



Refresh

BY MEGAN MICHELSON



Is hyperconnectivity
enhancing our world, or
destroying its meaning?

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MAGINE A WORLD where drones fly overhead while you rip a steep line through powder-stuffed trees. A tiny camera inside the drone captures footage of you, making even the average skier look like a breakthrough performer in a TGR flick. Magically, within a day or so, a polished, edited video appears in your inbox, primed to score a gazillion likes on Facebook.

That is the world Jason Soll envisioned. And it becomes reality this winter with the launch of Soll's Silicon Valley tech start-up, Cape Productions. While dozens of ski resorts are in the midst of writing policies that ban the use of personal drones, others are finding ways to incorporate them. This winter, skiers at resorts like Squaw Valley, California, and Fernie, British Columbia, can hire Cape's team of drone pilots and professional editors to produce an aerial video of their day on snow. For under \$200, you'll get a two-minute edit within 48 hours. It's the SharpShooter of the future.

Soll, 25, grew up in Ohio, and thanks to Warren Miller movies and a snow-covered mound in Pennsylvania, he became a skier. As a youngster, he took trips to Utah with his family, where he developed a love for soft snow and the Stein Eriksen buffet at Deer Valley. After college, he worked as a product design consultant at Google X, ground zero for gadgets built to make radical change. As a graduate student at Stanford's Business School, he came up with the idea for Cape, named because it transforms Clark Kents into goggle-clad Supermen.

"I knew of all these drone products in development, but I wasn't excited about having to deal with the hardware," says Soll. "Then I realized we could deploy the technology as a service, not a product. That would also solve the other challenges of video production, like editing and distribution. Those skiers with GoPros and selfie sticks, they want to capture the moment, but many just wind up with raw data on their hard drive. Our big idea was eliminate the hard work and let people capture the moment without any distraction."

Gaining permission to use drones at ski resorts required collaboration with the Federal Aviation Administration, the U.S. Forest Service, Transport Canada, and resort corporations. Cape received approval to operate in the U.S. and Canada this year and their drones will be limited to a small selection of runs within specific resort boundaries. "The last thing we want to do is create a world where drones are flying everywhere and you can no longer lose yourself in nature. We won't let that happen," says Soll.

The reality is it might be too late. The mountains are already intertwined with technology. As skiers, we now live in a society where powder turns are made for Instagram, the crowdsourced EpicMix app estimates lift-line wait times, and you can buy lift tickets online as if you were going to a movie.

Just how big is the digital world in skiing these days? Sales of action cameras and their accessories have doubled among snowsports users since 2011, now selling a hefty \$55 million. According to the SnowSports Industries America, 80 percent of skiers say they use cameras or smartphones to capture imagery on snow, then share their mountaintop photos on social media. For skiers under 25, more than 95 percent of them are active on social media.

But how has our addiction to the digital world impacted our enjoyment of the sport? Do we love skiing more thanks to social media, the Internet, and our phones? Or is technology slowly killing the soul of skiing?

BEFORE THE INTERNET grew into the bottomless crater it is today, you had to rely on word of mouth or outdated guidebooks on a ski trip. You'd show up in a place, go to the local shop, and ask the guy behind the tuning



bench which zone was holding the best snow. Sure, people fumbled along the way, but they also discovered things for themselves. When the Internet arrived, it changed the way we ski.

A crusty, bearded Utah man named Bob Athey started posting photos and descriptions of the snowpack in the Wasatch backcountry in the early 2000s. It's hard to know for sure, but he may have been one of the first to share that kind of information online. "I set up a Wasatch snow conditions page on TelemarkTips.com way before anyone was doing that," says Athey, now 63, who earned the nickname the Wizard of the Wasatch and has been ski touring in Utah since the 1970s. "I started the whole fad of posting photos of what the skiing and snowpack were like, which now has exploded beyond belief."

Athey built a rudimentary website around 2004 to supply snowpack information to the Utah Avalanche Center, where he was working as an independent contractor. It was, essentially, a



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precursor to the modern day Tumblr: one man and his impressions of the snow through words and photos.

Until the early 2000s, avalanche forecasts were issued mainly over telephone hotlines. The Utah Avalanche Center started issuing basic Internet advisories in 1998, and by 2003, the web had essentially replaced the phone hotline. Detailed snowpack photos came later. Getting that information online changed the way skiers approached the backcountry.

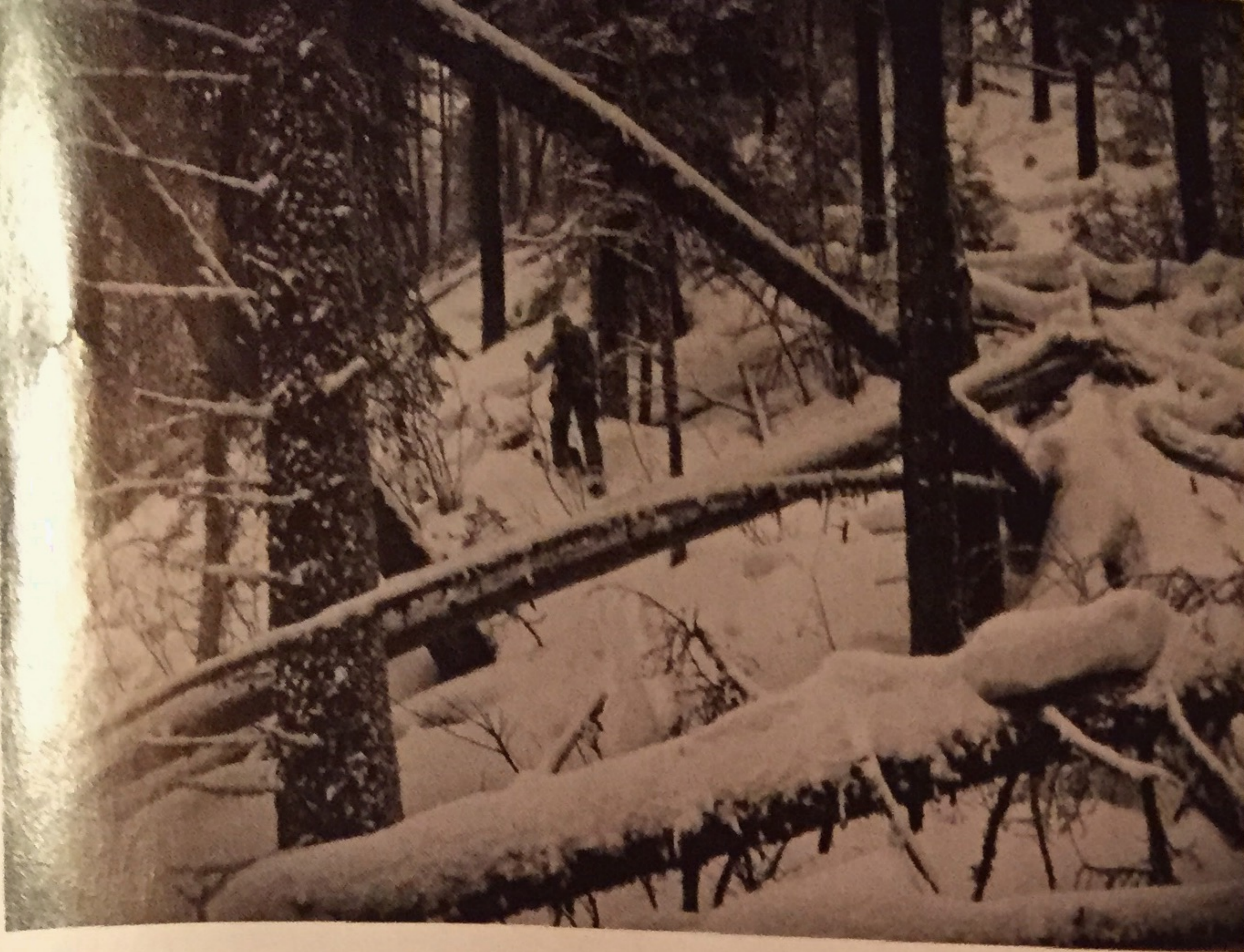
"The Internet made a big difference in people's access to and comprehension of the avalanche advisory," says Tom Kimbrough, a Utah Avalanche Center forecaster from 1987 to 2003. "The snowpack and avy photos and videos are a

big help in showing folks what conditions are really like."

Despite his pioneering ways on the Internet, Athey would rather stay away from social media. He doesn't use Facebook or Twitter. He has an Instagram account, but he doesn't follow anyone. He owns a \$20 pay-as-you-go phone from Walmart, but it's never on, so if you need to reach him, call his landline before 8 a.m. or after 6 p.m. Otherwise, he's out skiing.

Ask Athey how he thinks the Internet and social media have changed the backcountry, and he'll tell you the majority of info online is garbage. "I'm not going to ski based on where someone else skied," he says. "It's an 'all-about-me' thing—it's about who's the coolest one on the mountain, rather than providing actual information."

He has a point. However, beyond all those annoying posts on Facebook, the Internet has useful information. An overflowing and overwhelming excess of information, in fact. Planning a ski trip? You can find infinite details about nearly every snowy destination on Earth. From your kitchen table, you can use social media, webcams, forums, Google Earth, and an endless



launched in 2011, and it will soon be wearable on the Apple Watch. Which means there's an entire community of people using the app to earn badges on powder days (you get a snorkel badge when you show up to a resort reporting more than a foot of snow) and connect with near strangers on the lift.

Jeff Steele, a 35-year-old snowboarder with a Ph.D. in philosophy, is one of those users. "The app can track your season, how many resorts you went to, how many powder days you got," says Steele. "At the end of the day, with one click it overlays your runs on top of Google Maps and uploads a report to Facebook or Instagram. If I have a big day, I'll do that and it's like, 'Hey, I rode 7,000 vertical feet today.'"

In today's digital universe, there's a Bluetooth-enabled avalanche probe that collects snowpack data and uploads it to a crowdsourced website via your phone. You can now point your phone's camera at a mysterious peak on the horizon and an app will tell you everything you need to know about that mountain. Lift tickets can cost half what the resorts charge at the ticket window if you browse sites like Liftoptia. There's a website called Freshy-Map that uses a custom algorithm to determine the likelihood of finding fresh snow at the resort of your choosing.

You can borrow a beacon, shovel, and probe from a guy named Nick in Boulder, Colorado, for \$10 a day through a gear-sharing site called GearCommons. And once you're finally on the hill, you can capture your faceshots with a high-definition GoPro, then wirelessly upload and share your video to make your college buddies jealous in seconds.

The future has arrived and it's bursting with artificial intelligence. If information about our sport is what you seek, there's never been a better time to be a skier.



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number of apps and websites to learn everything from snowfall data to up-to-the-minute chairlift status to the best place to get chicken wings and beer afterward.

There's an app called SnoCru that locates your friends on the mountain in real time and tracks and compares your amassed vertical, top speed, number of runs, and more. SnoCru has been downloaded about 300,000 times since it

BUT IS IT POSSIBLE for a skier to live without the interconnectivity and steady stream of data? Is it better that way?

Ask Todd Stuart. He lives in a hut in the Utah backcountry that he built himself in the summer of 1990. He doesn't own the land and he won't tell you exactly where it is, but he will tell you there's excellent skiing out his door. To get home, he skins a mile and a half uphill, carrying everything he needs on his back.

Hut is a generous description of his modest shelter—it's a shack made



of logs, rocks, and recycled Little Cottonwood Canyon slide-path signs. The roof is plywood; the walls are tarp. It has a woodstove and two mattresses. In big winters, it's buried in snow and nearly invisible from the outside.

Stuart, who is 56 and skis every day he can, used to work as a ski patroller at Deer Valley (he now drives a snowcat at the resort and skins in the dark four miles each way to work his nightshift). When he got divorced and had to pay child support for his three kids, he couldn't afford his home and car, so he gave them up and moved to the woods. That was 15 years ago and he's still living out there.

In 2005, Stuart wrote his first of four books about the process of moving off the grid, which was titled, *Nobody Owes You Tomorrow: A Story About How Truth, Beauty, and Wilderness Can Heal the Human Soul*. "I got really hooked on living in the wilderness," says Stuart. "I could move to town and be normal, but I really treasure peace and quiet."

Stuart's not completely unwired. He gets cell service at his hut and he

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owns a phone, which he uses mainly to call his now-grown kids or for emergencies. He also keeps a computer at his girlfriend's house in Heber, which he uses to write his books.

"When you live in the woods alone, what's the greatest threat to your sanity?" asks Stuart. "It's cabin fever. Getting lonely. We're social animals. I have three beautiful children and I want them to be able to call me at anytime. But if I'm out there and I don't want my phone to



ring, I turn it off.”

Stuart sometimes looks at snow reports online. Mostly, he just looks outside. When he’s skiing the resort, which he does occasionally, he says he sees more and more people staring at their phones on the chairlift and not connecting to each other. “It doesn’t matter who you are, we are all there because we love flying down mountains. That’s what binds us together,” says Stuart. “If you can’t put your phone away long enough to get to know someone on the chairlift and make a friend, I think that’s sad. To me, that’s one of the most treasured parts of ski culture that is on its way out.”

He lives alone, eons from the nearest Starbucks, but Stuart says he loves being connected. Real-life connection, that is. Not the digital kind. He loves talking to new people and crossing paths with his neighbors in the mountains. But he also loves being out in na-

ture, where nothing can disturb him. “I’ve had more time to think without interruptions than anybody I know,” he says. “I treasure being surrounded by beauty and peace and quiet. That is a very real thing.”

NOW BACK TO THOSE DRONES. The one buzzing through the sky on your way down the hill. If they are a symbol of our current digital state, then are they nature’s buzzkill? Or are they a way to advance the richness of our lives?

The answer, of course, is up to you, and the lens from which you view the world. You can always escape to a shack in the woods. You can shut off your phone or ignore your feed—something most of us should do more often to cultivate the relationships right in front of us. Or you could allow technology to seep in and let the vastness of it make life easier, smarter, and less complicated.

That’s perhaps the greatest beauty of skiing: It can be whatever you want it to be. Technology enables us to get to snow-covered peaks. Our phones map our route, find our friends, and track the next storm. Our gear gets us up and down the mountain. But once we are there, surrounded by friends and giant, drifting flakes, none of that matters. Once we drop in, the world goes blank and all the wires disappear. ❄