

IN THE SLUMBER OF THE INTERACTIVE

Digital Interactive Technology and the Myth of Empowerment in Consumer Culture

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The next 12 months are expected to be a significant period for building consumer acceptance of such marketer-friendly technologies as broadband Internet, wireless and interactive television services. As a result, expect to see a boost in Web retailing and use of interactive television commercials, and a move closer to bringing those ubiquitous Personal Digital Assistants to fulfill their promise as a marketer's dream. Dot-com retailing and business-to-business online exchanges were the hot marketing technology stories of the 1990's, but at the beginning of the 21st century, the technologies are weaving marketing into consumers' lives on a daily, or even minute-by-minute, basis (Jarvis,2002: 1).

What?!?!? Technology is going to “weave marketing” into my every moment? Is it just me, or does that thought send shivers down your spine too? When I imagine the impact of technological innovation on my life, advertising is the last thing that comes to mind. As a consumer, my experience and understanding of technology is acquired through the marketplace; I come to understand the meaning of new technology by the ways that it is represented to me, usually, in the form of promotional material. Accordingly, I have been told that technological innovations such as cell phones and Personal Digital Assistants are new conveniences that are designed to make my life easier, more efficient, and in some cases, even safer. How silly of me to assume that these technologies are designed for me, since the above quote clearly indicates that they are little more than the answer to a marketer's dream. Why didn't they put *that* information on the Palm website? Why doesn't the Bell wireless commercial mention *that* in the pitch? The companies that produce these technologies present digital interactivity as an amazing new tool that will afford me freedoms that I have never even dreamed of. Even before I engage with these technologies personally, as a consumer, my understanding of them is constructed from the information supplied in their promotional material. But the above quote indicates that digital interactive technologies (DITs) are not really designed for my

benefit or to extend my personal freedoms, but rather to expose me to increasing amounts of advertising. If this is the case, am I still empowered by using these technologies? If DIT is really a marketing tool, can it also extend my ability to impact the world around me, or increase my agency as a person? I think that the best way to address these questions is to put them in the context of consumer culture.

We live in a culture that has been saturated with the ideology of consumerism. Theorists such as Stewart Ewen and Judith Williamson argue that the dominant ethos of consumption has been integrated into the North American worldview (Ewen:1976, Williamson:1978). The advertising industry imbues commodities with attractive symbolic meanings that consumers wish to possess, and thereby maintains the cycles of production and consumption. In one sense, just like other commodities, as technological innovations become fetishized, they become the *objects* of consumer culture. Yet unlike other commodities, technology seems to have a dual role in the processes of consumer culture. Not only is technology an *object* of consumer culture, but it serves as *agent* as well. By *agent*, I am referring to the ways that technology is used by corporations to further their financial goals. *Agent* in this sense does not indicate autonomy or intentionality on the part of technology, but rather how it functions to perpetuate consumer culture. Through the infrastructure of technology (Internet, television, radio, et cetera) the message of consumption is able to grow and spread across time and space. But as our participation in technology as both object and agent reproduces the ideology of capitalism, what are the repercussions for our own effectivity? (By “effectivity” I am referring to an individual’s ability to have meaningful impact upon the world.) If, as consumers, we are empowered by digital interactivity, does this have any implications for

the kind of action involved in political agency? If empowerment is to be located in the act of consumption, does DIT – in the role of object and agent – diminish our political enfranchisement? In this paper, I will attempt to address these questions. Paying special attention to the development of Interactive Television (ITV), in part one I will examine DIT development in order to construct a framework for understanding how technology, as both object and agent, is implicated in the persistence of consumer culture. In part two, I will broaden my perspective so I can address the notion of interactivity in general. By taking a deeper look at the notion of interactivity, I will examine the ways that DIT impacts upon the agency of its users. Through my object/agent framework I will challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions about technology that emerge through the discourses of consumer culture, and analyse the impact of DIT on human agency. I will argue that in many ways, the experience of technology within consumer culture is that of a dream where one believes they are awake. In other words, our experiences are those of a culture trapped in the slumber of the interactive.

In order to develop this framework, I will begin in part one by establishing what is meant by a dominant ideology of consumer culture. Next, I will examine the ways that meaning is constructed within consumer culture. Using Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and Jhally's application of the fetish to advertising, I will set up a model for understanding how technology becomes the object of consumer culture. While my argument will apply to DIT in general, I will be paying special attention to the rhetoric surrounding ITV. I believe that the innovation of DIT is unique in that it has the potential to have an unprecedented impact due to the existing popularity of television. Using concrete examples from ITV, cell phone, and PDA promotional discourse, I will

employ these notions as I examine how the meaning of DIT is constructed through their promotional material. To further this position, I will examine Stewart Millar's notion of "digital discourse" and Berland's theory of "techno-evolutionism." In the final section of part one, I will turn my attention to the notion of technology as agent. Using Slack's notion of "expressive causality" and Williams' model of determination developed in his analysis of television, I will make a case for ITV as agent. Integral to this argument is the notion that technology is an expression of the essence of the social whole; in my analysis, that social whole is consumer culture. In order to extend the object/agent framework to the analysis of human agency, in part two I will broaden my focus to the notion of interactivity in general. I will begin this section by examining how the notion of interactivity is conceptualized across several disciplines. Using the ideas of Lev Manovich and Paul Virilio, I will then put forth the case that despite the promotional rhetoric, DITs can actually function as tools of *disempowerment*. Borrowing from Ellen M. Wood and Jean Baudrillard, I will argue that within the framework of technology as both object/agent, this disempowerment stems from an essential confusion between the citizen and the consumer.

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PART ONE:

TOOLS FOR TRADE: TECHNOLOGY AS OBJECT AND AGENT OF CONSUMER CULTURE

(i): Somnambulist Shoppers? Theories of Dominant Ideology and Consumer Culture.

Within the dominant ideology of consumer culture, technology is both object and agent. Before I develop this framework of object and agent in more detail, it will be useful to define what is meant by dominant ideology; for this we will look to the work of Raymond Williams. In *Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory*, Williams poses a challenge to the traditional Marxist notions of base and superstructure. By providing an alternative view of determination that builds on Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Williams provides a model of ideology that can account for plurality within class divided social formations (Williams, 1982:1). Williams' argument begins with notion that the Marxist theory of culture has commonly depended on the notion of a determining base and a determined superstructure (Williams:3). Yet according to Williams, the mainstream Marxist notion of determination is in need of re-evaluation. Rather than viewing determination as "a predicted, prefigured and controlled content," we should instead consider it as "a setting of limits and the exertion of pressures" (Williams:6). In this way, superstructure can be seen in terms of cultural practices, not simply as content that is dependent on actions of the base. In his challenge to mainstream Marxism, Williams draws on Gramsci's notion of hegemony and argues that ideology is not merely an abstract imposed system of meaning, but rather is deeply saturated within consciousness (Williams:8). Consequently, our social, political, and cultural ideals are not a result of manipulation, but are experienced as common sense. As we are about to

see, Williams' concept of ideology is a far more tenable notion than the traditional Marxist version, since his use hegemony accounts for both domination *and* cultural practices that oppose the dominant view.

Williams' model of ideology begins with the fact that in every society there is always a system of dominant practices, meanings and values. However, this is not an abstracted dominant system; it is a hegemonic system, which is organized and lived through the everyday practices of individuals:

[Ideology] is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced, as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives (Williams:9).

Of great importance to this particular notion of ideology is that it is experienced *as* practice; at no time is the process static. In this sense, the dominant culture is not an intangible form exerting pressure and control; it is a process of incorporation whereby social institutions (such as education and the family) are the basis of transmission of dominant culture. Through such institutions certain meanings and practices are chosen and accepted, some are excluded, and others are reinterpreted into forms that support the dominant culture (Williams: 9). It is through the processes of these institutions that a dominant culture is continually reshaped. What makes this system significantly different from the abstract imposed dominant ideology of tradition Marxist thought, is that it has the ability to be flexible and accommodate alternative, "emergent," and oppositional meanings and values (Williams:11).

Using this as our working model of dominant ideology, I would like to now focus on the idea of consumer culture as one of the dominant ideologies of our time. Only once

we establish how consumer culture functions as a dominant ideology can we begin to understand the processes of meaning construction whereby technological commodities become the objects of consumer culture. There is little doubt that in today's North American society, consumption has taken on enormous importance in the daily lives of individuals. The commodification of everything – from jeans to genes – is a testament to this growing cultural trend. How did the activity of consumption become such a major part of our collective consciousness? In his book *Captains of Consciousness*, Stuart Ewen uses a historical analysis to account for the emergence of the American culture of consumption. According to Ewen, the establishment of the mass-production/mass-consumption economy in the U.S. involved far more than the development of productive resources and infrastructures; it was in fact an ideological attempt “to channel thought and behaviour into patterns which fitted the prescribed dimensions of industrial life” (Ewen, 1976:52). Intrinsic to the evolution of mass production was the creation of a cultural ethos of consumption. In other words, the 20th century American economy of mass production required a similar level of mass-consumption in order to thrive:

It became a central function of business to be able to define a social order which would feed and adhere to the demands of the productive process and at the same time absorb, neutralize, and contain the transitional impulses of a working class emerging from the unrequited drudgery of nineteenth-century industrialization. More and more, the language of business expressed the imperative of social and ideological hegemony (ibid.).

From this perspective, the development of consumerism was actually “an aggressive device of corporate survival” (Ewen: 54). Central to Ewan's argument is the fact that the advertising industry played an important role in the *creation* of consumers to satisfy the requirements of capitalism. The 1920s were a time of declining traditional values, and

advertising became the principle method of creating desires and habits to fuel the mass-production/mass-consumption cycle. According to Ewen, advertising was used as a tool of social order, “whose self-espoused purpose was the nullification of the customs of the ages” (Ewen, 1976:19). Furthermore, Ewen contends that its purpose was extended to the solidification of the productive process by “superimposing new conceptions of individual attainment and community desire,” and that “the development of an ideology of consumption responded both to the issue of social control and the need for goods distribution (ibid.). For Ewen, advertising was a way to habituate people to buying as a solution to the new realities of a growing industrial society.

A parallel notion of a cultural ethos of consumption is presented in *Promotional Culture*, where Andrew Wernick argues that promotional categories (advertising, marketing, and public relations) have become a pervasive element of cultural formation, thereby enabling the saturation of the market into all aspects of social life. As he explains, “[P]romotion has culturally generalized as commodification has spread....competitive exchange relations have generally established themselves as an axial principle of social life” (Wernick, 1991:186). Since all social discourses have become utterly saturated with promotional rhetoric, we are unable to think outside the promotional frame of reference. Moreover, in the sense that promotion shapes the signifying materials of a culture, it thus becomes a “dominant structuring principle” (ibid.).

Thus, the “cultural ethos of consumption” and the saturation of culture with a “promotional rhetoric” are two ways of articulating how consumerism has become a dominant system of meanings and values. These ideas about consumer culture are

echoed, extended, and debated in a growing body literature, the review of which does not fall within the scope of this paper. (Baudrillard, 1975; Boorstin, 1962; Fox & Lears, 1983; Haug, 1987; Jhally, 1987; Leiss, Kline and Jhally, 1986; Williamson, 1978)

However, it suffices to say that many of these theories, such as those of Ewen and Wernick, are in keeping with Williams' ideas about ideology as a set of hegemonic meanings and practices which constitute a sense of reality for most people in society (Williams:9). As we have just seen, in consumer culture, the "cultural ethos of consumption" and "promotional rhetoric" constitute the meanings and practices that support the dominant ideology. For Williams, the hegemony of dominant culture is constantly being remade in order to accommodate, reinterpret, or dilute oppositional expressions or forces, and the social institutions of family, education, work, et cetera, facilitate the process. However, when examining consumer culture as a dominant ideology it appears that the advertising industry is yet another institution that plays an integral role in the generation of meanings and practices. The advertising industry imbues commodities with attractive symbolic meanings that consumers wish to possess, thereby maintaining the cycles of production and consumption, upon which the dominant ideology of consumer culture depends. When faced with oppositional meanings or practices, advertising incorporates these alternative views in order to maintain the hegemony of consumer culture. In other words, through advertising commodities become meaningful and the dominant culture is constantly being remade. In view of this, I believe that the construction of meaning in advertising is a crucial part of the hegemony of consumer culture. Before we can develop the notion of technology as object, it is therefore necessary to examine how advertising contributes to the construction of

meaning in consumer culture. To make the link between advertising and meaning-construction, we shall begin with Marx and his theory of commodity fetishism.

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(ii): Object Relations: Technology, Fetishism, and the Construction of Meaning in Consumer Culture.

In *The Codes of Advertising*, Sut Jhally maintains that fetishism consists of “seeing the meaning of things as a part of their physical existence when in fact that meaning is created by their integration into a *system* of meaning” (Jhally, 1987:29). For Jhally, the meaning of commodities is constructed from their representation in advertising. Jhally’s analysis is based on the Marxist notion that commodity fetishism is a product of the two-fold nature of the commodity: for Marx, the commodity is comprised of both use-value and exchange-value. Use-value relates to the *utility* of a commodity—the value of a good at the moment of its use. By contrast, exchange-value is the expression of a commodity at the moment of its exchange. Rather than the expression of a specific utility, the exchange-value is realized when a capitalist produces a use-value to be sold (exchanged) on the market. Whereas use-value expresses a social relationship between human/ need and object/ satisfaction, exchange-value represents the rate at which one commodity can be traded for another, and therefore appears to express a non-social relationship between objects.

It is here that Marx directs our attention to the “mystery” of the commodity. Although exchange-value may appear to be a neutral relationship between objects, the commodity itself is the expression of human labour in production. Within the capitalist

mode of production, the worker is forced to sell her labour in exchange for wages.

According to Marx, this “alienated” labour relationship necessitates that a social element is involved in the apparent non-social relationship of the exchange of equivalent objects.

As Marx states, “As soon as men start to work for each other in any way, their labour also assumes a social form” (Marx, 1976: 164). Consequently, the commodity is actually an expression of human labour and by extension, the relation between commodities is actually the expression of a relation between different acts of labour (Lee: xiii). It is for this reason that Marx asserts that exchange-value is the expression of a social relation between people, rather than a non-social relation between objects: “It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx, 1976: 165). In other words, as commodities are exchanged on the capitalist market, the alienated social relations of labour are hidden and *understood* as the natural properties of objects, thereby becoming fetishized.

The theory of commodity fetishism explains how the realm of exchange – the market – comes to structure how we understand society (Jhally, 1993:12). By hiding the social relations of production, the fetish allows for an unlimited range of meanings to be attached to the commodity, thereby extending its importance in social life. As Jhally points out, while capitalist exchange systematically empties out the *real* meaning of commodities, advertising functions to “*refill this void with its own symbols*” (Jhally, 1987:51). So, as the fetish hides the true value of a commodity (human labour) advertising steps in to reconstruct the social meanings of the products we buy. In the surrender of its value to the meaning constructed in advertising, the commodity has

become an object of the consumer culture in which it is found. By object, I am referring to the fact that once a commodity has been fetishized and imbued with advertising's symbolic meanings, it has been constructed into *a thing* that it is not. In this sense, the commodity fetish can be seen as an important factor in the production of meaning in the dominant ideology of consumer culture.

By way of illustration, let us consider a practical example of how a commodity is fetishized and objectified within consumer culture. To do this, we will begin by looking at the example of Interactive Television (ITV). ITV is not really a new technology; rather it is a syncretic medium based on the convergence between television and internet technologies. Through this technology, viewers can watch television programming that has been equipped with online search capabilities. However, through its representation in the promotional discourse, ITV has been portrayed as the vanguard of all technologies, a means of freedom and choice and ultimately, power. For example, according to Microsoft, ITV gives viewers "greater control," because it blends "state-of-the-art television technology with the Internet's ability to deliver broad, deep, personalized information" ("Microsoft TV- What TV Can Be"). With the "power of the internet," television viewers have at their disposal "vast information riches" (ibid.). More than just a tool for information, MSN TV promises that "you can get closer to those you care about" (ibid). According to Rogers Interactive TV (a customer of the MS ITV platform), with their services, even if you know nothing about computers, "you'll enjoy all the benefits of cutting edge technology" ("Introducing Rogers Interactive Television"). ABC's Enhanced TV promises the viewer that she will be able to "interact with the broadcast" ("ABC's Enhanced Television"). According to AOL President Bob Pittman,

AOLTV uses “the power of interactivity” to connect friends and family in the AOL community (interview, MSNBC 06-19-00). From these descriptions, it seems that by using ITV viewers not only become technology experts, but they gain control and even become closer to friends and family. How ironic that a technology that isolates the individual from their physical community can also provide intimacy and warmth. The promotional discourses used to describe ITV have attributed to these technologies attractive social qualities, which upon consumption are available to the user. It is important to recognize that the rhetoric used in these advertisements is constructed by advertisers to sell products to consumers. The images and messages expressed in these ads link the use of their products to very powerful elements of society- the primal desire for connection and emotional warmth, and the ability to attain life’s rewards with minimal exertion. Not only do these images connote these almost mystical benefits, but they are often portrayed as “expert” information. While the actual use-value of ITV is nothing more than the ability to select from lists of on-screen choices, the meaning constructed through the fetishized advertising images connotes a very different understanding of ITV: somehow, the use of ITV will provide enjoyment through the benefits of technology. How is one’s life benefited through this process, and why is cutting-edge technology going produce enjoyment? The ideas of enjoyment, control, and connections with loved-ones are highly attractive, even sacred attributes within our culture of consumption. However, in the hands of advertisers, these attractive symbolic qualities construct a more marketable object.

While ITV seems to be the current “killer-app,” this kind of representation is not limited to ITV alone. DITs such as cell phones and PDAs are portrayed through a very

similar discourse and rhetoric. For example, a recent promotional campaign for LG cell phones promises that by using the product, consumers can “mobilize” their lives. In a series of ads in *The Globe and Mail*, consumers are told that by using this product, they can directly enhance the quality of their lives. The first of the series shows via a split-screen format an image of a man golfing, beside an image of two men in suits shaking hands in a boardroom. Underneath these images reads the caption, “Work on a deal while you work on your swing” (*The Globe and Mail, Section A July 02, 2002*). The ad declares that the new TM520 Tri-Mode handset “allows you to do two things at once – stay connected with the things you need to know and the things you love to do” (ibid.). The language and imagery used in the ad suggests that through the use of this particular product, one can enjoy a life of leisure *and* corporate finance *at the same time*. In the second of the series, the same split-screen style is used, but instead of the man golfing, there is an image of a father putting bait on a fishing rod, while his young son hugs him from behind. Under this reads the caption, “The communication tool that doubles as life support” (*The Globe and Mail, Section A, July 24th, 2002*). Again, this ad is suggesting that the cell phone it peddles will allow the user to do two things at once: gain freedom from the burdens of work, and in this case attain love through the ability to bond with a child. By attaching the ability to attain these simple pleasures to the use of a cell phone, these images produce the fantasies of freedom, leisure, and love that carry so much currency in our fast-paced culture of consumption. These attractive symbolic qualities are used to transform ITV from a technological innovation into means of transcending the complexities of modern life. But what these ads fail to represent is that by extending the responsibilities of work into the realm of leisure time, the quality of that time is greatly

diminished. How relaxing is closing a deal while on the golf course, or having to answer to an angry boss while on a fishing trip with your son? Yet the language used in these ads portrays the cell phone as tool of empowerment, a way to achieve happiness that is due to as a god-given right. In other words, the fetishistic language and imagery in these ads transform the technology from a means of communication into an object of almost divine importance; thus transformed, the technology has become the object of consumer culture.

As I have mentioned, another interesting aspect of the way the DITs are portrayed in advertising is that the ad itself is often framed in terms of educational material. For example, a recent Palm marketing supplement in *The Globe and Mail* (July 10, 2002) is designed to look like a regular section of the newspaper. Using similar fonts to the newspaper, the supplement even features the official *Globe and Mail* banner, with the name and date of the paper sprawled across the top of the section. The pagination even corresponds to the newspaper's official style, from P1 to P5. ("P" in this case meaning Palm, of course.) The section offers "news stories" related to the advantages of Palm PDAs in the workplace, how employees benefit from the technology, and how corporations are ultimately more profitable when they incorporate Palm into their organizational structure. The section even offers an op-ed piece entitled, "Which Palm Handheld defines you as a person?" (ibid.). In another piece entitled "Kindergarten to Post-Doc: See What Palm is offering students and educators" (ibid.:P4), readers are enlightened to the ways that Palm can enhance one's scholastic performance. However cleverly crafted they may be, the articles in the supplement are nothing more than weakly disguised ways to extend the market of Palm users. But the method of presentation

masks what amounts to a marketing ploy cloaked as valid educational information. In fact, the “content” itself is legitimated and differentiated from the advertising that appears in the supplement – advertising for Palm, that is. While it may seem harmless enough, this kind of advertising can be extremely duplicitous. As a supplement in a well-respected newspaper, the promotional information contained in this ad is portrayed as legitimated as educational and worthy. Whereas one might be sceptical of information provided by a salesperson, the content of the Palm supplement has an “official” nature to it, and is less likely to be second-guessed. Furthermore, as the promotional rhetoric is cast in guise of neutral information, the meanings it promotes become understood as taken-for-granted assumptions about the technology itself.

That this kind of discourse relies on a fetishized and objectified image of technology is not unique to ITV, cell phones and PDAs. In *Cracking the Gender Code*, Melanie Stewart-Millar argues that the imagination of popular culture has been captured by promotional images of technological freedom and interactivity (Stewart-Miller, 1998:13). Not only do these images represent technological progress; they also portray technology as a crucial cure for all our social problems (ibid.). In this age of digital technology, innovation is facilitated through the rise of what Stewart Miller calls digital discourse, which is:

...brought to us by leading technologists, computer industry elites and journalists, performs a number of important functions in society: it stimulates the social need for digital services, circulates myths of technotopia, popularizes new language and metaphors, and of course, it sells digital hardware and software itself (Stewart-Millar: 24).

From this perspective, our understanding of technology comes from its representation in the discourse surrounding it. The “myths” circulating in this discourse – technology as

transcendence, cyberspace as freedom, increased efficiency through speed, to name just a few – contribute to an attractive yet unrealistic image of technology. Nowhere in these portrayals are images of longer work hours, higher stress levels due to increased speed of work, or the social conditions whereby the technology was produced. As I argue above with regards to the construction of meaning in advertising, digital discourse is ripe with technotopic imagery that contributes to a very specific meaning of technology. In this sense, Stewart-Millar’s digital discourse is another way of articulating how technology is fetishized and has become the object of consumer culture.

A similar argument regarding the construction of the meaning of technology is expressed by Jody Berland. According to Berland, the representation of technology in public discourse shapes our attitudes and practices relating to the web (Berland, 2000:237). Depictions of digital technology, promising “sublime transcendence” come together to form a discourse of techno-evolutionism (Berland: 238). Fuelled by a scientific metaphor of evolution, the discourse of techno-evolutionism relies on the assumption that technological progress will ultimately lead to social progress as well. Constructed in part through the consumer discourses of advertising and promotion, this understanding of technology is fetishized as matter of market strategy (Berland:256).

Returning for a moment to the previous examples of ITV promotional material, we can see how the concepts of digital discourse and techno-evolutionism can be operationalized as aspects of the fetishization and objectification of technology in consumer culture. Viewers are repeatedly told that the use of ITV will secure freedom, control, even contact with loved ones. The adoption of the innovation of ITV is portrayed as a necessary step forward, and even those who know nothing about

technology must participate, lest they be left behind. My analysis has shown that as part of a larger cultural metaphor of progress, ITV has been construed as much more than the simple ability to point and click during a television program. Bearing in mind the notion of consumer culture as dominant ideology, digital discourse and the techno-evolutionary metaphor are important aspects of the hegemonic forces that shape technological meaning and practice. In the sense that the meaning of ITV has been shaped by these forces, it has become the object of consumer culture.

In the next section, I would like to analyze the notion of technology as agent of consumer culture, but I will begin by briefly summarizing what I have covered thus far. Beginning with William's use of hegemony in his definition of ideology, I examined the notion of consumer culture as dominant ideology. Using Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, I considered how the meaning of commodities is constructed in consumer culture. I argued that through their fetishized representation in advertising, commodities become the *objects* of consumer culture. To illustrate this, I critiqued the ways that ITV and other DITs are represented in their promotional material. Using Stewart-Millar's notion of digital discourse and Berland's theory of techno-evolutionism, I concluded this section with the idea that the promotion of ITV functions within the hegemony of a dominant ideology of consumer culture, and in this context, ITV has become the object of that culture.

Yet technology is not simply a blank slate or inert object onto which meaning is imposed; once imbued with attractive meaning, technology becomes an important agent in the perpetuation of consumer culture. In the following section, I will develop the framework of technology as agent. By *agent*, I am referring to the ways in which

technology is employed as an instrument in order to secure the specific effect of increased consumer activity. To elaborate the notion of technology as agent, I will examine the work of Slack and Williams. Paying specific attention to Slack's notion of "expressive causality" and Williams' model of determination developed in his analysis of television, I will explore the usefulness of these ideas as applied to the relationship between technology and consumer culture. Specifically, these models avoid the pitfalls of simple and symptomatic determinism in that they recognize the role of intention in the processes of research and development. Using these notions of causality as my conceptual architecture, I will demonstrate how they are articulated in the development of ITV. By analyzing the current state of research and development of ITV, I will illustrate how this new technological innovation is both an expression of, and a contributing factor to the consumer culture from which it emerges. This analysis will reveal how through the inculcation of symbolic meaning, ITV becomes a powerful marketing tool in the hands of its creators.

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(iii): Secret Agents? Technology and the Persistence of Consumer Culture.

An effective starting point for constructing the framework of technology as agent of consumer culture is Slack's work on expressive causality. Slack argues that mechanistic conceptions of causality are untenable in that they position technological effects outside of the social fabric of society. The mechanistic conception of causality – found in the philosophical traditions of mechanism, empiricism and positivism – has shaped much of Western thought on the relationship between technology and society

(Slack, 1984: 53). According to the basic tenet of the mechanistic conception of causality, “causes and effects are discrete and isolated objects, events, or conditions that exercise effectivity externally” (ibid.). However, Slack argues that an expressive causality position offers a view of effectivity that is sensitive to the particularities of social context. Unlike the mechanistic conception of causality, from an expressive causality perspective communication technologies are not seen as discrete, autonomous objects whose effects are either inherent or symptomatic of social forces. Rather, the expressive causality position views a technology as both cause and effect its society (Slack: 64). This means that technology not only exercises effectivity on a society, but develops as a response to the societal conditions within which it emerges. In this sense technology is not autonomous, but integral to society *as a whole*. Using a Hegelian notion of totality, Slack’s argument conceives of the social whole as an expressive totality in which phenomena (such as technology) are expressions of some inner essence. Parts of the whole are actually expressions of the whole. For Slack, causality in this sense is seen to be internal to the whole, in that phenomena are actually the effect of the unfolding of the essence: “the essence exercises effectivity through its parts” (Slack: 65). So, technology – a phenomenon which is an expression of the essence – is the *effect* of the unfolding of the essence. However, since the totality evolves as the essence unfolds, as an expression of the essence, technology can be seen as a reciprocal *cause* of the totality. It is this aspect of technology – its role as reciprocal cause – that will be a key building block in my framework of technology as agent of consumer culture.

Slack develops the expressive causality argument as she explains how within a Marxist conception of expressive causality, the totality (social whole) has a specifically

materialist essence. In this sense, technology (a phenomenon of the totality) is a reflection of the structure of commodity relations within the capitalist social formation (Slack: 71). Slack's use of a Marxist framework is useful for developing the notion of technology as agent of consumer culture, since it is contextualized within the structure of capitalist relations. Through the work of Lukács, Slack provides a way of understanding how technology has a reciprocal impact on the society from which it emerges. According to Lukács, within the capitalist mode of production, the commodity fetish penetrates all aspects of society. Within this totally reified system, technique is seen as a "moment" or expression of the existing mode of production (ibid.). Of relevance to my framework of agency is that this is not a uni-directional movement of influence; as productive forces determine the development of technology, so too does technology impact the further development of productive forces:

Yet once we understand that the conception of totality is one in which all of its parts are expressions of the unfolding of commodity relations, the way in which the technology retroactively influences the productive forces can only be to further develop the commodity fetish by enhancing the development of capitalist manufacturing (Slack: 72)

From this passage it is clear that technology is not an *actor* in the sense of an autonomous force impacting society. However, as an expression of the essence of consumer culture, the existence of a particular technology perpetuates this essence, and in this sense, technology can be seen as an agent.

According to Slack, the weakness of the expressive causality position – such as in the theories of Mumford, Ellul, Lukács, and Marcuse – lies in its apparent reductionism; when social structure is viewed as a totality composed of an unfolding essence, everything is reduced to this essence (Slack: 77). Consequently, she argues that the

expressive position denies the possibility that a technology might actually contradict the essence of a social formation. In other words, Slack argues that the expressive causality position cannot account for instances where a technology does not correspond to the dominant ideology. I find this particular issue to be a major weakness in Slack's argument, because it denies the possibility of counter-totalities and parallel, contradictory or opposing essences. The expressive position, as articulated by Slack, puts forward an essentialized vision of existence, where reality is defined as *one* social whole. However, if we incorporate a Gramscian perspective into the expressive causality position, we can imagine reality to be composed of parallel totalities, where the existence of one essence does not preclude the existence of other parallel, counter, or opposing essences. Recalling my earlier examination of Williams, it is apparent that his approach to dominant ideology and determination can accommodate competing, parallel, or "emergent" meanings and practices (Williams, 1973:11). Slack argues that expressive causality is a flawed model of determination due to its vision of totality; however, if this vision is substituted with Williams' notion of determination, perhaps a more tenable vision of co-totalities becomes apparent. Rather than dismiss Slack's argument concerning expressive totality, I will incorporate her model of determination and reciprocal causation into a more tenable version of totality, such as that found in Williams' work on ideology. In order to continue the development of a framework of technology as agent, let us turn our attention to the model of determination developed by Williams in his analysis of television.

In *The Technology and the Society*, Williams begins with a critique of the dominant paradigm of technological determinism. Reminiscent of Slack's observations

on mechanistic versions of causality, Williams maintains that these positions isolate technology from their social fabric. Using the example of television, Williams suggests a different interpretation of the history of technological causes and effects that restores intention to the process of research and development. Specifically, he argues that technology is developed with certain purposes and practices in mind (Williams, in Mackay and O'Sullivan, 1999:47). As I will show with the example of ITV, these purposes and practices are central to the persistence of consumer culture.

For Williams, the history of communications technology is not one of technological innovation creating new social conditions. Rather, Williams contends that conditions of social change (such as transformations of industrial production) emerging from a history of capital accumulation and technical improvements created new needs, and communications technology was the outcome (Williams, 1999:47). This “social shaping of technology” perspective recognizes that innovation occurs within a community of “selective emphasis and intention” (Williams: 49), with priority given to the needs of the “real decision-making groups” (Williams: 50). Returning to the example of ITV, I will illustrate that these decision making groups are the corporate elite of the consumer culture, designing technology to meet their financial needs.

Similar to the Marxist expressive causality framework presented in Slack, Williams' argument is that television emerged within a social formation of industrial capitalism. Within this “totality,” there are known social needs, and as just discussed, technological innovation occurs within a dominant community of selected emphasis and intention. Recalling Slack, the social whole is an expressive totality in which phenomena are expressions of some inner essence. According to Williams, within the “totality”, or

social formation of industrial capitalism, “mobile privatization” is the essence that exercises effectivity.

Williams identifies “mobile privatization” as the unique and paradoxical tendency that emerged shortly after the turn of the 19th century. Transformations in industrial production and transportation led to increased mobility on one hand, and an increased emphasis and importance of the family home on the other (Williams: 54-55). As industrial organization expanded, so did the dispersal of extended families; as the small family home increased in efficiency, so did the need for a “new kind of ‘communication’: news from ‘outside,’ from otherwise inaccessible sources” (Williams: 55). The contradiction of the opposing tendencies of increased mobility and domesticity was resolved by broadcasting. By the 1930s, television technology was integrated into the broadcasting structure, and by then the tendency of mobile privatization was even more pronounced (Williams: 56). In this sense, the development of television is the *effect* of a selective community of intention; it responded to the needs defined within the general limits and pressures of the *essence* of mobile privatization. However, television can also exercise *its own* effectivity; as an expression of the totality of industrial capitalism, the centralized production and privatized reception of television led to problems in production, due to the difficulty of procuring profits. The resulting economic response of commercial sponsorship constituted a practice that enhanced the capitalist social formation. Within the determining limits of industrial capitalism, television was the applied technology of the essence of mobile privatization. In this model of determination technology remains linked to the social fabric from which it emerges. Through its representation as an expression of an inner essence (rather than an isolated autonomous

force), the possibility of technological effectivity still remains reasonable. This means that within the social formation of industrial capitalism, television is an expression of the essence of mobile privatization; through the practice of television broadcasting, there exists an *unfolding* of that essence, and thus the reciprocal influence of television upon the social formation. Through his analysis of how the practice of television broadcasting has a reciprocal influence on the social formation, Williams has provided an important link for understanding technology as agent of consumer culture.

In order to illustrate and extend Williams' theory, let us examine the case of ITV, for through this example it becomes very clear how technology serves as an agent of consumer culture. According to the argument presented in part (ii), as an object of consumer culture ITV has been marketed as an amazing new technology offering choice, power and control to its users. However, upon further inspection the ITV situation presents quite a different scenario. Within the industry, ITV executives are touting the technology as "the holy grail" of advertising, because it has provided an intensely valuable new marketing space (Elkin, 2001: 3). With a wide-ranging set of applications, from Video-On-Demand (VOD) to TV banking and interactive commercials, the common denominator is the extension of commercial activity (via internet interactivity) into the realm of television. Highly celebrated in the television and advertising industries, "T-Commerce" (Television-Commerce) seems to be the driving force behind this new innovation. The ability to extend commercial activity via televised interactivity has industry experts quite excited. Within the advertising industry, ITV is believed to be *the* medium that will "deliver added value to advertisers" (Knight, 2002:3). For marketers, ITV consumers translate directly into bigger audiences for interactive

commercials. In fact, ITV technologies “are weaving marketing into consumers’ lives on a daily, or even minute-by-minute, basis” (Jarvis, 2002:1). However, the advertising and television industries are not the only players with vested interests in the development of ITV. According to a recent report, American FCC Chairman Michael Powell has plans to “give the free markets more rein to expand new telecommunications technologies, such as ITV, that offer new communications opportunities for marketers (Szynal, 2002:2). Apparently, the issue of ITV deployment is of great importance to the FCC due to ITV’s anticipated popularity in the next few years (ibid.).

According to a report by the Center for Digital Democracy, the same technologies that profile users on the Internet, such as data mining and user modeling, are being adopted by the ITV industry. Using data collection platforms stored in set-top boxes,

ITV provides advertisers the ability to target each individual viewer with personalized ads, thus increasing the likelihood of impulse purchasing. Every show watched, every ad viewed, every click, and every download becomes fodder for the compilation of data and the creation of user profiles, leading ultimately to pinpoint targeting of ads to individual consumers (Chester *et al*, 2001:3).

Ironically, despite all the rhetoric about choice and power, consumers are not being given any choice about the ITV infrastructure and the way it links them directly to marketers. For example, in the US, Cablevision’s ITV platform ‘Interactive Optimum’ tracks its users and builds a database of their program choices. From this information, marketers send out “targeted messages” and real-time email offers to make purchases online (Strugatch, 2002: 4). Furthermore, even when viewers do make legitimate choices – whether it be a purchase or what program to watch – interaction is limited to a predetermined supply of choices (van Dijk and de Vos, 2001:451).

However, the commercial influence is not limited to ‘targeted messages’ alone – in some instances the production of ITV content is completely integrated with advertising, marketing, and data collection (Chester *et al.*: 5). For example, Watchpoint Media, Inc. (a development of the MIT Media Lab), produces interactive video content with hyperlinks to direct commerce opportunities (*ibid.*). Even VOD, the content of which seems free commercial influence, is expanding into the realm of interactive advertising. In fact, the entertainment features of ITV, such as VOD and Personal Video Recorder services, are helping to drive interactive advertising. Although these services allow viewers to avoid traditional commercials, ITV developers are producing new forms of advertising that are initiated by the fast-forward command (Elkin: 2).

Another interesting facet of the ITV story is its connection to the cable industry. In the US, almost every major cable operator, including AOL-Time Warner and Cablevision have made major investments in ITV technology (Chester *et al.*:4). In Canada, Rogers Communications is also heavily involved in the ITV market. Using MSN’s ITV software, Rogers Interactive TV offers a range of services from Internet services to online banking. Interestingly, the development of Canadian interactive broadcasting is centred at the Rogers Centre, (Ryerson University, Toronto) in the Interactive Broadcasting Learning Lab. According to their website, the goal of this endeavour was “to pool academic and industry expertise in order to explore business opportunities in interactive broadcasting” (“Rogers Communication Centre Interactive Broadcast Learning Lab”). It is clear that from the outset, the development of Canadian ITV has been guided not by the ability to empower the viewer, but the need to expand commercial activity.

In order to fully develop my theoretical framework, I will now demonstrate how the examples presented above illustrate the notion of technology as agent of consumer culture. The examples presented above illustrate that the research and development of ITV is being conducted in order to promote and extend commercial interests. From this simple fact we can begin to conceptualize the idea of technology as agent of consumer culture. Once again, by *agent* I am referring to the ways in which technology is employed as an instrument to secure the specific effect of increased consumer activity. Recalling the theory of expressive causality, the social whole is an expressive totality in which phenomena are expressions of some inner essence. According to Williams, within the “totality”, or social formation of industrial capitalism, “mobile privatization” is the essence that exercises effectivity. Contextualized in the current argument, ITV (and DIT in general) are phenomena developed within the social formation (totality) of consumer culture. Because of its ability to mediate information instantaneously in a personalized and often portable manner, this technology complements the tendency for mobile privatization; ITV takes the idea of “news from outside” to a whole other level. As an expression of the essence of the totality of consumer culture, the practice of using ITV represents an unfolding of that essence. Moreover, through the unfolding of the essence ITV has a reciprocal influence upon the social formation. Recognizing the role of intention in the processes of research and development, this perspective acknowledges that the innovation of ITV has occurred based on the *needs* of the “decision-making groups.” As I have shown in the discussion of ITV, these *needs* are the ability to profit from “T-Commerce,” and these *groups* are the corporate elite of marketers who control the process. “Interactivity,” as developed within the corporate community of selected

emphasis and intention has provided this community the ability to track viewers' actions, provide product information, under the guise of entertaining programming. As a result, ITV exercises effectivity by facilitating the practices that constitute consumer culture. Finally, my model of technology as agent of consumer culture is complete.

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So, where does this view of ITV leave us? Within the dominant ideology of consumer culture, the meaning of ITV is constructed in part through its fetishization in its promotional discourse. As I have argued, it is through this process of fetishization that ITV becomes the object of consumer culture. Yet ITV is not simply an inert object onto which meaning is imposed; once imbued with meaning, ITV becomes an important agent in the perpetuation of consumer culture. Using the notion of expressive causality, I have suggested that within the social formation of consumer culture, the information and entertainment provided by ITV (and DITs in general) complement the need for mobile privatization. Essential to this is the fact that the increased demand for technologies of information and entertainment is a product of the fetishization of technological innovation in consumer culture. In other words, before technology can function as *agent* of consumer culture, it must first become the *object* of consumer culture.

However, this argument need not be limited to the particular innovation of ITV alone. As we saw in the opening quote, the ability to extend consumer activity via the internet is being celebrated as a marketer's dream. The advertising industry realizes that as techno-gadgets such as cell phones and PDAs become ubiquitous aspects of our daily lives, so do the advertising opportunities. But what does all this mean? It seems that in our consumer culture, innovation is driven by market forces – not human need. What are

the implications for a culture where innovation is fuelled by a spirit of enterprise, not human kindness? As object of consumer culture, technology is constructed as an empowering tool to improve our lives. As agent, technology plays an integral role in the persistence of consumer culture. If by adopting supposedly empowering technologies we are actually reproducing the ideology of consumerism, what are the implications for *human agency*? Do the practices bound up in technology as object and agent impact upon *our* ability to exercise effectivity? In order to address these issues, we must take a deeper look at how we understand the communication that occurs through technologies like ITV. In order address these concerns, we shall shift our focus to the notion of interactivity, for it is here that we can make the conceptual link to the issue of agency.

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PART TWO:

THE INTERACTIVE IDEAL: DIT'S AND THE ISSUE OF AGENCY

As we saw in part one, the use of technology in consumer culture is often framed by a promotional rhetoric of personal empowerment. Thus, our participation in technology as both object and agent of consumer culture reproduces the ideology of capitalism. At this point, I would like to examine the implications this process has for human agency. By human agency, I am referring to an individual's ability to act in such a way so as to have a direct and even political impact upon the world. Linked to the notion of politics, agency in this sense refers not only to an individual's ability to generate a critical view of their world, but also to their desire and ability to act on it. As we saw in earlier, technology marketers attach fantastical symbolic qualities to their

DITs; how does actual participation in digital interactivity – as both object and agent of consumer culture – impact upon our actual effectivity? Our political actions? Does digital interactivity contribute to political disenfranchisement? Before I can address these questions, I will first examine the notion of digital interactivity in more detail. Once I have reviewed the different ways that “interactivity” has been conceptualized, I will examine the issue of confusion that seems to surround the term. Using the work of Manovich and Jensen, I will explore the possibility that the kind of interactivity ascribed to many new technologies might actually be a myth. In order to develop the argument that interactivity might actually strip technology-users of agency I will examine the work of Paul Virilio. Specifically, his theories about the disappearance of a meaningful space of action will provide conceptual model for understanding the links between DITs and agency. I will then bring the argument full-circle, back to the context of consumer culture. Using the theories of Wood and Baudrillard, I will argue that DITs facilitate the process of political disenfranchisement whereby the role of citizen is obscured the role of the consumer. Finally, I will conclude my argument by addressing the issue of oppositional media and technology use.

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(i) Interactive Gumbo? The Mixed-Up Meanings of Interactivity.

The concept of interactivity is discussed in many disciplines, ranging from sociology, mass communications, to computer science. The only consensus in this growing body of literature is that there is no consensus. In their recent article, entitled “Defining Interactivity,” Edward Downes and Sally McMillan attempt a review of the concept (Downes and McMillan, 2000: 159). Their examination of the literature suggests

several different approaches to the definition of interactivity. For example, one approach argues that interactivity depends on the *amount of effort* [my italics] exerted by the user (Heeter, 1989; McMillan, 1998). Alternatively, another approach emphasises the *amount of feedback and two-way exchange* allowed by the medium (Rice, 1984; Rogers, 1995; Rice and Williams, 1994). For some theorists, the level of *user control* is the essence of interactivity (Rogers 1995; O’Keefe 1995; Finn 1998). Based on their review of this literature, Downes and McMillan designed a structured interview with which to survey a panel of experts, made up of both computer professionals and academics. According to their findings, individuals perceive interactivity in computer mediated communication, even when the direction of that communication is only one-way, or when the user has little control (Downes and McMillan: 173). As we shall see, the lack of consensus regarding the definition of interactivity will form an important element of my critique.

The confusion surrounding the essential elements of interactivity is a theme pursued by Jensen in his recent work on the subject. According to Jensen, this problem stems from the fact that the concept of interactivity is derived from the notion of interaction, which is itself a multi-discursive concept (Jensen, 1999: 165). For example, when used in a *sociological* context “interaction” is seen to be a measure of reciprocity between 2 or more people. In the context of *informatics*, “interaction” refers to the relationship between people and machines, however for *communication studies* the term is used to describe both the relationship between text/reader and reciprocal relations between humans (Jensen:169). Jensen argues that with the development of new media, “interactivity” is used to describe a trait that differs significantly with traditional media. However, it remains unclear just exactly what trait that is (ibid.). For instance, he argues

that in the context of media studies and computer science, “interactivity” is often used to describe reciprocal actions between two or more people mediated by a communication technology (Jensen: 170). However, these conceptions fail to provide a definition that can differentiate between old and new media forms of interactivity. In this sense, since e-mail and traditional letter-writing are two-way forms of mediated communication, they both represent forms of interactive media. While there is nothing implicitly wrong with a sliding definition of interactivity, when we return to the context of consumer culture the flexibility and confusion surrounding the definition becomes a serious issue. As I argued in part one, interactivity is used by marketers as a means of presenting certain communications technologies such as cell phones, PDAs and ITV as necessary new innovations that we cannot live without. Whether DIT offers us connection with friends or family, or the freedom to select from thousands of products from the comfort of your home or car, it has been constructed as fantastic tool that will somehow allow us access to what is portrayed as sacred liberties. However, in light of the flexible nature of the definition, what then actually makes these particular interactive technologies unique and more valuable than our current technologies? Furthermore, without an accepted definition how do we know that the “interactivity” presented by marketers is *actually* interactive? Based on my arguments from the first part of this paper, how can we be sure that the commercial meaning of interactivity isn’t being constructed in order to meet the corporate financial imperatives? If DITs are both objects and agents of consumer culture, can we trust the meanings that are ascribed to them by their marketers?

According to Lev Manovich, the notion that new digital media are interactive is actually a myth. For Manovich, new media are continually portrayed as interactive; in

contrast to old media where information is fixed, new media are purported to allow the user to engage with the content in such a way so as to choose their own content, and even co-author the work (Manovich, 2001: 49). But like Downes, McMillan and Jensen, Manovich contends that the concept of interactivity is too broad to be of use. In his examination of user experiences of interactive structures, he concludes that in terms of participation, many 'old' media actually display a higher degree of interactivity (Manovich: 56). In fact, he argues that it is incorrect to equate interaction with the physical act of pressing a button or choosing a link because this overlooks the authentic action of psychological interaction:

The psychological processes of filling-in, hypothesis formation, recall, and identification, which are required for us to comprehend any text or image at all, are mistakenly identified with an objectively existing structure of interactive links. (Manovich, 2001:57)

From this perspective, the interactivity celebrated by the marketers of digital interactivity is actually nothing more than the pre-programmed externalization of designer's associations. These inner mental processes have become confused with the structure of medium. For Manovich, this basic confusion is related to the modern tendency to externalize mental life, however I disagree. Manovich argues that modern psychological theories of mind – from Freud to cognitive psychology – equate mental processes with external visual forms (Manovich: 59). However, I believe that the confusion is actually related to advertisers need to construct attractive meanings for their products. As I revealed in part one, within the context of consumer culture, technology is fetishized and imbued with attractive symbolic qualities. By equating the physical act of pressing a button or selecting a link with the abstract qualities of freedom and empowerment,

marketers achieve a far more attractive portrayal of their product. In this sense, the association between pressing a button and empowerment is a product of the fetishization of technology, and can be seen as stemming from the fact that technology is the object of consumer culture.

But are we truly empowered by digital interactivity? As we saw in the promotional discourse surrounding ITV, the act of watching television was portrayed as an active, empowering tool to get in touch with friends and family— paradoxically and simultaneously allowing us physical distance *and* intimacy and warmth. Other DITs such as PDAs and internet-ready cell phones are portrayed as both tools with which to access information riches and ways to escape the responsibilities of our jobs. But as I have demonstrated, these tools are being developed based on the needs of the corporate decision-makers. In other words, these technologies are designed to meet the corporate need to extend advertising into every aspect of our daily lives. In fact, the action involved in using ITV does not require intellectual reasoning, or allow the user to have any kind of impact on the essence of the information seen. It is merely an extension of commercial activity into the sphere of televised entertainment. And although marketers are hoping to use ITV to “weave advertising into our live on a minute-by-minute basis” (Jarvis, 2002:1), this kind of interactivity is not limited to the sphere of television. As internet-ready cell phones and PDAs are becoming ubiquitous aspects of daily life, so too is digital interactivity. As our interpersonal communications become increasingly mediated by the internet, our degree of exposure to this commercial environment is constantly being increased.

Yet, as we saw in part one, as objects of consumer culture, ITV, cell phones and PDAs are understood as empowering devices that will bring us control, freedom and power. Paradoxically, the act of sitting in front of the tube, double clicking for information and receiving “information updates” in return seems quite passive indeed. In fact, Manovich argues that through the hyperlink (the key aspect of digital interactivity) we follow a pre-determined path of information, no longer guided by our own private and independent thoughts and associations. This idea is expanded as Manovich discusses the relationship between the computer screen and the body. Specifically, Manovich argues that the history of all screen-based apparatuses involves the immobility of the body. From the early histories of film and television to the current use of the computer, the screen has always offered a window out, a means to master the world; but not without a cost to the subject:

It is as if the subject who attempts to catch the world, immobilizing and fixing it within the representational apparatus...is trapped by the apparatus himself. The subject is imprisoned (Manovich:104).

If we apply the idea of imprisonment to the digital interactivity of ITV, PDAs and cellphones, it's easy to see them as tools of *disempowerment*. As we sit immobilized in front of our screens, surfing the web, double-clicking away, not only are we trapped in the apparatus, but we are immersed in the realm of consumerism that it contains. While our choices are reduced to lists of alternatives – whether I click on this or that – there seems to be an element of creativity and spontaneity that has disappeared. In the sense that digital interactivity limits and constrains our action, it is possible to imagine digital interactivity as a something that actually limits our ability to impact the world around us.

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(ii) Virilio's Paradox: Interactivity and the Shackles of Freedom

The idea that interactivity diminishes our ability to act is explored in depth by Paul Virilio. In fact, it is his position that the phenomenon of interactivity is actually depriving us of our own free will (Virilio, 1999:80). This notion stems from his theory that communications technologies have evolved to such a degree that the speed of communication has eliminated actual physical distance and space. As the 'information superhighway' allows us to communicate with each other in real-time across vast amounts of space, we in turn exist in a "reduced world" (Virilio, 1998: 21). As interactivity reduces the space of the world, people will begin to feel confined, their actions restricted (ibid.). In this way, as interactivity becomes more present in our lives, our experience of the world becomes characterized by a sense of "narrowness" (Virilio, 1999: 48). Recalling the examples from part one, it is easy to see how ITV and its applications can be regarded as limiting. For instance, on one hand, ITV is being celebrated as an enhancement of our effectivity; on the other, ITV is a technology that narrows our sphere of action as it keeps us bound to a screen, immobilized in our homes and pacified by a selection of online information that in most cases results in little more than personalized product information.

For Virilio, the reduction of distance and space through the speed of interactivity has significant political consequences. Through interactive technologies, we have been able to achieve "the instantaneousness of action at a distance," however this defeat of the world also signifies a defeat of the space of meaningful action (Virilio, 1998: 46). As interactivity eliminates distance and physical space and brings us immediate information, it also creates what Virilio calls the "miniaturization of action" – the loss of space and the

resulting “frailty of reasoning power” (Virilio, 1998: 52). For Virilio, action and agency can only exist in real space; according to this perspective, any and all action that occurs online is irrelevant. Similar to Manovich’s argument concerning confinement by the apparatus, Virilio’s argument evokes the image of a passive computer user mindlessly crunching away in front of an ineffectual screen. While this is only an image, reality presents us with a similar scenario: as digital interactivity becomes ubiquitous, more and more of our daily interactions occur with us in front of a screen. Subsequently, an increasing amount of our actions directed away from the world around us as they become limited to face-to-screen interaction. For Manovich and Virilio, it is this tendency to constrain and limit that allows digital interactivity to strip of us our agency. A potential weakness in the positions of Manovich and Virilio is that they seem to deny the possibility that the internet can ever function as an effective or empowering tool. I will return to this issue later on in the paper.

For Virilio, all this narrowing of space has the effect of limiting our actions in what he calls “an obligatory interactive confinement” (Virilio, 1998: 59). It is here that we can clearly understand how the disappearance of space through speed impacts upon our free will and agency. As we saw in part one, through the discourse of advertising, interactive technology becomes the object of consumer culture, and we become sold on the idea of interactivity as a tool of freedom and empowerment. However, for Virilio, it is this very process that is responsible for our confinement:

...so called “interactive user-friendliness”...is just a metaphor for the subtle enslavement of the human being to “intelligent” machines; a programmed symbiosis of man and computer in which assistance and the much trumpeted “dialogue between man and the machine” scarcely conceal the premises: not of an avowed racial discrimination this time so much as of the total, unavowed disqualification of the human in

favor of the definitive instrumental conditioning of the individual (Virilio: 153). As interactivity limits our space of action, our ability to act politically is also diminished. Integral to this loss of political action is that for Virilio, action in virtual space is “retroaction,” in other words, the opposite of action (Virilio: 162). The essential problem lies in the fact that we are confusing the real space of action with the virtual space of retroaction (Virilio: 163). This confusion results in a “delocalization” that leads to “uncertainty about the place of effective action” (Virilio: 164). If we situate this idea in my framework of object and agent, we can see how this “delocalization” is employed in the fetishization of DIT. Recalling the advertisements cited in part one, the promotional descriptions construct DIT as an object of effective action.

Interestingly, for Virilio the confusion about the real space of action has political implications – the inability to act politically in the entrapment of retroactive space creates a situation where democracy is directly affected. This process stems from the fact that in cyberspace, we experience a sense of disorientation in terms of our relationships with other people. The interconnectivity of cyberspace creates what Virilio calls *telepresence*: high speed interactivity between individuals which replaces the slower-paced intersubjectivity of traditional political systems (Virilio, 1998: 5). The ontology of telepresence is such that individuals no longer relate to one another in real space, and for Virilio, this means that they can no longer be politically active. This process coincides with a major change in social structure; as the traditional structures of family and neighbourhood have disintegrated, so have the opportunities for real political dialogue. At the same time that city and family structures are being reorganized away from community models, an increasing amount of our interpersonal communications are

transported into cyberspace. Accordingly, interactive technology assaults democracy with what Virilio calls the “tyranny of real time,” which is:

not very different from classical tyranny, because it tends to destroy the reflection of the citizen in favour of a reflex action. Democracy is based on solidarity, not solitude, and man has to reflect before acting...Democracy is the expectation of a decision made collectively. *Live* democracy, or automatic democracy, eliminates this reflection and replaces it with a reflex (Virilio, 1999:87).

For Virilio, interactivity (the kind of communication that occurs in real time) atomizes us as individuals away from our communities. Thus separated, we communicate at lightening speed, with no time for critical reflection. Although this point seems blind to the ways that the Internet has been used for active, democratic citizen activity,¹ there is value in the idea; in a consumer culture where interactive technology is both object and agent, digital interactivity is so often reduced to a choice of content or product information. Despite Virilio’s inability to envision a single empowering use for cyberspace, his basic message can still apply: with the loss of physical space, civil society, and political dialogue we are no longer able to resist the oppressive forces that present themselves in the virtuous guise of technological progress (Virilio, 1998: 63).

However, as we saw in the earlier part of this paper, technology’s role as object and agent of consumer culture depends heavily on the notion that technological innovation always means progress; as we saw in the work of Stewart-Millar and Berland, corporate culture sells this kind of progress in the fetishized images found in their promotional material. The images in these materials communicate to consumers that these innovations will increase our ability to communicate, enhance our ability to access

¹ Activists, student, and grassroots movements (such as the Zapatistas, Independent Media Centres, Ontario Federation of Students, just to name a few) have been able to use the Internet for communication, organization, and mobilization. I will address this point in detail at the end of the paper.

information, and above all allow us the ultimate ability of unlimited choice.

Interestingly, these messages invoke many of the freedoms associated with the modern notion of democracy. For Virilio, the idea that cyberspace can serve democracy is completely mistaken. He argues that the history of the technological innovation of speed – through the revolutions of transportation, industry and information – has been linked to the idea of democracy (Virilio, 1999:19). However, he adds that in each one of these cases, those in positions of power and wealth seem to have better and easier access to these so called revolutions. Similar to the earlier discussion of the commodity fetish, what Virilio calls “the havoc of progress” is brought about through the “illusionism” of the advertising industry (ibid.: 20). With this observation, Virilio provides us with a potent image with which to conceive of the ways that technology is imagined in our consumer culture. He notes that the instantaneity and ubiquity of action, once qualities ascribed to the divine, are now the ways we understand technology (Virilio, 1998:20, 184). In the context of consumer culture, these once god-like qualities have become the ultimate way to market our interactive technologies.

Recalling the first part of my argument, as object the technological innovation of digital interactivity, as seen in ITV, cell phones and PDAs, is fetishized within the dominant ideology of consumer culture. Once imbued with attractive symbolic qualities, this technology is eagerly adopted by users. However, this interactive digital technology is also the agent of consumer culture; as we saw with the case of ITV and PDAs, this technology is being developed with the explicit intention of increasing consumer activity. By adopting this technology, we are actually reproducing the dominant ideology of capitalism. When we examined the idea of interactivity in greater depth, it became clear

that the object/agent orientation of digital interactivity has certain implications for human agency. From Virilio's work on interactivity we have come to understand that as speed eliminates the space of active political dialogue, technology serves to atomize us. Through this process, we lose the effectivity and solidarity that community afforded us. In this sense, interactivity can be seen as leading towards an a-political loss of agency. But when we put this back into the context of consumer culture and the object/agent structure of technology, Virilio's arguments are only part of the puzzle.

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(iii) I Shop, Therefore I am: Interactivity and the Confusion Between the Citizen and the Consumer.

As interactive technologies become ubiquitous, our participation in them perpetuates the ideology of consumer culture, and our roles as citizens slowly become subsumed in our roles as consumers. It is not surprising then, to realize that the empowerment offered to us by DITs is ultimately framed in terms of its democratic potential; the freedoms that it offers are those due to us as citizens. The freedom and choice of unlimited information, the ability to express our preferences through our purchasing power, and the idea that we can achieve a certain degree of leisure are all notions that are allegorical of democracy. The symbolic meanings embedded in their promotional portrayal connote that by participating in these technologies, we are actually enacting our own democratic rights. It appears that somehow our roles as citizens have become obscured by our roles as consumers. To explore this idea in greater depth, let us look to the work of Ellen M. Wood.

According to Wood, the history of democracy is one of successive restrictions to citizen action, and interestingly, this trajectory is inseparable from the development of capitalism. As Wood points out, early forms of Athenian democracy were composed of an extremely active citizenship. Unfortunately, this citizenship was limited to the exclusive group composed of the propertied classes (Wood, 1995:208). However, with the emergence of a liberal capitalist democracy, there was also an extension of citizenship to many more people; however the nature of citizenship was far more passive. As capitalism gave rise to the notion of the “free and equal” wage labourer, it also initiated the process of dispossession, where the peasant was detached from property and community, along with common and customary rights (Wood: 209). Subsequently, as the labourer was conceived as a liberated individual, their “extra-economic” inequalities fell outside the realm capitalism (Wood:211).

Wood argues that the subsequent distancing of the people from their politics stemmed from two separate but related issues. First, as feudal relations gave way to capitalism and peasants became wage labourers, they became detached from their property and communities (Wood: 210). Thus, as individuals became labourers they were separated from their previous social identities. Ironically, it was this very lack of property and communal solidarity that witnessed the “labouring multitude become a community of citizens” (Wood:211). Intrinsic to this process is the paradoxical fact that with the onset of this kind of democracy, there was a distinct separation between political and economic spheres:

Capitalism, then, made it possible to conceive of ‘formal democracy’, a form of civic equality which could coexist with social inequality and leave economic relations between ‘elite’ and ‘labouring multitude’ in place (Wood: 213).

As a result, the social structure of capitalism altered the meaning of citizenship, so that the notion of civic equality – limited to suffrage – remains blind to social inequality. Furthermore, Wood argues that this style of democracy actually distances people from their politics. Using Constitution-era America as her example, Wood argues that the representative structure of the government – the rule of the people by a distant group – greatly diminished the effectiveness of civic action in public space (Wood: 219). In fact, the representative structure acted as a filter to distance people from politics:

The ‘people’ was no longer being defined, like the Athenian *demos*, as an active citizen community but as a disaggregated collection of private individuals whose public aspect was represented by a distant central state (Wood: 219).

Thus, the concept of ‘the people’ was invoked to disarm the powers of the multitude. And since capitalism’s disparity of social class had no political relevance, huge segments of social life remained untouched by the notion of political equality. In other words, for Wood, the first aspect of disenfranchisement stems from the structure of the liberal capitalist democracy; both the representative structure and the irrelevance of social inequality served to pacify the citizenry. But the second aspect of the process illustrates how the notion of freedom was slowly redefined so that it could be located in the market. And this is where we get back to our object/agent issue. As we are about to see, the idea of freedom through technology use, (which we have established is really the freedom to practice consumption wherever and when ever) is really an element of the confusion between citizenship and our roles as consumers.

Integral to the history of democracy in the US is that as the focus shifted away from an active citizenry, it moved towards a passive enjoyment of constitutional rights. In other words, as democracy moved away from collective popular power towards the

privacy and isolation of the individual, it slowly became associated with the notion of liberalism (Wood: 227). Furthermore, the idea of “liberal democracy” only became possible with the emergence of capitalist social property relations. The separation of the political and economic necessitated that the economic sphere was an autonomous entity, untouchable by political privilege (Wood: 234). The tendency to identify democracy with a free market is therefore a product of the separation of the economic sphere in modern liberal capitalism (Wood: 235). Thus, the market is constructed as and believed to be realm of freedom and choice, through which we can exercise our civic rights. In fact, as we become less active participants in the political sphere of democracy, we tend to associate our civic freedoms with our ability to participate in the economic sphere.

Remember the post-911 economic slowdown? President Bush went on national television and told Americans that it was their *civic duty* to shop! If the idea of confusion between the role of citizen and consumer is applied to the notion of digital interactivity, it becomes clear why technology is portrayed as a tool of empowerment; intrinsic to its role as agent of consumer culture is that DIT serves as a device that brings us the opportunity to participate in the economic sphere, where we are free to exercise this kind of democratic freedom. As I illustrated in part one, much of the research and development that goes into DITs is funded by and for corporate interests. However, once these technologies as associated with the notions of market freedom and consumer sovereignty, they take on entirely new meanings for consumers. Rather than functioning as tools for “weaving advertising into our live on a minute-by-minute basis” (Jarvis, 2002:1), DITs are often perceived as innovative new ways to engage in freedom and choice!

Before we continue, let us briefly sum up what we have just covered. Through the theories of Virilio, I demonstrated how technology, specifically interactivity, functions to eliminate the space of active political engagement. I then illustrated how the loss of political engagement is theorized by Wood, but with specific emphasis on the role capitalism has played in the diminishment of active political engagement. While these two theories address the loss of the political from two different perspectives, their critiques provide us with some interesting conceptual models for understanding possible implications of interactivity (Virilio) and why we have come to associate active interaction with simple commodity consumption (Wood). Interestingly, similar ideas are articulated in the work of Jean Baudrillard. In fact, I will argue that through Baudrillard's work on consumer culture, we can make the necessary links to understand how interactivity is implicated in the loss of agency.

(iv) In the Slumber of the Interactive: DIT's and the Issue of Agency

At this point, I would like come full circle and return to where I began this investigation: the dominant ideology of consumer culture. As I have argued, it is within the culture of consumption that DITs affect the way we understand ourselves as active agents. In order to make the cognitive leap from interactivity to agency, let us examine Baudrillard's work on consumer culture.

According to Baudrillard, the discourse surrounding commodities – what he calls objects – repeatedly tells us the story of our “stupefied power, of our potential affluence and of our absence from one another” (Baudrillard, 1988a: 29). Parallel to the previous

discussion of commodity fetishism, the discourse of objects promotes an identity of individualism that serves to isolate us from a more “agentic” and empowering collective identity. In fact, through this system of objects, consumption gains control of social life (Baudrillard: 33). This control stems from the fact that all of our actions, public services and behaviours are regulated through the culture of consumption. Through our experiences of consumption there is a “general climatization of life,” whereby there exists “a complete conditioning of action and time” (ibid.). For Baudrillard, this conditioning is very much a part of the standardization of social space by commercial interests, as seen in drugstores, shopping malls, airports, et cetera. Integral to this idea is how advertising tells us that our participation in this process will provide the material conditions for happiness; for Baudrillard, as everything is appropriated and simplified into this system, consumption becomes the organizing factor of daily life (Baudrillard: 34).

Similar to Ewen’s ‘ethos of consumption’ and Wernick’s ‘promotional rhetoric’, for Baudrillard, consumption is thus a kind of abstraction that subsumes all forms of social life:

Work, leisure, nature, and culture, all previously dispersed, separate, and more or less irreducible activities that produced anxiety and complexity in our real life...have finally become mixed, massaged, climate controlled, and domesticated into the simple activity of perpetual shopping (ibid.)

Intrinsic to abstraction (and what makes it relevant to the issue of political loss) is the fact that for Baudrillard, within this homogenized environment there no longer exists oppositional discourses. In a similar vein to Wood’s explanation of the confusion between the citizen and the consumer, Baudrillard argues that within this homogenized environment, there exists a myth of individual choice and resulting satisfaction. In fact, it

is this notion of individual choice that is equivalent to the notion of freedom in the dominant ideology of consumer culture (Baudrillard: 39). Subsequently, as the consumer society replaces oppositional discourses with homogenous elements, actual freedoms have been replaced by the mythical “liberty and sovereignty of the consumer” (ibid). Baudrillard contends that within this system of mystification, our participation in the engines of consumer capitalism is portrayed as a means of empowerment. It is not surprising then that our involvement in the market is often described using the rhetoric of civic duty (Baudrillard: 48, 51).

When we return to the notion of digital interactivity, Baudrillard’s arguments about consumer culture provide us with an interesting way of articulating how technology-users are impacted by the commercialization DITs. As object of consumer culture, the meaning of interactivity is constructed to represent the ultimate form of freedom, action, and empowerment. Specifically, within the context of ITV, and PDA’s, the use of these tools, (which I have argued is clearly linked to consumption) is constructed as the ultimate form of action, freedom and empowerment, in that it allows us access to unlimited product information and selection, and the ability to financially interact anywhere, anytime. Yet if we follow Baudrillard’s argument, rather than an expression of our sovereignty, this kind of interaction is really an example of how our actions are conditioned by the logic of consumerism.

Interestingly, the argument that Baudrillard makes about consumer culture as social control shares similar aspects to Virilio’s notion of atomization. As we aim to attain the qualities embedded in our commodities, our identities as individuals become evermore important. In this way, consumption limits agency by atomizing individual

consumers (Baudrillard: 53). Whereas alienated relations of production can lead to solidarity and class consciousness, the individualist ideology embedded in consumption does quite the opposite; as consumers we are solitary and isolated from each other. Yet as we saw with Wood's argument about liberalism, it is through our participation in this individualism that we feel we attain our natural liberties.

So, after all this talk of consumer culture, the loss of political space through technology and consumerism, and the discrepancies between the citizen and the consumer, what are we left with? After reviewing Baudrillard's work on consumer culture, it becomes clear that DIT enables the culture of consumption (via the conditioning of social space) to be extended out from the public space of shopping malls and airports, into the private spaces of our homes (via Internet and ITV) and the private moments of personal communication (via cell phones and PDAs). Rather than giving us the ability to effect the world around us, DITs are increasing commercial activity into our daily lives, thereby limiting our space of action. And it is here that we begin to see how Baudrillard connects Virilio's work on technology to Wood's work on democracy. With Virilio, we saw that as technology enables increased speed of communication, we experience a loss of the space of meaningful action. As DITs become a major vessel for the extension of commercial activity, Wood's work explains how our participation in that activity is often framed in terms of democratic civic action. And finally, as more and more of our social space is subsumed by the discourse of commodities (via interactivity), we are left with a homogenized environment void of any oppositional voices.

While this might seem like a tidy way to end my argument, at this point it would be irresponsible of me if I didn't address an obvious potential critique. Much of the work

that I have presented thus far takes a very critical look at the workings of technology and consumer culture, and leaves very little space for the efficacy of individual resistance to these dominant ideologies. Throughout my argument I have alluded to this fact, but at this point I would like to explicitly acknowledge that this perspective has not recognized that a) the meaning of technology does not exist a-priori, but is generated through our experiences with it, or that b) not all DITs are designed to increased consumption. There are several elements to this position, each of which I will take up in turn. I will then explain why the critical perspective that I have taken is nonetheless relevant and necessary.

The first issue that seems to negate the object/agent position on agency is that individuals can derive their own meaning of a particular technological innovation through their personal experience with it. For instance, even though a PDA or ITV program might be designed to increase my ability to participate in consumptive activities, I may never use it in that way. My use of any particular technology will be catered towards my personal needs, values and habits. (However, if we recall the theories presented in section one, within consumer culture values and habits are constructed!) Furthermore, if I derive pleasure from DIT's and the new shopping opportunities that they afford me, whose right is it to say that this is wrong? That said, the way I use any particular technology is completely up to me, and there is nothing to stop me from using that PDA as a paper weight, fridge magnet or doorstop if I so choose. Additionally, there is a strong argument to be made regarding the use of DITs in oppositional ways that resist dominant culture. Internationally, activist and grassroots movements such as the Zapatistas, have begun to use the Internet to mobilize their causes. The activities of

organizations such as Independent Media Centre, The Centre for Digital Democracy, The Media Access Project, and MediaChannel.org directly challenge the corporate structure of the media and advocate the use of media and technology in the public interest.

In light of these positions, one might be tempted to dismiss the idea of technology as object and agent (and the resulting effects on agency) as elitist, universalizing, or even naïve. However, I believe that in the current culture of consumption this kind of critique is necessary to challenge the assumptions constructed in the promotional discourse surrounding advertising. The position that I have taken does not negate the existence or usefulness of oppositional and alternative technology-uses. And while it is true that *individual* uses of technology may not correspond to the fiscal imperatives of consumer culture, it is important to recognize that I have been discussing these issues at an *institutional* level. Furthermore, the fact that I have acknowledged that these practices exist does not eliminate the need for critical perspectives.

The fact remains that the Internet is increasingly being controlled by private interests. Since 1993, the development of the Internet has been slowly taken over by private corporations (Dahlberg, 1998: 73). How can the Internet be celebrated as a bastion of free and democratic expression if it is driven by the motor of capitalism? Internet enthusiasts such as Nicholas Negroponte often argue that digital communication will increase competition in communication markets; in reality, the structure of digital communication has made it more likely that communication firms will consolidate across media sectors, thereby increasing media concentration (McChesney, 2000: 21). Furthermore, as the spaces of digital interactivity become increasingly commercialized,

advertisers may exert increased control over content. For Robert McChesney, this possibility poses a serious threat:

The evidence so far suggests that media giants will be able to draw the Web into their existing empires. While the Web is in many ways revolutionizing the way we lead our lives, it is a revolution that does not appear to include changing the identity and nature of those in power (ibid.: 33).

Thus, as corporations encroach upon the public space offered by the internet, opportunities for oppositional use become less available. In a parallel but relevant manner, the development of broadband connections (that will allow high-speed access to the Internet) is becoming concentrated in the hand of big-business; under these conditions access to the Internet becomes expensive and thus restricted, and small voices will soon be left out of the mix.

In this paper I have argued that participation in DIT not only perpetuates the dominant ideology of consumer culture, but that engagement with interactive technologies has a limiting effect upon the agency of its users. I began this argument in part one by developing a framework for understanding how technology is both object and agent of consumer culture. I illustrated that as object, the technological innovation of digital interactivity is fetishized within consumer culture. Once imbued with attractive symbolic qualities, this technology is eagerly adopted by users. However, DIT is also the agent of consumer culture; as I demonstrated with the cases of ITV, cell phones and PDAs, this technology is being developed with the explicit intention of increasing

consumer activity. By adopting this technology, users are actually reproducing the dominant ideology of capitalism.

In part two, I utilized the framework of object and agent as my basis for arguing that DIT can limit the agency of its users. I maintained that this disenfranchisement stems from the lack of an expected definition of interactivity. The flexible nature of the concept is utilized by marketers as they fetishized technology and imbue interactivity with symbolic meanings that carry currency in consumer culture. Furthermore, our participation in this kind of interactivity atomizes and isolates us as it eliminates the space of political discourse. Integral to my argument is that the idea of freedom through technology-use, (which I have argued is really the freedom to consume goods via the internet) is really an element of the confusion between citizenship and our roles as consumers. Within the dominant ideology of consumer culture, our participation in technology is framed in terms of its democratic potential, yet as I have shown, as interactivity subsumes our social spaces with the discourses of commodities, we are left with a homogenized environment void of oppositional voices.

Finally, it has been my premise that the commercialized and fetishized images of technology form the dominant understanding of technological innovations and contribute to our taken-for-granted assumptions about technology-use. In this way, our personal experiences with technology – no matter how pleasurable they may be – have been framed by taken-for-granted assumptions of consumer culture. These assumptions promote the idea that DIT is a means for personal empowerment, but as I have argued, it is through this myth that we are actually disempowered. As we engage with technology

under these conditions, we become trapped in the slumber of the interactive. As Paul

Virilio remarks,

Praising the merits of the new technologies is certainly useful for the advertisement of new products, but I don't think that this is useful for the politics of new technologies. From now on it is necessary to determine what is negative in what seems positive. We know that we can only advance in technology by recognizing its specific accident, its specific negativity...(Virilio, 1999:12).

If we are to benefit from the innovations of new technologies, it is absolutely necessary that we see beyond advertising's promises, as we construct clear and unbiased understandings of how technology impacts upon our lives. For this reason, it is my hope that the arguments presented in this paper will provide a critical challenge to the assumptions about technology generated within consumer culture.

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