

# PREFACE

A recent commercial for wireless telephone service depicts a family having dinner together, making phone calls to one another at the table as well as to a child upstairs in his room. We expect that some people react to that commercial with enthusiasm, praising the increased ease with which family members can communicate. Others, however, are likely to be horrified at the intrusion of technology into the personal space of what is an increasingly rare family gathering. That dilemma is at the heart of *Our Virtual World*. Is technology a friend or foe? How can we make sure it is more friendly and useful than it is intrusive and even frightening? One thing we do know: the increasing virtualization of everyday interaction—whether at work, play, or life—is something that we all must face, and an awareness of the tradeoffs is the first step to managing them.

Many people wonder and worry about our virtual world. What will technology bring? How has it already changed our lives? What has it done and what will it do to our children? What will the workplace look like even a few short years from now? Will human interaction be completely replaced by computers? These are only a few of the questions that are on people's minds, and these questions reflect the topics that are explored in this book.

We began this project because we were intrigued by the magnitude and breadth of change that technology was bringing every day, in so many ways and to so many places. We wanted to explore those changes, in straightforward language and in a format that anyone could read, understand and enjoy. Our goal and rallying cry for this book was that it be “eminently readable.” We believe that we and our colleagues have met that goal and hope that our readers agree.

The diversity of authorship in the book's chapters ensures that many different points of view are presented about the important questions surrounding work, play and life in our virtual world. Our authors come from a variety of disciplines and places, as can be seen from their biographical sketches and from the chapters themselves. Some chapters describe studies that the authors have conducted on an aspect of our virtual world while other chapters are based on their ongoing experiences in the virtual world. Regardless of methodology, all of the chapters are written in a straightforward, easily readable style that is jargon-free and accessible to all.

We see many different audiences for the book. Casual readers will find provocative ideas to think about and apply to their own worlds, giving them a broader sense of what they might expect from technology. Students and teachers can use the book for courses in business, social sciences, and the humanities, concentrating on whatever perspective is appropriate for them. Policy makers will find issues that need their care and attention, as the virtual world increasingly challenges our

traditional ways of dealing with one another. We hope that all our readers enjoy the diversity of viewpoints and the depth of analysis presented in these chapters.

We are grateful to our families, friends, and colleagues for their support and help with this book. We first developed the idea for this book while both of us were visiting professors at Agder College in Kristiansand, Norway, in the fall of 1996. There is nothing like spending a winter near the Arctic circle to stimulate your thinking! However, the cold outside was offset by the warmth inside offered by the excellent and cordial faculty at the EDB Institute. The welcoming and stimulating environment there created a good beginning for our book. Tusen takk! We also thank our colleagues and students at our respective universities for stimulating conversations about technology and all its impacts.

The authors who contributed their ideas and time in writing the chapters for this book were a genuinely delightful group of people. We thank them sincerely for their insightful ideas and their willingness to work with us on the vision we had for the book. As with most people, our chapter authors had many other things to attend to while working on the book, but they were both gracious and responsive to our schedule.

Our appreciation also goes to the folks at Idea Group Publishing—Jan Travers, Mehdi Khosrowpour and Michele Rossi—who encouraged us along the way, nudged us when we flagged and patted us when we delivered.

Finally, we thank our families and dedicate this book to them.

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