Foreword

The tsunami hits. The twin towers buckle and tumble bricks, steel and mortar into the Earth. Mobile phones slow time into pixels yet rush us into viewing. The tide rises; the dust cakes faces. Visual essays emerge, in real time. We are there. We feel the tide rise; we wrap ourselves around trees. We watch horrified as people cling to life whilst leaping through windows to their death. We are a miracle story of survival amidst a visual tale of tragedy. Later, from Asia, bodies flow past in visual essays, news reports, as attachments to emails. From North America, iconic images are constructed. Overnight "firefighters" become firemen, gendered relations are re-established, memorials are erected, and voices are hushed. Here in Australia, we donate western clothes to Muslim countries. We mourn our pre 9-11 innocence. From my safe haven I watch postmodern tragedies wrapped together and constructed for me, *as if real*, by technology. I eat digital for breakfast.

In 1972 computers filled buildings rather than a human palm. In the same year Berger famously argued in *Ways of Seeing* that "the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled" –*seeing* is a complex process of constructed and negotiated meanings. Yet three decades later we saw, did we not, the truth of the Boxing Day Tsunami? We know what happened in New York. We saw it over and again. Machine-mediated experience conveyed to us the notion that we saw *what really happened*. The camera captured *the real*. Mobile phone, computer and television screens became gateways for ingesting the truth. We shuddered at each new, raw truthful image told to use through neutral technology.

Yet at the same time machines are personified and empowered. *Wall-E* (a robot with human-like characteristics), is a "him" that is cute and adorable. *He has* agency. He is programmed to work long after humans have left a post-devastated Earth. He has purpose and he explores – watches the sun rise and set, collects intriguing objects; thinks. Humans on the other hand, have lost their way. They are without consciousness. Their decisions are constructed by parameters they no longer question. They no longer struggle to remember, as Kundera argued we must. *Wall-E* is a cultural artifact that provides, oddly, a narrative of a machine-with-agency in proximal development with imagined human qualities; juxtaposed with humans capable only of passivity, obedience, corporeal pleasure, and routine. The human narrative is bankrupt and silent, and all that remains are the fatty excesses of human consumption. Only *Wall-E* can save them.

As cultural narrative, *Wall-E* constructs for the viewer a contradictory moral tale. Technology will destroy human existence; technology will save human existence. Technology is neutral; technology holds the truth. *Wall-E* is a long way from the moral and revolutionary tale told my *Metropolis* where humanity is saved by human agency. How are we to respond to this conundrum? McKenzie (2006) argued in *Knowing Machines* that in order to better understand the place of technology in the postindustrial world research is needed to understand the "social shaping of technology". How do we distinguish between machines and the *use* of machines? How do we work out the confusing and contradictory way in which technology is portrayed within society?

Somewhere in the savior narratives that personify machines, exists a complex tale of lived experience. We need these stories to be told if we are to resist the juxtaposition of machines as all-knowing, immutable and beneficent and humans as faulty and corrupt. In Australia, public policy advocates a digital education revolution, and this is interpreted through a "one laptop per child" roll-out. Equality and access to economic and social advantage within the Information Age is often interpreted as "owning a computer". Apple, for examples, donates iMacs to children throughout the developing world. Computers mediate and construct economic and social participation, provide access to literacy education, and when connected to the web, to information and new forms of social communication and educational capital such as online courses. Understanding how this mediation takes place is increasingly important.

The authors of **Interaction in Communication Technologies and Virtual Learning Environments: Human Factors** have provided a robust means of exploring this mediated space through insightful social research. One of the impressive qualities about this book is its honesty and clarity. This is not a book un-critically selling the benefits of communication technologies and virtual environments. It is not a "how to" book, nor is it a book of "exemplars". Instead the authors help their readers think about the ways in which social relations are mediated by virtual worlds within applied settings; and how these worlds are constructed, resisted and refused by users. This is a book written by educators who are passionate about the possibilities of embedding CMCs in their work, but equally passionate about doing so to create better worlds. Virtual social relations offer the possibilities of engaged pedagogy beyond traditional boundaries and power relations. This passion is clear as the book examines the shallow-end of the virtual learning pool, where students become alienated, podcasts don't work, cultural diversity is not well developed, and training is at times inferior. All these insights provide a platform upon which the ethic of human agency within the human/machine interface, are voiced. This voice is nuanced, experimental, and expansive as each author makes sense of the everyday worlds of work, learning and virtual social technologies through the lens of social theory.

Ultimately, the collective view presented by the book is that "communications technologies are revolutionizing and fundamentally altering how individuals and organizations interact, communicate and work". This is a far cry from the *Wall-E* view of the world, where human agency has failed. Rather, the authors explore the implications of the human/machine interface, in order to better extrapolate how knowledge is constructed, shared and owned through social and community engagement. This is a critically important project for educators who are locally and globally attempting to engage with the spaces created by virtual social communications and learning technologies, whilst maintaining a commitment to learning as a socially mediated and essentially human endeavor. Educators and learners need to actively pursue hopeful action as social agents in a digitized world. As Freire argued in 1968, "To exist humanly is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection" [emphasis in original]. As this book shows, this is not an objective process of transmitting "what do we know is true?" in a knowledge-economy. Nor is it about remaining within the bounds of the meta-language and software rules established by computer-mediated communications (CMCs). Rather, to exist *humanly* in a digitized world reflects an ongoing naming and renaming of the human/machine interface in the context of social interaction, consensus, equity, social justice, and ultimately, human rights.

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