

A NEW TECHNOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Education, Technology and Entertainment

BY PAUL A. ELSNER

Many of us are bewildered and beleaguered over the forces of technology. Stanley Davis and Christopher Meyer published for the Ernst and Young Center for Business Innovation a book titled *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy* (a disconcerting title to be sure). But the Sedona Conferences may be de-blurring the blur in their own fashion. While the pace of change is faster than the speed of light, the patterns, not unlike the author's analogy of strobe lights freezing the dancer's movements in a discotheque, suggest that the forces of change are not very discernible.

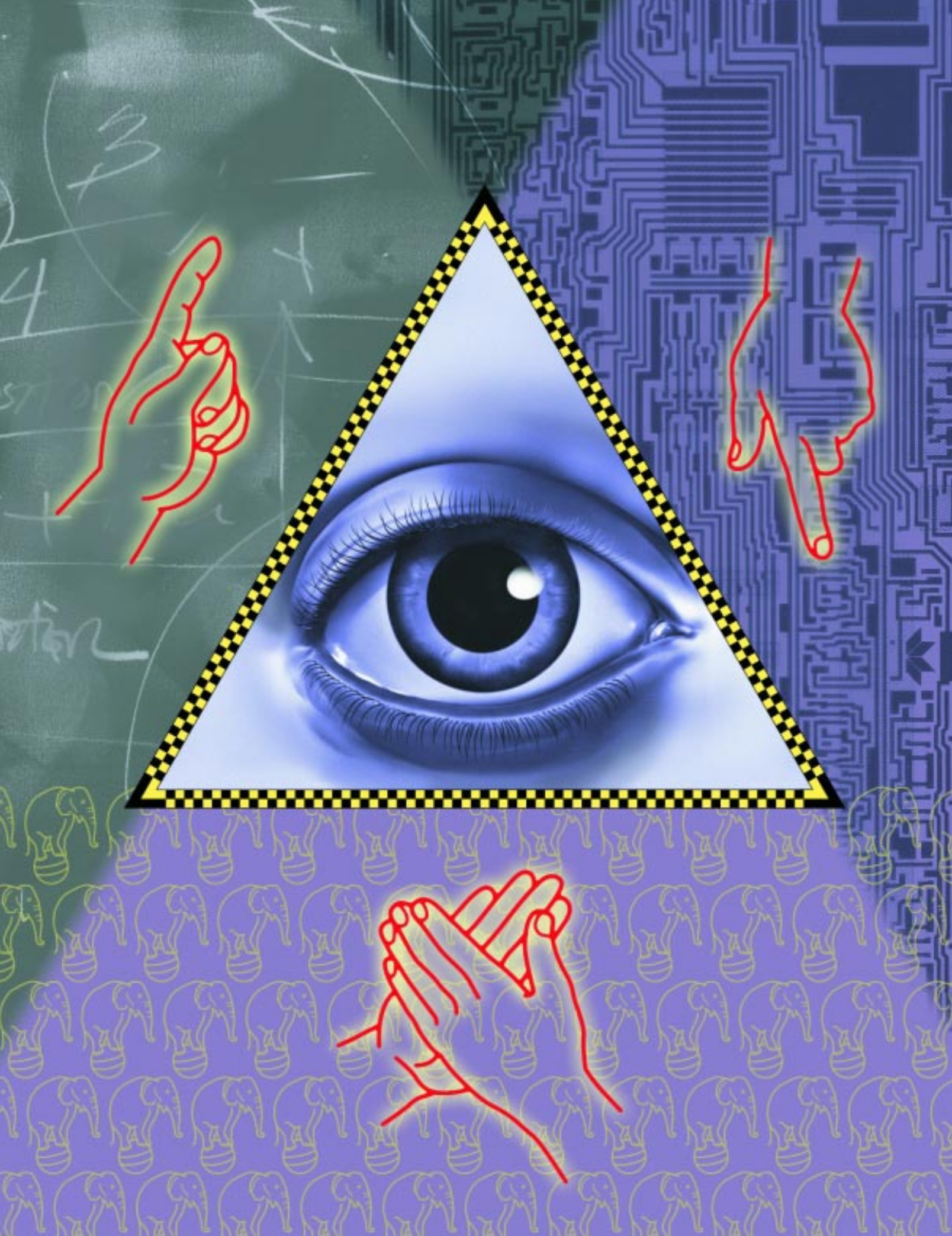
These forces are embedded in what we already know a lot about: (1) education, (2) technology, and (3) entertainment.

The Sedona Conferences have occurred three times. Two have been major attempts at aligning entertainment, education and technology around a future's framework. A third, not really a conference, was a conversation held in Barcelona in September 1999. Thirty-three participants came from seven countries, including South Africa

and Australia. They came to unravel the complexities of this new triad: education, technology and entertainment. But they were really attempting to examine the impact of technology on their own organization and on all of our lives.

To illustrate how the pieces of technology, entertainment and education are coming together, the first Sedona Conference in April 1998 had such diverse speakers as Mark Gill, President of Miramax Films, and Russell Ferstandig, President of Mobius Research, speak on, what else... but the new Educational Psychology and Learning Theory.

This link between education and entertainment was brought home by Mark Gill's thesis that emotion outweighs rational decision-making in making the appeal of what films we want to see. People exercise their options from what they feel, not always what they have analyzed. To illustrate my point, Mark Gill arranged for two films to be shown at Sedona in 1999: *Life is Beautiful* and *Shakespeare in Love*. Both were shown with never before publicly displayed technology—digital projection. This was the first time that any feature



length film was even shown in a digital format.

What is *Life is Beautiful* about? Ask the potential investor, as Gill explains the difficulty of selling a foreign film with English sub-titles, about a subject matter that cannot be humorous or entertaining.

"It's an Italian film, sir."

"English sub-titles?"

"Yep!"

"What's it about?"

"Well...love...but it could be about parent-child relationships."

"...but it's sort of a comedy!"

"What's the main story element?"

"The Holocaust."

"You got to be kidding?"

Well, we know the story *Life is Beautiful* was out-awarded, out-audenced, out-honored in acting, screenplay, and directing. It took as many honors as any film in the Academy's long history.

Why? Emotion motivates.

Nor would you expect audiences to flock to a film "about Shakespeare."

So, too, *Titanic*, destined to be a megamillion dollar production overrun, was rescued by 800 million teenagers who saw it from the front three rows as one of the great love stories of all time. Emotion wins out over logic again.

If a love story can save a sinking "Titanic," the lessons of Sedona are clear. Technology does not stand alone very well. People make motivation. Passion can work its way past technology, but it takes a human hand and mind to push it there.

True to Sedona's remarkable events, participants demonstrate their technology as Mark Gill and Russ Ferstandig did in bringing the first-ever digital projection technology to a public audience by showing *Life is Beautiful* and *Shakespeare in Love* by way of projection research and new technology developed by the Digital Projection Division of Texas Instruments. Over a million dollars of equipment was brought to Sedona. We saw digital projection at Sedona, first. So in a sense, Sedona not only demonstrates technology, it deconstructs it as well.

Sedona brought Roy Stringer to our attention as well. What we know about technology may be less important than what we know about multiple intelligences and variant learning styles.

But Stringer, a savy, Liverpool accented technologist, cuts to the issue: why education, technology and entertainment play out a synergy that we have not seen before.

Roy Stringer has been commissioned to

develop CD-ROM presentations of Stephen Hawking's entropic singularity known as "black holes." "There's got to be a way to represent these phenomena visually," states Stringer at a leadership breakfast at Scottsdale Community College. Hawking's interest is an inspiration to Stringer. Hawking feels that if we could broaden the base of the number of astro-physicists young enough to perceive these singularities called black holes, we multiply the chances of creating theoretical breakthroughs in this kind of knowledge. "Besides," adds Stringer, "Stephen Hawking admits confidentially that he is interested in time-travel."

So am I, and Sedona leads me to a newer perspective on the link between technology, education and entertainment.

Stringer lashes these three elements together for me by pushing another agenda. In connection with his consultative work for the University of Glasgow, Stringer helps to probe the mysteries of immunology and cytology. His technology interest takes him to research on ovarian cancers. To reframe the challenge of hunting for the mysteries of cell division processes leading to cancerous ovarian cysts, he brings us to the basics of entertainment—the comic strip.

Stringer shows us a hugely exaggerated Lichtenstein-type cartoon character...posed as a *noir* detective, starting his day beleaguered, cynical, jaded but enticed into this case by the curious challenge of the problem. How do these cells and their mysteries elude us. "Well, I had no intentions of taking on this case, but this...intrigued me...so...."

Stringer's point is that the educational process will enrich its stories by new and fast developing film and video streams. We can now show 730 dimensions of the wafer slices of your liver. But we can also be a cell and swim by a white cell and listen to our encoded messages as strategic conversations about avoiding calamitous physiological events, fifty years later, and allowing us to avoid our pre-destined deaths.

Now the Sedona Conference has told us other things as well—that these 800 million teenagers who saved the Titanic from being a sinking financial ship, resonate to the same reggae, hip hop, and rock, the same signature clothes, and the same themes of love and probably violence. Sedona tells us that this is the largest market phenomenon the world has ever seen; moreover, this youth cohort has the highest video and audio standard in the world. If Alexis de Toqueville visited America in 2050 rather than in the last century, he

would not see the youth working in the grain fields and steel mills, or the commodities of the industrial and agricultural revolution. He would see these youth creating audio and video products—the emerging commodities of the new digital world.

Sedona gets better when Dana Atchley presents his format to the technologists and educators assembled—this audience was not really prepared for what they got. Atchley's format was aptly called "Digital Storytelling—Ancient Technologies and New Technologies." Atchley is the creator of *Next Exit*, an interactive theatrical performance of the ancient art of storytelling. His clients range from Coca Cola, Price Waterhouse-Coopers, Silicon Graphics, to Simon and Schuster.

In following *Next Exit's* visual vignettes, a digitally elicited stream of Dana's memories of family vacations, career departures, graduate education in graphic design at Yale, translations of family icons, events and traditions, peel back Dana's life and living layers of time revealing significance, daydreams and regeneration of self.

To open the audience to warmth and bonding, he digitally lights a campfire from his keyboard...pop, comes up a friendly log fire at the corner of a twenty foot screen: Dana pulls up a bench and he tells his story with the memories and an iconography of a soulful but not a sorrowful life on the metaphorical highway.

Atchley's performance moves the audience. This is technology's highest moment. We are living and coming to allow another person, because technology, for once, brings us to such an intimacy with this profound man. To me, a Sedona participant and later a presenter, I never felt the campfire burn out. It still glows for me, and judging by the audience's evaluation, that I have never seen as high, his fireside chat still bonds them as well.

We organized and built Sedona to be an "intimate examination of the future." I have seen Dana Atchley's *Next Exit*, and once again, it is the integration of the arts, entertainment, education, and technology that moves my heart.

Francis Bacon placed technology in perspective. In his *Novum Organum*, he stated that no empire, no sect, no star could have the impact on humanity as momentous as the invention of gun powder, the magnetic needle of the navigational compass, or the invention of the printing press, all or in combination of which may have spawned the ref-

ormation or the discovery of the new world.

We have seen technology move empires and sects...but can it move the stars? Perhaps not, but at Sedona, Dana Atchley proved that technology can move people's souls. Judging by the pre-sign-up for possible future Sedonas, faculty in particular want to know more about this integration of technology for the classrooms. Remember, you will hear more about Digital Storytelling.

The participants at the Sedona Conferences and Conversations have been curiously diverse. It is easier to account for the strong UK presence, because some of the speakers, less so the participants, had attended the multi-media conferences, organized at Edinburgh with the coordination of John Barker, who has moved on to the DVD community.

But we have had in recent months representation from several more countries, including South Africa and Australia. Speakers, like Kieran O'Hea, who has supported experimental multi-media projects from his offices in the European Commission, have brought larger European audiences. A growing cadre of multi-media experimenters and creative designers have emerged in Barcelona, Dublin, West Germany and in several middle European and Scandinavian countries. They are attracted to the Sedona Conferences.

Sedona has shown us developments in animation, avatars, and DVD. But Gary Hare's demos in the first Sedona conference on the avatar technology developed in an Icelandic firm, created by Horipro of Japan (DK 96), and promoted by OZ Interactive, showed us the power of computer-designed animation. A Japanese avatar, known as Kyoko Date, fashioned as a hip hop, rock singer, attired in a black halter, lycra briefs and Doc Martins, has already had CD record sales and several marriage proposals. I never thought the dancing "avatar" baby in Ally McBeal was real, but some Japanese men thought their avatar dancer-singer was real enough to propose marriage!

What's the link between education and entertainment. We were told that Chinese policy planners were interested in having the avatar repixelated to look Chinese, where she might be designed to run continuously on two to three educational channels to teach English to several million TV viewers. So much for avatars. Or tune into www.nodna.com, a German-based site that rents virtual characters or wait for Syndi, a soon-to-be-released avatar, described by Peter Seidler in ARTBYTE.

Learning English in China is better than money in the bank. It causes job promotion, foreign travel, and favored consideration for 21st century opportunities in China's movement from a centrally-planned economy to a market-driven one.

Does Sedona teach us something new? Yes it does. It teaches us about the newly emerging synergy between education, technology, and entertainment.

What Sedona is not is technology for technology's sake, although there is usually enough techno-wizard heat present to warm the technologists up.

Sedona is about how we might have missed the target. Donna Campbell, the Director of the Manhattan Cyber Lab for the Ericsson Corporation, demonstrated the ERICA awards project, that recognizes Internet technologies that build and preserve communities. The criteria: How can the internet create socially purposeful centers of activity?

This raises the question that I have posed in the past. Where are the embracing visions of technology? What are its promethean themes? How does this technology lift us to a higher vision? Donna Campbell helps me answer these questions. But integration of technology, entertainment, and education is the driving engine that recasts our purposes. I like the Scottsdale Community College's (SCC) presence at the Sedona Conference. Like Yavapai College, SCC has demonstrated the best living example of art, education and entertainment synergy.

In 1988, SCC brought to Sedona a retrospective of Maya Deren, a Russian immigrant regarded as Europe's first woman film director. The dance, the film school, the theater and music departments at SCC put together a mixed-media performance that was a stunning example of technology, art, entertainment and education. Then in 1999, Scottsdale Community College put on a 14th century choral opera with media, dance, and a 220-member chorus. Below the orchestra pit were eight synthesizers propelling the music of composer Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* to 21st century sound and media production. Bravo!

Michael Wolf asserts in his 1999 book, *The Entertainment Economy*, that the building block of the global economy is entertainment. Wolf believes that to attract market, you have to have an event. The E-factor brings home the message and the market. He says that 76 million Americans, or 28 percent of the population, control \$2.6 trillion or more than 51 percent of our nation's wealth. This cohort intends to have fun.

They own their own house and their car and they want what singer Sheryl Crow sings: "All I wanna do is have some fun. I got the feeling, I'm not the only one."

The format for the Sedona Conferences allows a small assembly, no more than 250 people, to hear speakers and discuss issues and implications of the mixing of entertainment, education and technology.

These conferences usually will rotate to international locations, but they will always return to Sedona. But because of its international interest, conferences are rescheduled in Birmingham, England and other European and possibly Southeast Asian cities, such as Singapore or Hong Kong. Smaller conversations, like the one recently held in Barcelona-Sitges, allowed more intimate conversations among those who must lead technology agendas. These are small groups, never more than 30 to 35. The Barcelona group met last September to address such topics as:

- The impact of technology on our organizational structures,
- Integrating our inner life with the purposes of our organizations,
- Mind-dance and the art of dialog in a technology environment,
- The creative processes and change strategies.

Barcelona was an experiment. It was hugely successful. But participants wanted more personal time with each other.

That is the story of the Sedona Conferences and Conversations. We want to revisit ourselves in this puzzling, often bewildering technological age.

Binding the expertise from the entertainment world, especially from film and video production, from education, and from technology, unravels some secrets about who we are, why we are here, and maybe, where we are going.

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