

Reflections after a lifetime of change

ABSTRACT:

The events of September 11, 2001, the terrorist attack that destroyed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York changed the world, and while the effects were much reduced in faraway Australia, they became immediately apparent online. Any view through the global window was likely to be changed, and impossible to anticipate. To me, "think globally and act locally" still sounded like good advice, and while I had retired, I had no more retired from going online than I had retired from being on the phone, so I was going online, to "re-think globally and react locally". I was teaching myself about the changed online world. Everyone's online experience is unique, and I guess you and others will want to go online to re-think their changed online world individually. In the twentieth century, while I did a lot of 'travelling hopefully', I kept hoping to arrive. And for a short time in retirement in the twenty first century, I thought I had arrived - but around the world, little remained unchanged after the events of September 11, 2001. Here is my story of my online day, and of what I've been learning about events following September 11, 2001 and about telecommunications and change in the twenty first century.

IN MY LAST YEAR as a school student, I was given a nineteen thirty Essex car. I got it going, registered and insured. Then I started driving it to school, and I started learning about using automobile technology. I remember driving that car to school every day, and I remember telling myself, "It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive". In nineteen sixty one, travelling hopefully had literal meaning for me.

Later in the nineteen sixties, when I returned to schooling as a school teacher, I had experience of employment in the fast-changing world of telecommunications, and of learning to 'travel hopefully' in the world of ideas. I found uses for everything that I had been learning, and William James' belief that "... a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas, however deep, ..." (1) enabled me to use media technology that was changing very rapidly in the absence of agreement about describing non-print learning experiences. I was able to keep up with technology, save time on 'abstract formulas', and spend more time with students, but staying hopeful about educational 'particulars' meant that many of those 'particulars' would still be waiting for me to reflect on when I retired at the end of the century.

In retirement in the twenty first century, I was expecting to arrive! I'd been 'travelling hopefully' using online technology in the twentieth century, and I was glad it was over. I had started reflection, and I had started writing! But on September 11, 2001, the terrorist attack stopped me writing and started me 'travelling hopefully' all over again. As I saw the first reactions on global television, I realised that all the unwelcome classroom experiences coping with uncertainty that I'd had with educational technology in the twentieth century hadn't been wasted - every heart-stopping 'crash' and mystefying hard disc failure; all those reputation-destroying intermittent faults and maddening software bugs. In the aftermath, those experiences were all turning out to be relevant, and I started browsing the 'Online Newshour' website(17), listening to streaming audio, watching streaming video and reading the text transcripts there, educating myself about what was happening, and what it might mean for me. I also re-read Neil Postman's 1991 paper "Amusing ourselves to death"(14), alerting myself to possibilities for long-term downsides that might otherwise pass



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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH:

I had worked with computers and with telecommunications in the 1960s before I started working at Sacred Heart College at Somerton Park in Adelaide, I taught subjects from Maths and Science to Computing and Religious Education. I have been involved extensively in professional development and curriculum development activities and in developing educational technology.

A stroke in 1976 gave me a special interest in personal computing, and reason to stay in touch with developing online technology and telecommunications. I can read a computer monitor much more readily than I can read print on paper, and I find using a computer in global telecommunications liberating. Most of the writing I've done for publication about using online technology in education, has been done since a more recent stroke in 1992. I retired around the turn of the century.

In retirement, I expect to keep going online like I expect to keep using the telephone - in a more relaxed, but still purposeful fashion!

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unseen in the aftermath of such a dramatic occurrence!

Writing this with a sense of "back to the drawing board," in the early twentyfirst century, I had on my desk both an online PC and a telephone, and I had been using them both every day. Like everyone else in Australia in the twentieth century, I made a lot of use of technology, and as a teacher and administrator, the technology I found most useful was the online computer. Online technology was powerful, and reflection about using it seemed important to me, but there was never enough time for all the things I thought were important, and as things that were important for students and in administration became urgent each year, I got them done each year, and things that would wait got put off, and put off, and finally left until retirement. The online world had been changing before 'the events of September 11, 2001', and as I wrote early drafts of this text, I'd been listening to people practising being interactive on talk-back radio, so I was anticipating increasing interactivity and I've put my email address and my global phone number on my byline. After the events of September 11, 2001, I was expecting each individual reader to see a changed individual view through the online window, and just as I was expecting individual differences, I was also expecting different generations to have different responses - the events were on everyone's agenda, but they were having a lesser impact on my peers than on their students and other younger people!

The millenium bug had been teaching us travellers to think about what happens on arrival, and I wanted to remain aware of that. But in a world where outcomes depended on dramatic technology, it had been a challenge even before the events of September 11 happened, to get the abstractions of humanitarian concerns articulated as objectives, and to ensure that they were made to count among the technological wonders in the big picture. As I saw it, scientific method facilitated managing information in fields like neuro

science and military science so much, that I found that only if the outcomes showed what Albert Schweitzer would have recognised as "reverence for life"(25), could I feel free of wishful thinking when 'travelling hopefully'. For individuals like me, the challenge of the twenty first century would be maintaining such thoughtful responses after an information war!

So in the wake of the 'events of September 11', I found it necessary to expand the range of websites with whose content I would interact in crafting learning experiences from television news broadcasts. I had been getting much of my news from electronic sources, listening to radio and watching television, and anything I wanted 'in writing', I got online by interacting with the content on the 'interactive' website of a broadcaster or newspaper. I found additional well-organised sources of the information I needed in specialist websites like "Janes Information Group"(2), and the "BBC 'War on Terror'"(6), and to get 'humanitarian' information, I added the "Doctors Without Borders/MÉdecins Sans FrontiÈres US Site"(9). The National Geographic: Afghanistan interactive map(13) was useful, and so was writing this article. I have learned to expect diverse responses by email after publication - they become part of extended learning for me. Watching news items at that time kept me reminded that "The first casualty of war is truth", and that dates back hundreds of years before Christ (BC), so some things don't change much! I've also seen Abraham Lincoln quoted as saying (in 1864 or 1865), "You can fool all of the people some of the time; you can fool some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." At that time, Lincon didn't say "You can fool yourself any old time", but I think he might have said it after the events of September 11, 2001!

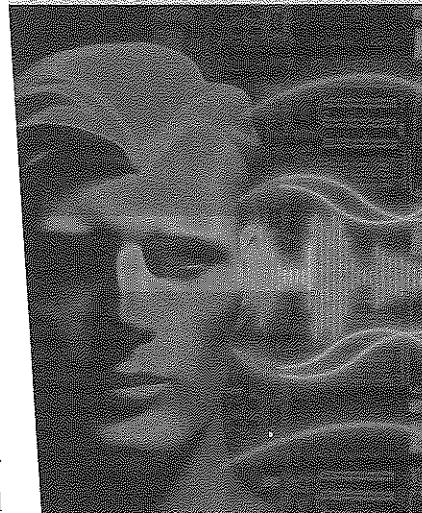
Using technology in teaching and to overcome disability led me to using telecommunications technology and computers, and the more I learned about using computers online, the more impressed I became with them. Experience would have taught me to have confidence in my appreciation of the educational outcomes of using online technology, but if I hadn't read that quote, and been able to 'travel hopefully', I might have discarded as wishful thinking the idea of writing well-articulated sense about using something changing as fast as educational technology, and I would not have played the

part I ultimately played in the South Australian Education Broadcasts Advisory Committee of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or in updating Media Studies in the South Australian R-12 Media Studies Curriculum Committee. Technological change didn't slow down after the nineteen sixties, and by 1987, when I was presenting a poster session 'using videotex', at the Australian (national) Computers in Education conference (ACEC87), I was still using the idea of "a large acquaintance with particulars", and the pace of change had become very obvious. Videotex was a computer communication system with 'chunky' graphics that operated at low speed through the telephone network. Lessons I learned using videotex still apply, but in the 1990s, computers got faster and more powerful, with greater graphics capability, and videotex became obsolete. By that time, I had an online PC at home, to match the PC at work, carrying files between them on the one backup disk I kept in my pocket. I was going online everyday, spending more time online than on the phone. After a further stroke in 1992, I spent some years on campus rehabilitating and reflecting on my online experiences of the later twentieth century. I wrote about being online (3), making it count (4), and the outcomes for individuals and communities (5). In doing so, I was able to take advantage of dramatic technological developments in the personal computer, graphical user interface and browser software, and I continued upgrading lightly, going online everyday during upgrades, 'enlarging my acquaintance with particulars', and moving on without regrets. Upgrades came and upgrades went, PCs got traded in and hard discs got replaced, and I saw all this as adding value to the intellectual property in my head, and the only information I preserved additional to that, was the diskette in my shirt pocket with a backup of work in progress. In the year 2001, I was able to get an extended writing day with year-round mobility by moving to a serviced unit in a large retirement estate, where I could stay inside in Winter. In retirement, going online was keeping me informed and aware. It got me news day by day, with continuing news of major events. I felt well-informed, but I remained glad I was still using the idea of "a large acquaintance with particulars" following the events of September 11, 2001.

My final upgrade was to WINDOWS 2000, and I finished this last draft using it.

It enabled me to cut and paste, edit a full screen of large print text, which 'the Narrator' text reader would then read back to me, and I could hear text and think about what the changed text would say to you.. Windows 2000 finally got me using the world wide web as my bookshelves. I 'set as homepage' a 'no-frills' hyperfile that resides on the C: drive of my online PC, so it is truly personal and I can modify it 'at will' or even, 'on the fly' without upsetting other users. I edited into this hyperfile URLs for 'Step by Step Tutorials for Windows 2000'(11), 'Microsoft Windows 2000 Professional Documentation' (12), and Microsoft guides for users with low vision(18), as well as wallpaper selection websites like the National Geographic Photo of the Day(20) and NASA's astronomy picture of the day(23) VisibleEarth(21) and Goddard Space Flight Center(22). Wallpaper from the website of the Hubble Space Telescope(19) got me writing reflectively, and wallpaper from the Banrock Station Website(24) set a nostalgic writing scene for me - I was last there in the nineteen sixties when my uncle ran Banrock and many of the events in this story had yet to occur.

My "large acquaintance with particulars" didn't exist in an information vacuum. It had to make sense in the context of the news, and since the introduction of television, my news had come in large part from that medium. After a slow start, television news improved rapidly, and the change to colour television brought further improvement as I saw it. Even before a stroke in 1976 made reading print on paper much more difficult than reading print onscreen for me, I had found that news I got from a website could be used directly in worksheets and assessment and evaluation documents in education. I was using radio to alert me to breaking news, and I would go online and choose an online newspaper to get me the details in writing. When I started doing this, I was using computer bulletin boards, and building libraries of text documents, but by the twenty first century, access to the World Wide Web had been getting me access to news with visually interesting content on websites like CNN ASIA, with specialist news like news of sport on a



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website like sportal or sportserver, and I could use the whole World Wide Web as a library. In addition to a radio receiver and a television receiver, I was using a video-cassette recorder (VCR) to re-schedule the time of any broadcast television program around my preferred bed-time and around institutional mealtimes, so I could exploit 'sitting in the sunshine' opportunities to suit myself. Having that VCR also enabled me to time-shift a replay into office hours or to 'sample' it at fast forward speed to give it more or less attention.

Using an online PC enabled me to ensure that any hours in a day that I spent watching television would be the outcome of informed decisions, to make the most of smart 'interactive' website content and get custom learning experiences from the broadcasts. It also put me 'in touch' with people involved in production and presentation. For planning all this, I was using the Adelaide Night TV guide (8) that my online PC got for me from the Sofcom website every day. I was also getting broadcast schedule information from Ninemsn's Adelaide Citysearch TVguide(10), and information about individual programs from the 'interactive' websites of broadcasters like ABC(16) and SBS(15).

I'm hoping for great things from interactive digital television, and I sent an email to the relevant Australian Commonwealth Government committee to encourage patience about setting Australian standards for it(7). While I couldn't predict the final technological details of interactive digital television, I knew that Australians would want access to programs from USA, UK, Canada, and elsewhere around the globe so, in Australia we would have to wait for a year or two for interactive digital television standards to 'shake down' over time in the really big markets elsewhere. Meanwhile, we knew who would be watching it, we knew who would be presenting it, and we knew who would be producing Australian content for it, so I was hoping to see development of skills for it, particularly interpersonal

communication skills. It seemed likely to be important in the home, enabling distance learning to support parent and preschooler, teaching and learning, 'learning to write' in addition to 'learning to talk'.

Since the 1990s, I had published almost as much in the USA as in Australia, and I was keeping up with the global view through educated US eyes by watching the PBS 'Newshour with Jim Lehrer' on television everyday, and browsing their 'online Newshour' website. The program that I was watching on SBS-TV in Australia, had been broadcast a day or so earlier in the USA, but for thoughtful news and current affairs, this delay was rarely significant, and anyway, I had a choice of local channels for 'breaking news'. The Newshour attracted me for the quality of its coverage of global current affairs from the super-power perspective. On the 'Online Newshour' interactive website, PBS provided streaming audio, streaming video, and transcripts - everything that an individual might need in crafting custom learning experiences from 'Newshour with Jim Lehrer' television program items. The Newshour was well-informed on Washington news, and got access to the newsmakers (On the day before the Catastrophic Events, the 'Newsmaker Interview' was of special interest to me - as Jim Lehrer interviewed our Australian Prime Minister John Howard.) The program never underestimated the viewer's intelligence. Nor did it overestimate its own teaching authority, and for each person appearing on the show, a mini-CV was provided in writing in the transcript on the website.

That's at the END of my day! Here's a whole day in my post 9-11 life

My day begins about six o'clock when the clock radio starts playing, and I press the button that turns on my online PC. Once this online PC has gone through its startup routine, I can consult its excellent memory, and it'll store a legible note if I answer the phone, and later I will be able to print the note - with the assistance of the PC, I can read and write. I can also go online to learn what's happening elsewhere and to plan my television viewing. I am ready to start my day, and I turn on the light.

Ecclesiastes said in the Bible, "There is nothing new under the Sun", and of human behaviour, that's still true! After breakfast, I find myself doing what my Grandpa used to do after breakfast. I don't regard my day as really started

until I feel informed about what's in the newspapers. My Grandpa used to read the local news and I do just like my Grandfather did, but in the twenty first century, "Everything old is new again", and the newspapers are electronic! Online, I can read a selection of electronic newspapers from around the globe.

I was enthusiastic about distance education that overcame the distance between educators. I was enthusiastic about electric writing that gave me the same feeling of being in control of communication in writing as I had had of being in control of communication in speech in the classroom. Using my familiar online PC from my homeunit in Adelaide, the webCT software enabled me to participate in conference activity on the other side of the Earth without frustrations from timetable clashes, timezone differences, datelines or daylight saving. Electronic writing made e-learning more like active participation in a seminar-lecture than learning by studying texts. I enjoyed it, and I was impressed. It left me hoping to see distance education opening up esoteric opportunities for teachers and students - I loved it, and post September 11, it is looking even better, but I don't expect to see distance education saving money for education providers!

Upgrading established skills can be like restructuring an investment portfolio of intellectual capital, taking longer to upgrade than it took to establish. When I eventually made time to revisit those 'particulars', they had been accumulating for decades, but I could use the more developed tools of the later time on them. After the events of 11 September, 2001, I had to upgrade and update information skills about conflict very fast.

The World Congress on Information Technology(26) that is to be held in Adelaide later this year (in 2002) will have an online dimension organised through EdNA Online(27). To me, after the events of September 11, 2001, that seems like something no World Congress should be without.

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