Digital Nation? No Thanks!

Contributed by Peter Crabb
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One of the brilliant insights in Daniel Quinn's 1992 novel Ishmael is that modern industrialized people do not know how to live. Humans have long been cut off from the contingencies of nature, first as a consequence of discovering the wholly unnatural skill of growing reliable food supplies in one place, and later as a side effect of learning how to manufacture wholly unnatural objects and environments. The resulting alienation from nature and from our ancestors' nature-adapted ways of life left us clueless and susceptible to being sold ideas about how people should live, usually by the most audacious psychopath in the group.
Systems of dos and don'ts and fear-inspiring superstition kept the overworked and underfed serfs and slaves distracted with mythology, rituals, "moral" prohibitions, and unrestrained baby production. Except for the rare Spartacus, the serfs and slaves didn't have the time or energy to give any trouble to the soft, overfed elites living in white palaces. They simply went along with the program.

Some things just don't change.

Today the industrial capitalist elite is hard-selling a mythology-based way of life that undermines human potential and the capacity for sustainable communities. As part of the pitch, PBS (the P variously standing for Petroleum, Pharmaceutical, Pentagon, Propaganda, or Phone, take your pick) aired the Frontline program "Digital Nation" in February, 2010, a 90-minute infomercial selling tv-viewing serfs the notion that junk technologies are good for them.

At the outset, the producers give their game away with the announcement that "Major funding is provided by Verizon Foundation." Indeed, the look of the just-released DVD is quintessentially Verizon: images of attractive young people gazing happily into cell phones. In real life, of course, most cell phone users are visibly bored or frustrated or downright angry as they desperately clutch their gadgets. But this video is not about reality. It's an outline for a business plan that uses Madison Avenue-style myth-making to seduce the audience.

The tone of the video is set in the opening sequence, when writer-producer-director-correspondent Rachel Dretzin sits down at a blurry web cam, looks the viewer in the eye, and begins with the ubiquitous pseudo-hip condescension, "So . . . ." This opener should immediately alert viewers that they are about to be explained to by savvier-than-thou technology cultists about the emerging electronic information and communication technologies (ICTs) and how they are shaping society.

It is not surprising, then, that in what follows there is lots of happy talk about corporate technology products. Co-writer-correspondent Douglas Rushkoff has long been a cyber-enthusiast and mythologizer of technology. He says that "Virtual worlds do offer humans the chance to do something altogether new," by which I don't think he means sitting around getting fat and developing carpal tunnel syndrome. Philip Rosedale, CEO of the virtual world Second Life, crows, "We're alienated from each other and the world around us. When people come together in a virtual world, we immediately become more social, more connected, and more dependent on each other." Real world bad, unsustainable fake world good. And one teenage technology cultist couldn't have put it more mythically if she were paid: "We should embrace the technology that we have, and we should be thankful for it."

In typical USAn media Newspeak fashion, Digital Nation pretends to look at "both sides" of technology issues, as though there are always only two sides. This is a well-established technique used by advertisers who know they can persuade people to buy their products if they present a view that opposes their own. It makes them look fair-minded and thus more credible. Despite a few remarks about the pitfalls of technology dependency, the take-home message of the video is that technology is inevitable, it is a force of nature, don't ask questions, and lie back and enjoy it. Oh, and, it's all about YOU!

At MIT, an institution not known for circumspection about technology, psychologist Sherry Turkle nonetheless makes the sensible observation that college students "have done themselves a disservice by drinking the Kool-Aid and believing that

a multitasking learning environment will serve their best purposes." Stanford sociologist Clifford Nass elaborates by reporting laboratory evidence that the idea of multitasking is sheer myth. He finds that college students who think they are really good at multitasking—texting, watching American Idol, listening to an MP3 player, emailing, surfing the web, munching Cheetos, and writing a paper on the gender instantiations of Miley Cyrus all at the same time—are in fact really bad at all of those things. The brain can only do one thing well at a time. In typical Verizon advert style, an attractive young MIT coed dismisses concerns about multitasking by coolly announcing, "We are completely capable." Who do we believe, the nerdy scientists or the beautiful young people?

Katie Salen, a professional educational technology booster, promotes the use of computer games in schools. "Games give us an incredibly engaging learning experience. . . . What it comes down to is that if you can't engage that kid in wanting to learn something, you really have a problem on your hands." So be sure our taxpayer-funded schools buy lots of corporate technotoys to keep the kids distracted with texting and twittering and facebook-befriending, trendily called "student-centered education." In one of the rare moments of enlightened dissent, journalist Todd Oppenheimer counters that this is "complete hogwash. . . . Schools are one of the few institutions we have in our society where you can have a sustained conversation about something without being bombarded and distracted by all these machines. We have to protect that." He is right about the potential of education, but we've already failed miserably to protect kids and schools from the creeping technology menace.

The dialogue about multitasking and distraction is part of a larger battle over consciousness, and the corporate sellers of junk technology are winning that battle as they colonize the minds of younger generations. Those of us who envision a new reality that is free of corporate parasitism would do well to take note of this development. It isn't just tv and the internet. It's a whole consumption constellation of corporate-produced distractions that have totally captured the attention and energies of young people. The digital ghetto they live in isolates them from older generations and cultivates contempt for any reality other than the one they have been sold. Why visit with neighbors or learn to garden when texting is so much more fun and easy?

The video lamely pretends to address the problems of technology's impact on physical and mental health. In one segment Douglas Rushkoff travels to South Korea to investigate internet and video game addiction among young people. The Koreans have treatment programs where kids give up their gadgets for several weeks of reeducation, low-tech activities, and diet and exercise. Exoticizing technology-induced behavioral problems by reporting from South Korea subtly implies that USAns don't have the same technology addiction problems. But the critical viewer will see plenty of images of pudgy, addle-brained USAns glued to screens, the real story.

No reference at all is made to the multiple hazards of electromagnetic fields (EMFs). We just see joyous innocent girls and boys clutching electronic devices close to their bodies. It's not surprising that a Verizon-funded program would avoid broaching the topic when the current industry plan appears to be all wi-fi in all places at all times. Nor are there any references to the environmental harms of these technologies. Nothing about the alleged fact that one Google search uses enough electricity to boil a cup of water. Nothing about the disastrous effects of mining rare earth metals to manufacture these gadgets. And nothing about the plague of plastics these technologies are made from. As far as this program is concerned, there really are no costs to the promised digital world.

We are told that technology is also changing business. Visiting IBM's world headquarters, we learn that the computer company has largely adopted a telecommuting model, where workers stay home several days a week and meet and work online, leaving the physical buildings empty much of the time. The implication is that this is the way of the future for business. But the promise of telecommuting that was hyped in the 1990s hasn't materialized for most workers, whose days still include time trapped in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the way to brick-and-mortar workplaces. Instead of the liberation promised by telecommuting, ICTs have brought us something quite different and unwelcome: the erosion of the boundaries between work and home and between the corporation and the self. When email first became a routine part of university business, I was outraged when I returned home at the end of a long day of teaching to find more orders from bosses waiting in my email inbox. There was no escape. And things got worse from there as many workers were issued pagers and then cell phones and then PDAs. The 24/7 work world invaded the serenity of home, disrupted family ties, and obliterated personal space. But you won't hear anything about that on this video.

There are two tell-tale segments about technology and the military. We can guess that these were included because the program's sponsor, Verizon, must profit handsomely from militarism. Surely every one of the quarter of a million U.S. service personnel at over 700 military bases around the world must carry a cell phone and subscribe to cell service. That's a bloody big market.

In one of those segments, we visit the U.S. Army Experience Center near Philadelphia, where teenagers as young as 13 are lured to play with sexy weapons, helicopter and Humvee simulators, and first-person shooter games to get a feel for the adrenaline rush of combat. Recruiters joke with the kids who shout "Die!"and "Kill them!" as they play. "A 21st century approach to recruiting, modeled on the Apple Store," reports our correspondent, Rachel Dretzin. Weekly protests outside the Army Experience Center focus on the intentional blurring of the line between reality and combat video games. One Army recruiter assures us, "Certainly video games are not like warfare. I think most kids are smart enough to understand that." A teenage visitor to the Center concurs: "I don't get confused. It's all fictional. I mean, it's fun, but it's nothing like the real thing." Anyone who saw the WikiLeaks video released in April, 2010 (link below) that shows a helicopter gunship pilot's view of mowing down Iraqi civilians as though he were playing a video game might come to a different conclusion.

Katie Salen says the distinction between the real world and the virtual world is a peculiarly adult perspective, "an idea that's come from a generation where 'virtual' didn't exist . . . but kids have the ability to kind of move seamlessly between the digital and the real." Rachel Dretzin echoes that sentiment:"Maybe there's something these kids are getting that we [adults] aren't sure how to value yet." Kids are the experts, adults are out of it and just plain stupid. Never mind that the people who make and market these technologies are very crafty adults who know exactly what they are doing as they lure young people into all-consuming technology dependence.

Summing up the video's me-centered consumerist ideology, correspondent Douglas Rushkoff muses, "But when you stand back and look awhile, it becomes clear that people will take almost any technology and use it to express themselves, to find other people, to remake the world on their own terms . . . I love the possibilities of a digital life."

When I stand back and look, it becomes clear that the corporate powers are forcing junk technologies on us that are destroying our health, our communities, and the planet. We are being reduced to cyber-serfs. I for one will stick with the possibilities of real life.

Peter Crabb recently spearheaded a new policy at the college where he teaches: cell phone use in the classroom are banned. He is a social psychologist who lives among the flora, fauna, and fungi of rural eastern Pennsylvania. For now, at least, he can be contacted at pbcrabb at verizon dot net.

Sources

PBS digital nation

collateralmurder.com

Further reading:

Your Brain on Computers: More Americans Sense a Downside to an Always Plugged-In Existence, by Marjorie Connelly, New York Times, June 6, 2010

Consumed by the Web, by Ruth Marcus, Washington Post, June 9, 2010