

High-Tech Loneliness: How Our Inventions Keep Us Apart

It seems that each year we invent new ways to keep human beings from meeting each other.

Home entertainment is fast becoming the leisure of choice, as more and more people take advantage of the wide assortment of electronic entertainment available. Video stores sprout everywhere; videotapes siphon customers from theaters and museums, and now video games attract those who once would have participated in traditional out-of-home sports such as bowling.

We now have all kinds of food establishments racing to deliver food. Is this the beginning of the end of the restaurant renaissance? Going to a restaurant involves parking, walking, and sometimes waiting in line — and even some element of risk from street crime. Compare this to the no parking, no walking, no waiting, no standing, no risk, no hassle way of life we have in our own homes when we have our meals delivered. Even preparing our own food is less and less of a hassle with prepackaged meals getting better and better and microwave ovens making cooking quick and efficient.

Futurists call this social phenomenon "cocooning," where families stay close to the homestead and interact very little with their outside surroundings. Home shopping networks, faxed mail, home computers and offices — such things threaten to rip the social fabric by keeping people from interacting with each other. In the long run, this cannot be healthy for our culture.

Already we are seeing the effects of a less-interactive society: People find that it is not as easy as it once was to meet others — especially those of the opposite sex. Traditional meeting places such as fairs, town dances, clubs, etc., are experiencing lower attendance because of the cocooning lifestyle. Society's crack-down on drunk driving has made singles retreat from the bar setting. For many, the way to meet other people has been reduced to reading the "Personals" section in the back pages of magazines.

It used to be that religious and educational parochialism separated the sexes and structured how people should meet. Sunday was filled with "blue laws" that shut down taverns and other social hang-outs. And to this day we find the sexes separated in some religious and private schools — even in some universities — throughout the students' growing years. But now, technology is separating us from others. Paradoxically, the advanced technology that brings more of the world to us, making us a global society, also leads us to spend less time interacting with the larger segments of society.

Social interaction might seem to be increasing because people are traveling more, but the cocooning syndrome is spreading to our hotels and resorts as well. Increasingly, everything is done to keep people from leaving the immediate confines of their hotel and exploring its environs. This is why the Atlantic City experiment — allowing legalized gambling in order to attract visitors to the once-popular resort — failed in its goals of revitalizing the community as a whole: The casino operators did everything they could to keep people from leaving the casinos and exploring the rest of the city. Entertainment within the casino was provided, food was plentiful, gift shops for browsing were placed right in the hotels. As a result, comparatively few visitors wandered away from the casinos to the city's central business district, and most of the city saw no economic improvement.

Now, this same phenomenon is happening worldwide, as hotels become travel meccas in and of themselves. The irony is that people now fly to a foreign land for a week and never meet the people who actually live there.

To get people out of their homes and hotels, extraordinary measures must now be taken. Museums are fighting back with high technology, such as large-screen 70mm film auditoriums and Disney-type movable exhibits. Market places — the former centers of urban life and social interaction — are being refurbished or constructed from scratch (such as Boston's Quincy Market or Baltimore's Harbor Place), as people learn that we need attractions other than those provided by television or the local fast-food store.

These sorts of places are the great battlefields in the war against cocooning. Their developers may be remembered as heroes of a new revolution — a revolution against the onslaught of a passive society.

Mingling with other people and exploring our surroundings should not be abandoned because of advanced home entertainment technologies. What we do in our spare time should not be decided in a combat between cocooning technology and the lure of our public places. There should be equal time for both.

— Mitchell Gordon

About the Author

Mitchell Gordon is a writer and founding member of the Philadelphia chapter of the World Future Society. His address is 928 Clinton Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107.

Copyright of Futurist is the property of World Future Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.