Making choices

by Nick Wray

Michael Harris' The End of Absence is a smart, funny and timely meditation on the differences wrought by digital on how we live and work today, and a world remembered "by those born before 1985, before the surfacing of the Internet."

Over 10 chapters and 260 pages, 34-year old Canadian journalist Harris (born in 1981) reflects intriguingly, wittily and sometimes poignantly on his theme. He casts his gaze over the impact of e-mail and digital text, multi-tasking, smart phones, information-overload, public opinion and 'truth' online, to online bullying. There's also a fascinating chapter on dating and sex sites on a journey that whilst expansive never feels disjointed.

The narrative begins in the late noughties, as digital (and global recession) begin to impact his and others' private and professional lives: the shock of finding his own (salaried) newspaper theatre review job being 'undercut' by those happy to write online for free as blogs mean that 'everyone's a pundit now.'

Then, as recession bites and online competition further reduces newspaper ad revenues, the numbers of salaried writers and journalists start to decline. A case study in the transition of once safe middle class jobs to today's increasingly insecure professional 'employment', explored by Guy Standing in *The Precariat*. At the same time an uncomfortable (for a journalist) blurring of boundaries between 'writing' and ads begins, as editorial teams became online 'content creators' pushing "electronic nothings" around:

> *"Ten years ago, no magazine editor imagined spending half the day maintaining Twitter feeds or refereeing comment trails on Facebook."*

Or, being told by their publisher, that their "Twitter avatar lacks punch".

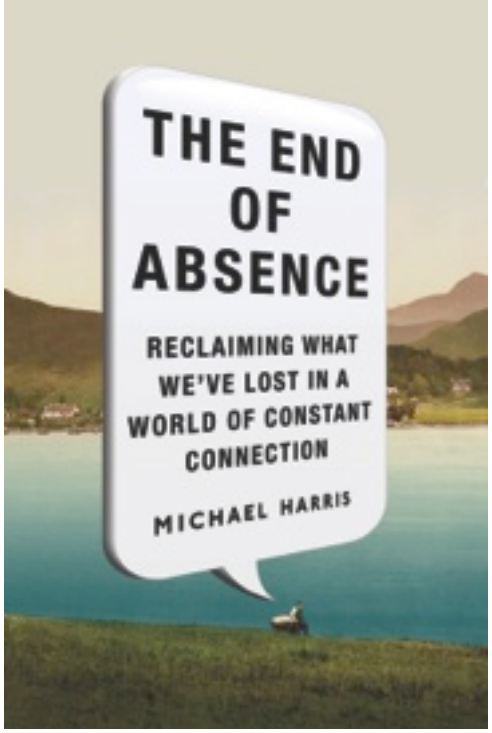
Harris' attempt to actually revisit 'absence' and go 'off the grid' in order to read 'War and Peace' ("1300 pages weighing the same as a dead cat"), forms one of many interesting threads around which he weaves reflections and anecdotes, personal experience, and pithy quotes:

> *"Jean Cocteau thought radio 'a faucet of foolishness' that was going to wreck people's minds."*

But this is more than autobiography and the scope is very much broader than journalism and publishing. His stories and anecdotes are invariably backed up by recent research. We learn, for example, that the average US office worker spends a quarter of their day managing email. If accurate, this at least ought to make us pause to wonder what kind of workplace ecologies – and indeed mental 'ecosystems' – are we now creating for each other, both in and out of the office?

Harris also uses humour to make a point. On child rearing, for example, he cites the iPotty, a device which encourages toilet training through a Skinnerian-like 'app' that rewards two year olds via a built-in iPad screen for appropriate in-potty-behaviour.

But there is a fundamental seriousness here, a point he makes when quoting a 2013 Nielsen report which found that the average US teenager manages around 4,000 text messages a month (I make that 133 a day), compared with a mere 764 (25 a day) sent by US adults. And more disturbingly, citing the Kaiser Foundation's findings that, even back in 2010, children aged eight-18



The End of Absence:
Reclaiming What We've Lost in a World of Constant Connection

by Michael Harris

ISBN 9781591846932

spent an average of over seven-and-a-half hours a day on electronic 'devices.'

This figure rises to nearly 11 hours a day if 'multi-tasking' (playing with more than one device at a time) was taken into account. Food-for-thought in terms of what kids did pre-internet, and what they're doing (or not doing) now?

Harris quotes from The Shallows, Nicholas Carr's excellent (and recommended) book on 'how the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember,' which summarises recent research on the limits of human memory and plasticity in relation to our neurophysiological ability to process digital data. This, along with the findings of others like Daniel Levitin, increasingly appears to suggest that whilst channels of communication proliferate through digital, our Stone Age brains—young or old—are simply not able to keep up.

Whilst the book is titled 'The End of Absence', 'absence' proves hard to define. Perhaps this is inevitable, given the challenging task of defining a lack? But Harris certainly establishes a tangible sense of difference between the pre- and post-internet worlds.

For example, he describes a pre-mobile phone trip he took as a young man to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. A trip which many years later, Harris remembers whilst taking a selfie having climbed the Eiffel Tower—framing a Parisian reality for absent friends and partner via social networking, rather than revelling in the moment as he once had as a young man in the Scottish wilderness.

A sense of difference, too when Harris find himself in conversation with a younger colleague (DOB > 1985) who thinks nothing of breaking off mid-sentence to maintain other dialogues via iPhone emails and texts, whilst Harris waits open mouthed for their conversation to resume. As Harris says, this person doesn't understand the 'absence' (of flow, connection, conversation)—for them this is just the way it is.

But this is not an 'anti-internet' book, but a collection of reflections, and the author shows the benefits of the internet and his unwillingness to be without it. For example, even as Harris charts the decline of his print-based employment as a journalist and reviewer, he acknowledges the inescapable attraction of sites like Rotten Tomatoes – as a means to ensure that he and his friends select the 'right' film for a good night out. Even though he knows this is made possible by reviewers' 'meta-data'—including his—being distilled without remuneration to them.

Harris is scrupulous, too, and points out that the 'age of absence' was not necessarily golden. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, for example, contained errors, just as Wikipedia does today. But he also makes the important point that,

> *"In an arena where everyone's version of the facts is equally valid, and the opinions of specialists become marginalised, corporate and politicized interests are potentially empowered."*

The index (for print-based readers without a search function, of course) could be better, and the glossary and particularly the short prologue feel stylistically as though they belong to another book. The subtitle, "Reclaiming what we've lost in a world of constant connection," also implies a manifesto, or a polemic, but the book offers neither, rather being a reflection on change.

But these are quibbles. This is a very good book: thought-provoking, elegantly written, intelligent and highly recommended. As Harris concludes:

> *"Every technology will alienate you from some part of your life. That is its job. Your job is to notice. First notice the difference. And then, every time, choose."* ◀

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Nick Wray, formerly IPC Magazines/ Time Incs Digital Publisher, now works on futures, digital and writing project consulting. Nick's award winning text on digital public spaces, interface, and content, The Living Garden, has just been made available on Authonomy.