**Reviewer's introduction to the Communications panel session, Radical Technology 2.0 conference, Bristol 2-4 September 2016**

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The introduction to the Communications section of *Radical Technology* is credited to Eric Lowbury. That was actually me, but I was working for the BBC World Service at the time and I thought my employer might take issue with my comments on cultural imperialism.

I'd like to start with one of my favourite tweets.

"Someone has printed out the whole of yell.com and just dumped it on our doorstep. Weirdo." <https://twitter.com/drewm/status/9393827315>

That was Drew McLellan, from Bristol, on 20 February 2010.

It happened to me, too. (Show printed copy of Yellow Pages.)

Print was the dominant medium from 1500-1900.

Then cinema, radio, tv and the internet came in successive waves.

Print ruled for five or six lifetimes. It is already half a lifetime since Radical Technology was published in 1976.

Long enough to give us some historical perspective. Also time enough for a lot of change.

40 years is about 300 dog years and 1000 internet years.

Everything we imagined has happened, all the utopian stuff like vast online encyclopedias, wireless phones, free video calls, and global self-publication; and all the dystopian stuff too - the surveillance and loss of privacy. Plus lots of stuff that wasn't foreseen at all.

In the 1976 book, the transport chapter, by the late Patrick Rivers, is the one that has aged best. Our transport system, and the possible ways of greening it, are still much the same - apart from the arrival of robotic vehicles such as drones and driverless cars.

Tom Picton's piece on citizen video journalism seemed a bit of a curiosity for 20 or 30 years - but now American cops have to be a bit more careful who they shoot, because any bystander might be filming the event.

The monochrome litho printing, the heavy camcorders, the phone phreaking gadgets seem very remote from today's technology. But you need to read this book as a historical document and understand that these were the cracks in the system where the seeds of subversion could germinate.

So instead of doing a detailed post mortem I'll pull out some big themes that concerned us a lot at the time. I'll suggest that you and the panel - whom I'll introduce in a minute - might like to examine how these themes have played out.

Communications and media make an interesting test case for the whole notion of Radical Technology.

There was much debate in the 1970s over whether any technology is intrinsically radical or intrinsically oppressive. This was related to McLuhan's idea that the medium is the message. Nowadays we make McLuhanite observations that, for example, Twitter makes you love people you have never met, while Facebook makes you hate people you know already. I know it's more complicated than that.

For one thing a medium like Twitter changes over time. Once Twitter was alive with real-time news of protests and repression on the streets of Teheran. Now the venture capitalists are demanding payback and Twitter is turning into a soulless advertising vehicle.

So perhaps media technologies aren't intrinsically progressive or reactionary, but have a life cycle. They start out radical and become increasingly conservative as the software developers remodel them to serve corporate interests. Perhaps the same is true of other technologies like windpower, in which case the search for Radical Technology is never-ending.

Two other themes of the 1976 book are autonomy and conviviality. You can have off-grid energy but you can't really have off-grid telecommunications. But things like Youtube, blogging and social media have turned us all into so-called content producers, and they are a lot easier than ham radio was. It's certainly a kind of autonomy.

The question is, how much control over our devices, our data and our conversations are we prepared to trade away, for the benefits of being connected?

Ivan Illich coined the phrase 'tools for conviviality', and the Radical Technology team were very taken with the idea that the right technology choices could promote healthy and satisfying social relations. In 1976 we knew that the wired infrastructure - what we then called the telephone network - could support digital communications with much higher bandwidth than speech. But I don't think many of us foresaw that people would live their lives in almost continuous multi-media contact with their friends, through small wireless devices.

The smartphone, combined with social media, is the ultimate tool for conviviality - unless you take the contrary view that it has produced a generation who don't know how to relate to other humans face-to-face.

I'm going to leave those questions in the air and introduce the communications panel.

(Martin Ince, Richard Elen, Daphne Davies, Gary Alexander.)