

WHY

I (STILL)

LOVE

TECH

by
Paul Ford

Art by
Tyler Comrie

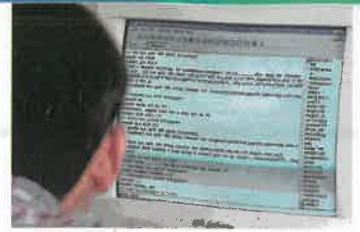
In defense
of a difficult
industry.



Nerds,

we did it. We have graduated, along with oil, real estate, insurance, and finance, to the big T. Trillions of dollars. Trillions! Get to that number any way you like: Sum up the market cap of the major tech companies, or just take Apple's valuation on a good day. Measure the number of dollars pumped into the economy by digital productivity, whatever that is. Imagine the possible future earnings of Amazon.

The things we loved—the Commodore Amigas and AOL chat rooms, the *Pac-Man* machines and Tamagotchis, the Lisp machines and RFCs, the Ace paperback copies of *Neuromancer* in the pockets of our dusty jeans—these very specific things have come together into a postindustrial Voltron that keeps eating the world. We accelerated progress itself, at least the capitalist and dystopian parts. Sometimes I'm proud, although just as often I'm ashamed. I am proudshamed.



And yet I still love the big T, by which I mean either "technology" or "trillions of dollars." Why wouldn't I? I came to New York City at the age of 21, in the era of Java programming, when Yahoo! still deserved its exclamation point. I'd spent my childhood expecting nuclear holocaust and suddenly came out of college with a knowledge of HTML and deep beliefs about hypertext, copies of *WIRED* (hello) and *Ray Gun* bought at the near-campus Uni-Mart. The 1996 theme at Davos was "Sustaining Globalization"; the 1997 theme was "Building the Network Society." One just naturally follows the other. I surfed the most violent tsunami of capital growth in the history of humankind. And what a good boy am I!

My deep and abiding love of software in all its forms has sent me—me—a humble suburban Pennsylvania son of a hard-scramble creative writing professor and a puppeteer, around the world. I lived in a mansion in Israel, where we tried to make artificial intelligence real (it didn't work out), and I visited the Roosevelt Room of the White House to talk about digital strategy. I've keynoted conferences and camped in the backyard of O'Reilly & Associates, rising as the sun dappled through my tent and emerging into a field of nerds. I've been on TV in the morning, where the makeup people, who cannot have easy lives, spackled my fleshy Irish American face with pancake foundation and futilely sought to smash down the antennae-like bristle of my hair, until finally saying in despair, "I don't know what else to do?" to which I say, "I understand."

When I was a boy, if you'd come up behind me (in a nonthreatening way) and whispered that I could have a few thousand Cray supercomputers in my pocket, that everyone would have them, that we would carry the sum of human ingenuity next to our skin, jangling in concert with our coins, wallets, and keys? And that this Lilliputian mainframe would have eyes to see, a sense of touch, a voice to speak, a keen sense of direction, and an urgent desire to count my actual footsteps and everything I read and said as I traipsed through the noosphere? Well, I would have just burst, *burst*. I would have stood up and given the techno-barbaric yawp of a child whose voice has yet to change. Who wants jet packs when you

can have 256 friggabytes (because in 2019 we measure things in *friggin'* gigabytes) resting upon your mind and body at all times? Billions of transistors, attached to green plastic, soldered by robots into a microscopic Kowloon Walled City of absolute technology that we call a phone, even though it is to the rotary phone as humans are to amoebas. It falls out of my hand at night as I drift to sleep, and when I wake up it is nestled into my back, alarm vibrating, small and warm like a twitching baby possum.

I *still* love software. It partially raised me and is such a patient teacher. Being tall, white, enthusiastic, and good at computers, I've ended up the CEO of a software services company, working for various large enterprises to build their digital dreams—which you'd figure would be like being a kid in a candy store for me, sculpting software experiences all day until they ship to the web or into app stores. Except it's more like being the owner of a candy factory, concerned about the rise in cost of Yellow 5 food coloring and the lack of qualified operators for the gumball-forming machine. And of course I rarely get to build software anymore.

I would like to. Something about the interior life of a computer remains infinitely interesting to me; it's not romantic, but it is a romance. You flip a bunch of microscopic switches really fast and culture pours out.

A few times a year I find myself walking past 195 Broadway, a New York City skyscraper that has great Roman columns inside. It was once the offices of the AT&T corporation. The fingernail-sized processor in my phone is a direct descendant of the transistor, which was invented in AT&T's Bell Labs (out in New Jersey). I pat my pocket and think, "That's where you come from, little friend!" When the building was constructed, the company planned to put in a golden sculpture of a winged god holding forked lightning, called *Genius of Telegraphy*.

But by the time the building was finished AT&T had sold off the telegraph division, so the company called it *Spirit of Electricity*. But that must have been too specific, because it was renamed *Spirit of Communication*. And then in 1984, the Bell system, after decades of argument about its monopoly status, broke up (with itself and with America).

Now the New York offices are rented out to, among other things, a wedding planning



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Getty Images (all photographs)

Jerome Hardaway, Geek-at-Arms,
Vets Who Code

JavaScript

I CALL JAVASCRIPT the working man's language. It's not something they teach you in school; you learn it in a boot camp or on the job or out on your own. The real masters of JavaScript are college drop-outs and military veterans. I know one amazing coder who's a former MMA fighter. But JavaScript is everywhere. It's in the web interfaces we use every day, in the deep backend recesses of our favorite applications. You want to try disabling JavaScript and going on the web? Good luck with that.

Some programming languages are built for your happiness. JavaScript is like, screw you and screw your happiness. It's like boxing; you pay for it in blood, sweat, and tears. It has a vast vocabulary and quirky idioms. (Don't get me started about scope and hoisting!) The syntax doesn't forgive your mistakes.

But you get what you put into it. And veterans work hard. Our curriculum at Vets Who Code is built around learning JavaScript in small groups, like a fire squad. And like the military, it's drills, drills, drills. But we rely on each other, reviewing code, debugging, teaching each other new skills.

For those who put in the time and learn to love JavaScript, the hardest thing might be choosing any one thing to do with it. It helped me build my career, starting from my very first hackathon, where I built an online platform for LGBTQ communities. (We won.) Today I'm using JavaScript at my job and at home; just the other day I used it to link my smart light bulbs to my Google Home. I say, "Hey Google, party mode," and the house lights up in eight colors. My kids love it. And soon, when they start learning JavaScript, I'm excited to see what they'll build, too.

As told to Gregory Barber



website and a few media companies. The statue has been relocated to Dallas. Today everyone calls it *Golden Boy*.

IN THE LATE 1990S I was terrified of mailing lists. For years the best way to learn a piece of software—especially some undocumented, open sourced thing you had to use to make websites—was to join its community and subscribe to its mailing lists, tracking the bugs and new releases. Everything was a work in progress. Books couldn't help you. There was no GitHub or Stack Overflow.

I could only bring myself to lurk, never to contribute. I couldn't even ask questions. I was a web person, and web people weren't real programmers. If I piped up, I was convinced they'd yell, "Get off this mailing list! You have no place in the community of libxml2! Naïf!" The very few times I submitted bugs or asked questions were horrible exercises in rewriting and fear. Finally I'd hit Send and—

Silence, often. No reply at all. I'd feel awful, and a little outraged at being ignored. I was trying so hard! I'd read the FAQs!

Eventually I met some of those magical programmers. I'd sneak into conferences. (Just tell the people at the entry you left your badge in the hotel room.) They were a bunch of very normal technologists contributing, through their goodwill and with their spare time, to open source software tools.

"I use your code every day," I'd say. They were pleased to be recognized. Surprised at my excitement. They weren't godlike at all. They were, in many ways, the opposite of godlike. But I am still a little afraid to file bug reports, even at my own company. I know I'm going to be judged.

So much about building software—more than anyone wants to admit—is etiquette. Long before someone tweeted "That's not OK!" there were netiquette guides and rule books, glossaries, and jargon guides, like *The New Hacker's Dictionary*, available in text-only format for download, or *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Internet*, first released in 1987. Bibles. There were the FAQs that would aid newcomers to the global decentralized discussion board Usenet. FAQs kept people from rehashing the same conversa-

tion. When college freshmen logged on in September—because that's where the internet happened back in the 1980s and '90s, at colleges and a few corporations—they would be gently shown the FAQs and told how to behave. But then in 1993, AOL gave its users Usenet access—and that became known as the Eternal September. The ivory tower was overrun. That was the day the real internet ended, 26 years ago. It was already over when I got here.

The rulemaking will never end. It's rules all the way down. Coders care passionately about the position of their brackets and semicolons. User experience designers work to make things elegant and simple and accessible to all. They meet at conferences, on message boards, and today in private Slacks to hash out what is good and what is bad, which also means *who is in, who is out*.

I keep meeting people out in the world who want to get into this industry. Some have even gone to coding boot camp. They did all the exercises. They tell me about their React apps and their Rails APIs and their page design skills. They've spent their money and time to gain access to the global economy in short order, and often it hasn't worked.

I offer my card, promise to answer their emails. It is my responsibility. We need to get more people into this industry.

But I also see them asking, with their eyes, "Why not me?"

And here I squirm and twist. *Because—because we have judged you and found you wanting*. Because you do not speak with a confident cadence, because you cannot show us how to balance a binary tree on a whiteboard, because you overlabored the difference between UI and UX, because you do not light up in the way that we light up when hearing about some obscure bug, some bad button, the latest bit of outrageousness on Hacker News. Because the things you learned are already, six months later, not exactly what we need. Because the industry is still overlorded by people like me, who were lucky enough to have learned the etiquette early, to even know there *was* an etiquette.

I try to do better, and so does my company. How do you change an industry that will not stop, not even to catch its breath? We have no leaders, no elections. We never expected to take over the world! It was just



Meredith Graves, Director of
Music, Kickstarter

Shudder streaming service

I HAVE A LIFELONG obsession with the dark and creepy. As a little kid, I liked weird, scrompy music and unpleasant sounds. I was also obsessed with literary horror—the *Goosebumps* series, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. In third grade, I read Stephen King's *Rose Madder*, which involves domestic violence and is *totally not* an appropriate book for that age. It was my first woman-turns-on-all-of-y'all horror novel.

Later on I got into horror movies and all the adjacent genres. I'd rummage through the dollar bins at the Salvation Army, trying to find that ultra-obscure early-'80s Italian movie that some people claimed was actually a real murder. Then, a few years ago, Shudder came about. It's very punk how they do things. The people behind it are appealing to a community that enjoys archival stuff, that worships the low-budget and the DIY. They have an open comments section, and they use that to figure out what movies to get next. This is by us, for us, 150 percent.

Every time they put things on the site, it feels like a friend saying, "Hey, guys! I spent all last Saturday doing bong hits and finding weird horror movies on YouTube. Let me show you." But it's not niche, and the original content they put out offers a diversity of voices. They have a podcast that's all about women in horror, hosted by a woman in horror. And they just released *Horror Noire*, the first comprehensive documentary about the history of black horror in America.

I'm an early riser. I can watch two movies on Shudder before work. When I see the notification that I've paid my subscription, I'm like, "Shit, yeah. That rules."

As told to Anthony Lydgate

a scene. You know how U2 was a little band in Ireland with some good albums, and over time grew into this huge, world-spanning band-as-brand with stadium shows with giant robotic structures, and Bono was hanging out with Paul Wolfowitz? Tech is like that, but it just kept going. Imagine if you were really into the group Swervedriver in the mid-'90s but by 2019 someone was on CNBC telling you that Swervedriver represented, I don't know, 10 percent of global economic growth, outpacing returns in oil and lumber. That's the tech industry.

No one loves tech for tech's sake. All of this was about power—power over the way stories were told, the ability to say things on my own terms. The aesthetic of technology is an aesthetic of power—CPU speed, sure, but what do you think we're talking about when we talk about "design"? That's just a proxy for power; design is about control, about presenting the menu to others and saying, "These are the options you wanted. *I'm sorry if you wanted a roast beef sandwich, but sir, this is not an Arby's.*" That is Apple's secret: It commoditizes the power of a computer and sells it to you as design.

Technology is a whole world that looks nothing like the world it seeks to command. A white world, a male world, and—it breaks my heart to say it, for I've been to a lot of Meetups (now a WeWork company), and hosted some too—a lonely world. Maybe I'm just projecting some teenage metaphysics onto a lively and dynamic system, but I can't fully back away from that sense of monolithic loneliness. We're like a carpenter who spent so long perfecting his tools that he forgot to build the church.

But not always. One night in October 2014, I had a few drinks and set up a single Linux server in the cloud and called it *tilde.club*, then tweeted out that I'd give anyone an account who wanted one. I was supposed to be working on something else, of course.

Suddenly my email was full: Thousands of people were asking for logins. People of all kinds. So I made them accounts and watched in awe as they logged on to that server. You can put hundreds of people on one cheap cloud computer. It's just plain text characters on a screen, like in the days of DOS, but it works. And they can use that to make hundreds of web pages, some beau-

Software partially raised me, and it's such a patient teacher.



TECH
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The Heavenly Hellsite I came for the hostility, but Twitter became my sacred space.

by
Molly Jong-Fast

I WOKE UP one day, at age 38, and realized I was the worst kind of bored housewife. My kids were old enough to no longer need me, my amusing(ish) satirical novels were largely being unread, and my life had become a dull hum of paint colors and upholstery. I live on New York's Upper East Side, where everyone shares the same small, incredibly specific concerns—private schools, vacations, and getting our husbands to notice us. I was drowning in provincialism.

And so, like any well-adjusted person, I took to the internet.

I went to Twitter originally to express my displeasure at the way the president of the United States was running things. I was devastated by the election and looking for a fight, of a genteel sort. My ranting

Illustration by
StoryTK

was largely futile—like yelling at the guy who works in the Verizon store about bad cell phone coverage—but suddenly I wasn't alone and I wasn't talking about upholstery. I came for the hostility but was slowly seduced by the community of a sacred (and sometimes profane) space.

Sure, the climate apocalypse was coming, and democratic norms were being destroyed, but I was making friends. I followed people who shared a similar sensibility, but there were others. There was the NBC reporter I became friends with by trolling him for going on Fox News. I followed an anonymous parody account who turned out to be an adorable single father with a kid the same age as mine. I became friends with hackers, charlatans, and members of the deep state. People in my real life were worried about study skills and selling school-branded sportswear. People on Twitter were worried about immigrant children being pulled from their parents.

I came from a family that wrote about everything all the time. When I was growing up, my mother, Erica Jong, constantly wrote about me. So I didn't have the same kind of relationship with privacy that normal people did.

A few weeks ago, my eldest son (whom I call "woke teenage son" on Twitter) had a flare-up of his Crohn's disease. It was a Sunday; I took him to the hospital and watched him be wheeled into surgery to be treated for a disease he had inherited from me, from my bad genes. It was a soul-destroying moment.

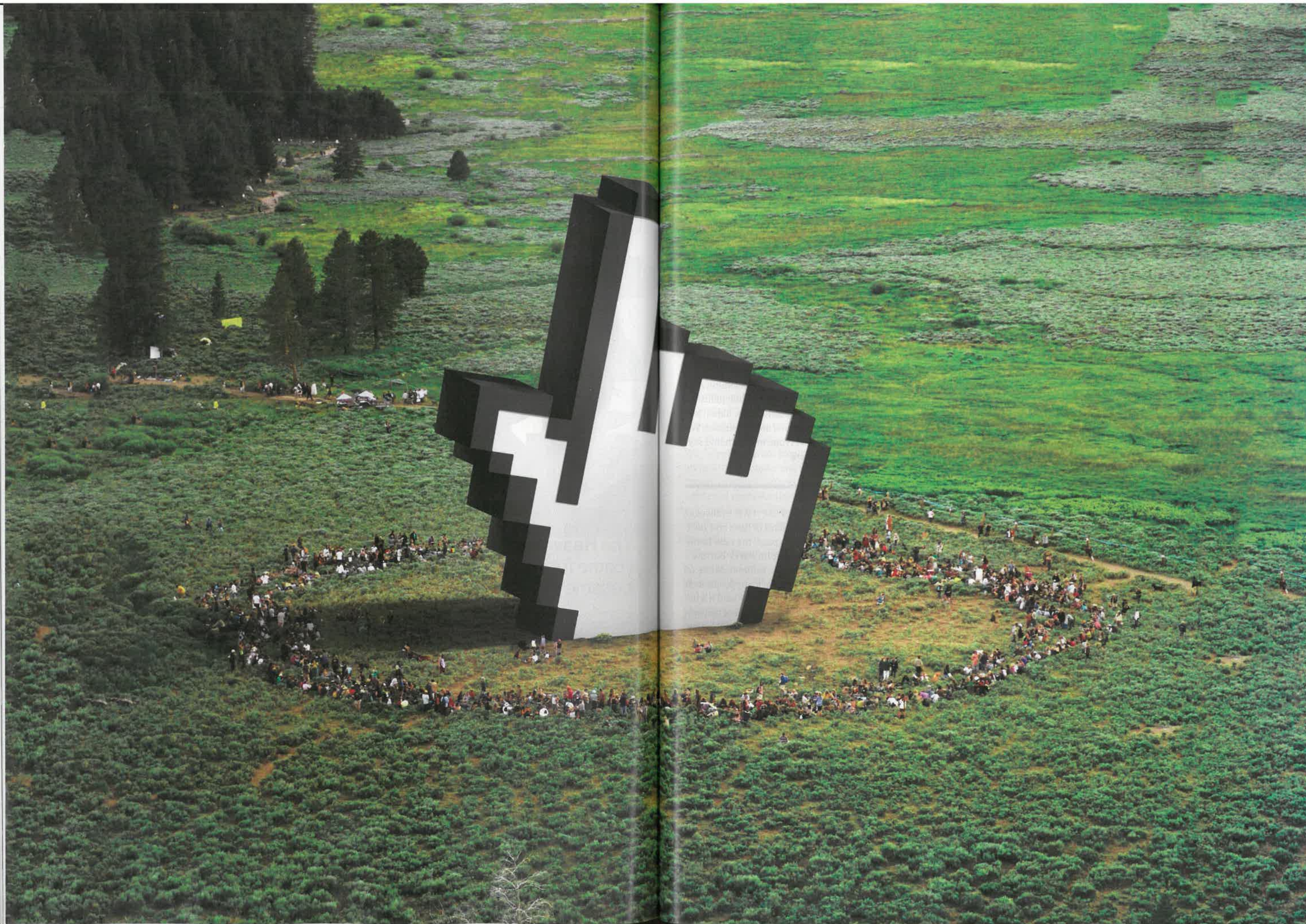
"Can I tweet about this?" I asked him.

"Absolutely unequivocally not," he said sharply, right before the anesthesia began to take hold.

So, I didn't. I sat in the hospital waiting room unmooed. I had embraced Twitter and a life of extreme online living. And by doing so I had found the connectedness that I desperately needed. I called some people, but it didn't feel the same as being in my community. I knew it wasn't my trauma to share, it was his. So I tweeted about politics, but felt like a fake. I didn't want to talk about politics. I wanted to be consoled. And I realized *that* is what I'd been coming to Twitter for.

My son came out of surgery, and a few hours later he was complaining about the cellular service in the hospital. I, too, survived, but it was a stark reminder of how emotionally dependent I was on this odd bit of technology and the world it contained. ■

Molly Jong-Fast (@MollyJongFast)
is the author of three books.



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Colonel Enrique Oti,
Director, Project Kessel Run,
US Air Force

Chat apps

THE U.S. MILITARY spends billions on IT, and I'm one of the people in charge of getting new software built and deployed. But I doubt I'll ever build something people love as much as their free chat apps.

mIRC, our weapon of choice, is free and open source—a type of Internet Relay Chat. We started using it almost 20 years ago, and it spread organically. Now it's at the center of how we manage just about everything, from coordinating rescue missions and strikes to monitoring the ebb and flow of combat. The technology is so ubiquitous and simple, you can almost forget its importance—until a chat server goes down. For IT, that's a five-alarm fire.

In combat ops, it's common to see officers with 30 chat windows open. Some will swivel their chairs between computer systems, chatting across multiple security levels with coalition partners. They're running the wars, chat line by chat line. Lives depend on keeping information flowing, not stuck in silos. Chat is our backbone.

Outside of combat, chat apps are flattening the military's strict hierarchy. On my software team we've started using more modern tools than mIRC to converse, like Slack and Mattermost. Yes, we all appreciate having #Random to blow off steam with weird news articles and programmer memes. But the main benefit is collaboration and being able to engage a generation of recruits raised on Twitter and Snapchat. Today, one of my newest airmen can ask a question in a Slack channel and see a response from a colonel in minutes. For both of us, that's empowering. (To be clear, these are my personal views, not the official policy or position of the Air Force, DOD, or the US government.)

As told to Gregory Barber



tiful, some dumb, exactly the way we made web pages in 1996. Hardly anyone knew what they were doing, but explaining how things worked was fun.

For a few weeks, it was pure frolic. People made so many web pages, formed committees, collaborated. Someone asked if I'd sell it. People made their own tilde servers. It became a thing, but an inclusive thing. Everyone was learning a little about the web. Some were teaching. It moved so fast I couldn't keep up. And in the end, of course, people went back whence they came—Twitter, Facebook, and their jobs. We'd had a very good party.

The server is still up. Amazon sends a bill. I wish the party could have kept going.

But briefly I had made a tiny pirate kingdom, run at a small loss, where people were kind. It was the opposite of loneliness. And that is what I wish for the whole industry. Eternal September is not to be hated, but accepted as the natural order of success. We should invite everyone in. We should say, *We're all new here.*

"GOVERNMENTS OF THE Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind." This was John Perry Barlow's "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," a document many people took seriously, although I always found it a little much. Barlow was a prophet of network communication, an avatar of this magazine. "On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather." It's signed from Davos, 1996 (the year of "Sustaining Globalization").

Exposure to the internet did not make us into a nation of yeoman mind-farmers (unless you count *Minecraft*). That people in the billions would self-assemble, and that these assemblies could operate in their own best interests, was ... optimistic.

But maybe! Maybe it could work. There was the Arab Spring, starting in 2010. Twitter and Facebook were suddenly enabling protest, supporting democracy, changing the world for the better. This was the thing we'd been waiting for—

And then it wasn't. Autocracy kept rearing its many heads, and people started getting killed. By 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was shutting off Twitter in Turkey to quell protests, and then it came home, first as Gamergate, wherein an online campaign of sexual harassment against women, somewhat related to videogames, metastasized into an army of enraged bots and threats. And as Gamergate went, so went the 2016 election. It was into this gloomy context that I made tilde.club that night—a blip of nostalgia and cheer fueled by a few Manhattans.

People—smart, kind, thoughtful people—thought that comment boards and open discussion would heal us, would make sexism and racism negligible and tear down walls of class. We were certain that more communication would make everything better. Arrogantly, we ignored history and learned a lesson that has been in the curriculum since the Tower of Babel, or rather, we made everyone else learn it. We thought we were amplifying individuals in all their wonder and forgot about the cruelty, or at least assumed that good product design could wash that away. We were so hopeful, and we shaved the sides of our heads, and we never expected to take over the world.

I'm watching the ideologies of our industry collapse. Our celebration of disruption of every other industry, our belief that digital platforms must always uphold free speech no matter how vile. Our transhumanist tendencies, that sci-fi faith in the singularity. Our general belief that software will eat the world and that the world is better for being eaten.

It's been hard to accept, at least for me, that each of our techy ideologies, while containing various merits, don't really add up to a worldview, because technology is not the world. It's just another layer in the Big Crappy Human System along with religion, energy, government, sex, and, more than anything else, money.

I don't know if I can point to any one thing and say "that's tech" in 2019. (Well, maybe 3D graphics GPU card programming. That's nerd central.) The cost of our success is that we are no longer unique. The secret club is no longer a gathering of misfits. We are the world. (We



- TECH
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Kate Zwaard, Director of Digital
Strategy, Library of Congress

Concordia open source software

NOTHING TELLS PEOPLE they belong to an institution like asking them to help out, so at the Library of Congress we built an open source software package called Concordia that allows crowdsourced transcribing. Then we set up By the People—a site that invites people to transcribe handwritten and original documents.

Transcription really called to us because it is how you get people deeply into the library's collection. They are reading images of primary source material. They're reading Clara Barton's diaries, Mary Church Terrell's papers. They're reflecting on history.

Anybody can volunteer; one person transcribes and another person validates that transcription. The site went up in October, and 4,200 people have set up accounts. So far 43,040 images have been transcribed and more than 11,000 validated.

People sometimes ask for help, and history Twitter will jump in. There was a professor using our Letters to Lincoln collection in a class and had a hard time figuring out one of the words in a letter from a Republican club; 51 people in a social media thread worked to decipher the word *pervades*. Then the product of that is so exciting. We have a searchable database of text.

I do it a lot myself. Branch Rickey's papers are just awesome. He is most famous for bringing Jackie Robinson into Major League Baseball, and through crowdsourcing we were able to transcribe 1,926 pages of his scouting reports on prospective players. I would never have guessed how fun baseball scouting reports could be! One of my favorite lines is "I doubt if he has any adventure in his soul."

As told to Vera Titunik



are the servers. We are the ones who gather faves and likes, so let's start clicking. Sorry.)

I've made a mistake, a lifelong one, correlating advancements in technology with progress. Progress is the opening of doors and the leveling of opportunity, the augmentation of the whole human species and the protection of other species besides. Progress is cheerfully facing the truth, whether flooding coastlines or falling teen pregnancy rates, and thinking of ways to preserve the processes that work and mitigate the risks. Progress is seeing calmly, accepting, and thinking of others.

It's not that technology doesn't matter here. It does. We can enable humans to achieve progress. We make tools that humans use. But it might not be our place to lead.

I wish I could take my fellow CEOs by the hand (they're not into having their hands held) and show them Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, and any of the other places where people are angry. Listen, I'd say, you're safe. No one is coming for your lake house, even if they tweet "I'm coming for your lake house." These random angry people are merely asking us to keep our promises. We told them 20-some years ago that we'd try to abolish government and bring a world of plenty. We told them we'd make them powerful, that we'd open gates of knowledge and opportunity. We said, "We take your privacy and security seriously at Facebook." We said we were listening. So listen! They are submitting a specification for a world in which fairness is a true currency, and then they're trying to hold everyone to the spec (which is, very often, the law). As someone who spent a lot of time validating XML and HTML pages, I empathize. If bitcoin can be real money, then fairness can be a real goal.

We might have been them, if we'd been born later and read some different websites. And it's only time before *they* will become *us*.

EVERY MORNING I DROP off my 7-year-old twins, a boy and a girl, at their public school, and they enter a building that was established a century ago and still functions well for the transmission of learning, a building filled with digital whiteboards but also old-fashioned chalkboards and good, worn books.

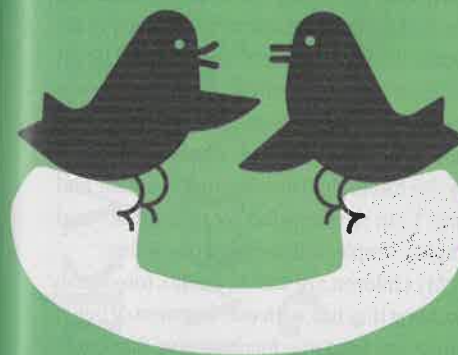
I think often of the things the building has seen. It was built in an age of penmanship and copybooks, shelves of hardbound books and Dick and Jane readers; it made its way through blue mimeographs with their gasoline smell. Milkmen delivered with horses when it was built, and now every parking space is filled with Toyotas and school buses. Teachers and principals come young and retire decades later. There are certain places where craft supplies are stored. The oldest living student just turned 100 years old, and some students walked to his home and sang him "Happy Birthday." They announced it at the multicultural music event.

The school hasn't moved in a century, but it is a white-hot place in time. Ten or twenty thousand little bodies have come through here on their way to what came next. While they are here, it's their whole world. It feeds the children who need to be fed.

I watch my kids go through the front doors. (I call this my "cognitive receipt," because unless I see them I worry that I somehow forgot to drop them off.) Then I walk to the bus stop. The bus comes, and off we go, across an elevated highway and through a tunnel. Then we take the FDR Expressway and drive right under three bridges: the Brooklyn, the Manhattan, the Williamsburg. Each bridge has its own story, an artifact of its time, products of various forms of hope, necessity, and civic corruption, each one an essay on the nature of gravity and the tensile strength of wire. Everyone on the bus looks at their phone or looks out the window, or sometimes they read a book.

Sometimes I think of the men who died making the Brooklyn Bridge; sometimes I play a game on my phone. This is as close as it gets to the sacred for me, to be on a public conveyance, in the arms of a transit authority, part of a system, to know that the infra-

TECH
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The Kindness of Strangers I tweeted out my phone number and rediscovered humanity.

by
Robyn Kanner

THE CALLS COME in during twilight. At first, the tone is a whisper. They're trying to see if I'm someone they're comfortable with. I look for a common interest: food, film, music—anything that connects us as humans. After that, I let them lead.

I've been taking phone calls from strangers for a few months now. This practice started after I was digitally shamed on Twitter. I had written an op-ed in *The New York Times* worrying about our culture of shame. I empathized with a white teen growing up in a conservative, Midwestern home. In my heart, I know a couple things to be true. We're all human beings that deserve the opportunity to change or grow. Speaking our truth is better than scolding or silencing the voices that we don't like. It's healthy to disagree.

Of course, there was a backlash. I was called racist. My mentions were filled with malice. Strangers tweeted about how they had lost respect for me.

Illustration by
StoryTK

Close friends said nothing at all. I was being digitally shamed for arguing against digital shaming. A congressional candidate and internet influencers urged me to issue a public response. It's a lonely experience to feel like the most hated person alive for just saying what was on my mind.

So I put my phone number in my bio on Twitter. Then, when no one called, I tweeted out my number with an invitation to reach out.

The first call came through around 9 at night. The caller was a librarian with an upbeat voice. I was prepared to answer as many questions as she needed to ask about my op-ed. Instead, she told me about the men in her life. I listened and offered any advice on men that I had—which, as a single woman, is not much. It was surprisingly normal and, after 20 minutes, we said our goodbyes.

The calls started to pour in. A soldier on a military base told me about his favorite films. We talked for two hours, and I loved every minute. A therapist had seen me tweet about my sobriety and called to talk through her own. A man in a loud Uber Pool called on his way home from drinks with coworkers. Like me, he was ashamed that as a teen he had identified as a Republican. A woman who had just moved to the United States for work called to talk about how hard it's been to make new friends. Someone with an unlisted phone number called to say that I was an idiot and then hung up. Another softly asked if I was OK. Each conversation left me feeling more human, less shamed.

I've always loved talking on the phone. I adore the subtle ways a phone call can evoke intimacy. You hear the cracks in a voice, the sound of breath, and the patience of thinking. And there's no audience. It's the one-to-one connection that reassures we can correct our mistakes without fear of them following or haunting us. It's a compassionate technology.

Before hanging up, I check in to see how my caller is feeling. It's a closure that brings us closer. Surprisingly, no one ever mentioned the article. I merely listened and shared my feelings with dozens of strangers. I'd done this countless times on Twitter, too, but always seemed to miss what they were really saying; the connection between the human heart and human mind somehow got disconnected. Shouting online may bring us instant gratification, but a phone call helps us sleep at night. ☑

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