Three short essays on technology by Virginia Heffernan

Beep!

The beep is an ingenious creation. Like the railroad toot but unlike an old telephone ring, beeps have both a distinct start and finish, marked by the twin plosives "b" and "p," and an elastic center that can generously expand and contract like an accordion: *beeeeeeeep*. You can create Morse code in beeps. Beeeep beep beep beep. Beep. Beep. Beep beeeep beeeep beep.

"The beep is a purely human-made, electrical sound," Jonathan Sterne, a professor of communication studies at McGill University, told me by e-mail. Plants don't beep, nor weather, nor animals. (The beep-beeping Road Runner of Warner Brothers is an exception.) If you hear a beep, you know that a person, or more likely his artifact, is signaling. There's no wondering, Is that a beep or a nightingale? Is that a beep or a tornado? Beeps are also not voices or music.

And still, sonically exotic as they may be, beeps are now easy to make; they are cheap and light. No wonder they have become ubiquitous. Everything beeps. E-mail beeps. Text messages. Trucks in reverse. Hospital monitors. Spaceships on TV. Call waiting. Stoves, dashboards, cameras, clocks. Coffee machines. Dishwashers. Elevators. Toys. Robots. Toy robots.

All these beeps have a single message, as Max Lord, an interactive designer who specializes in audio technology, told me by e-mail. "Beeps mean, 'Pay attention to me,' " he wrote.

In Dennis Lehane's novel "Mystic River," a cop lies in bed listening to the world beep. He notices the beep of the "ceiling fan, microwave and smoke detectors and the humming beep of the fridge." "It beeped on the computers at work. It beeped on cellphones and Palm Pilots and beeped from the kitchen and living room and beeped a constant beep-beep-beep on the street below and down at the station house and in the tenements of Faneuil Heights and East Bucky Flats."

"When the" — bleep, he wonders — "did that start happening?"

When, indeed? The short answer is 1929. That's the birth date the Oxford English Dictionary gives for the onomatopoeic word "beep." Prewar beeps must have been produced by car horns, though sonar, electric elevators and clown horns may have beeped or protobeeped even before the 1920s. Other car horns of the period, and now especially those of big cars, are usually heard to "honk."

Beeps as the sound of cute cars — that makes sense. A small, zippy, nuisancey thing chirping, " 'Scuse me, could you move a smidge? Thanks!" That's a beep.

As a source for beeps, car horns gave way to piezoelectric technology, a breakthrough used increasingly after World War II in labs, hospitals and military operations. With the arrival of the

transistor, small piezo buzzers could be made to beep in devices like electronic metronomes and game-show buzzers. "Finally, product designers had an efficient, low-power way to make any device emit a tone," Lord told me. Beeps could now be heard in a range of contexts, but the sound still managed to speak of seriousness and technology.

Today, of course, the beep sound is digitized. Modulated, engineered beeps punctuate and define our experiences with computers and smartphones. Beeps also echo through movies. In an e-mail message, Randy Thom, an Oscar-winning sound designer, explained the role of beeps in film: "The word 'beep' refers mainly to short-duration (less than two-second iterations) sounds that are more or less tonal and are usually associated with high-tech environments ranging from cars to imaginary space-alien laboratories. Beeps are often associated with button pushes, but also high-tech warning or alert systems."

Whether or not we consort with R2D2, consumers must confront a cacophony of beeps. They may make us feel more techy and efficient, but those pleas for attention also exact a toll. Beeps must either be ministered to, shut down or ignored — and all of these responses cost us energy and intelligence. No wonder we lament the julienning of our attention spans in the digital age. Maybe it's the work of ignoring so many beeps that contributes to the feeling that we're chronically remiss, behind and fragmented.

On the other hand, as Sterne pointed out, the Web is "largely a silent medium." We prefer to enjoy our visual and textual experience online in silence. Other than a few chimes and classy sound effects that communicate "everything is working" — the best being Brian Eno's beautiful late-lamented Microsoft start-up sound — a personal computer should produce only the white noise of its fan. Sound design for computers could become like sound design for cars, Benjamin Tausig, a Ph.D. candidate in ethnomusicology at New York University, wrote to me. "The ideal is not necessarily silence, but warmth, smooth operation and possibly even luxury."

He's right. For Web tours, nothing beats the untechy ambience of a library reading room: warm, smooth and luxurious — with all the beeps on low or off.

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Let Them Eat Tweets

 Twitter — the microblogging service that lets you post and read fragmentary communications at high speed — is fun, but it's embarrassing. You subscribe to the yawps of a bunch of people; they subscribe to your yawps; and you produce and consume yawps for the rest of your days. The me-me-me clamor brings to mind Emily Dickinson's poem about the disgrace of fame, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?": "How public — like a Frog — / To tell one's name — the livelong June — / To an admiring Bog!"

Now that I inhabit the Twitter bog, though, I don't complain. Twitter can be entertaining, and useful — and, really, who doesn't like the illusion, from time to time, of lots of company? I have only lately begun to wonder whether I'd use Twitter if I were fully at liberty to do what I liked. In other words, I'm not sure I'd use Twitter if I were rich. Swampy, boggy, inescapable connectivity: it seems my middle-class existence has stuck me here.

These worries started to surface for me last month, when Bruce Sterling, the cyberpunk writer, proposed at the South by Southwest tech conference in Austin that the clearest symbol of poverty is dependence on "connections" like the Internet, Skype and texting. "Poor folk love their cellphones!" he said.

In his speech, Sterling seemed to affect Nietzschean disdain for regular people. If the goal was to provoke, it worked. To a crowd that typically prefers onward-and-upward news about technology, Sterling's was a sadistically successful rhetorical strategy. "Poor folk love their cellphones!" had the ring of one of those haughty but unforgettable expressions of condescension, like the Middle Eastern gem "The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on."

"Connectivity is poverty" was how a friend of mine summarized Sterling's bold theme. Only the poor — defined broadly as those without better options — are obsessed with their connections. Anyone with a strong soul or a fat wallet turns his ringer off for good and cultivates private gardens that keep the hectic Web far away. The man of leisure, Sterling suggested, savors solitude, or intimacy with friends, presumably surrounded by books and film and paintings and wine and vinyl — original things that stay where they are and cannot be copied and corrupted and shot around the globe with a few clicks of a keyboard.

Nice, right? The implications of Sterling's idea are painful for Twitter types. The connections that feel like wealth to many of us — call us the impoverished, we who treasure our smartphones and tally our Facebook friends — are in fact meager, more meager even than inflated dollars. What's worse, these connections are liabilities that we pretend are assets. We live on the Web in these hideous conditions of overcrowding only because — it suddenly seems so obvious — we can't afford privacy. And then, lest we confront our horror, we call this cramped ghetto our happy home!

Twitter is no longer new. It's nearly three years old. Early enthusiasts who used it for barhopping bulletins have cooled on it. Corporations, institutions and public-relations firms now tweet like maniacs. Google has been rumored to be interested in buying the company. The "ambient awareness" that Twitter promotes — the feeling of incessant online contact — is still intact. But the emotional

force of all this contact may have changed in the context of the economic collapse. Where once it was "hypnotic" and "mesmerizing" (words often used to describe Twitter) to read about a friend's fever or a cousin's job complaints, today the same kind of posts, and from broader and broader audiences, seem . . . threatening. Encroaching. Suffocating. Twitter may now be like a jampacked, polluted city where the ambient awareness we all have of one another's bodies might seem picturesque to sociologists (who coined "ambient awareness" to describe this sense of physical proximity) but has become stifling to those in the middle of it.

A typical hour on my Twitter account, which I use to follow the updates of about 250 people, has some wonderfully cryptic tweets from Murray Hill, a drag-king entertainer, and Touré, the novelist and critic, alongside some less-inspired posts from P.R. people and cultural institutions trying to pass as normal Twitterers. I myself mostly post links to this column, hoping that the self-promotion is transparent enough that people can easily ignore a link or click it if they're curious. But don't get me wrong: I'm also just shouting my name the livelong June to a subscribing bog.

If this way of using Twitter bothers you, never fear: people like me get their comeuppance. If you hang out in the bog, a Twitter search might turn up commentary about you like this: "X might be the dumbest person I've encountered in print" and "X writes like a dog about to be gassed at the shelter." (X here equals, sadly, "Virginia Heffernan.")

I used to think that writers on the Web who feared hate mail and carping bloggers were just being old-fashioned and precious. But now, while I brood on the maxim "connectivity is poverty," I can't help wondering if I've turned into some banged-up street kid, stuck in a cruel and crowded neighborhood, trying to convince everyone that regular beatings give you character. Maybe the truth is that I wish I could get out of this place and live as I imagine some nondigital or predigital writers do: among family and friends, in big, beautiful houses, with precious, irreplaceable objects.

If I've come to be wary of social networks, which I once embraced with zeal, maybe it's because I take my cues from those very networks. In the old days, Facebook updaters and Twitterers mostly posted about banal stuff, like sandwiches. But that was September. It's spring now. Look at Twistori, a new site that sorts and organizes Twitter posts that use emotionally laden words like "wish" or "hate" or "love," thereby building an image of the collective Twitter psyche. The vibe of Twitter seems to have changed: a surprising number of people now seem to tweet about how much they want to be free from encumbrances like Twitter.

"I wish I didn't have obligations," someone posted not long ago. "I wish I had somewhere to go," wrote an-other. "I wish things were different." "I wish I grew up in the '60s." "I wish I didn't feel the need to write pointless things here." "I wish I could get out of this hellhole."

And finally, "I wish I was rich and had personal assistants." Right on. And those assistants, presumably, could do our Twitterwork for us.

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Framing Childhood

American children in 2010 have a bright, clear reason for being. They exist to furnish subjects for digital photographs that can be corrected, cropped, captioned, organized, categorized, albumized, broadcast, turned into screen savers and brandished on online social networks.

I'm trying my hand at anthropology here: where farmers bred to produce field hands, industrial workers bred because they couldn't help it and Kennedy-era couples bred to goose the G.N.P. by buying sailor suits and skis, we form families in the Internet age so we can produce, distribute and display digital photos of ourselves.

The marching orders come immediately, with the newborn photo, which must be e-mailed to friends before a baby has left the maternity ward. A conscientious father — chief executive of the budding business — must snap dozens of shots of the modestly wrapped newborn, generally with a Canon PowerShot though sometimes with a showy digital single-lens-reflex camera or a lowly cameraphone. Back at a laptop, he uploads the haul, scrutinizing pixels with the intensity of Anna Wintour. He selects a becoming one. The mother signs off, often via e-mail, from her hospital bed.

A parent may also edit the picture, correcting red eye or composition or even complexion problems, perhaps adding a jolly border or animated confetti (depending on class affiliation). Enclosed in an e-mail message, accompanied by a line or two of introduction, the portrait is broadcast like direct-mail advertising.

Thus a parent is minted. Good thing the drill starts early, as the signature act of Internet-era parenting repeats itself, again and again, in tighter and tighter cycles, throughout a childhood. It determines the rhythms of beach vacations and snow days. Eventually the business of family-image production and dissemination incorporates increasingly sophisticated and expensive cameras and photo-edit software and microblogging and distribution and organization systems (Tumblr, Picasa, Picnik, MyFamily, Shutterfly, Snapfish, Kodak Gallery). Before long the family has become a multimedia publisher, and — though it imagines itself a producer — a consumer of digital tools, gadgetry and broadband.

For a parent, this time-consuming vocation has twin payoffs: it wins you a break from your actual children while bringing you closer to their images. Pictures of kids, like idealized Victorian boys and girls, can be seen but not heard.

The child's life, reciprocally, becomes that of a model — and more. Every aspect of the family business becomes familiar to a child. Early on, she learns that she can examine a photo on a viewfinder as soon as it's snapped; that she should monkey around rather than pose, as "film" is distinctly not at a premium; that a substantial share of her parents' mysterious clicking at their computers consists of organizing and reorganizing images of her. My own son's first word for laptop, when he saw a woman plugging away at one at Starbucks, was the word he used for himself: "baby." What else could the woman be doing so intently at a screen but what he saw me do — paging through picture after picture of him?

The connection between parenthood and digital photography dawned on me during Apple's video presentations of the iPad, the company's latest personal-computing device. In the videos, a parade of Apple executives, clean-cut men with close-cropped hair, caress a glassy, oversize tile, while proselytizing about it. "It's going to change the way we do the things we do every day," raves Phil Schiller, an Apple vice president.

So which of digital culture's great offerings — which of the "things we do every day" — are enhanced by the iPad? Let's look at the demos. Are there shooter games, pornography, academic papers, live sports, message boards, chat, e-commerce, political blogs?

No. Instead, there are family photos. The iPad user, as we meet him, is a man alone, aswim in pictures of kids. Sure, he watches movies like "Up," reads Ted Kennedy's memoirs and plans and chronicles travel to Telluride, Colo. But what he does most ostentatiously is organize and exhibit photographs of children: at birth, on the beach, in Paris in the rain, with conch shells to their ears. One of Steve Jobs's first boasts about the iPad screen? "People put their own photos on it." Later, the iPad e-mail client is demonstrated as it sends a baby picture. Scott Forstall, a senior vice president at Apple, doesn't hold back: "IPad is absolutely *the best* way to view and share your photos."

Increasingly, personal technology seems like a delivery device for a lifestyle, a tacit prescription of how to live in the Internet's symbolic order. Study something like the iPad closely enough, and it seems to set a course for how we're now to use words and images for business and pleasure. Maybe it shouldn't be surprising in shaky economic times that the highest calling for the heaps of digital devices in our lives, with their functioning in excess of anything we rationally require, is to shore up our families, and advertise them to the world, and back to ourselves.

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