

Open Debate

◀◀ **JOHN SEELY BROWN**

FORMER CHIEF SCIENTIST AT XEROX CORP.,
now a consultant and “chief of confusion”

SHANNON O'BRIEN ▶▶

SENIOR AT MARIN CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL,
who lives in Novato, California

Resolved: “*The future’s so bright, I gotta wear shades.*”

BROWN: We are experiencing a “Cambrian explosion” of innovations that will impact every aspect of how we live, work, and play. Computers are getting powerful enough to do both cool and deep stuff.—We can model incredibly complex physical and biological phenomena that enable us to build nanostructures, bio-inspired machines, and medicines heretofore unthinkable. These innovations will directly improve our quality of life through more efficient energy use, medical devices for noninvasive surgery, and designer drugs that minimize side effects, to name a few.—And they might just provide us the means to reverse or at least abate the damage we have been doing to our environment.

O'BRIEN: The future is exciting, different, a giant leap into the hopeful unknown. But I worry about it, too. Technology can bring fun to your day (Xbox, TiVo), but it also keeps people from communicating and bonding like they used to. Many teenagers instant-message instead of having actual relationships. Everyone rushes through the streets jabbering on their cell phones, iPods stuck in their ears. No one has time to be close to, well, anyone. And who are our role models? Britney Spears? 50 Cent? I hope not. The media has pumped my generation with images of superficiality, violence, drugs and alcohol, and casual sex.

BROWN: There are a couple of points where I'd differ with you. First, the Net is letting us build dense human networks that stretch the globe.—Today, three years after leaving Xerox PARC and self-employed, I have access to library resources richer than ever and to colleagues scattered all over—partly because of the new connections the Net has provided.—

And about mass media:—Yes, much of it has sunk to the lowest level. But digital tools and the Net have enabled many more of us to distribute our own movies and documentaries. We have an emerging blogosphere that acts as a media watchdog and allows new forms of participatory democracy. Thus, we now have much more powerful ways for your generation to give voice to your vision of the future.

O'BRIEN: I was at a friend's house for New Year's. We spent the entire day chatting and playing board games, charades, you name it. Next thing I knew, it was 9 p.m. My friends and I had passed the day without turning on the television or resorting to video games. And it was one of the best times I've had in a while.

The next day, I went to another friend's house—and I found myself scrunched on the couch with four kids glued to the TV. No one was talking or bonding. Two friends were locked on MySpace, and another was texting. So, yeah, technology is amazing—but people have to find balance between the real world and the cyberworld.

P.S., Mr. Scientist: Is “blogosphere” really a word?

BROWN: It is very true that the digital world must involve new social practices before its true social and civic power can be realized. As you said, one of the challenges we all face today is maintaining a balance between the physical and the digital—but the more important balances are between “the now” and tomorrow, and “the here” and elsewhere.

But a question: You've told me what you imagine for the world. What about for yourself?

O'BRIEN: Who knows? I remember in third grade I daydreamed about the year 2000. I was convinced I'd be riding in flying cars and living on Mars. Well, that didn't work out.

Society puts too much pressure on teens and young adults to have a plan, to know exactly what they want from life. My parents and teachers began drilling me on college options before I was even a freshman in high school! I know I am going to college, I know I want to travel, and I know I want to someday find a job that I am passionate about. That's all I know. . . . I'll follow the path as I go, I suppose.

