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EDITORIAL

The new freedoms

5 *Bourgeois* economists claim that cell phones have streamlined markets in the Global South, enriching people in zones where banking and economic information are scarce thanks to the provision of market data. Exaggerated claims include ‘the complete
10 elimination of waste’ and massive reductions of poverty and corruption through the empowerment of individuals (Jensen, 2007). This utopianism has seen a comprehensive turn in research away from unequal infrastructural and cultural exchange towards an extended dalliance with new technology and its supposedly innate capacity to endow users with transcendence (Ogan et al., 2009). Massive publicity was generated when Kelvin Doe, a 15-year-old Sierra Leonean, visited MIT in 2012. Doe had constructed a functioning radio station from *detritus* he had found in trash cans. More than two million on-line viewings of a video about him in the week to 21 November that year testified to the appeal of this tale (Lieberman, 2012; Hudson, 2012).

15 What a brand new day this is. But in William Gibson’s novel *Pattern Recognition*, Hubertus Bigend, founder of the Blue Ant advertising agency, says life is changing so quickly that ‘[w]e have only risk management’ (2003, p. 57). Those lapsed sacerdotal zealots of the new media, Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff (2010) of *Wired* magazine, say the web is dead because its social networks and software applications are supplanting the old fantasy of an open frontier with a new hegemony of guides and leaders operating inside a small number of institutions. And another former true
20 believer, Andrew Keen, argues that the internet generates a cacophony of noise and ignorance rather than quality and knowledge. He is equally aghast at what the web has become (2007, p. 12).

25 It’s easy to mock Keen as an elitist who fails to appreciate the revolutionary qualities of new technology. It’s not so easy to prove him wrong. Consider the mad opposition to infant immunization that has gathered pace among superstitious segments of the US population and dominates YouTube videos and responses on the topic. This is just one of countless examples of perilous medical misinformation that circulate irresponsibly on the service (Keelan, Pavri-Garcia, Tomlinson, & Wilson, 2007). As fewer and fewer media outlets become available to them, tobacco companies turn voraciously to the internet. Medical researchers are concerned at evidence of product placement via ‘smoking fetish videos.’ Aimed at under-age drug users under the *soubriquet* of ‘community engagement,’ they draw massively positive reactions. Many old TV commercials for cigarettes are also slyly archived there, new life breathed into their emphysemic messages (Freeman & Chapman, 2007). Similarly, new magical freedoms associated with cell-phone usage have created new dangerous nightmares for public-health professionals, as prostitutes at risk of sexually-transmitted disease increasingly communicate with clients by phone and are less easy to educate and assist than when they are at conventional workplaces
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45 (Mahapatra, Niranjana, Halli, & Jain, 2012).

And is Kelvin Doe's story so new? Here is the great novelist Ralph Ellison's version eighty years earlier:

There were the accidents through which so much of that world beyond the Negro community became available to me. Ironically, I would have to start with some of the features of American life which it has become quite fashionable to criticize in a most unthinking way: the mass media. Like so many kids of the Twenties, I played around with radio – building crystal sets and circuits consisting of a few tubes, which I found published in radio magazines. At the time we were living in a white middle-class neighborhood, where my mother was a custodian for some apartments, and it was while searching the trash for cylindrical ice-cream cartons which were used by amateurs for winding tuning coils that I met a white boy who was looking for the same thing. I gave him some of those I'd found and we became friends. . . . I moved back into the Negro community and . . . was never to see him again. (quoted in Smith, 2003, p. 93)

Kelvin Doe was, of course, fetishized as the story of an unlikely Third World prodigy that proves the need to replace aid programs with individual initiative. Such stories matter. When recast as per Ellison's anecdote, they can point out the materiality and inequality at the heart of media innovation and question its utility – if they are analysed in a critical way that focuses on citizenship rights, not entrepreneurial fictions.

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