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Fenwick McKelvey, who teaches communications studies at Concordia University, has a background in algorithmic media. CHRISTINNE MUSCHI

# Profiling your digital self

How putting yourself "out there" is defining who you are

We update our profiles, peruse our news feeds and share our thought, actions and countless images on social media. But to Fenwick McKelvey, these seemingly random social activities we willingly participate in are increasingly all business.

By making subtle decisions about how information is ranked and transmitted, recording every click and swipe and collecting reams of data about consumer preferences and actions, software systems ensure that our digital lives are increasingly observed, notes Professor McKelvey, who is a member of the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montreal.

"Underlying all this mediation is a great deal of power – new forms of power," says Prof. McKelvey, who teaches media policy in Canada and is an expert in Net neutrality, researching how software affords new forms of control in digital communication systems.

These issues are of the sort described and envisioned by Canadian science fiction author William Gibson, whose techno-thrillers have been credited with presaging emerging technologies and trends – from coining and then popularizing the term "cyberspace" in his first book, *Neuromancer*, to envisaging the rise of reality TV.

**Prof. McKelvey has studied the evolution of the Internet, the trend toward the introduction of more intelligent systems and networks in communications and the debate over how much control the carriers of content should have.**

Prof. McKelvey and Mr. Gibson will be featured in the 2015 Concordia University Thinking Out Loud conversation series, held in partnership with The Globe and Mail. Their session, on February 5, titled "Digital Life, Digital Identity," will focus on the Internet, fiction and the future.

The two come from very different times, places and perspectives. Professor McKelvey, 33, grew up on the cusp of the introduction of the Internet. He holds a PhD in Communication and Culture, with a background in "algorithmic media," the intensification of software within communication infrastructure. Mr. Gibson, 66, who grew up on the cusp of the introduction of television, is a fiction writer in Vancouver who has just published his tenth novel, *The Peripheral*, which presents two successive imagined futures.

For Mr. Gibson, the dichotomy is not atypical. "I find it's more unusual to enter into a conversation with someone my own age and find common ground." He watched his own children, now 33 and 36, bravely start out as what he calls "immigrants"

and then progress through the emergence of today's digital world. "We are all living it, they are growing up with it," he says. "One day there'll be no more immigrants to the digital, and everyone will be native to it." And I suspect that one of the things that the fully digitally native will think about the immigrants is that the immigrants have a peculiar obsession with making a distinction between the digital and the real. I don't think the fully native will make that distinction."

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"I'm interested in the technology. What are the wires? What are the pipes? Then you also talk about the medium – how the information is encoded and how that overlaps with institutions, corporate bodies or actors," says Prof. McKelvey, who is working on a book on the intensification of Internet software, which he calls "media daemons."

Online services such as Netflix, he notes, raise questions about neutrality in media and broadcasting. Because it controls the platform, Netflix pushes programming to users through algorithms that profile them. "By default, there are a lot of suggestions about who you are or what you'd be interested in," he explains. Such entities are also difficult to regulate in Canada. "So we're simultaneously dealing with all of these political and policy questions about whether we have any control over the influence or outcomes that are playing on our cultural life."

Concordia's Department of Communication Studies is involved in a range of research projects that are, says Prof. McKelvey, "informing how we try to understand what is going on in the digital." These include a news-game that situates the user as a sex worker to explore the implications of the new federal anti-prostitution legislation, as well as a project on aging and technology.

"Technology is always being designed for the youth," he notes. "The project is trying to peel back some of the logic driving what we are producing, looking at who's the user being imagined and talking through some of the shortcomings of that approach."

According to Mr. Gibson, the study of communications should be "a borderless brief," ranging from gaming to community, "because we can't predict how emergent technologies are going to affect us socially or individually. [And] so, we need someone at least keeping an eye on it."

"I think I'm sometimes rather good at recognizing things in the present moment that have potential to stick around and become more important," he says. "It's not as though I have some hotline that says, 'Give

me a bunch of cool things from the future that I can put in this book.'"

Prof. McKelvey notes that Mr. Gibson writes about the "order flow," the sum of everything being bought and sold around the world at any given moment in time. While there has always been a desire to be able to predict what's ahead, he says that "future-making is very present-

oriented, and imaging the future is a way of intervening in the present."

Fiction, meanwhile, is constantly informing how we understand technology and how industrial forces are building it. As an example, he cites the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "The idea that you'd have a video screen to talk to someone seemed like science fiction [then]," he says. "Now we do it."

## THINKING OUT LOUD

To register for the Thinking Out Loud conversation with Fenwick McKelvey and William Gibson, visit [concordia.ca/talks](http://concordia.ca/talks). The event is free, but spaces are limited.

## JUST TALKING

# My so-called digi-life

Sci-fi writer William Gibson and Concordia media professor Fenwick McKelvey discuss the realities of growing up digital



Professor Fenwick McKelvey (left) and William Gibson (right).

### Q Do we have a digital life and a digital identity?

**William Gibson:** I think we do, although the more interesting question at this point is, do we have any life that isn't digital yet?

**Fenwick McKelvey:** I'm very interested in the question of power and the operations of power, and that's important because the ways that we are now going online and being mediated, the fact that all of our everyday activities are increasingly happening online, mean that there are new ways that we co-exist with one another and that our activity is recorded.

**William:** It would be really interesting, as a thought experiment, to proceed from the assumption that we're all deluding ourselves about the extent of our recent digitalization, and, in fact, we're all leading kind of traditional lives without realizing it. I don't know if I would believe that, but it would be interesting to proceed for a while as though that were true and see where it goes.

**Fenwick:** One issue to look at is the forms of power that are taking advantage of this moment. And what does it mean to someone who is growing up on social media and always being recorded in activities?

### Q So, what does it mean to be growing up on social media?

**Fenwick:** All of our actions become aggregated, malleable and computable, and there is power that is being constituted by certain social media companies able to observe, predict, suggest and understand the near future.

**William:** I saw someone on Twitter last month who said something like, "I'm so sick and tired of never being able to lose track of anyone." That really struck me, because when I was in my 20s, I could totally lose track of just about anyone, and just about anyone could totally lose track of me.

**Fenwick:** I think that's something that we are potentially haunted by, as we grow up online, that we're not alone any more. There are consequences of having such malleability in the forms of mediation that are so integral in our everyday lives.

**William:** Sometimes, talking with someone half my age, I'll suddenly realize that they probably don't even think about the remarkable fact of the huge prosthetic memory device that they can call on about anything in the entire world. They have it on a little machine in their pocket.

### Q Can we predict the future of the digital?

**William:** When we're dealing with change driven by emergent technologies, our historical records so far indicate that we're completely unable to predict where a given new technology might be taking us.

**Fenwick:** Can we predict the future? I don't know. But should we be engaged in speculating about the future, because that has an impact in what we do in the everyday moment? Yes, 100 per cent.

**William:** Yet, historically the biggest changes are ones that weren't anticipated by the people who developed the technology and by the people who introduced the technology into our society, and by the journalists who were writing about the technology while it was being introduced.

### Q How does the digital shape who we are?

**Fenwick:** Part of what's interesting is not about trying to predict the future but about observing the systems that are at work in actualizing one future over another. It's been interesting to look at the role of venture capital as a kind of

world-building force, as a future-maker. We can also look at policy; as routine as it sounds, what the CRTC is doing in part ideally is trying to engage in future-making.

**William:** But don't forget that often the biggest changes are completely unanticipated side effects of the new technology, and the inventors don't have a clue what it's going to change until enough people actually have it in hand.

### Q Is fiction important in the study of digital life and identity?

**Fenwick:** Ideas of fiction are constantly informing how we are building things. With *Neuromancer*, we had a fictional cyberspace before we had a real cyberspace, and the two are linked in a certain way.

**William:** I don't think it's possible to write today a naturalistic piece of literary fiction set in the contemporary world without being able to include and socially understand contemporary technology. The world outside the window today requires analytical and descriptive tools that actually have to be borrowed from science fiction. Literary fiction has to catch up with that.

**Fenwick:** I think there's a really important link in fiction as a way of understanding or parsing what's going on in the moment ... Also, what interests me as a critical scholar with a responsibility of acting in the public interest is how can we use fiction to emphasize or talk about concerns we're dealing with politically.

*Fenwick McKelvey, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montreal. He is an Internet researcher on topics that include Internet policy and governance, network neutrality, social media policy and politics, platform studies, digital media activism and digital political communication.*

*William Gibson is an author of science fiction who lives in Vancouver. He is considered to be the father of the literary subgenre known as cyberpunk, and was the first to introduce the term "cyberspace." He has authored 10 novels.*

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