Hi Maria,

I think I probably read at least part of Computers in the Human Context when I was doing my Masters at GA Tech (1993-1995). In 1995 I wrote my Masters thesis on the convergence of TV and the internet. I’m curious to hear more of what you think of the 1990s perspective. I should see if I can find my thesis somewhere. It might be on a Zip drive, though…

That’s an interesting thesis! It would be novel to revisit, especially since streaming is really popular now.

Some of the text stays relevant from a theory perspective, but every time they mention VCRs, I think of how quickly that technology was outpace. But we still use facsimile machines! (It took me a few minutes to figure out what that referred to).

The 90s perspective is definitely different from most of the current books I read on technology. Current trends in tech discussion are very focused on data privacy, large corporations, and a sort of exploration of the self.

Based off some other 90s books I’ve read (like the Mezzanine), there’s this feeling of almost manifest destiny/tech saviorism? Like the Soviet Union has collapsed, now it’s time for Americans to take Concordes across the world in order to brainstorm solutions for the Global South. One of the essays in Computers In the Human Context touches on this – the author mentions that the IT Revolution is pitched as inherently democratic, that equality will be a side effect of computers, just as globalization would mean infinite human connection. That perspective seems naïve now. How could things just be “better” without any work?

There’s another undercurrent of digital life as this “other.” There’s anecdotes of people rushing home to chat online, but it seems like a digital mall, where the internet is this space you can dip in and out of. I guess that’s the case with many predictions: it’s really easy to go all (computers have taken all our jobs) or nothing (computers flop).

How do you feel that your perspective has changed since then? Did those predictions feel accurate?

I am really fascinated by the 90’s – my friend threw an “Enron Christmas holiday party” last winter and it was one of the best themed events. They feel like an inflection point.

There’s this novel (that I wouldn’t recommend to a friend) called the Mezzanine, and it traps so many slivers of what the 90s were. So much of those paradigms persist online and we use so much of that infrastructure.

Maybe in the next 10 years, we will start shedding those limitations (which of course, came out of the 60s).

Surfing the web or “be right back” – the web is no longer something else, something that we tap into.

The ‘90s are intriguing to me since so many things seem hyper-saturated? Like endless amounts of advertising, ruthless commercialization, pretty much anything relating to mall culture. Which still

In a lot of ways, the 90s seem like peak American pop culture? Friends is still a big part of pop culture, even though so much of that show seems dated.

From the globalization perspective, I think it’s very American. Like the Soviet Union has collapsed, it’s time for America, dressed in Tommy Hilfiger windbreakers, to open up the rest of the world.

Like the American way is inherently good, and so is technology. Technology and equality and this optimisim of bringing equality and democracy to the rest of the world. In a very “feed the starving children” kind of attitude. But as the tech itself has shaken out, especially after 2016 (kind of a turning point of tech optimism), technology seem less inherently equalizing/freeing.

That equality will be a side effect of computers, just as globalization would mean infinite human connection.

Globalization and technological advancements coming hand-in-hand to unite the world and I don’t know, ascend to a higher plane of happy existence. But without doing any work, they would just inherently fix things.

TITHC mentions “robots in prisons” as a solid plus. I can’t imagine someone saying that right now, especially in a post-terror world.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Mezzanine

Techno-stress as this other. Where computers still dip in and out. They’re not something in the home, really. Maybe the TV, or teenagers staying up late.

Everyone wants to buy in and build a better world.

One computer per household paradigm.

Like fax machines! In these 30 years, faxe machines?

The focus on Soviet communications and seeing the Global South as something to take care of (kind of).

Computers still seem a novelty and that we would just port everything we do to the internet.

Which like, we did. But

So many of these examples come from

The mall, but online.

Everything saturates super fast now, but now we don’t care.

That apathy wasn;t there yet. The tech is new.

Interestingly now, we don’t really worry about how American culture/values/etc will negatively impact the rest of the world. Tech is focused on the individual right now.

The fall of the Soviet Union probably meant many eyes on American democracy and its values. And techonology is seen as this great equalizer, this way to continuing to sell democracy. But now, we have a bit more of this view that technology doesn’t inherently mean equality.

At the beginning of this “IT Revolution” as it’s reference so many times. There’s a lot of skepticism about letting technology follow in the steps of opening up trade. Like, some people think the tech won’t make it. Or that it will be solely used for humaniatian concerns. And I think some of that skepticism has left the public eye. First introductions of computers weren’t great; I imagine that Dilbert was a true-to-life commentary. But now that computers are so seamless, that we carry them around, I think some of the criticism was lost. It’s definitely coming back: 2016 dampened that boundless enthusiasm in technology.

The whole “children are starving in Africa” mindset seems very 90s. And I think it’s reflected in the text

It’s also oddly, the period of time barely in textbooks.

Big data

From an American perspective, the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This is the future: flying on a concorde to a mall in another country

The book really seems like it’s anticipating an enormous change, but in many ways, so much has stayed the same. Kind of how AI came out of the 1960s, but we still can’t generate much accurate data without immense human support.

But, it’s hard to think of a parallel to the homegrown computer scene in 2020. It’s not that everything is known, but it’s harder to imagine such a geographically located, isolated sitatuion.

This idea of global superpowers

Melissa

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Melissa House

In cooking, I frequently forget the magic of celery. I tend to disregard it for salads too (Mom made the same iceberg salad with carrots and celery every night of my childhood). When I remember it I’m usually happy I do.

Still reading all of your newsletters. Thanks for keeping up with them. Seems like you’re staying well, I am too up here in Tahoe.