

Summer 2001

# Technology & Identity Is rapidly accelerating technology eroding our sense of who we are?

Barbara Molony

*Santa Clara University*, [bmolony@scu.edu](mailto:bmolony@scu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarcommons.scu.edu/history>

---

## Recommended Citation

Molony, B. (2001). Technology and Identity: Is rapidly accelerating technology eroding our sense of who we are? In *STS NEXUS* 1(2).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).



STS Nexus » STS Nexus 1.2 » Technology and Identity

## WELCOME

[About Us](#)[Activity Areas](#)[Programs](#)[Academics](#)[Scholarship](#)[CSTS News & Media](#)[CSTS News](#)[Donate](#)

## Technology & Identity Is rapidly accelerating technology eroding our sense of who we are?

**Barbara Molony**

### Introduction

Societies as well as individuals construct identities through the words and actions of people, the physical being of humans, the structures of our cities and institutions, and the cultural record we leave by design or by happenstance. As a society, we are the sum total of our multiple meanings. As individuals, we have, throughout the long course of human history, found our identity in the relationships we have with those close to us in our families and communities; today, we must include the Internet as a space in which we create our identities.

The pace of technological change seems to many people to have accelerated in recent years. So, what is it that constitutes our identity? Is it our selves, interacting with one another across cyberspace? Have our identities become modified or invented versions of our physical selves? Is our identity as a culture a vast morass of unmediated information? Is our identity as a society eroding because we are unclear about the survival of our cultural legacy? What is the potential of the Internet to build or disrupt the communities that under-gird our identities? Do cyberspace connections bring us together or segregate us; do they make us more or less lonely?

These questions, and many others, were discussed among panelists: David Halberstam (journalist, author, and historian), John Staudenmaier, S.J. (Professor of History, University of Detroit, Mercy), and Mary Furlong (Chairman, ThirdAge Media, and Chief Officer, Strategic Relations, MyFamily.com). The panelists' remarks and their responses to questions posed by moderator Haynes Johnson and by the audience can be divided into two major topics; 1) the impact of technology on individual identity, and 2) the impact of technology on community identity.

### Technology and Individual Identity

Sounding a cautionary note about over-reliance on technology to form our identities, David Halberstam reminded us of the importance of giving priority to human judgment over tools like computers. But he also observed that the Internet has been a "democratizing instrument," with the

#### About the Author

**Barbara Molony**

Barbara Molony, Professor of History, joined the Santa Clara University faculty in 1981. Since then, she has been the co-Director of the International Business Program (1982-1988) and the Women's Studies Program (1996-present). Her first book, *Technology and Investment in the Prewar Japanese Chemical Industry* (Harvard, 1990), examined the social and economic implications of technology development in Japan's historical context. Her more recent publications have addressed, among other topics, gender and the structure of the workplace and gender-based employment legislation. Her technological "claim to fame" is that her Ph.D. dissertation (in History and East Asian Languages, 1982) was alleged to be among the first Ph.D. dissertations submitted to Harvard University to be written at a computer keyboard rather than on an electric typewriter.

ability to empower many of us.

Defining our cultures in terms of our tools is nothing new, John Staudenmeier, S.J., noted. However, humans have interacted in one form or another with machines or tools throughout history, and more particularly, during the past century, with technologies that move information at the speed of light. He suggested that the effects of our use of the Internet on our identities is mediated by our physical bodies' pace, at the "speed of blood," as Staudenmeier put it, in contrast to the speed of light. It is possible to be inundated with a tidal wave of information, with a technology overload that leads to media fatigue.

Just as streets and the built environment created networks in the pre-information age, the Internet creates networks among individuals in the information age. But, just as the networks of streets necessarily conformed to the needs of the human bodies that used them, so our electronic networks must be modified by the needs of the human body. Having some time off-line to process information can cure "media fatigue," the result of having too much information. Staudenmaier felt that we all need "offline time" to find our identity, and suggested we consider fasting from the Internet one night per week.

"Identity is hard work—it is an achievement of adults," noted Staudenmaier. The Internet forces us to face squarely the hard work of identity formation. In the village of the pre-information age, people could use their own judgment to determine the validity of the information they acquired. They knew both the context and the author of the information, and could offer immediate feedback to the author. On the Internet we are who we say we are. The information, or the message itself, becomes far more important than the author. Identity, then, is something we cannot simply take for granted but must create in the new Internet context. Perhaps our identities are less bound to ourselves in this new age; perhaps they are to be found, as they were among humans of the past, in our communities. There is a tremendous appeal to community formation through the Internet. In an age when we hear of the calls for territory-based communities and the evils of ethnic cleansing those types of communities might engender, we also have the potential to build global communities based on local views to transcend the threats of insularity and parochialism.

### Technology and Community Identity

Getting more information to people and building communities among them is one desired outcome from our information revolution. Staudenmaier posited that technology changes are, in some cases, causing American ethnic communities to vanish and that online communities often result in a narrowing of focus. Communities of interest take many forms, from professional communities groups, to practice ethnic and even hate groups. Recognizing the possibility that individual members of existing families might seek virtual communities at the expense of time spent with their immediate families, Mary Furlong stressed the greater positive potential for lonely people to build communities and families through the Internet. Based on her work with "computers for kids over 60," she observed that as we grow older, we face the question of who we are, the fundamental issue of social identity. This identity is formed not only by looking at where we've come from, the memories of our past, but also through having a vision for the future, Furlong averred. And the Internet has an unparalleled potential to build communities, to reconnect families, and to develop new bonds among individuals. Furlong has observed several dozen marriages among people who have met through Internet services she has developed, which indicates that the Internet can play an important role in encouraging us, at any age, to have a vision for the future. She also cited the example of SeniorNet, the first virtual community for seniors, as a vehicle where seniors share their identities (their life histories) with

» Summer 2001

» STS NEXUS Editor's  
Overview

» Technology and Us

» Social Dimensions of a  
Networked World

» Co-evolving Social  
Systems with Escalating  
Technological Change

» Technology and Identity

» The Digital Economy

» The Internet and Public  
Policy

others.

The potential outcomes for our identities in the information age can be both positive and negative. The Internet can make us more global in our view of ourselves, overcoming fundamentalisms of religion or ethnicity or ideology, but, ironically, it can also be used to support narrow-mindedness. Halberstam reminded us that fault lines of deep conservatism still exist in our globalizing world. Even those who condemn the modernizing influences of the Internet and the Western cultures, with which it is, perhaps increasingly less appropriately, identified, use it when it meets their needs. On a more positive note, Furlong pointed out that many people turn to the Internet for spiritual connection to others. "It's not OK to connect to the world if you don't connect to the soul," she added.

Halberstam observed that in a world where we are more and more connected electronically, people feel less and less connected emotionally. Contrasting online communities with the rich personal narratives in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, he commented that our technological society may actually be the most disconnected society in the world's history because of the decline of communities of neighborhood, family, faith, military, and work.

Halberstam's query, "To whom do I matter?" touched a sensitive chord in all of us. Furlong noted the impact of headcount reductions and lack of mentors as examples of the loss of meaning in the high-tech world. Staudenmaier pointed out the need for someone to whom we can tell the unimportant stories—in other words, a family member who gives one his or her undivided attention? In response to an audience member's question about the future, the panelists conjectured that the extended family in twenty years will increasingly be one of our choosing and will include virtual members as well as those with whom we are physically close. Communities in the future will likely provide a global umbrella over local interest groups. And certain kinds of exclusion by age, ethnicity, or gender may be mitigated by the Internet's ability to permit the transmitter of information to craft his or her identity to maximize others' reception of one's message.

As in previous eras of social, technological, and economic change, our contemporary accelerating pace of change will have all sorts of unanticipated consequences. Nowhere will these be more fundamental to humankind than in the area of identity. The questions raised by members of the audience reflected some fear about the divisions in our contemporary world and a search for means to overcome those divisions through the Internet. Halberstam was concerned that the institutional bonds of our society have loosened in recent times, as families move apart, work has become alienating, and people no longer have communal memories such as those forged, for many men, through military service. On the other side of the coin, elsewhere, community ties of a pathological sort, such as those associated with fundamentalism and ethnic cleansing, have been strengthening less sanguine types of community ties.

Both of these conditions—the loosening and tightening of different types of community bonds—present problems that the panelists believed could be mitigated by the forming of new identities through the Internet. Halberstam anticipated that the role of women in the political system would continue to evolve and become more powerful as women expressed their interests. Staudenmaier and Furlong both stressed the ability of the Internet to construct bridges over societal division and to help increasingly isolated individuals fashion new identities in new communities of interest. As our physical connections with others appear to be stretched thin, we can maintain old ties and even build new connections through the Internet. Our differences in age, in ethnicity, in nationality, and so on can be used beneficially and not as ways to divide us. Who we are—our identity—is intimately tied with whom we relate to, and our newfound ability to create

communities across cultures and nationalities, contributing our local knowledge to global communities, has the potential to dissolve regional and ethnic tensions. Sounding a warning note, Staudenmaier recognized that the Internet could also support communities of narrow-mindedness.

In response to a question asking the panelists to conjecture on community in 2021, all three panelists commented that there will be a need for communities that provide intimacy, that communities will be global, and there will be "communities of choice."

### **Future Directions**

Some additional questions could not be addressed during this stimulating session, and may become crucial issues in the years to come. For example, our contemporary electronic communications can, indeed, foster communities in the present, and this is a definite benefit. But the medium of connectedness is ephemeral when compared with the written and printed materials, such as letters, literary and cultural documents, and government records that offer us a tangible way of transmitting our cultural legacy across time and not simply space. The Internet is unsurpassed as a bridge across the miles, but can it be a bridge across the years? How will we define our identity as a culture?

In the end, all three panelists were cautiously optimistic about our ability to craft new identities through the Internet that can, paradoxically, help us forge old-fashioned connectedness in a seemingly disconnected, modernizing world.

