



Artifact from the Future: Imagine a ride across town a decade from now. Your windshield is a projection screen, and you're in control of the programming. You have a sociologist's bent, or you're in the market for a new house, or you're a journalist looking for a little context for your current assignment. Whatever your motivation, you've just purchased a new little windshield app called **Privilege Namer** that highlights imbalances in the world around you—like the fact that only 12% of families on the block you're driving right now have kids who made it to college (compared to the national average of 62%). You see three options to alter the imbalance in real time: donate books from Amazon, support a targeted ad campaign to these households, or send an inspirational message to a child in this block. Or tap *More* for more options.



Artifact from the Future: It's 2021. Ula's Facebook friend feed makes suggestions for people she should friend and unfriend, complete with explanations, using **Designer Networks**. Tomek's network tends to be overweight even though he isn't, and there's a 30% chance that Ula will gain 10 pounds in the coming year if she invests time and energy in this relationship. Friending Jing, on the other hand, has improved Beth and Tracy's grades, so Ula should definitely friend her. Oops! What's this? Three people in Ula's network have identified their connections to her as the source of their financial problems. How could that be?

the quick list

- › *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Change Our Lives*, Nicholas Christakis & James Fowler. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009
- › *The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey*, Spencer Wells. New York: Random House, 2002. See also: The Genographic Project, led by Spencer at National Geographic, [genographic.com/genographic/](http://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/)
- › *Total Recall: How the E-Memory Revolution Will Change Everything*, Gordon Bell & Jim Gemmell. New York: Dutton, 2009
- › "Criminal Justice and Health and Human Services, an Exploration of Overlapping Needs, Resources, and Interests in Brooklyn Neighborhoods," Eric Cadora. www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/410633_CriminalJustice.pdf
- › Orgnet.com, by Valdis Krebs, author of *The Network Thinker*, www.orgnet.com

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Beyond Polemics

As our digital experience of reality makes the connection points between communities more visible and malleable, the long-standing divisions between *us* and *them*—concepts that underlie all kinds of injustices—will be challenged.

Fueled by notions of a discrete *us* and *them*, meaningful communities have long been formed by defining one group over and against another. This separatist view of human communities can trigger strong social bonds, but it also forms the substrate for injustice of all kinds. Over the next decade, however, our digital experience of reality, as well as our emerging understanding of biological systems, will make the connection points between communities more visible and malleable, and new tools will broaden our capacity for empathy. We don't have to imagine a singularity or a worldwide mind in order to anticipate a new capacity of human minds to think beyond polemics—to re-imagine ourselves as porous entities and our communities as a single living system.

—Rachel Hatch

critical balances

DISINTEGRATION
integration

New perspectives on social connections may stress traditional communities in unintended ways, even as they prompt new relationships.

EXPOSURE
accountability

Social network analysis and urban mapping reveal new patterns of *inter-responsibility* for our social and environmental conditions.

CONTAGION
isolation

Economic redevelopment and justice reform adopt fresh approaches based on social contagion theories and social network strategies.

PERSUASION
regulation

New and more subtle forms of persuasion enter the popular lexicon of social interactions, tapping neuroscience and social network analysis.

community: beyond polemics

REDEFINING THEM: NEW CATALYSTS OF EMPATHY

In a 2021 world of augmented reality, people will be able to measure, compare, and visualize the reality of the *other*. Systemic structures of privilege that were previously invisible to many will be made visible to all. With greater transparency, we will literally see the connections between the benefits the more privileged receive and the costs to the less privileged. This ambient awareness of privilege will seemingly make the divisions starker in the near term. The growth of a middle class in many emerging economies ironically fuels this dissatisfaction. In fact, we're already seeing the result of these new identities in global terrorism and fundamentalist politics.

But at the same time, we're beginning to have new types of conversations across those divisions in the form of growing awareness of common threads. We are developing mechanisms that highlight what we share—whether it's an evolutionary family haplogroup origin, a shared water reservoir, or a probability of dying of the same disease. Supercharged by increasingly large and complex data sets available at a moment's notice on multiple (and often mobile) devices, common threads between people are being traced and shared like never before. While genetic breakthroughs underscore these biological commonalities, the evidence of connections across a wide spectrum of social issues is becoming increasingly visible and accessible as well.

Discrete notions of *us* and *them* are also challenged by our growing understanding of network effects. Leveraging theories of social contagion, we are modeling, visualizing, and even predicting the influence of our behaviors (whether to reinforce happiness or promote obesity) out to the third degree of separation. People with whom we previously may have perceived no connection (*them*) will increasingly become linked to us in surprising ways.

For people accustomed to grappling with complex data sources, such information will make the effects that our communities have on us much clearer; for those who are overwhelmed by large amounts of unstructured information, the result could be greater confusion. As tools for filtering and analyzing these new streams become more widespread and accessible, however, we will be able to form much deeper insights into the functioning and effects of our communities. Ultimately, we will have the ability to cultivate much larger and more complex communities than could previous generations.

These traceable linkages of well-being could foster an increased sense of connection to (and in some cases, responsibility for) people who seem completely unrelated—even those we have never met. This altered perception has the potential to enable much deeper empathy for those who are not obviously like us, and our sphere of empathy will likely continue to grow to encompass entities we wouldn't previously have considered to be candidates for empathy. A watch out: these changes to our technosocial ecosystem could undermine our existing empathic patterns. While we may be more aware of those with whom we are connected, the awareness may overwhelm our response systems and render our empathic actions shallow or scant.

“ I was thinking about the lowest common denominator: somebody who may only have a prepaid cell phone. Instead of an AR application, I was thinking of a system more like ChaCha, in which somebody could ask a question. In instances like job interviews, it might be helpful for people to walk away for a second and ‘phone a friend’ in the game show sense of the word. That might help decode some of the language and some aspects of the conversation that they may not otherwise have access to. ”

Kati London
Vice President, Area/Code



“ In order to increase resilience, we should create automated aggregators of sources of information. The aggregators should present all the facets of the problem. I believe that the moment you are able to present—in an objective way—all the facets of a problem, that adds to the solution rather than to the problem. ”

Paul Radu
Cross-Border Journalist,
Organized Crime and
Corruption Project



“ Many people who are unemployed or suffer from economic hardship suffer silently. It's not necessarily the kind of suffering that is outward like the suffering that's felt during a natural disaster. I think one of the exciting things about the future of communities being heightened with digital experience is the power to help communities tell stories, to share a story in a comfortable way, a story that can be used to build connections through the community. ”

Mark Rembert
Co-Director, Energize
Clinton County



RE-IMAGINING US: TOWARD THE POROUS PERSON

The flip side of redefining the other through heightened empathy is re-imagining ourselves, not as a particular collection of discrete individuals but increasingly as a single living system. As our digital experiences map the interconnectedness of our material lives, we will see—perhaps in startling new ways—that humans operate not only as discrete nodes in networks, but also as an integrated biological and social system. In the next decade, a more *porous perception* of who we are as people will begin to take shape. Under a high-resolution lens, we can begin to see how permeable we are to the influences of others on our lives. We will see and feel more clearly and perhaps unavoidably that there is a little of *them* that permeates each of *us*, and a little of *us* that is absorbed into *them*.

Just as our sense of our responsibility to our environment shifted when we saw the first image of the entire sphere of the Earth from outer space, our 2021 mapping of ourselves as porous people could catalyze new ways of imagining ourselves as communities, as a species, as an entire ecosystem. If ecological thinking redefined our approaches to everything from how we manage our streams to how we develop our neighborhoods, our sense of ourselves as porous people could well push the

boundaries of our present-day human psychology. We may begin to evolve entirely new ways of perceiving and of responding neurologically to the communities we occupy. We may learn new ways of acting in concert for the benefit of the whole.

Which brings us back to the starting point of humanity's millennia-long struggle with injustices based on *us-them* distinctions. We have a choice: We can use our emerging technologies to more ruthlessly filter the world to suit the current bounds of our minds. This way lies enclave communities, enclave realities, and growing inequities. The alternative is to remodel our minds—to allow them to perceive and process much more complicated reality-scapes and to grow beyond the habit of polemics.