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The Economist

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Computer geeks love and demand technology for its own sake. They also tend to be better with machines than with people. The consequences can best be observed when geeks congregate offline - ie, in person - at technology-themed conferences in Silicon Valley. It is now a requirement at such conferences that the hotel ballroom, or whatever the venue happens to be, is blanketed with Wi-Fi coverage, so that the audience can wirelessly surf the internet while sessions are in progress.

Full Text (395 words)

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How to network between coffee breaks

COMPUTER geeks love and demand technology for its own sake. They also tend to be better with machines than with people. The consequences can best be observed when geeks congregate offline--ie, in person--at technology-themed **conferences** in Silicon Valley.

It is now a requirement at such **conferences** that the hotel ballroom, or whatever the venue happens to be, is blanketed with Wi-Fi coverage, so that the audience can wirelessly surf the internet while sessions are in progress. Assuming it works--at **Supernova**, a recent **conference** in Santa Clara, the signal was mostly down--the next step is for the attendees, sitting in neat rows, to avert their eyes from the podium and fix them on their laptops. In doing so, they need not miss out on the live action, for many have mounted webcams that capture the visuals on stage and display them in small windows on their screens. Thus set up, the audience blogs, making the pretty sound of many hands clicking.

Normally, a blog--short for web log--is a sort of online diary where people record their thoughts and post links to their favourite web pages for friends to see. But at tech **conferences**, the blogs, in the form of internet chat rooms, can also be projected on to a large screen next to the stage. Attendees can now look up from their laptops and, without making eye contact with the people sitting next to them, read what everybody else is saying about the panel discussion. The appeal is obvious.

Geeks sometimes want to shut up other geeks, but don't know how to do it gracefully. So now they can blog it on to the screen. This is how Steve Mills, the software boss of IBM and, to some attendees, a sort of buttoned-down, corporate geek, was dispatched during his keynote

address at AlwaysOn, a **conference** in Palo Alto last month. As Mr Mills held forth about things being "leveraged" and the "empowering" effect of "modular design and componentisation", the dialogue on the screen next to him became agitated. "Blah blah say something!" read one blog. "OK, bring in the hook, enough of the IBM commercial," said another. "Seriously, what is this dribble...what a waste of 45 minutes," read a third. As a means of getting rid of dull **conference** speakers, this is one technological breakthrough that deserves to spread fast.

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