

Windows¹

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From about 1990-1994 I directed something called the Ontario Telepresence Project at the University of Toronto and University of Ottawa. I was the project's scientific director, and perhaps for that reason, my second floor office had the best view. Hence, I had a "window cam" pointing out onto the main quad on the campus – a pretty beautiful sight. Even without the infamous bird incident at PARC, I knew that this was valued because of any piece of the entire system that ever failed (and in the early stages, things were – shall we say – not overly stable), the thing that caused my phone to ring the fastest was my window cam.

Lots of people (especially lowly graduate students) had landlocked offices, i.e., no windows. This was their only link to what it was like out. Was it snowing? Raining? Or even daylight still? They had no other way of knowing from the bowels of the building.

But the day that the guy cleaned the outside of my windows was a special day, with various parts of his anatomy gyrating in front of the lens. And this was almost outdone by the time there was a car crash right in view of the camera. Trust me, on such days people were not discussing video compression algorithms or the finer points of SMPTE time code over lunch.

The fact is, the power of the window became an effective tool for social engineering. Ron Riensenbach, my managing director, and I shared and administrative assistant. She sat in a landlocked area in the inner part of our office suite. When she started, following the "good form" established at PARC, I asked if she would like a mediaspace node installed on her desk. Of course, I was just following form, so I was really taken aback when she said, "No. I am just an admin, and I don't want my bosses able to watch my every move and keep their eyes on my like that." Hmmm. Welcome to the real world Bill, where groups are not made up of trusting peers and you can't take things like trust and respect for granted.

Thanks to my deep experience with birds, window washers, car crashes and the weather, I at least had the wit to ask a different question: "Would you like a windowed office instead?" The answer was and immediate and definitive "Yes." So, we installed a monitor on her desk, and the software to let her hook up to the window cam, but no microphone or camera.

This was great. She was happy (as were a number of other admins in the general area, who while not related to our project, also requested – and got – similar "windowed offices"). Our new admin got a window, and some consequent brownie points with her peers.

¹ From: Harrison, Steve (Ed.)(2009). *Media Space: 20+ Years of Mediated Life*. New York: Springer Verlag, 25 – 26.

We all settled in and work progressed. Working relationships were established, along with the inevitable dependencies on each other. One of these was that between Garry Beirne, one of our programmers, and Ron and my admin. I can't remember what the project was, but they needed to have constant interactions for a while. Consequently, one day she asked "Can someone hook my monitor up so that I can see Garry sometimes, instead the window? I need to know when I can call him." (Garry was on the 4th floor at the far side of the building. We were on the 2nd.)

The answer was "No – it would not be fair letting you see him if he can't see you." Which led to an immediate request, "So can I have a camera, microphone and speakers too?" To which the answer was an immediate "Yes."

The point is that the window, besides simply improving the working environment, also was an important tool in building trust and understanding - of the technology and the social mores associated with it. It provided a path to a pull for the technology and associated services, rather than a push. It was a valuable tool for social and cultural change.

And I wish that I could tell you that I was such a brilliant and insightful manager that I planned the whole thing. But that would be a lie.

However, like the birds, the lesson was not lost on me. Living the experience rather than just thinking about it, brings a whole different level of learning and depth of understanding. And I needed it. I still do.