

## Skype makes monsters of us all

By Jack Shakely

When God saw that our egos needed deflating, he invented Skype.

Skype is the 21st-century invention that sci-fi movies had been predicting for decades: phonavision. Actually it's "computavision," with a tiny camera at the top of your computer screen. Very "Futurama." But what "Soylent Green" and other futurist movies didn't tell us is that this new invention makes you look like you died a week ago Thursday.

I enthusiastically signed up for Skype a few years back when my grandchildren were still toddlers. The idea of being able to talk with and see my grandsons was very appealing. But reality trumped the ideal.

The 2-year-old resolutely refused to sit in front of the computer screen and screamed and clawed his way up his mother's arm like a skittering spider monkey. The 4-year-old was more benign, but after wiping peanut butter and jelly all over the screen and pounding on the computer keyboard, he too lost interest and started wrestling with the dog.

I initially chalked this up to short attention spans until I looked down at the far right corner of my computer screen and saw staring back at me the grimacing death mask of a character out of the cast of "Marat/Sade." I had Skyped my grandchildren, pulling back the curtain on a bed-headed, stubble-chinned lunatic of a grandfather. Nobody, including me, had any use for this person.

I'm not trying to finger Skype as the sole perpetrator of this cruel technology. I'm sure there are many equally mean-spirited phonavision variations out there, all with the same design flaws. For one, because the camera is at the top of the

screen and the image of your unlucky caller is mid-screen, it is impossible to maintain eye contact. Looking at the person on the other end of the call makes you look like you are talking to your lap. The only way to remedy this is to look directly into the camera, which means you can't see the other guy.

Which may be just as well. Because the other design flaw, and I'm not quite sure how they do this, is to make everybody over the age of 50 look a decade older on the spot. I've read that television adds a few pounds to you, but decades? And pounds? And where are my friends buying their clothes? Ratty Bathrobes 'R Us?

I have an old friend, an editor and teacher, who lives halfway across the country. Every few weeks for the last 20 years, we get together by telephone to discuss everything under the sun. Just before Christmas, she told me she was getting a new computer and suggested we jump headlong into the new century via Skype.

My friend is a true beauty, with a mass of blond, cascading hair framing an intelligent and inquisitive face. Or she was until she got Skyped. The poor creature I gazed on looked like Jane Wyatt the day after she left Shangri-La.

My friend looked pretty rough, but at least she didn't make me gasp, as I did her. Talking to her lap, she recovered enough to laugh and say, "Well, Jack, I guess we can stop calling you the Gray Fox, huh?"

To many of us of a certain age, Skype is an answer for which there was no question. And the telephone, which is still in play, thank God, has a built-in design superiority. Every telephone is a time machine. Leaning back and looking out the window

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with the phone in my ear, I notice that my male friends have regained their flat stomachs and lost their bald spots. My female friends don't wear much makeup because they don't need it, and somehow they all seem to be wearing those starched cotton shirtwaist dresses I so admire.

And I can peek in on my grandchildren every day on Facebook without scaring the bejabbers out of them. Forward into the past.

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### **ABOUT THE WRITER**

Jack Shakely is a novelist, a former newspaper editor and president emeritus of the California Community Foundation. He wrote this for the Los Angeles Times.

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