

April 15, 2003

**‘THE SOUL OF TECHNOLOGY IS IN TRANSITION’**

- Technology and Spirituality are Yoked Together and Will Change Together
- Ethical Evaluations of Technology Need to Consider its Human Use or Abuse

In a world that is increasingly considered mad and out of control, technology is often thought to contribute a negative effect.

Today at a Media Lab Europe Open\_House on Spirituality and Technology it was however argued that any ethical evaluation of technology not only needs to consider the human input but the obvious and constantly changing links between spirituality and technology, and science and religion.

“An isolated ethical evaluation of technology can too easily lead us away from the real question, which is one about ourselves as human beings,” Dr.theol. Anne Foerst, visiting professor for Theology and Computer Science at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, New York. “Human beings are fantastic and incredibly interesting but also intensely flawed with a tendency towards prejudice and hate, a tendency which influences many aspects of life including the way we use technology.”

Technology changes people. A person whose words can reach across an ocean or around the world (through a mobile phone) is different from a person who can only speak across a room. Given such changes, our spirituality changes (just as it changes as we grow older and wiser or older and more foolish) as well. Such change is a part of life and while that change is good, not all change is good. Technology and spirituality are yoked together and they will change together.

“When I was about 10 years old, I became a convert to atheism, enamoured of science and technology and believing that it was incompatible with any whiff of religion or faith, said Dr. Ken Haase, acting director of Media Lab Europe. “As I grew older, experience and education led me to realise how the scientific orientation and the religious orientation might be not only compatible but even intimate with one another. Much of this came from paying attention, as a person and a young scientists, to what I call “the place where the answers stop”.”

“Human beings are always asking questions. About the world, about themselves, about their family and friends, about their triumphs and tragedies, about reasons and causes and consequences. In the way of these things, questions lead to answers lead to questions and so on. But there is always a point, whether for scientist or minister, expert or amateur, when the answers stop. This place is a place of mystery and of challenge upon which both the scientist and the minister (and sometimes the theologian) focus their attention. I find that this is never a fixed point but it is always a crucial point.”

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Media Lab Europe is about creating technologies with individuals and their human nature at the center. Technology, unlike science, makes little sense without people around to use it or abuse it. Media Lab Europe takes this matter of definition and turns it into a central focus, being concerned with issues like well being, self awareness, community, and individual learning and development.

This person-centrism is also characteristic of spirituality, which is about the very human experience of "the place where the answers stop". And so technology and spirituality are a natural pairing which is resonant with, but distinct from, science and religion. And the questions which arise in this pairing arise from the technological evolution of the person.

Ends.

### Notes to Editor:

#### **About Media Lab Europe**

Leveraging the innovative and entrepreneurial operating model of the world-renowned MIT Media Lab, Media Lab Europe adopts an interdisciplinary approach to researching the ways in which new technologies expand human potential. Media Lab Europe's home is in Dublin where it was established two years ago as a 10 year joint venture between the MIT Media Lab and the Irish Government. 100 people work for the not-for-profit Research Institute, across seven groups and supporting areas. To find out more about Media Lab Europe please visit [www.medialabeurope.org](http://www.medialabeurope.org).

#### **About Open\_House**

Open\_House at Media Lab Europe is a series of monthly research driven forums for business and research professionals. Featuring some of the best minds from MIT and the Media Lab family, keynote speakers are also drawn from the worlds of business and academia. Attendees get the opportunity to immerse themselves in the future with global thought leaders, technology experts and Media Lab Europe researchers. Open\_House also provides an opportunity for attendees to exchange views with other senior professional, envisage futures and gain insight to help share research and business directions.

#### **About Open\_House Speakers on 'Spirituality and Technology'**

**Dr theol. Anne Foerst** is visiting professor for Theology and Computer Science at St. Bonaventure University in Olean, NY. She is also the director of NEXUS, The Science & Religion Dialogue project. She joined Bonaventure in January 2001. Previously, she has worked as research scientist at the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and was also affiliated with the Center for the Studies of Values in Public Life of Harvard Divinity School.

At the AI-Lab, she served as the theological advisor for the Cog and Kismet Projects, two attempts to develop embodied, autonomous and social robots in analogy to human infants which might learn and develop more mature intelligences. She also initiated and directs "God and Computers", a dialogue project initially between Harvard Divinity School, the Boston Theological Institute and MIT and now to be continued at St. Bonaventure. In this function, she has organised several public lecture series and public conferences on Artificial Intelligence, computer science and concepts on personhood and dignity. She is consultant of several projects which explore the connection of new media and religion and especially the Christian churches; she has also presented various keynote addresses on the interaction between religion and science.

Her work on dialogue has been covered in numerous print and internet media (MS NBC, Boston Globe, Der Spiegel etc.) and she appeared in many radio and television shows (ABC, CNN, Odysee etc).



## Media Lab Europe

The European Research Partner  
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**John Moriarty**, spiritual writer and philosopher, was born in Kerry in 1938. Sometime gardener, lecturer and broadcaster, in 1997 he hosted the RTE television series, 'The Blackbird and the Bell'. His books include Dreamtime (Dublin, The Lilliput Press, 1994), and the first two volumes of Turtle Was Gone a Long Time: Crossing the Kedron (1996); Horsehead Nebula Neighing (Lilliput, 1997); and Anaconda Canoe (Lilliput, 1999). His forthcoming collection is entitled Night Journey. He lives down from the Horse's Glen at the foot of Mangerton Mountain in north Kerry.

**Dr. Kenneth Haase** is the Acting Director of Media Lab Europe, the MIT Media Laboratory's European Research Partner. Haase is the founder of **beingmeta, inc.**, a Boston-based start-up which continues his academic work on knowledge description and natural language processing. Haase is working to solve the genuinely hard problems of content and knowledge description in the short-term, while also proposing solutions that are long-lived and sustainable. He is also involved in a variety of XML standardization efforts, and was particularly responsible for the addition of conceptual mark-up to the NITF (News Industry Text Format) wire standard. He has consulted widely in the IT, manufacturing, and finance sectors.

Haase has lived and worked in Finland (where he currently holds a professorship at the University of Tampere), Belgium, Germany, and Ireland, gaining experience in the value of collaboration and cooperation across languages, cultures, and points of view. He earned his PhD from the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at MIT, working with Professors Marvin Minsky (Media Lab) and Thomas Kuhn. He also received an MS in computer science and a BS in philosophy, both from MIT

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