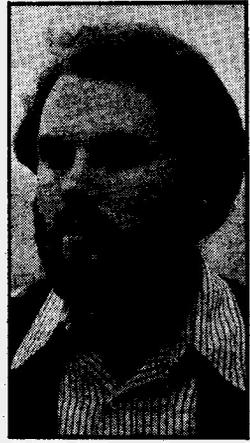


Ralph Keyes



The Bionic Boom

My airline ticket agent wore a button saying YOU'RE THE BOSS. I tried to get him to give me one. The agent refused. He wouldn't even tell me where I could go apply for a button. Some boss.

More revealing of our relationship was the computer terminal he was working beneath the counter. The guy spent quite a while furiously punching its keys before returning my ticket with a seat reservation. God knows what data he was processing. For all I know he was checking with my mom in Illinois for advice on where to seat me. Or inquiring of the Pennsylvania Highway Patrol whether any warrants were outstanding for my arrest. Or clearing me with the CIA.

I don't know. What I do know is that I wasn't in that transaction. I wasn't the boss. *He* had the computer.

Every day it becomes clearer to me why Chief Broom in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" felt controlled by an invisible combine of knob twisters and button pushers. Every day I feel a little more that way myself. And I don't feel alone. Just scan our latest expressions. "Bionic" is the word of the hour, perhaps because so many of us would like to be bionic. Then we'd really be wired, completely plugged in and on the right frequency for beeping back at the combine in its own language. "They *envy* machines," says psychoanalyst Herbert Hendin of his college-age clientele. "Many I saw wanted to be virtual robots."

PLUGGING IN

But we can't go bionic. Yet. In the meantime, what we can do is buy gadgets—millions of gadgets—from beepers on our belt to video games on television in a desperate attempt to plug in.

Citizens-band radio is a classic example of this. There are any number of explanations for CB's popularity. But you need only listen in for a few hours to citizens airwaves cluttered with threats to "dust your britches" and "walk all over you" (with an illegal wattage boost) to get a handle on CB's appeal. Manufacturers know what it is they're selling and advertise accordingly. "Pace gives you the power to make people listen," assures one. "Punch is what sets Cobras apart from other CB's," says another.

Not just CB's but radios in general are building in the means not just to hear but be heard. "A lot of people want a radio with a built-in public-address system," explains Toshiba in a trade ad for its colleagues. "It's crazy, but that's what they want. So that's exactly what we're giving them."

But is it crazy? Or are we just feeling the need for a little . . . amplification—the better to establish our presence?

CLOUT

This need helps explain the popularity of digital watches. Many watchmakers at first had trouble grasping that a heavier timepiece of uncertain illumination that took two hands to work rather than one would catch on. Their mistake was in thinking of watches primarily as a means to tell time. Digitals do so much more. They have heft. Their numbers are the same kind that went to the moon. And most important, as one wisened-up watchmaker recently observed, the American public *likes* to push the button and command the watch to perform.

In other words, your kids may not listen to you but your watch will. Your digital watch. And *no one* can steal the time off your wrist. Permission must first be asked. Then you graciously punch your watch's button and read out the time. Clout.

Such a device on your wrist can feel like a good connection. A beeper on your belt can feel even better. As a symbol of being plugged in, these tiny pagers are the ultimate. A walkie-talkie in its holster may slap against your hip reassuringly like a magnum .357. But beepers are more elegant, more classy—like discreet little derringers.

My friend Ed the undertaker, first in his business to use a pager, says important status distinctions are made according to the brand you wear and where you wear it. Doctors tend to keep beepers on their belts, salesmen in their shirt pockets and hookers in their purses. Ed just clips his to a jacket pocket. Once during a basketball game his jacket started beeping and Ed had to go pick up a body. The rest of us were very impressed.

But I wonder. Are such connections really good ones? Or are they a pathetic

attempt to stay afloat in a sea of wires?

What interests me more than electronic devices themselves is the human need that they're meeting badly—the need to tune in and talk back. So far we've been content to do this as recreation, making like truckers over CB and playing with our watches as if they were cockpit controls. This year's big seller has been video games. Soon home computers are expected to come on strong, microprocessing units the size of a breadbox that are capable of keeping an eye on the brownies or providing a fourth for bridge.

They could do more.

Washington lawyer Robert Ellis Smith, who specializes in citizen access to data, has been raising some interesting questions about ensuring personal power in the face of computers. His questions are striking only because they're so rarely asked.

PUNCHING OUT

Why, Smith wants to know, should he be denied government information because it's "stored in the computer"? Why shouldn't he be allowed to just punch it out himself?

Why, if his health-insurance company can get his medical profile in minutes by computer, shouldn't he be able to do the same rather than spend a futile year writing letters?

And why, over all, shouldn't we average citizens be able to use home or public computers for contacting bureaucrats terminal-to-terminal, talking back to our congressman, getting our own police records, making our own reservations, writing our own tickets and computing our own taxes?

Good questions. There are many more to be raised.

By posing enough questions we may keep the next generation of gadgets from being merely space-age cap guns.

Ralph Keyes is writer-not-in-residence at the Center for Studies of the Person in La Jolla, Calif. His latest book is "Is There Life After High School?"