

Ubiquitous Computing, Ubiquitous Inattention

Craig Ullman

When computer engineers draw schematics, they always represent the Internet as a cloud. The origins of this iconography are pretty simple: the Internet is a distributed network, so if you want to send data from point A to point B, the data gets broken into bits (so to speak), and the individual packets are sent any which way, to be gathered up and re-assembled at point B. So you enter the Internet Cloud

at one point, you come out of it at another point, but how you got there is totally obscured.

Over the years, the Internet Cloud has enveloped the surface of the Earth with wires. You had to plug in, get connected, be in a place where you can connect. You had to go to the Cloud, but now the Cloud comes to you: wireless technology is becoming ubiquitous. Coffee chains and fast food outlets, public buildings and private homes, are all unplugging and connecting to the Internet Cloud via several different wireless formats (Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, etc.). The different formats ultimately do not matter; no doubt they will be replaced as even more robust technologies reach the market. The point is, we will soon be living our lives subsumed by the Cloud.

For educators, the Cloud already is looming over the horizon. Duke University recently announced that all incoming freshmen would be given Apple iPods so they can wirelessly download course materials, multimedia, school information (“What’s for lunch at the caf today?”) and so on. At first glance, one might be surprised by the naiveté of the university administration: how could they imagine the mostly bourgeois

students of Duke don’t already have iPods? But there’s certainly a value in standardization, and I’m sure they’ve got a plan for the kids who already have one.

The convenience of wireless communication with the student body is certainly appealing: the students can take the university with them. But there’s a catch to this: how can the administration, and more importantly, how can the professors, question a student using an iPod in the classroom? And exactly what is that student doing? Checking her class notes? Looking up a movie schedule? Downloading music? And every other student in that class will have the same iPod, and no doubt will have a similar important reason to refer to his or her iPod just when the professor once again explains the structure of a circular argument.

So let’s get back to point A. The Internet Cloud will, in only a few years, envelope every last corner of the Earth. There will be no physical location on the planet (except, perhaps, under water), where you won’t *already* be online. So your mind will always occupy (and be occupied by) two separate and independent metaphysical spaces—the actual and the virtual.



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Of course, you will argue that people will just put their iPods away. But what about your camera-video recorder-watch-text message-multimedia Web browser-cell phone which will also be connected? How could anyone leave home without it?

Our students, the information pioneers of our society, will be more and more likely to spend their time in a space that they can shape, where their input has affects, where what they think matters.

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