

# Endless Empowerment and Existence: From Virtual Literacy to Online Permanence in Presence

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## BACKGROUND

Steven John Thompson, PhD, is an iconologist engaged in the analysis of media iconics. From 1982-92, Steve was a newsman in the broadcast and print industry. Since 1994, his expertise is in study and analysis of Internet technologies, more recently as existential phenomena. Steve conducted pioneering empirical research in Internet addiction published in 1996. His engineering concentration in the sciences for technologies that affect societies (STS) is the primary lens through which he conducts his new media research. That dynamic process includes the leveraging of ethics, philosophies and policies for Internet phenomena at the cybernetic, cybersemiotic and cyberwarfare levels, as informed largely through digital media, journalism, and terrorism studies.

## ABSTRACT

This analysis resumes elements of pioneering research initially published on Internet addiction and dependency (Thompson, 1996). Further study of Internet phenomena over the 15 years since has taken the author into the realm of iconic mediated messaging as a struggle between global media, terrorism, and the viewer (Thompson, 2010). Having grown in access and privilege within the consumer Web -- initial concerns over usage and expectations as laid out in 1996 whereby Internet addiction and dependency were determined to be more along the lines of investment and empowerment vs. self-destructive habit -- the maturation process from initial usage to full-fledged Internet literacy has been fraught with obstacles, yet with deep reward.

As a scholar well-versed in interdisciplinarity and cybercultures, and having moved away from the fears of Internet addiction to the reality of empowerment, one recognizes a plethora of reasons why Internet literacy has molded scholarship and individual into a new creation of cybernetic origin: *cyberspace provides and subscribes opportunity for humans to communicate as more than the sum of their parts*. In the process of literacy change and alteration over this time period, there has also been adjustment in the cyber network, which has been fed both the good and bad that humanity has been able to conjure and upload: a vast, endless, exponential archive of every human conception.

What have we learned in the last 15 years as a species interacting with the virtual species that has seemingly aligned itself with our purposes and future, a future that has taken on the permanent persona of an ever-presence in which we are perpetually thrust? This analysis evaluates emerging media and information literacy trends, the cyber-human, and individual participatory freedoms and consequences that confront those trends for people connecting to the Internet.

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This paper triangulates select aspects of two case studies from core areas of my research on Internet phenomena in order to leverage timely, relevant sociocultural propositional elements of Internet Addiction and Dependency Syndrome (IADS) and Iconics into a third ‘case study’ on Cybersemiotics, Cyberality and Networked Literacies reflective of socio-philosophical matters that may inform current Media and Information Literacy (MIL) initiatives.

Highlights from these studies as they inform the third section of the paper lay foundational considerations for my proposed conclusions. Consequently, these highlights provide a possible trajectory for consideration of access, citizenship, privilege, power, and philosophy of Internet phenomena relating to critical adjustments in global reception for MIL as a sociocultural imperative. These considerations result in identification of mainly three global citizen outcomes of individual consequence and direction: choices to be made in view of available, requisite options.

### **CASE STUDY ONE: Internet Connectivity: Addiction and Dependency Study (IADS)**

I do not wish to get into the matters of Internet addiction and dependency so far as whether there is such a phenomenon, as my quantitative and qualitative study from 1995-96 addresses that question as best it can. The purpose of the study was never to determine respondent addiction or dependency.... “The real purpose of this research has been to determine what the disruptions appear to be from those who are experiencing them the most, and then attempt to evaluate what this might mean for a global society affected by often unlimited access to this new medium” (1996, p. 143). If we continue in that vein, 15 years later, we may realize that addiction is a moot topic, that obsession of any object is not outside the realm of human grasp, and that we have moved away from addiction to the more critical, expedient experience in the West, onto dependency.

Definitions for my initial study were as follows: **Addiction** *implies that you may have no will of your own concerning a particular habit. Dependency implies that you have a strong, compelling desire to continue a particular habit*" (p. 142). It is evident that social media and other applications today have turned the Internet appliance into something habitual, not unlike a toaster, however, much more pronounced and repetitive, like a hobbyist's radio or artisan's craft; e.g., a potter's wheel, a walkie-talkie, or even a skateboard may be some possibly analogous connections.

My initial conclusions from 1996 indicated the following:

"There is no doubt that computer users are exhibiting characteristics similar to addicts of other substances. But for many people connecting to the Internet, claims of addiction or dependency are surfacing simply as these users grow alongside the medium. Speed, user-friendly software and ease of access are all contributing factors to both the readiness of people to participate and the further proliferation of the medium being explored" (p. 152).

Speed and user-friendliness have caught up with the Luddite and brought her/him into the fold. We in the West are now undeniably dependent upon access to the Internet for everything connecting to it, a process leaving very little content in our physical world untouched by virtuality.

One of the questions I asked regarding the Internet appliance and the user was, "Are these people simply trying to break a new habit, or is there a deeper, psychological bonding taking place between them and their substance? Many people who think they are addicted are simply growing with the medium, feeling the insurgence of dynamics it presents, and interpreting it all as being out of moderation when it comes to the perceptions of their usage" (p. 153). Prior to the publication of the study, finding persons in 1995 who claimed addiction to the Internet was not an easy task.

Today, grandmothers and children are in the same state, connecting with friends and family, enjoying music and literature, being educated and informed, and simply experiencing a vast array of virtual connections that they may conclude are enhancing their lives. Of course, these are the variables that make MIL initiatives attractive for dissemination and promulgation, and an imperative for those persons out of the loop for whatever reason access or understanding is at bay.

So, when it comes to addiction, it has been supplanted with the urgency of dependence. The Internet, however virtual we wish to call it, still has – and is – substance. “Internet users can be addicted, and many are addicted, to their substance.... Even when carried out further through its hierarchical levels of progression, many users fit the mold reserved for substance abusers” (p. 153). The West is now, collectively beyond addiction, and ultimately dependent on the Internet.

My research concluded this was not necessarily a bad thing that while heavy Internet connectivity contained some ‘very real factors disrupting people in their personal lives,’ it also provided a “process of learning as much as possible in as quick a time as possible, [often] about [the foundational concepts which belie] this new medium, and how to incorporate it as a viable means of communication in ones [sic] daily living experiences” (p. 153). We must move ahead presuming its ‘supreme’ value far outweighs its detriments to society and the individual, and that may ultimately be because we simply must move forward with it; there is no turning back.

My final words on this component of this paper from my study are the contention that:

“Internet connectivity has validity for the furtherance of humans as sensitive, intellectual beings procuring some of the finest experiences accessible to them via the available resources at this given period in history [1996]. Human sensitivity must be made adaptable to the needs and concerns of individuals whose lives are being disturbed, disrupted, and in some cases, destroyed, as a result of

their Internet connectivity habits. Human intellect must be made aware of the many challenges presented by further acquisition of knowledge via this new medium, challenges which may have detrimental effects that can be further exacerbated by a false but ready assumption that knowledge is power, and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise” (p. 153).

## **CASE STUDY TWO: ICONICS**

Post 9/11, I began to analyze media images in a new light. They were acquiring new elements to their composition that were being ‘hypered’ by attributes of digitality and the Web. After working in this capacity with media for nearly 10 years, I published some of my conclusions on what I called *iconics*. Their importance to this paper lies in their foundational contribution to the philosophical cybernetic nature of our future in what may be designated as digital presence.

These observations focus on who is controlling global information, on who has access, what governs these variables, and how society is affected and influenced in the end. I would like to leave the first observation without further commentary from my paper published on the topic below strictly for the foundational considerations it addresses in connecting ubiquitous news and information sources with the concerted image for the creation of our new icons, or, better: iconics.

### **Iconics: Power of the Image (Makers)**

“While words alone are [fully] capable of conveying adequate information across media channels, the news industry crafts around the dual enterprise of both word and image,” and “audio-visual supports of these communication devices constituting new media are standard means of rhetorical expressions in acquiring and sharing information in daily life” (2010, p. 351).

Consequently, “media images previously bound by the constructs of analog technologies have taken on [powerful] new dimensionality through participation and promulgation within

media outlets of digitality. This new digital territory for the iconicity of images is changing the way cyberspace adopts an icon, and the way humanity avails itself of it” (p. 351).

### **Iconics: Power of the Digital Image**

Some of my previous conclusions were that because of exponential audience receptivity — through ubiquitous global media ownership and promulgation — the image or icon becomes an iconic: a relatively omnipotent, highly revered structural phenomenon of exponential potential. I defined an iconic as an *instantiation*, a media moment in the global consciousness that rises to new stature due to its placement in that consciousness through a gestalt of its visual rhetorics in sync with tenets of digitality (p. 355). I illustrate how the effects of this metamorphosis are far-reaching and powerful, and so far, have been best realized in mediated messagings associated with rhetorics of terrorism, especially as terrorism archives in cyberspace (p. 355) through the permanence of iconics as a viral phenomenon (p. 359).

### **Iconics: Power of the Digital Network**

My doctoral dissertation of 2010 concluded that as an extension of the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media, iconics contribute to the proposition that the cyber network is borderline autopoietic, and they act with agency within the virtual. Their permanent presence can be understood to constitute an armory of available weaponry that the system or anyone connected to it can wield at will, should there be access and privilege.

Consequently, as cyberspace becomes the next battleground for human values and objectives, the cyber network -- with its steady iconic creation machinations, high propensity for omniscience, and ubiquity -- renders new ethical and technological challenges. It is into this sphere of digital existence where proponents of the West have virtually materialized with habitual, dependent, corporate strength and intent, where hyperreal sensitivities and objects abound, and



where the merger of man and machine are taking on new ethical and philosophical dimensions capable of affecting the planet as a whole, and the species in ways in which there is no return.

### **CASE STUDY (RESULTING) – Cybersemiotics, Cyberality, and Networked Literacies**

Media and Information Literacy fills a needy gap. It identifies members of society, entire countries that can benefit from becoming more literate in media and information objectives. Yet, that gap may not be what it appears to be. Michel Foucault in 1964 in *Madness and Civilization* rewrote critical historical trajectories from his study and analysis of gaps, ultimately disempowering those who used their powers to usurp authority over the less fortunate, yet more importantly, empowering ‘gaps,’ as we had historically, previously discarded them.

Instead of finding ways to divide, we should rethink the reasoning behind our delineations, we should ask why we do this. Why label a person digitally literate and another media literate or another simply literate? The future is riddled with people at various stages of literacies. MIL seeks to equip the non-literate with basic literacy skills needed for enjoyment and participation in 21st century communication along with an intended outcome of informed citizenry contributing to the greater good of the self and mankind. This necessary tool is intended to narrow the gap between a global society's marginalized and its privileged. Let us make no mistake, it is of extreme value.

Still, might we take a more rhizomic approach to the matter vs. a hierarchical or even scalar one, when considering the primary digital source of human knowledge and interaction? If so, this may lead us to three major, collective considerations operating individually today and into our future. This brings me to the conclusion of this paper, leaving the reader with these terms that are self-indicating markers of where media and information literacy may stand today. They are: The All-Knowing Human, The All-Knowing Network, and, Perpetual Connectivity and Perpetuation.

## **BREAKDOWN OF THE ALL-KNOWING HUMAN (A-KH)**

### **1. Aliteracy/Aliterate (Xliteracy/Xliterate)**

*The person who can but chooses not to participate in cyberality.*

### **2. Eliteracy/Eliterate**

*The person fully-fitted for participation in cyberality.*

### **3. Ill-literacy/Illiterate**

*The person marginalized by issues of cyberality.*

Each human citizen prototype is positioned in society according to the following schema:

#### **CONDITION OF THE XLITERATE**

The person who can -- but chooses not to -- participate in the global exchange of information. This person exercises freedom of choice and expression while it exists to willfully resist the rise of digital alteration to the human condition. The *xliterate* is individually vulnerable.

#### **RISE OF THE ELITERATE**

This person chooses to participate in the global exchange of information at the highest level of connection. This person exercises freedom of choice and expression while it exists to willfully participate in the rise of digital alteration to the human condition. The person with *eliteracy* is fully-fitted -- corporately, economically, permissively -- with perpetual readiness to:

- **Access/Archive**
- **Code/Codify**
- **Collaborate/Commune**
- **Gain (Data/Prestige)**
- **Participate (-/0/+)**
- **Bond and Seal with the Network**

## EMERGENCE OF THE ILLITERATE

This person is handicapped in exercising freedom of choice and expression to willfully participate in the rise of digital alteration to the human condition. This is the emergence of the *illiterate* (ill-literate) and *illiteracy* diagnosed as disease. Possible consequences are deeper discrimination, wider marginalization, psychological questioning, extreme social ostracization.

## THE ALL-KNOWING NETWORK (A-KN)

The Internet harbors all the human knowledge we have in existence that we are capable of archiving in it, as well as all the current knowledge we perpetually add to it. Apart from content in our known universe, to which digitality should subscript, the volume of knowledge digitally encoded across the Internet and concentrated in the cyber network is perhaps voluminously larger than any conceivable force or structure known to mankind. Its ubiquitous presence makes its participants and their respective participation co-generators with the network for much of what is to come for humanity as a species, and potentially new adaptation to machine. Not since the Enlightenment has society been confronted with endless concepts of where the universal wind of change may ultimately take them for enjoyment of life and its next evolutionary exchange.

## PERPETUAL CONNECTIVITY AND PERPETUATION (PC+P)

Digital applications and chips in mobile phones attached to the hand and held to the ear are headed into the body along with a score of other materials attributable to human enhancement technologies and a determinism to transhumanism. The proliferation of cell or mobile phones provides access to the Internet for more people than standard ISP connections, resulting in more access. Brain implants and neuro-interfaces enhance Internet connections in new ways. Their affordability will make them worthwhile for the privileged.

With friends, colleagues, and professional contacts moving into the global hive, there will be much incentive to join the network with increasing finality or be stigmatized, left out, a psychosocial outcast. Benefits appear to far outweigh the consequences. Addiction is a non-issue in this scenario, dependency is required. Addiction is not a bad word anymore, it is the norm, result of our dependency, magnified to the level of twenty-first century human necessity and expectation.

### **CONCLUSION**

Much more research obviously needs to be done in some of these areas. Key, critical questions remain, such as who will be key players on issues of governance and policy, where are we headed in terms of corporate power vs. individual empowerment, who are the winners and losers there? We must also wonder where there may be room for resistance, or *detournement* encouraged by potential outside advantages. How will we cope with impending new dimensions to cyberwar, what opportunities are provided us for peace, if any? And we must protect that important space for the individual who chooses to stay simply human, whatever the chosen or prescribed level of media and information literacy: without repercussion, without prejudice, without discrimination, without requirement, without injury.

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