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# Digital Hype: A dazzling smokescreen

**A**s each new season brings more waves of higher-tech digital products, I often think of Mark Twain. Along with being a brilliant writer, he was also an ill-fated investor – fascinated with the latest technical innovations, including the strides toward functional typewriters and typesetting equipment as the 19th century neared its close.

Twain would have marveled at the standard PC that we take for granted now. But what would he have made of the intrusiveness of present-day media technology – let alone its recurring content?

It's getting harder and harder to drive out of cell-phone range – that is, if you really want to. And judging from scenes at countless remote locations, many people would rather not forfeit 24/7 phone access for conversations that involuntary eavesdroppers hear half of. (Virtually always, it seems, the more boring half.)

These days, mainstream media fascination with blogs and the bloggers who love them often seems to assume that the very use of the Internet enhances the content or style of what has been written. It's a seductive cyber-fantasy. Speed is useful, and so are hyperlinks and visuals-on-demand, but – fortunately or not, depending on your point of view – there's no digital invisible hand that can move any piece of writing very far along the road to worthwhile reading.

A central paradox of the rapid advances in media technologies is that the quantum leaps in computer hard drives and software have been accompanied by an approximately zero boost in human mental capacity – or in what we refer to with such words as "insight," "wisdom" and "compassion." You can't visit a local mall or an online site and pull out a credit card to purchase an upgrade in gray matter or human connection.

The momentum of digital communications has conveyed a sense of inevitability. As last year's cutting-edge gizmos become old hat, resistance appears to be futile. But the question is not whether we're "pro" or "anti" technology. More pertinent are inquiries like: What's the point of all this hyper-computerized stuff? How does it relate to the most important meanings of life?

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To explore the answers to such questions, even the finest desktops and search engines are unlikely to be much help. Mega-outfits like Microsoft and Google offer incredible ease and speed. When we're seeking information or images, they can do almost everything better and faster than we can – except think and reflect, feel and create, love and mourn...

A half-century ago, there was much talk about the fear that machines would replace people in the workplace. Now, "automation" has an almost quaint ring to it. But the high premium put on speedily moving a business agenda goes back many decades. "In an age of advanced technology," Aldous Huxley foresaw, "inefficiency is the sin against the Holy Ghost."

In recent years, the corporate emphasis on the efficient use – and, let's face it, exploitation – of human beings has become more overbearing. By now, no one expects a big company to exhibit much loyalty to employees in the long run. And the ubiquitous presence of media technologies in the workaday world, from computer to cell phone to BlackBerry, has facilitated chronic employer demands for greater "productivity." While a new digital gizmo may serve the worker, that worker is still expected to serve management's often-insatiable drive for profits – more efficiently than ever.

News outlets routinely provide breathless accounts of the latest digital dazzles. But precious little media attention focuses on the deeper qualities of the human experience, the content of the lightning-fast communications or the ultimate end-product. Data streams move faster than the eye can see. Information doesn't flow, it rockets. But what's it all for?

Even the most wondrous media technologies can't supply an iota of meaning. Yet the prevalent media discourse keeps equating digital breakthroughs with human breakthroughs. But that's a very dubious proposition.

*Norman Solomon's latest book is "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: [www.WarMadeEasy.com](http://www.WarMadeEasy.com).*