

What People Are Saying About Life Before the Internet

Michael Gentle has succeeded in writing a book that is neither an anti-tech rant nor a call for a return to some idyllic past. An entertaining read.

François Jolles, CIO, International Union for the Conservation of Nature, Switzerland

An insightful look at a slower and simpler time, and a reflection on what we have gained and lost. It raises some interesting questions on the effects of the internet on health and well-being in a digital age.

Lilian Dudley, Emeritus Associate Professor, Department of Global Health, Stellenbosch University, South Africa

Michael Gentle reminds us of some of the small pleasures of life, from enjoying an evening out without interruption to not having to work at home, much of which has been replaced by 24/7 connectivity. Perhaps this insightful and highly enjoyable work will encourage us to occasionally revisit the charm of former times, albeit without forfeiting the advantages that technology now offers.

Dr. Nancy L. Segal, Psychology Professor, California State University, Fullerton; Director, Twin Studies Center

Life Before the Internet

What we can learn from the good
old days

Previous Books

The CRM Project Management Handbook (Kogan Page, 2002)

ISBN 978-0749438982

IT Success (Wiley, 2007)

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Michael Gentle



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Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
1 When Amazon was just a river	3
2 How on earth did they manage?	6
HOME	11
3 Children learned to fend for themselves	13
4 Children played with each other, not with phones	16
5 Children played for hours outdoors	19
6 People knew how to use their hands	22
7 Children had limited access to pornography	25
8 We would always answer the phone	28
9 It was okay to drop in unannounced	31
10 We took photos for ourselves, not for others	34
SCHOOL	39
11 We were good at mental arithmetic	41
12 We had good penmanship	45
13 We were good at remembering things	49
SOCIAL INTERACTION	51
14 People gave us their full attention	53
15 There were advantages to being unconnected	56
16 Phone conversations were private	59
17 We wrote letters	62
18 People could disagree and still be polite to each other	65
19 Relationships required socialization	68
20 People spoke to each other in restaurants	71

LEISURE	75
21 Reading books was part of everyday life	77
22 We knew how to read maps	80
23 Travel had the power to surprise	83
24 Movie plots were more creative	87
WORK	91
25 There was no email distraction	93
26 You couldn't take work home with you	96
27 There were lots of secretaries in the workplace	99
OTHER	103
28 Patience was part of everyday life	105
29 Physical activity was part of everyday life	108
IN CLOSING	111
30 Technostalgia	113
31 Off the grid in Mexico	116
APPENDIX	119
The internet made simple	121
Biography	127
Note to Reader	128
References	129
Further Reading	131

To Olivier

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1

When Amazon was just a river

I think the internet is one of the greatest inventions of all time, sitting right up there with the motor car and commercial air travel. As far as technology goes, it's clearly the greatest show on earth.

The internet has improved our lives beyond measure. We have a wealth of information at our fingertips that used to require a trip to the library. We are just a video call away from our loved ones on the other side of the world. Yesterday's products and services, which used to require paper forms and standing in line, have been reengineered to such an extent that what used to take days and weeks now takes hours and minutes. You can shop online from the comfort of your living room, and let your goods make the journey rather than you. You can rent out your home, your car – and even your clothes – to complete strangers.

The internet is now so much a part of our lives that it has become like electricity: it's always on, you don't care how it works or which power station it comes from, just so long as it's there.

Few people (starting with me) would wish to return to the predominantly paper-based era of the late 20th century. That would be like wishing to return to a time when there were no cars or airplanes.

And yet, much as we welcome these amazing benefits, the old way of life often hides positive aspects that we used to take for granted and that are now on the verge of being lost forever.

For example, the flexibility of working from home is clearly a huge advantage, but few would dispute the fact that we had better work-life balance back in the days when this was not

possible. Parents may feel secure knowing that their children are always reachable, but there was a time when this just wasn't an option, so children had to learn to fend for themselves.

I came to the internet as an adult. I therefore belong to a generation that can talk about the era before the internet based not on research, but on actual experience. Author Michael Harris is another. As he says in his book, *The End of Absence*: "If we're the last people in history to know life before the internet, we are also the only ones who will ever speak, as it were, both languages. We are the only fluent translators of Before and After" (Michael Harris, 2014).

This is a book about Before and After.

I grew up in the 1960s, when Amazon was just a river, a domain was a stately home and to browse meant you were looking around. We didn't have a phone or even a television in our house until I was ten years old. We listened to the radio for entertainment. We played outdoors for hours on end. We read books to while away the time, or played board games like Monopoly and Scrabble.

When I was at university in the 1970s studying mechanical engineering, I did my calculations on a slide-rule, since affordable, hand-held electronic calculators only appeared towards the end of the decade. If you're wondering what a slide-rule is, it's a wooden contraption about the size of a big ruler that has two logarithmic scales that allow you to do multiplication and division. And if you're wondering what a logarithmic scale is, you probably weren't paying attention during maths class at school.

When I started working in the 1980s, the newly invented PCs and Macs of the computer revolution were still hugely expensive. So, the only high-tech device on an office desk was likely to be a push-button phone.

In the 1990s, I started using email and got my first laptop and cell phone (or mobile phone). In 2002, I became one of the early users of the Blackberry, well before the arrival of the iPhone five years later.

By the time the internet went mainstream at the turn of the century, I was 40 years old. My children were in their mid- to late teens and had also essentially grown up without the internet. Compared to today, we were a family of tech dinosaurs. Then again, so were millions of others.

The internet rapidly became an integral part of my work. As an IT professional, I quickly went native as I embraced the internet in all its wonder and complexity. I became as internet-savvy as the next person.

Today, in my sixties, and with considerably less hair, I have to say that it has been quite a ride – one that I would now like to share with you. You will see how the last unconnected generation used to live, and catch the tempo of everyday life, from home and family to work and leisure. You will come away with a fresh understanding of some of the unintended consequences of living in a hyper-connected society. And – who knows? – you might even decide to make some changes.

Chapter 2

How on earth did they manage?

Many digital natives probably wonder just how their parents and grandparents ever managed before the arrival of the internet. No email, no smartphones, no Google – everyday life must have been really hard!

Actually, it wasn't hard at all. It was easy. In fact, it was very high-tech. To understand how that's even possible, let's do a simple thought experiment.

Fast-forward to 2050, where we discover that teleportation is now possible, just like in *Star Trek* ("Beam me up, Scotty!"). Teleportation means that people can be transported anywhere in the world, with body, soul and luggage disappearing at, say, Frankfurt, and reappearing on the other side of the world in, say, Toronto. "Travel time" is virtually instantaneous.

Now also imagine that some author with time on his hands writes a mildly interesting book called *Life Before Teleportation: What we can learn from the good old days*. Readers would learn that back in the 2020s, you actually had to physically travel by plane to get from Frankfurt to Toronto, an 8-hour flight that would involve such unpleasant things as going through airport security, eating airline food and sitting in the middle seat for the whole journey.

The "teleportation natives" of 2050, who will never have seen the inside of a plane, would probably wonder how we even put up with such travel back then. The hassle, the onboard experience and the sheer waste of time is something they couldn't even imagine. "Thank goodness for teleportation," they would say. "How on earth did they manage?"

Today in the 2020s, your likely reaction is that we're managing just fine. Nobody is waiting impatiently for some

futuristic technology to arrive to replace intercontinental air travel. Why, we're not even waiting for supersonic travel so that we can get there in half the time.

Another example: keyboards. Today's basic voice assistants will almost certainly evolve over the next ten years to the point where keyboards are no longer required to dialogue with a computer. And yet, when you use your computer today, do you curse your keyboard and yearn for full voice control? Of course not. You merrily type away because you live in the present. You know that your keyboard is the most advanced technology of its kind.

When you stop to think of it, hindsight comparisons are really just intellectual exercises in which people judge the past by the standards of the present. If nothing else, it is intellectually dishonest.

In a *New Scientist* article entitled "Clarke's Three Laws", we learn that the late science-fiction writer, Arthur C. Clarke, came up with what he saw as some fundamental truths – and you will no doubt recognize the third one:

- When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.
- The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.
- Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.

Predicting what future technologies might look like runs into the above laws. You're effectively asking people to imagine things that would appear to be impossible, if not magical, by the standards of the day.

For example, I can't imagine a single person before the era of GPS satellite navigation saying, "I'm really tired of reading a

map to get from point A to point B. Why can't somebody invent a talking car that tells me how to get there?"

Or someone waiting in line outside a phone booth saying, "This is such a waste of my time; when will someone invent a cordless pocket-phone so that I can call anyone, anytime, anywhere?"

These imaginary solutions would essentially be indistinguishable from magic. If any of our parents or grandparents had dared to imagine some of the internet-based technologies we have today, people would have laughed them out of the room and wondered just what they'd been smoking.

Today, you'd be hard-pressed to come up with a present-day technology that you think is terrible and imagine what it might look like in the future. Even science-fiction authors and movie scriptwriters – who certainly put a lot of effort into their predictions – get a few things surprisingly right, and a lot of things laughably wrong.

The original TV series *Star Trek*, for example, was – uncharacteristically – a pretty good predictor of the future, especially considering that it was created in the 1960s. The scriptwriters accurately foresaw things like mobile devices, Bluetooth headsets, tablet computers and voice-interface computers (and, who knows, maybe one day we'll add teleportation to the list).

On the other hand, 20 years later, the 1982 movie *Blade Runner* got a lot wrong when trying to imagine the year 2019. Its predictions of replicant humanoid robots and flying cars were hopelessly optimistic, to put it charitably. The movie was even incapable of predicting cell phones, which were only ten years away. Instead, the futuristic people of 2019 still used payphones (albeit with video screens) and paid by credit card.

As the baseball-playing philosopher, Yogi Berra, reportedly once said, "It's tough to make predictions, especially about the future."

At the end of the day, our minds are constrained by our current scientific knowledge – see again Clarke’s first two laws. In other words, we don’t know what we don’t know. This explains why people are generally satisfied with whatever technology they’re using. Every era is high-tech compared to the previous one; even the iron age was high-tech compared to the stone age. With the exception of visionary entrepreneurs like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, there are few frustrated people silently screaming, “There must be a better way!”

So next time you wonder just how your parents or grandparents managed before the internet, you can rest assured that they managed just fine – as fine as you and I are managing today with our current technologies, which will be hopelessly outdated by 2050.

HOME

Chapter 3

Children learned to fend for themselves

Before cell phones, smartphones and 24/7 connectivity, children left the house in the morning and often didn't see their parents again until the end of the day. Like the Apollo astronauts in radio silence on the far side of the moon, they were unreachable till they showed up again, and neither they nor their parents fretted about it.

This responsibility forced children to plan their day and deal with the vicissitudes of daily life, from missing the bus to running out of money. They had to improvise and make decisions. They acquired the autonomy and self-confidence necessary to become capable adults – the term in vogue at the time was “street-smart”.

Children today might still grow up to be capable adults, but they are less able to fend for themselves because of the smartphone in their pocket. Not only can they call their parents at any time, but their parents can also call them – and that might well be worse. Perhaps this permanent digital umbilical cord isn't in everyone's best interests. Children may grow up to be less autonomous, and parents less trusting that their kids can make it through the day unaided.

Moms and dads today wave goodbye to their children as they set off on a short journey to the cinema or across town – and then add anxiously, “Text me when you get there.” When did parents start concluding that their kids are basically incapable of getting from A to B in one piece?

How different it was for us free-range children of the pre-internet era. We were allowed to roam far from home without the constant worry that something might happen to us. That level of freedom today could get parents arrested.

I grew up in a safe and pleasant middle-class suburb with my twin brother. We were both roaming around in the street where we lived from as early as six years old, after having been taught the basics of road safety by adults and older children. Our parents would regularly send us to the corner shop to buy odds and ends. The store was just a few hundred yards away, on the intersection of a quiet suburban street. We always walked on the sidewalk facing oncoming traffic, just like we had been taught. We had learned the right way to cross a street – look left, right and left again, and walk across only once it's safe to do so. Monday to Friday, we went to school on our own using public transport, just like most of our classmates.

But it was on weekends that the real adventure started. With our friends from the neighbourhood, we would play football in the park, walk to the cinema several blocks away to catch a movie, or to the municipal swimming pool to mess around in the deep end – even though we had never been taught how to swim. And during it all, there was never a parent in sight. The very notion would have been laughable. Parents trusted their children not to do anything stupid and be home in time for dinner. It was a textbook definition of benign neglect.

This type of upbringing was the norm in much of the world. You only have to watch the sitcoms, cartoons and dramas of the time to notice that TV children were not constrained by parental angst. Like their real-life counterparts, they were mostly out of the house playing, getting up to mischief and riding their bicycles in the street.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I brought up my own children this way. By the age of ten, they would walk or cycle to their nearby school. They had no organized activities after school and were essentially left to their own devices. They were out playing somewhere: at the sports field, in the street or at someone's house.

Many modern parents probably worry that, unlike in the “good old days” before the internet, their children are at greater risk today of traffic accidents, child abduction and countless other dangers. However, all available research suggests exactly the opposite: the risks children face today are significantly less than they were thirty years ago. However, the perception is that they have increased, fuelled by sensational media reports and personal horror stories shared millions of times on social media. There was a time when ignorance was bliss. Thanks to the internet, this is no longer possible.

So-called helicopter parenting, characterized by excessive concern about children’s safety, was a societal phenomenon that started to take root in the 1990s. It was greatly amplified soon afterwards with the arrival of mobile technology and the internet, which allowed parents to be permanently connected to their children – even to the extent of monitoring their location through geolocalization apps.

Fortunately, people are slowly starting to question the wisdom of constantly keeping tabs on kids and wrapping them in cottonwool. Leading the charge in the USA is Lenore Skenazy, who was labelled by the media as America’s worst mom after she let her nine-year-old son ride the subway alone in New York and wrote a column about it. She fought back and started her Free-Range Kids movement. She is president of Let Grow, which promotes childhood independence and resilience, and is the author of the book, *Free-Range Kids: How Parents and Teachers Can Let Go and Let Grow*. Meanwhile, the state of Utah passed a bill in 2018 making it legal for parents to let their children go outside unsupervised – for example, to play in the park, go to the store or walk to school. Several other US states are said to be considering similar legislation.

As a popular quote puts it, a ship in port is safe, but that’s not what ships are built for.