

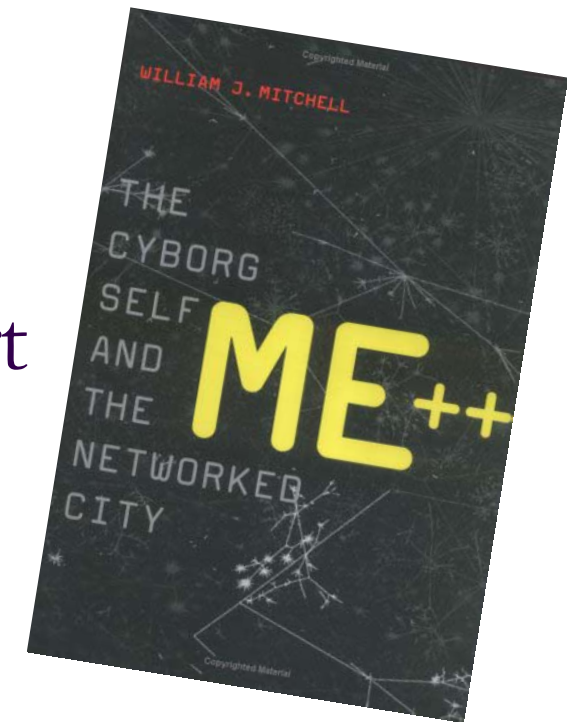
Me ++ The cyborg self and the networked city Digital Book Club

William J Mitchell

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Contents | Connecting creatures Wireless bipeds Our take Actions

“Disconnection would be amputation. I am part of the networks and the networks are part of me. I link therefore I am”



Me++ author, MIT's William Mitchell, describes himself as an electro-nomadic cyborg; 'Disconnection would be amputation. I am part of the networks, and the networks are part of me. I show up in the directories. I am visible to Google. I link therefore I am'.

Chronicles of the future don't come richer, better grounded or more intense than Mitchell's trilogy of the networked world. *Me ++* untangles the way fleshware weaves into the urban futurescape with such clarity and intensity you're left reeling. But here's a warning: if you are one of those who 'want a simpler life, choosing to unplug and to live off the grid in Idaho', then this is not for you. Mitchell describes himself as an electro-nomadic cyborg; 'Disconnection would be amputation. I am part of the networks, and the networks are part of me. I show up in the directories. I am visible to Google. I link therefore I am'. Mitchell is head of the MIT Lab's academic program in Media Arts and Sciences, and former dean of MIT's School of Architecture and Planning.

Connecting creatures

We're woven into the urban fabric and now the digital fabric, 'our muscular and skeletal, physiological and nervous systems have been artificially augmented and expanded'. The reach of our presence extends indefinitely and 'interacts with the similarly extended reach of others to produce a global system of transfer, actuation, sensing and control'.

Mitchell anchors the future as the natural progression from a journey that began with the first roads, 'primitive forms of network infrastructure'. Along the way he wanders through the industrial era that saw human power augmented first by animals, then steam and later electricity that could be delivered remotely from the power source.

Telephony was the threshold which let sensory networks explode and then become augmented into our personal space – 'more part of our bodies than part of the architecture'. As surely as Moore's law is twinned with compression, audio become video, but more profoundly changed the nature of communication: the convention of synchronous became asynchronous, one-to-one became many-to-many, and then any-to-any. He reminds us how post-Foucauldians focus on the notion of gaze, and how the unrestricted gaze in an any-to-any world rejected and trivialized Orwell's modernist fantasy of Big Brother to replace it with a perfectly omniscient Big Other. This is the perpetual ebbing and flowing of data in and out of the lives of characters created by Gibson, the sci-fi visionary who coined the phrase cyberspace and gave us the visual language to describe being jacked-into the networked world.

'I am both a surveying subject at the centre of my electronic web and the object of multimodal electronic surveillance. Re-released Big Brother (or Big Other 2.0) is made from little pieces linked together; he/she is everywhere and in all of us'

Whether accidental, tangential, or intentional, whether requested or unwarranted, this is the climate of permanent surveillance we've imperceptibly slid into: 'the default condition is electronic transparency, and you have to work hard to produce limited zones of privacy'. All of which gives a deprivatization of space, bolsters the premium on privacy, and should focus legislators on the protection of data and identity as they once focused on crime and defence. My reading of Mitchell is an implication that the rules of Haussmann's rearchitected of Paris into Grande Boulevards and lines of orderly control, need to be negotiated and transposed into the legal structures for data, freedom and protection in the digital networked community.

More from MIT

MIT has been an inspirational think-tank since its start. Nicholas Negroponte's work made translucent windows into the future and even now his seminal text, 'Being Digital' is a foundation stone for the digital networked society.

Use the links in our Digital Book Club to keep up on new publications from the team at MIT.



If the protection of property is a cornerstone in society, then now identity can be ported, then it follows that its protection is paramount.

‘Organization: units and hierarchies *emerge* from the dynamics of interaction’

Like much of Mitchell's - and our - future, whether delocalising the nervous system is friend or foe lies in the hands of the holder. As I reread *Me++*, AOL were running full page adverts in our national press to focus the debate on regulation and freedom. But is there any *one* who can regulate? Are our political models - based on nation states and mixed economies - even fit for the task? In a peer-to-peer world, can wikis be the answer to social support - less about control than about enabling for informed choices - and can any of this be possible without uniformly high education standards? Alas Mitchell falls short of taking us there, but he takes us to the point where we have to ask the question. The new lessons in self organizational systems that have come from control theory - swarming bees, flocking birds, tribal teenagers - seem uncomfortable if multiplied up to become the dominant social framework (and all this when the public debate gets no further than the digital divide and in enabling those without access). But if self-organising systems with, the rich feedback of the digital networked community, have 'units and hierarchies that emerge from the dynamics of interaction', then at what social cost?

The augmenting of our own neural networks, by those outside is something our generation has always known. We have grown up 'outsourcing' much of our mental arithmetic to calculators, so the transition of outsourcing our data to databases, our knowledge to networks and our interrogation to search engines, does not feel that unnatural - indeed for the digital generations it *is* natural. But step forward to outsourcing decision-making, and replacing our own judgments with those of anonymous peered communities and that comfort vanishes.

But our generation is still locked in the mindset of a rather antiquated notion of a computer; the construction of a device that sits in an office, a home or a bag. What happens when that computer *becomes* the office home or the bag? What happens as processing gets distributed over the fabric of our homes or the entire urban skin? Fastforward into only the near future and we see a world of ubiquitous RFID tags, all chattering away deep in conversations we're oblivious to, as oblivious as I am to the electrical chatter my internal control system as my digits flick across this keyboard or as my diaphragm draws gasses across the exchange membranes of my lungs.

Mitchell's multidisciplinary drawings are as refreshing as they are ceaseless.

Wireless bipeds

Mitchell unpeels the layers of wireless that envelop us today. From Bluetooth to GEO satellite systems, he's folds each into the next. He talks of a new type of nomad - electronic nomads - who can wander through the networked spaces, porting data and connecting to systems as they need to. The relevance of how backpackers select their degree of self sufficiency may seem tangential, but the analogies he uses build a story of growing freedom from the tyranny of distance and gentle progression towards the networked individual.

The concept of nodal subjectivity resonates well with today's online homesteaders. Their communities are building up virtual mirrors of the structures many traditional communities have taken decades to hone. However Mitchell argues that 'we are experiencing a fundamental shift in subjectivity', citing Taylor's observations that 'in emerging network culture, *subjectivity is nodular*... I am plugged into other objects and subjects in such a way that I become myself in and through them, even as they become themselves in and through me'. Mitchell acknowledges perspectives of social science disciplines, but concludes that for those leading the networked generation 'disconnection would be amputation. I am part of the networks and the networks are part of me. I link therefore I am.

With much of the text acting as a literature review to the networked world it's packed not just with the jigsaw pieces of that world, but with the supporting layers of foundations that enable it: microfabrication, nanotech, wearables, invisible money, filmless movies, access, spatial recognition, portability; it's all here and more.

What does it mean? Our take...

This is big picture stuff - the twenty year view - stuff to expand your horizons and reframe the context. Sure, there's lots to quibble about, perspectives to challenge, interpretations to argue against, and many more possible futures to consider. But whatever your starting point, Mitchell's work is, at the very least thought provoking, and for many of us, a plausible chronicle of the future. The implications of an augmented world which weaves both the physical and data presence of people into its socio-economic landscape and architecture, are so vast, numerous and profound, it's difficult to frame how we should even assess them. The effects on companies are as deep as the effects on citizens, and the effect on culture as pervasive as the restructuring of community. The death of distance was only the start, it's given way to life through nodes and whether you're searching on Google, messaging on MSN, blogging and vlogging, or simply working remotely, you're already heading towards being one of Mitchell's cyborgs in the networked city.

Actions

This is big blue sky stuff - the twenty year horizon - so go easy on changing your life or your business right now. Reflect and think about where this touches your world, look for the small changes you can make and be conscious of how transitory our current world is.

Access more of our Digital Book Club Reviews by signing up for our email service. Buy your copy of the book for reference in a single click through Amazon affiliate DigitalStrategyConsulting.com; see what else we're recommending and why.

Dust off 'Being Digital', Negroponte's seminal text that still feels like it was written tomorrow.

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Invite us to come and talk with your team about changes in the near future and their impact on your business.

Resources & Links

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About the author

Danny Meadows-Klue has been a commentator on the digital networked industries since 1995. He managed the UK's first online newspaper and has helped run web businesses ranging from mass market portals and consumer magazines, to online stores, search and email services. Among his industry roles he is the co-founder and former chairman of the UK and European Internet and Interactive Advertising Bureau, and has been lecturing on digital marketing for more than a decade. He set up Digital Strategy Consulting in 2000 to help firms accelerate their own digital networked media strategies.



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Making sense of a digital world

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