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Dear Mayer,

Tell me it isn't so!

First, congratulations on your venerability. I credit all the cycling you used to do – before you were driven off the roads by the fearsome traffic and took to your rowing machine.

Secondly, I must express my regret that your ninetieth birthday party will not be an occasion where one can “press the flesh”. Raising a glass to your 3-D laser hologram will just not be the same. But with all your now-ancient friends dispersed to the four corners, it is certainly better than nothing.

Thirdly, at the time of writing, only qualified optimists such as me, would have believed that so many of your friends would still be alive to attend your virtual birthday party - let alone in robust good health, owing to spectacular advances in the biosciences.

Fourthly, and now we get to the main point of this letter, I describe myself as a “qualified optimist” because the “progress” in science and technology that I can imagine at the time of writing will, by the time you read this, have created a world that I won't much like. I promise to be delighted if my pessimism proves ill-founded. But my method of forecasting is the common one; you pick trends that are running strong and project them into the future, unless and until you see something that might impede them.

So much was promised. Telephones, fax machines, video conferencing, email and the Internet were to be our salvation. They would dematerialise the global economy. They would transform it into an information economy that would tread more lightly on the Earth. Electronic mobility would substitute for physical mobility. Red-eye flights to business meetings would be replaced by a saunter into the virtual-meeting room. Most of us would compute to work rather than commute to work. Urban rush-hour traffic jams would melt away. We would be better informed, and democratically empowered by the Internet's ability to register our views by means of online voting. We would be liberated to spend more quality-time with our families and neighbours. Year by year we would become richer, more convivial and kinder to the planet. Moore's Law stipulated that these trends would be exponential; the power of computers – the key drivers of all this progress – would continue to double every 18 months for as far as the eye could see.

This is the vision that was promoted by government and industry with generous quantities of both money and exhortation. Even at the time it was obvious to some

(including you and me) that the exhorters were either deluded or (more often) cynically deluding.

The historic evidence was clear. While electronic mobility could on occasion substitute for physical mobility it was overwhelmingly a stimulus to it. Just as with the telegraph and the telephone before them, email and the Internet provided people who were physically remote from each other with new reasons to meet, and facilitated their doing so. The eyes of the increasing numbers of business travellers¹ will have become even redder as they are expected to travel with their computers – downloading messages and updating their spreadsheets as they go – and attending endless time-zone-spanning virtual meetings – all computers now coming with tiny built-in cameras as standard.

The urban rush-hour traffic jams will indeed have disappeared, to be replaced by pervasive all-day congestion². With the exception of a few small islands of urban café society – focussed on Starbucks – the search for somewhere to park, and liberation from the morning commute to work will have encouraged the dispersal of further millions to exurbia, and their settlement at densities unserviceable by public transport – let alone feet or bicycles.

Better informed our world will not be. As we roam wider, we spread ourselves thinner. The greater the geographical extent of our “known world” the lower the level of resolution at which we can know it. As the volume of information overwhelms the human capacity to make sense of it, people are compelled to adopt ever-cruder filters. On contentious issues – genetic engineering and global warming are current examples – information overload combines with crude but highly selective filters to polarise global public opinion; people abstract from the Internet only what they want to know.

And convivial it will not be. Hypermobility societies³ are anonymous societies, and anonymity breeds crime, fear and paranoia. The biggest losers will be children. You will recall our study of children’s independence over 30 years ago⁴ in which we discovered that hardly any children were being allowed out of the house anymore unless chaperoned by an adult - and the answers we got when we asked parents why they were denying their children the freedoms that they (the parents) had enjoyed as children: fear of traffic and fear of strangers.

By 2021 there will be many more strangers. The *Stranger Danger* campaigns run in schools were a late 20th century symptom of the social stress caused by hypermobility.

¹ DETR forecasts at the time of writing anticipate that by the time you read this there will be about three times as many tourists and four times as many business travelers passing through Britain’s airports. The forecasters clearly do not share the “dematerialist” expectations of the enthusiasts for electronic mobility.

² The DETR forecasts at the time writing predict that by the time you read this there will be 40% more traffic on Britain’s roads. Alarmed by the closure of large parts of the British motor industry, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry proclaims that people need to be persuaded to buy more cars.

³ J. Adams. The social implications of hypermobility. Report for the OECD Project on Environmentally Sustainable Transport, ENV/EPOC/PPC/T(99)3/FINAL (21 Jan 2000). Available (with added irony) on the web at <http://www.oecd.org/env/docs/epocppct993.pdf> (p 95>) and <http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/highlights/hypermobility/index.html>

⁴ *One False Move ... a study of children’s independent mobility*, M. Hillman, J. Adams & J. Whitelegg, PSI, 1990.

Neighbourhood Watch was another; “neighbours” who did not know each other put stickers in their windows and pretended to look out for each other. By the time you read this such schemes will have been abandoned as the ineffectual shams that they were, and replaced by CCTV cameras capable of recognising faces, backed up by data bases storing personal information about every thing from DNA to body odour⁵ and, for those who can afford them, private security services and gated-communities. The ultimate gated-community at the time of writing offers a foretaste; it is the *ResidenSea*, an ocean going cruise liner under construction in Norway, with 110 residential apartments (at \$2 million > \$5 million each), combining high security, the ultimate in video conferencing and satellite communications, and the financial advantages of living off-shore.

The Government’s Crime Prevention Panel acknowledges the existence of trends that are fostering crime: easier access, reduced geographical barriers, increased size of the rewards and increased anonymity⁶. It characterises the crime problem as a technological arms race and proposes fighting high-tech with higher-tech. And in the threat they spot an opportunity: the “potential for the UK to excel in world-leading technology and solutions”.⁷ In an annex they list some of the exciting possibilities. They include: genetics, biometrics, biomimetics, sensors technology, magnetic materials, smart materials, encryption propinquity tagging ... nanotechnology ... wearable technologies ... intelligent alarms ...

The report does acknowledge, in passing, the existence of the problem of “social exclusion” – those outside the gates of the gated community – and proffers a technological solution: “new technology can reduce crime and fear of crime ... by being universally available across society, strengthening communities and reducing social exclusion.” But this “solution” is oblivious to the nature of arms races; *universal* accessibility to the technological weapons about which the Panel enthuses would make them available to the enemy as well.

Their method for anticipating the future, like mine, projects on-going trends indefinitely in the absence of perceptible impediments. I would be intrigued to know how many of the Crime Prevention Panel have read Orwell’s *1984*, or Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Their future is Orwellian with a brave new high-tech gloss. Can I see any impediments to its realisation in a hypermobile world? None!

What drives the forecasters’ models of increasing mobility? Economic growth. Are there any governments anywhere resisting economic growth? No. Is their Orwellian future democratically resistible? No. Participation rates in democracy are decreasing. Increasing mobility increases the scale of problems that need governing – moving the locus of political power from Town Hall, to Whitehall, to Brussels and ultimately to completely unaccountable organisations like the World Bank and the IMF. As effective accountability decreases, so does the incentive to vote. The electronic referenda proffered by the proponents of cyber-democracy will routinely leave people

⁵ *Just Around the Corner*, Crime Prevention Panel, Foresight Programme, Department of Trade and Industry, March 2000, www.foresight.gov.uk/.

⁶ *Turning the Corner*, Crime Prevention Panel, Foresight Programme, Department of Trade and Industry, December 2000, www.foresight.gov.uk/.

⁷ *Turning the Corner*.

frustrated by the simplistic propositions on which they are invited to vote, and disenfranchise large resentful minorities. Nowhere in the genre of science fiction in which distance has been conquered by science and technology can one find a plausible example of effective democracy. The scale of the problems that need governing precludes it.

While writing this letter I took a break to listen to a BBC programme on “virtual tourism”: without touching fragile environments it will simulate not only the view, but also the noises, smells and even the weather of remote parts of the world which will be spared an invasion by real tourists. I fear Mayer that, like your virtual birthday party, I find the idea less than completely satisfying.

Perhaps I will logon to your birthday party 20 years from now to discover that your arguments have prevailed - that everywhere governments are esteeming the local above the national and global – that walking and cycling have been granted priority over every other form of transport. But, as I write the tide appears to be running strongly in the opposite direction. I hope you will be able to convince me it isn't so.

I hope to come and see you soon – in the flesh. Be prepared. I will need a drink.

Very best wishes.

Your young friend, still imbued with your irrational belief in the efficacy of rational argument.

John Adams