My Lovely Ball and Chain

It is becoming exceedingly hard to remember the world before the big bang of wireless, when you couldn't take a picture or film with your mobile, or use a phone's inbuilt GPS to know within a few centimetres where you stood on the planet.

More than mere gadgets, our phones define our lives: they are an elusive admixture of style, performance and status whose innovative features offer us an entirely new way of viewing the world. Like trains, telegraphs and cars in past centuries, our phones represent the ability of technology to transform civilization and with it human nature.

Life without our chunks of wirelessly-connected electronics is a form of death – you need only ask someone who's lost his or her phone to describe the resulting deep sense of loss at being cut off, even temporarily, from their social networks. From simple voice communication to text messaging, mobile email, video email and new GPS technologies, every facet of how people interact has been changed by the device that was first showcased to the world some 30 years ago and in ways that the pioneers of the technology would never have dreamed. With many of us storing SMS trails, cell phones are even replacing diaries as the repositories of our lives, keeping track of all our friends, lovers and gossip (in the omnipresent txt-spk that even young children master as a mother tongue).

Today, there are more cell phones in the Gulf region than people, with an average penetration rate estimated at 130 per cent. And despite some major deficiencies in regional networks, particularly in terms of pricing and bandwidth, it is only a matter of time before Arab users will use their phones instead of a paper cinema ticket, say, or watch the latest TV shows while on the go. Cell phones already reign supreme as the one technology most people can least go without.

We are – to a man, woman and child – utterly and hopelessly enslaved to our phones; instead of having a phone tethered to the wall, the phone is now tethered to us. In the past, you had to get someone live on the phone who was sitting at his or her desk in a certain location. They were literally tied to their location. Today, that limitation is gone and the work goes on, regardless of whether you're shopping for your favourite cereal in the supermarket when that important call comes through, or you're picking up the kids from school.

While the ability to work wherever and whenever has captivated business people the world over, some unwired folk – in ever dwindling numbers – don't see the allure of being connected 24/7. These detractors are often the first to raise issues of cell-phone etiquette in restaurants and of health hazards (even if the harmful effects from wireless signals on the brain have now been largely disproved).

But beyond frying our wits, our dependency on the cell phone is perhaps not all that healthy. To be sure, some cell phone users are a tad obsessed with being connected, and not everything on state-of-the-art cell phones is worth calling home about. We are permanently bound to these devices to a degree that would baffle not to mention disturb our grandparents. Not unlike Pavlov's dog, there is an uncanny buzz of anticipation when the phone rings in our preset tones.

Moreover, there are some genuine fears that cell phones are actually disconnecting people from the real world – an argument that is made more immediate, for example, when personal phone calls interfere with driving.

However, the upsides to being constantly connected far outweigh the disadvantages. Previous generations could never understand our deepest need for instant information and our twitching desire to share instantly with our contacts our thoughts and ideas as soon as they've been formulated.

There are no dark continents in today's globalized world. In order to compete, both professionally and socially, our lives must move at or quicker than the speed of electronic transmissions. We've become so accustomed to using the Internet, satellite TV and of course our phones that a single day without them can feel like falling back to the Stone Age in some twisted anthropological experiment.

There is no escape, even if you do actually want a break from the electronic shackles. These days, the most remote desert island in the Pacific will have wireless broadband. Same goes for Mount Everest Base Camp (from where, incidentally, a daily blog is being kept via satellite phone). Electronic communications have become so prevalent that you'd have to sink several leagues under the sea to escape from it. And that is the reason why – ultimately for practical purposes – the majority of us opt instead to swim, or in some cases just float awkwardly, in the sea of electro-communication.

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What's in a Name?

It's all in a good name, which – to paraphrase Shakespeare – offers the "immediate jewel" of one's soul. Unfortunately, most corporate names in the Gulf region often feel like they've been devised around a kitchen table. Typically, company names are either fuzzy or they resort to highly duplicated family or geographic names. For example, few outside Dubai let alone the region are truly able to distinguish between Burj al-Arab and Burj Dubai.

Names have become the single-most important corporate asset. Publicity campaigns can only go so far in attracting a worldwide audience given the challenges to the contextual basis of names in the modern, globalized market. Consequently, most Arab companies will need to rebrand themselves if they are to extend beyond the region to become, say, The Economist, Sony or Microsoft of the future.

The trouble is that Arab companies couldn't have hoped for a worst time to be reinventing themselves. With the rise of global business, conflict has become rampant in this realm of language and of intellectual property. In the West in particular, people fight over them with the passion and righteousness seen in ancient battles over land or religion. In that sense, a select few names have become the coveted high ground – think, for instance, of the name Coca-Cola, which is believed to be worth some $60 billion.

Internet-style name disputes, which broke out in the 1990s, have become epidemic since the dot-com boom and most big companies in the West spend millions on defending their global brand names. Consider the name Apple, both the computer and the record label and holding company for the Beatles. Apple Computer and Apple Corps managed to co-exist for a quarter of a century, until Apple Computer opened a music store, which caused Apple Corps to see red and file suit.

Arab marketing departments are attempting to enter cyberspace at a time when wars over names are bringing about a sea change in the scale of modern society. Simply put, the world has finally run out of names.

In the course of human history, expanding social units have brought on expanding name systems. In tribes and villages, single names were sufficient and there was no need to fight over who would be called Qays, say, or Leila. But tribes grew into clans, cities became nations, and society had to find a more suitable onomastic system – to give the naming structure its technical term. Surnames and patronyms became necessary as were names based on geography and occupation.

Society has being forced to do better again; and, in a Dickensian twist, Arab companies couldn't have hoped for a better time to be rebranding. Help is at hand from an unlikely source: the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Icann), which oversees the management of internet names and addresses.

Specifically, the Icann board ruled in June 2008 to make available a whole slew of new generic top level domains (gTLDs) – the suffix in a web address such as .com or .org. Projected to come into effect by the second quarter of 2009, the new naming rule will allow companies to register any word so that, for instance, domain names ending with .news, .doha or .soap will soon be up for grabs.

Moreover, Icann passed another proposal aimed at allowing these domains to be registered in scripts other than Roman characters, including Arabic and Chinese. Specific countries could receive the equivalent of their two-letter country code, like Bahrain's .bh, in their native alphabet. This means that an Arabic website will soon be able to have its web address entirely in Arabic.

These changes will certainly smooth the way for web addresses that end in city names, brands and generic words, which in turn could create the largest boom on the internet since its creation. However, they could also sow confusion, potentially develop a gold-rush mentality and create a host of new ways to exploit the web addressing system, thereby starting a wave of legal skirmishes over applications to register trademarks – .gulf, as a case in point, could be subject to endless wrangles by any number of competing corporations across the region.

Overall, though, marketing departments in the region will be girding their loins given the massive boost to the roster of possible coinages in both English and Arabic. In their drive to find the mot juste for their companies or logos, they should perhaps consider advice from George Eastman, who first coined Kodak from scratch: "A trade name must be short, vigorous, incapable of being misspelled to an extent that will destroy its identity and, in order to satisfy trademark

laws, it must mean nothing." Even Shakespeare might have found the name Kodak immediately memorable if not exactly brimming with soul.

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ebooks

The movies couldn't do it. Radio couldn't do it. Even television couldn't do it. With each great forward leap in communications, pundits have prophesied the death of the lowly, old-fashioned paper book. Indeed, the demise of publishing has been predicted ever since the days of Gutenberg. But for most of the past century – through cycles of wars and recessions – the business of books has jogged along stoically and at a steady pace: no unsustainable highs, but no devastating lows either.

However, now it is the internet's turn to threaten the industry, as growing numbers of technophiles claim that e-publishing will deliver the deathblow to paperbacks. Of course, publishers have been burned by ebook hype before. At the turn of this century, analysts were predicting we would all be reading novels on our Palm Pilots. And there still is not a clear consensus on the definition of "ebook". Sometimes it refers to a handheld device specifically designed for reading electronically distributed books – the current heavyweight in this category being Amazon's Kindle, which is the closest so far to being the iPod of books.

But ebooks can also refer to works that are available in any online or downloadable electronic form and therefore accessible on any computer. For instance, Google, which is already digitizing some 7 million out-of-print volumes from libraries across the world, announced last month that it had formally entered the ebook fray, with various publishing deals aimed at selling contemporary works of fiction and non-fiction through their book search engine.

High-tech aficionados are already looking forward to a time when ebooks supercede bound volumes in the way email has all but replaced the posted letter. They say digital books will be significantly cheaper than printed titles thanks to diminished costs related to printing, binding and shipping. They are right, of course, but that should be cause for concern, not celebration.

Online giants such as Google and Amazon are bent on building vertical publishing businesses – from acquisition straight to your doorstep or monitor – without a single middleman in sight: no bricks-and-mortar publishing house, no literary agent, no printing press and no bookshop.

Even authors will lose out, both in editorial expertise and earnings, if the book market turns electronic. Royalties are based on the retail price. On a book retailing for $30, say, a writer typically earns $4.50, or 15 per cent. With its drastically reduced price, royalties for an ebook version of the same work could be as low as 30 cents on a sale of $2. With time, this is bound to put off authors from putting pen to digital paper, which in turn means that technophiles will mostly be reading a lot of college fiction and how-to manuals.

That said, ebooks are starting to go mainstream along two different paths. First, there is a corporate and professional market for bulky reference material where network-based access is

not appropriate for reasons of security, cost and reliability. Equally, in the education sector, the use of electronics to deliver classroom texts is increasing, particularly in the West, and there have been calls to replace paper textbooks with ebooks as a way of saving money.

The second is ephemera: material that has a very limited life span in the hands of most readers. For magazines, for example, an ebook provides a more satisfactory way of reading text-intensive material than is currently delivered to web browsers. Examples of other media that fit into this category are most newspapers, and any novel that you wouldn't read a second time.

But it is too early to say how ebooks will stack up against dead tree editions; because the market is so new, industry analysts have yet to produce estimates of its future potential or to profile ebook users.

Moreover, aside from several teething issues, which affect the take-up of ebooks – for instance, the electronic sound of a page being turned will never match the real thing – avid readers tend to be people who accumulate stuff and take pleasure in owning books. Even though a personal library of about 300 books could fit into one ebook, many people will still find that a far less satisfying alternative, regardless of the space saved. Besides, if you just want a novel to read while travelling, you will probably stick with a paperback: it weighs less, you won't be too upset if you lose it, you don't have to worry about battery life and the flight attendant won't tell you to put it away when the plane starts to descend.

None of which, to be sure, is likely to hold off the rise of ebooks, especially for a generation that is already more comfortable with laptops and iPods than printed books. But it remains to be seen whether Gutenberg's adherents will go without a fight.

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The Technological Imperative

In debating the impact of technology, historians often cite something called "the technological imperative". It is the idea that if something can be done, it will be done, and that human beings lack the discipline needed to turn our backs on a tempting but dangerous new technology. We are always eager to reap the rewards of progress, always eager to dismiss any danger as the price of doing business.

Take, for instance, the rise of the computer. Fifty years after its invention, the computer is already listed with the wheel, the printing press and the steam engine as a technology that has most radically transformed the world. Like the printing press, the computer has greatly accelerated the flow of information; like the steam engine, the computer can be applied to a variety of industrial uses, making the entire economy more efficient. But in its impact on how human beings live, the computer is best compared to a humble technology called the clock.

Like the computer, the clock simply generates information – in its case, the time of day – and shares that information with a large number of people. Yet historians credit the clock as one of the most influential inventions of all time because it changed the human mindset. Its unique

power lay in its ability to synchronise millions of human beings, to create out of many independent individuals one smoothly functioning organism.

Without the clock it would be impossible to agree to meet a client at 3:30 p.m., or get to work by 8:00 a.m. That is what the computer has succeeded in doing in recent years, as it shifted from a large, stationary object in the corner of a room to something that many of us carry around throughout the day. The computer has made us more accountable to each other, more connected through its various and intertwined platforms – email, blogging and social networking sites. It has synchronised human activities far more closely and in many more ways than the clock ever could.

And yet that is still only the beginning. As a catalyst for change, the computer's potential is almost limitless, and the transformations it has caused to date are relatively minor compared to what the future holds. After all, the computer was designed to mimic, extend and eventually challenge the most potent force for change on the planet: human intelligence.

Most scientists seeking to create some form of artificial intelligence explain their goals in relatively practical, non-threatening terms. They want to make computers smarter, and thus more useful. To be sure, they want to use computers to help human beings who have been paralysed by disease or accidents, for instance, or build computers that feel less mechanical and friendlier to their human users. Each of those goals is feasible. Each offers real-life practical benefits to human beings.

But there is also something deeper going on. When you read scientific journals and look at the work being doing, it gradually becomes clear that at some level, perhaps even an unconscious one, scientists are trying to understand life and consciousness, and in science you do that most convincingly by creating life and consciousness artificially.

There is nothing new about that impulse: humans have always had the drive to create, to try to mimic if not duplicate the godlike power to give life. Cro-Magnon man drew lifelike images of his prey on cave walls. Medieval Jewish mystics told the story of the Golem, a creature moulded out of clay by a powerful rabbi and then given the breath of life. In the 18th century, inventors used the new art of mechanics to build lifelike animals that moved and behaved like their real-life counterparts, even to the extent of eating food and excreting waste.

The pioneering work in robotics, artificial intelligence and other computer-related fields is a modern expression of that ancient drive. So is research by scientists in other fields. For instance, geneticists have succeeded in isolating the 300 or so genes essential to build a simple bacterium. They intend to fabricate those 300 genes from scratch out of manmade chemicals, then combine them within an artificial cell wall. The result would be a new form of life created entirely by the hand of man.

Hardly surprisingly, such developments send a chill down the spines of many people. We may be compelled to re-create life, but we should be terrified at the thought of succeeding. In our apparent compulsion to exercise godlike powers over life – in our insistence that we too can

endow our creations with intelligence – we are playing with things we cannot fully comprehend. It all smacks of arrogance, and arrogance can reap a bitter harvest.

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