How to Stop Worrying and Learn to Love the Internet (1999)
Douglas Adams
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A couple of years or so ago I was a guest on *Start The Week*, and I was authoritatively informed by a very distinguished journalist that the whole Internet thing was just a silly fad like ham radio in the fifties, and that if I thought any different I was really a bit naïve.

I suppose earlier generations had to sit through all this huffing and puffing with the invention of television, the phone, cinema, radio, the car, the bicycle, printing, the wheel and so on, but you would think we would learn the way these things work, which is this:

1) everything that's already in the world when you're born is just normal;

2) anything that gets invented between then and before you turn thirty is incredibly exciting and creative and with any luck you can make a career out of it;

3) anything that gets invented after you're thirty is against the natural order of things and the beginning of the end of civilisation as we know it until it's been around for about ten years when it gradually turns out to be alright really.

Apply this list to movies, rock music, word processors, and mobile phones to work out how old you are.

This subjective view plays odd tricks on us, of course. For instance, 'interactivity' is one of those neologisms ... but the reason we suddenly need such a word is that during [the 20th] century we have for the first time been dominated by non-interactive forms of entertainment: cinema, radio, recorded music and television. Before they came along, all entertainment was interactive: theatre, music, sport – the performers and audience were there together, and even a respectfully silent audience exerted a powerful shaping presence on the unfolding of whatever drama they were there for.

I expect that history will show 'normal' mainstream twentieth century media [and its lack of interactivity] to be the aberration in all this. 'Please, miss, you mean [back in the 20th century] they could only just sit there and watch? They couldn't do anything? Didn't everybody feel terribly isolated or alienated or ignored?'

'Yes, child, that's why they all went mad. Before the Restoration.'
'What was the Restoration again, please, miss?'
'The end of the twentieth century, child. When we started to get interactivity back.'

Because the Internet is still so new we still don't really understand what it is. We mistake it for a type of publishing or broadcasting, because that's what we're used to. So people complain that there's a lot of rubbish online, or that it's dominated by Americans, or that you can't necessarily trust what you read on the web. Imagine trying to apply any of those criticisms to what you hear on the telephone. Of course you can't 'trust' what people tell you on the web anymore than you can 'trust' what people tell you on megaphones, postcards or in restaurants.

... But the biggest problem is that we are still the first generation of users, and for all that we may have invented the net, we still don't really get it. In 'The Language Instinct', Stephen Pinker explains the generational difference between pidgin and creole languages. A pidgin language is what you get when you put together a bunch of people ... who have already grown up with their own language but don't know each others'. They manage to cobble together a rough and ready lingo made up of bits of each. It lets them get on with things, but has almost no grammatical structure at all.

A neologism is "a relatively recent word, or phrase that may be in the process of entering common use, but that has not yet been fully accepted into mainstream language."

Remember he's writing this in 1999.

However, the first generation of children born to the community takes these fractured lumps of language and transforms them into something new, with a rich and organic grammar and vocabulary, which is what we call a Creole.

The same thing is happening in communication technology. Most of us are stumbling along in a kind of pidgin version of it, squinting myopically at things the size of fridges on our desks, not quite understanding where email goes, and cursing at the beeps of mobile phones. Our children, however, are doing something completely different. Risto Linturi, research fellow of the Helsinki Telephone Corporation, quoted in Wired magazine, describes the extraordinary behaviour kids in the streets of Helsinki, all carrying cellphones with messaging capabilities. They are not exchanging important business information, they're just chattering, staying in touch. "We are herd animals," he says. "These kids are connected to their herd – they always know where it's moving." **Pervasive wireless communication, he believes will "bring us back to behaviour patterns that were natural to us and destroy behaviour patterns that were brought about by the limitations of technology."**

We are natural villagers. For most of mankind's history we have lived in very small communities in which we knew everybody and everybody knew us. But gradually there grew to be far too many of us, and our communities became too large and disparate for us to be able to feel a part of them, and our technologies were unequal to the task of drawing us together. But that is changing.

Interactivity. Many-to-many communications. Pervasive networking. These are cumbersome new terms for elements in our lives so fundamental that, before we lost them, we didn't even know to have names for them.