium, Sweden, France, Italy and England, and there have been numerous petitions, manifestos, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience (see the separate feature on Global Opposition to Cell Phone Technology). In Spain, a judge acknowledged "the rights of citizens to a healthy environment free of fields" and ordered corporate compensation to victims of "electromagnetic trespass".

Hear tell: it is time to integrate the struggle against the invasiveness of wireless telecommunications into our anti-globalisation work. The only way I know to reclaim our thoughts and acts, heal the schizoid fragments perpetrated by expansionist systems, and reconstitute lasting communities on this Earth is for us to listen, learn, and be visible.