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The Secret of Life

Moore's Law: The processing power of the computer doubles every 18 months.

Gore's Law[1]: Myths about the Internet double in their distance from reality every 18 months.

Although I began to think seriously about writing this book in 1996, shortly after the publication of *The Political Economy of Communication,* and started work in earnest in 1999, my interest in the field dates back to 1973, when, as a graduate student, I spent a summer doing research for Daniel Bell on trends in communication and information technology. My specific job was to write a critical review of research on forecasts about the new technology, particularly that of the mass media. I read much of what had been written about radio and television, including promises that broadcasting would bring about revolutionary changes in society, both for better and for worse. But my focus was to be on new technology. At the time, that meant cable and "pay" television and the prospects for computers (which, of course, had not yet appeared on the desktop). I decided to concentrate on cable television, which many people were taking seriously as a potential successor to radio and broadcast television. Cable TV, the typical conclusion went, had the potential to connect people like no other technology. It would bring about ubiquitous two-way communication, and it would likely usher in a Wired Society governed by Electronic Democracy. The multichannel universe would revitalize communities, enrich schools, end poverty, eliminate the need for everything from banks to shopping malls, and reduce dependence on the automobile. If only we had the will, the money, the right policies, etc., etc. In short, cable TV would transform the world. Sound familiar? It is striking how little predictions about new technology have changed over the years. As people

once hailed the Telegraph Age, the Age of Electricity, the Age of the Telephone, the Age of Radio, or the Age of Television, we are now said to be in the Age of the Computer.

It is not surprising that we call it the Age of the Computer. In the 1990s, personal computers entered homes and offices throughout the developed world and even began to make inroads in the less-developed countries. What sense would it make to call this the Age of Radio? But how many of us recall, through personal experience or reading, that people once spoke of the Age of Radio as easily as we speak of the Computer Age? Even fewer would know that among the heroes of that earlier age were the Radio Boys—youngsters who lent romance and spirit to the time by building radios, setting up transmitters, and creating networks. Often this was done surreptitiously, contravening patents, copyrights, and other government rules as well as the business plans of big companies. Popular fiction celebrated their exploits. Elsewhere, their unwillingness to conform was decried. We might view them as equivalent to today's computer hackers. Anthropologists would see them as electronic tricksters. But we hardly remember them today, for radio, like its predecessors the telegraph and the telephone and like communication media that followed (including broadcast and cable television), entered the realm of the commonplace and the banal. They no longer inspire great visions of social transformation. They are no longer sublime. Yet who among us would disagree that the telephone, radio, and television (even cable television) are powerful forces in society and in the world? The irony, it appears, is that, as these once-new technologies lost their luster, gave up the promises of contributing to world peace, and withdrew into the woodwork, they gained a power that continues to resonate in the world. The Age of Radio is dead, but radio continues to grow. Cable television did not bring about a Wired Society, but it expands throughout the world.

And what about the computer? In the late 1990s, the computer was anything but banal. All the wonders that were forecast for the telegraph, electricity, the telephone, and broadcasting were invested in the computer. One of the central points of this book is that computers and the world of what came to be called cyberspace embody and drive important myths about our time. Powered by computer communication, we would, according to the myths, experience an epochal transformation in human

experience that would transcend time (the end of history), space (the end of geography), and power (the end of politics). It is easy to dismiss myths as inconsequential fictions, thus making the task of understanding them simple: unmask the fiction, open people's eyes to the truths that myths conceal, and thereby eliminate their power to fog minds and manipulate behavior. If myths about cyberspace were simply lies that exploited people (for example, by getting them to bet their retirement money on firms that promised to make millions of dollars selling pet food over the Internet), unmasking myths would be likely to correct the behavior. By revealing that "dot-com was more like dot-con" (Cassidy 2002), it would end the matter.

Useful as it is to recognize the lie in the myth, it is important to state at the outset that myths mean more than falsehoods or cons; indeed, they matter greatly. Myths are stories that animate individuals and societies by providing paths to transcendence that lift people out of the banality of everyday life. They offer an entrance to another reality, a reality once characterized by the promise of the sublime.

I will have much more to say about the specific meanings of myth, transcendence, banality, and the sublime in the next chapter. For now, it is important to emphasize the need to resist the peculiarly modern temptation to see myth as falsehood. Enticing as it is for people influenced by science to want to assess stories as true (accurate) or false (myth), this is myopic and beside the point. Myths are not true or false, but living or dead. "Disproving" a myth by pointing to its failure to conform to an accepted truth or to evidence usually does little to dispel it (Ohmann 1962).

For at least 2 years, people continued to bet on Internet companies whose prospects for success were nearly nonexistent. They did so because people believed, among other things, that ".com" after a firm's name conferred a mythical power that allowed the firm to transcend accepted marketplace conventions. History, skeptics contended, teaches that stock prices should not go up for companies that are losing large amounts of money and can demonstrate little concrete evidence that they will stop doing so. But instead of listening to stories like this, even when backed up by the rigors of a historical analysis of price-earnings ratios and other statistical indicators, people continued to bid up stock prices. Rather than allow the myth to be undermined by facts proving it false, many people, including some of the experts, answered with myths of their own.

In a widely read book, an economics writer for the *Washington Post* predicted that the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which at the time was near its historic high of about 11,000, would soon reach 36,000. Not to be outdone, the editor of the magazine *Wired* predicted in a popular book titled *New Rules for the New Economy* that by the year 2020 the average annual family income in the United States would surpass $150,000 and the Dow would be between 50,000 and 100,000. That may yet happen, but in March 2003 the old economy still ruled and the Dow dipped below 8,000, down about 35 percent from its high of less than 3 years earlier.[2]

Many Internet experts and gurus came to the conclusion that history had changed fundamentally. It may have once taught us something, but this is the end of history. Convinced by the demise of the Cold War and the magic of a new technology, people accepted the view that history as we once knew it was ending and that, along with the end of politics as we once knew it, there would be an end to the laws propagated by that most dismal of sciences, economics. Constraints once imposed by scarcities of resources, labor, and capital would end, or at least loosen significantly, and a new economics of cyberspace (a "network economics") would make it easier for societies to grow and, especially, to grow rich. It was as if we had uncovered a new set of scientific laws, the equivalent of a new physics. However, instead of a quantum world in which the behavior of subatomic particles followed its own set of laws (laws dramatically different from those, such as gravity, that defined traditional physics) we now encounter a network world in which the laws of economics follow strange but generally beneficent patterns. What made the dotcom boom a myth was not that it was false but that it was alive, sustained by the collective belief that cyberspace was opening a new world by transcending what we once knew about time, space, and economics.

Of course, the world that gave rise to these myths began to change fundamentally in the spring of 2000 when stock markets everywhere, led by the dotcom and telecommunications firms that had propelled the boom, began a steep slide. By the fall of 2002, markets were at 6-year lows, most of the new Internet companies had disappeared, once-dominant telecommunications equipment firms (Lucent, Nortel, Cisco, JDS) had lost about 90 percent of their value, and new telecommunications providers (WorldCom, Global

Crossing) were either bankrupt or nearly so. Between the first quarter of 2001 and the second quarter of 2002, Silicon Valley lost 127,000 jobs—9 percent of its workforce. The losses were most acute in the clusters that had driven economic growth. Software, computer hardware, and semiconductor firms lost 22 percent of their jobs over the same period (Fisher 2003). When not dealing with economic collapse, many firms and their top executives faced criminal charges for having defrauded their stockholders by falsely inflating profits to pump up their stock values. For some it appeared that the only genuine break with history turned out to be the unprecedented collapse of a major industrial sector. Nothing like this had been witnessed since the Great Depression.[3] Most historians reached further back, to the collapse of the railroad industry in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, for anything resembling a precedent. But even the comparison to the building binge of the railroads' heyday, when twice as many rail lines as were needed were built, was not entirely fitting. The fiber optic spree created more than 20 times as much capacity as was required, and in only 5 or 6 years (Howe 2002).

Remarkably, the collapse even had a profound impact on long-established firms that presumed they had purchased protection from anything approaching such a disaster by aggressively pursuing a policy of convergence (that is, the merging of firms based in different lines of media activity but particularly incorporating Internet-related activities). The leading example, and the one that propelled the convergence mania, was the January 2000 merger of the media giant Time Warner and the Internet leader America Online. As the world's top Internet service provider, AOL, the betting went, would greatly extend the reach of Time Warner's enormous array of content providers, including magazines, books, video, and film, by giving them a gateway to cyberspace. Pundits agreed that people would be using the Internet for media access, and that therefore the convergence of the world's dominant content provider and its major Internet company was certain to succeed. But after 2 years the sure bet turned sour, and after 3 years the industry was in deep trouble. Between March 2000 and March 2003, AOL lost 80 percent of its value. Almost every other convergence venture suffered a similar fate. Even mighty Microsoft shed 53 percent of its value over that same period, and Intel was down 73 percent. Established telecommunications firms fared much worse. JDS shrank in value by 98 percent, Lucent by 97, and Cisco by 81 (Norris 2003).

The responses to this catastrophe followed a predictable range, including, at least for a time, denial (the turnaround is just a quarter away) and escape (get out of the business). Suddenly the network world went from promising to transfer the entire social fabric (shopping, banking, education, entertainment, etc.) to the Internet, and painting sweet visions of a lucrative world rebranded as Everything.com, to making people wonder whether the Internet would do anything more substantial than deliver messages and pornography. Was it all a digital hustle?

This book is, in part, a response to the extraordinary boom-and-bust cycle. But it aims to provide more than just a set of answers to the question "What happened?" Though that question must play a large role in any current book about cyberspace, the goal of this effort is to deepen and extend what we know about cyberspace by situating it within what we know about culture, and specifically about mythology, about central myths of our time, about the history of communication media, and about the political economy of computer communication. The book is not meant to question those who would maintain that communication and information technologies are powerful instruments of social change; they are, and it is important to demonstrate carefully how they contribute to social change and how they retard it (Kogut 2003; Woolgar 2002). In fact, I will argue that it is when technologies such as the telephone and the computer cease to be sublime icons of mythology and enter the prosaic world of banality—when they lose their role as sources of utopian visions—that they become important forces for social and economic change.

The Digital Sublime is structurally similar to but substantively different from my 1996 book *The Political Economy of Communication*. That book took political economy as a starting or entry point and built a bridge to the cultural analysis of communication. This one begins with culture, particularly as manifested in mythology, and builds a bridge to political economy. The earlier book aimed to demonstrate the usefulness of a political economic approach to communication, but only as part of an epistemology that was non-essentialist and based on mutual constitution. In particular, it defined political economy as the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and exchange of resources, such as communication. As a starting point in analysis, political economy pro-

vided a useful way to understand media, communication, and information. But, the book insisted, political economy did not comprise an essential core to which all other perspectives could be reduced. Rather, it maintained, the social field is mutually constituted out of multiple perspectives, including political economy and cultural studies. That book began by systematically interrogating political economic theory, proceeded to demonstrate how it has been applied to communication research, and "rethought" these applications by showing how the political economic processes of commodification, spatialization, and structuration provide useful tools for broadening and deepening our understanding of the field. The concluding chapter documented the mutually constitutive relationship between political economy and cultural studies, indicating how each provided a useful critique of the other and how together they could deliver a powerful perspective on communication and media analysis. In sum, while political economy offered the primary basis for understanding the field, it was certainly not determinative. A sophisticated cultural analysis was also required to provide a robust comprehension of social communication.

In this book I start with culture and specifically examine the range of ways to think about myth. It is beyond the scope of one book to provide a complete cultural analysis of cyberspace. Rather, I choose to focus here on one important dimension of a cultural analysis—myth—and its application to computer communication. But, on the epistemological grounding of my 1996 book, I eschew determinism to demonstrate how an analysis founded on myth can build a bridge to a political economic understanding, indeed is mutually constituted with political economy. Myth is the starting or entry point to a valuable understanding of computer communication, but it leads to, requires, and (particularly as I will demonstrate in the final chapter) is mutually constituted with a political economic perspective.

Chapter 2 takes up the meaning of myth and examines how cyberspace contributes to the construction of contemporary myths. In large measure it provides a cultural analysis of myth and cyberspace. However, it demonstrates the mutually constitutive relationship between myth and power by examining some of the leading mythmakers from the academic, political, and business worlds and the institutions that support this mythmaking process. The chapter concludes by considering the relationship between

myths of cyberspace and other ways of reflecting on and telling stories about it, particularly the connection between myth and metaphor.

Chapter 3 takes up the connection between myths of cyberspace and one of the central myths of our time: the end of history. The mix of powerful new information and communication technologies and widespread support for the belief that we have entered an age marked by radical changes having to do with time, space, and social relations creates a new vision of social life.

Chapter 4 discusses two related myths: the end of geography and the end of politics. These myths promise that, in addition to a radical disjunction in time, we are participating in radical transformations in space and in social relations.

Chapter 5 shifts from the intellectual sources of cyberspace myths to their history in the experience of earlier communication and information technologies. It examines popular and intellectual responses to the telegraph, electricity, telephone, radio, and television. The widely held beliefs that computer communication is ending history, geography, and politics are not at all new. Time, space, and politics were also to be radically transformed by earlier new technologies. Not only does this demonstrate that our response to computer communication is far from unique; it also documents our remarkable, almost willful, historical amnesia. One generation after another has renewed the belief that, whatever was said about earlier technologies, the latest one will fulfill a radical and revolutionary promise.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by building a bridge from the largely cultural analysis of myth to a political economic analysis by concretely examining the political, economic, and social significance of cyberspace. It starts in an increasingly mythic place: "Ground Zero," the site of the attack on the World Trade Center. But the site was mythic even before the attack. If there ever was a physical location for the birth of the myths of cyberspace, it was here, even more so than in Silicon Valley or any of the many other high-tech centers that claim to be the birthplace of the Information Age. The World Trade Center was constructed as the centerpiece of a planning effort that began in the 1950s to transform lower Manhattan into a global center for communication, information, and trade, the international capital of a burgeoning post-industrial world.

New York was to be the informational city and the twin towers its icon. Beginning at Ground Zero, this chapter goes on to consider the significance of what grew from those towers, taking us through the political economic forces that propelled the boom that inspired so much mythic thinking to the bust that, in combination with the physical destruction of the World Trade Center, led some to surmise that the Information Age might be over. The chapter suggests that any such judgments are as premature and shortsighted as visions of the end of history. It ends by returning to Ground Zero, where questions about what will be done there mirror questions about the future of cyberspace and call to mind a perennial myth of American culture and politics.

"The Secret of Life"

Since this is a book about myths, it is appropriate to begin with my own version of an old myth[4]:

The Norse god Thor liked to descend from Valhalla from time to time to play among the mortals. On one such occasion, he overdid it and found himself outwrestled by a local hulk named Sven, who managed to maneuver Thor into a painful headlock. Thor protested but Sven would hear nothing of his godly claims. In fact, Sven's only response was to tighten his already powerful grip. It was time for stronger measures. Thor offered a deal.

"What would it take for you to release me?" Thor moaned.

Sven initially ignored the offer but finally bit. In fact, he took a big bite: "Tell me the secret of life."

"The secret of life?" Thor groaned. "What kind of deal is this? You want me to give up the secret of life just to be released from a headlock?"

Sven smiled and then applied more pressure. Finally, the god relented, but came back with a counter-offer.

"I'll tell you the secret of life, but on one condition," Thor insisted, a smile, visible only to the gods, growing around the corners of his mouth. "Pluck out one of your eyes."

"This headlock must have cut off the blood to your brain," Sven bellowed. "I'm the one in control here and I'll be the one to offer the deals."

"Don't press your luck," bristled Thor. "Remember, I may look like a mortal now but I'm capable of reminding you that I am a god at any time. Now think about it. You receive something no mortal has ever possessed, something that people far smarter than you, and after far more sacrifice, have failed to acquire. Most would give both eyes for such gift. All I ask for is one of yours."

Although he kept his grip firm, Sven's determination loosened as he thought about the offer. The more he thought, the more he liked the idea of knowing

something that no other person, in all of human history, has ever known. But an eye is a high price to pay. His mind bounced backed and forth like a teeter-totter: "Secret of life/Pluck out an eye; Pluck out an eye/Secret of life; Secret of life/Pluck out an eye." At last, first with some hesitation and then with cold determination, Sven relented. He reached into his left eye and, with a scream that could be heard throughout the land, ripped it out.

"Here, Thor, my eye for life's secret."

Finally released from the painful power of the brute, Thor relaxed his own muscles, looked at the bloody organ in Sven's hand, took it, and spoke.

"You have earned your reward, dear Sven. Now for the secret of life. It is painfully simple: See vigilantly, with both eyes."

One of the primary sources of a myth's power is its elasticity, which allows the reader or the listener to draw many conclusions from myth's inherent ambiguity. For me, "The Secret of Life" offers two important meanings. The first is that the secret of life is not a thing, something material such as wealth, an object that one can point to as clear evidence of life's secret. If there is a secret of life, it is a process, like the act of seeing, which can be used in many different ways, provided that we do so with vigilance. But, as Thor insists, much to Sven's consternation, we must see vigilantly with both eyes, and that admonition helps me to explain a central purpose of this book.

Much of what has been written about computer communication, the Internet, or cyberspace focuses with one eye on what we might call its material characteristics. These describe the major technologies that produce cyberspace, the political rules of government, and the economic rules of the market that go a long way toward organizing it. This singular focus is understandable: cyberspace is somewhat new, and so the technologies and rules that govern its use are in a formative stage and warrant close scrutiny. Nevertheless, we would benefit by considering what the other eye sees: the cultural or mythic character of what computer communication creates. Cyberspace is indeed technological and political, but it is also a mythic space—perhaps even a sacred space in the sense that Mircea Eliade (1959) meant when he referred to places that are repositories of the transcendent. Seeing vigilantly with both eyes means recognizing that computer communication makes up and is made up by technological and political practices as well as by mythic and cultural ones. To be more precise, we can say that cyberspace is mutually constituted out of culture and political economy, out of the interconnected realities of myth and social institution.[5]

The technical, political, and economic dimensions of cyberspace are important to understand, and some of these are taken up below, particularly in the final chapter. But so too are the mythic and cultural dimensions. Moreover, the book maintains, we must comprehend the culture of cyberspace if we are to deepen what we know about its more material qualities. In essence, culture, particularly myth, is our starting or entry point, the main discourse in the book's analysis, but political economy is always present as subtext, related to culture in mutual constitution.

What Is Cyberspace?

The word 'cyberspace' was coined by William Gibson, whose 1984 novel *Neuromancer* described a world in which computers define the terms of life, including its struggles, pleasures, and pains. Much of the action takes place in a netherworld that is part material and part computer code. By defining the literary genre that came to be called "cyberpunk," Gibson launched himself into the ranks of the "digerati," a select group of the computer savvy who create the language, imagery, and tone for what they and their followers see as a new world.

'Cybernetics'—a word derived from 'kubernetes', the classical Greek word for the helmsman of a ship—designates the science of steering or managing large systems. One genuinely attractive aspect of the word 'cyberspace' is that it is connected both to a mythic world conjured in code and to a world rooted in and increasingly dependent upon large, complex, formally rational systems.[6]

Remarkably for someone writing in 1984, more than a decade before 'Internet' and 'World Wide Web' became household words, Gibson acknowledges the strange combination of myth, science, magic, and logic that made up cyberspace in the very first mention of the word: "A year here and he still dreamed of cyberspace, hope fading nightly. All the speed he took, all the turns he'd taken and the corners he'd cut in Night City, and still he'd see the matrix in his sleep, bright lattices of logic unfolding across the colorless void." (Gibson 1984: 4–5) And why shouldn't Gibson's protagonist pine for a digital world far richer than what the material world of atoms and molecules might provide! "He'd operated on an almost permanent adrenaline high, a byproduct of youth and proficiency, jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his

disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix." (ibid.: 5)

Gibson's definition of 'cyberspace'[7] stands up well over the multiple generations of systems that have spread both the myth and the science, the vision of two eyes, since 1984: "Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts. . . . A Graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of thought ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. . . ." (ibid.: 51)

Three Eyes?

In what might be called "seeing vigilantly with three eyes," the sociologist Bruno Latour (1993) challenges us to break through the neat but false compartments of nature, politics, and texts that many use to explain the secrets of life. According to Latour, we insist on understanding science as natural (that is, as the rational integration of material forces, including technologies); as politics (the strategic maneuvers of self-interested social actors and forces); or as text (that is, the rhetorical strategies that are used to explain and thereby linguistically constitute the world). By placing each of these elements in its own box, Latour maintains, we are able to retain the natural quality of science even as we understand that politics and rhetoric play roles. By doing this, according to Latour, we retain a powerful fiction—sustain a myth, perhaps—that we are distinct from our pre-scientific predecessors. We say we are modern; Latour disagrees. In making the case that "we have never been modern," Latour insists that the three ways of seeing—natural, political, and textual—are mutually constitutive, or, perhaps better put, mutually contaminative. There is no distinctly natural world of science separate from the political and the rhetorical. There is therefore no distinctly modern.

One does not have to accept Latour's conclusion that we have never been modern and are therefore no different from the ancients to recognize the value of his perspective.[8] We do indeed tend to acknowledge the

political and rhetorical influences on scientific understanding—witness the discourse about networks, relatedness, and entanglement in quantum physics that challenges the discourse about discrete atomic units popular in Newtonian physics. Nevertheless, we continue to compartmentalize politics and rhetoric as forces external to an entirely different process, which we call science. But Latour and his fellow science-studies scholars (Hughes 1983; Pinch 1986) compel us to examine how politics and rhetoric are constitutive of the scientific enterprise. We may see with two or even three eyes, but they all create one vision. Historians of technology are also increasingly recognizing that our machines have been created out of a powerful religious ethos (Noble 1997). James Carey and other communication scholars have spoken about a ritual theory of communication and how it draws us to the inescapable conclusion that "in contemporary popular commentary and even in technical discussions of new communications technology, the historic religious undercurrent has never been eliminated from our thought" (Carey 1992: 18). "From the telegraph to the computer," Carey continues, "the same sense of profound possibility is present whenever these machines are invoked."

Myths and the Computer

This book applies some of these ideas to the growth of the computer, the Internet, and cyberspace. Specifically, it argues that cyberspace is a mythic space, one that transcends the banal, day-to-day worlds of time, space, and politics to match the "naked truth" of reason with the "dancing truth" of ritual, song, and storytelling (Lozano 1992: 213). Indeed, cyberspace is a central force in the growth of three of the central myths of our time, each linked in the vision of an end point: the end of history, the end of geography, and the end of politics. The purpose of the book is to understand these myths in order to develop a deeper appreciation of the power and the limitations of computer communication. As we shall see, myths are not just a distortion of reality that requires debunking; they are a form of reality. They give meaning to life, particularly by helping us to understand the seemingly incomprehensible, to cope with problems that are overwhelmingly intractable, and to create in

vision or dream what cannot be realized in practice. For the novelist Christa Wolf, who brought new life to the mythic figure of Cassandra, "to learn to read myth is a special kind of adventure. An art that presupposes a gradual peculiar transformation; a readiness to give oneself to the seemingly frivolous nexus of fantastic facts, of traditions, desires and hopes, experiences and techniques of magic adapted to the needs of a particular group—in short, to another sense of the concept 'reality'." (Wolf 1988: 196)

Cyberspace may not be bringing about the end of history, of geography, and of politics, but there is much to be gained from studying why it is not doing so and why people believe that it is. And even after what is arguably the greatest collapse in modern business history, after millions of people lost billions of dollars in the telecommunications and dotcom industries alone, people still believe. Forget the crash, forget the banality of technology; the December 2002 issue of *Wired* offers a cover story and several feature articles on computers, science, transcendence, and religion. New media convergence may have failed, but there is a "new convergence" between technology and religion. Editor-at-large Kevin Kelly (2002: 183) announces that "God is the Machine" and concludes that "the universe is not merely like a computer, it is a computer."

Perhaps the greatest mistake people make about technology is to assume that knowledge of its inner workings can be extrapolated over years to tell us not only where the machine is heading but also where it is taking us. Research has provided some correction to this view by demonstrating that economic, political, and social forces are as important in determining where we are headed as is an understanding of the technology. We now know that culture is also deeply implicated in the mix of influential forces, and that culture, even for us moderns, includes mythology. For some, myth is indispensable to understanding. The philosopher Mary Midgley writes: "We have a choice of what myths, what visions we will use to help us understand the physical world. We do not have a choice of understanding it without using any myths or visions at all. Again, we have a real choice between becoming aware of these myths and ignoring them. If we ignore them, we travel blindly inside myths and visions, which are largely provided by other people. This makes it much harder to know where we are going." (1992: 22) The media critic Neil Postman makes a similar case, although he under-

standably worries about the use of the word 'myth' because it summons thoughts of falsehood rather than of vision. Nevertheless, Postman maintains, while his purpose is neither burying nor praising gods, he must insist "that we cannot do without them, that whatever else we call ourselves, we are the god-making species" (1996: 6). In fact, Postman asserts, this god-making or mythmaking capacity demonstrates that "our genius lies in our capacity to make meaning through the creation of narratives that give point to our labors, exalt our history, elucidate the present, and give direction to our future" (ibid.: 7).[9] But it is a genius that exacts a price by tempting us to use myths about the future to avoid present conflicts and create a false sense of social cohesion. The sociologist C. Wright Mills noted several decades ago that "the more the antagonisms of the present must be suffered, the more the future is drawn upon as a source of pseudo-unity and synthetic morale" (1963: 302). Critically examining myths of cyberspace may help us to loosen the powerful grip of myths of the future on the present. It may lead us to question the naturalized tendency to see the future as the pure extension of logic, technical rationality, and linear progress, and other bulwarks against the primitive forces of instinct and intellectual poverty that have historically weighed against human accomplishment. In this view, cyberspace is a mythic gloss on individual achievement and genuine community against the ostensibly backward Others who would undermine both.

The critique of mythology helps to disturb and subvert the conventional and therefore solid sediment of meaning and common sense that gives cyberspace a normality and indeed a certitude of superiority. This is particularly important now because cyberspace is today's repository of the future. As Carey has said (1992: 200), "nostalgia for the future, among the pastorals available to us, seems the more pernicious precisely because it is less self-conscious." But it is also instructive because in their texts, and more so in their subtexts, the myths of cyberspace point to an intense longing for a promised community, a public democracy, or what Carey (ibid.) refers to in the American context as John Dewey's "conjoint life of the polity." It is this element of genuine hope that an understanding of mythology, rather than an outright dismissal of it, aims to uncover. By splitting open the solidly constructed images of technical progress and juxtaposing them with other images, we can contribute to productively

destabilizing the dominant representations of what we are supposed to be and where we are going. In this regard, I would agree with the historian of religion Wendy Doniger (1998) on the need to replace Roland Barthes's vision of myth as post-political (in essence, what is left after the politics is eliminated) with the view of myth as pre-political. Myths can be viewed as an early step in a process that, when examined with a critical eye, can restore with every critical retelling a political grounding that myths appear to leave out. In essence, myths can foreclose politics, can serve to depoliticize speech, but they can also open the door to a restoration of politics, to a deepening of political understanding.[10]