



FREEDOM OF PERSONAL MOBILITY AND RELATIONSHIP HAS NEVER BEEN GREATER THAN IT IS NOW, WITH NO NEED TO WAIT TO ACCESS INFORMATION, ORDER GOODS ONLINE AND COMMUNICATE GLOBALLY WITH FRIENDS, FAMILY AND COLLEAGUES. BUT COULD THERE BE A COST TO BEING ALWAYS ONLINE AND IN TOUCH?

electric crazyland

Interview Safeera Sarjoo

With most of us leading chaotic lives, a little help in making the day flow more smoothly is always appreciated. Whether it's emails delivered straight to your phone, groceries being ordered online or paying bills sitting at your computer, technology provides us with the ability to juggle both work and home life.

Outsourcing so many tasks is practical, but is it good for our well-being and relationships? Futurist and keynote speaker Richard Watson has talked about how we endanger our thinking, becoming 'shallow, narrow, cursory, hurried, fractured and thin' by being continually online. While we think new bursts of technology are a step forward in society, is it causing our intellectual potential to take a step back?

Charlie Leadbeater, author and leading voice in innovation and creativity, agrees to a certain extent. He says, 'Sitting in front of the television for hours on end can be pretty dulling. Digital devices can induce a kind of twitchiness, a need to constantly check, update. Especially with smartphones and iPads – and what will follow – they will be constant companions.'

The rise of tablet PCs such as Apple's iPad, Samsung's Galaxy Tab and BlackBerry's Playbook gives technology enthusiasts new devices to integrate into their life. Constantly competing, the more products these leading brands unveil, the more we, as consumers, buy into them. This makes it even more difficult to switch off, and questions our ability to get by without them.



But what do we mean by technology? The term has grown so wide in recent years that it's become essential to be able to define what we mean, as Eric Meade explains. 'When we ask, Can we live without technology, it's which ones and which person.' A senior futurist at the Institute of Alternative Futures, he continues: 'It depends on what technologies you're talking about; technology is a moving target. Some of the things that may not have existed ten years ago are very well integrated into our lives. I guess technology has made the integration into our lives in such a way that we don't even consider them technology – I mean, a chair was, at some point, a technological innovation.'

RICHARD WATSON ECHOES THIS NOTION. 'THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY IS TO SOME extent a history of technology and innovation. If you mean high tech, such as electronics, digital technology and computers, we could live without them, but the pain would be huge, for a while. Younger generations would be the worst off, but could also turn out to be the most creative.' Though despite his optimism, he does believe we've gone past the point where we can live without basic technology.

Mid-year figures from the CTIA in June 2010 show wireless penetration standing at a staggering 93% of the total US population. With Canada predicted to reach the 100% mark by 2020, Leadbeater believes it is becoming increasingly impossible to lead a tech-free life.

'We went on holiday to the Sinai Desert last year. Stopped at a Bedouin shack in the middle of nowhere. We sat drinking tea. Then this woman's mobile phone rang. Soon everywhere will have a signal. My 11-year-old assumes there will be wi-fi everywhere. Bandwidth will become a kind of assumed right, like clean water.'

Having integrated itself into our everyday lives, the amount of time spent on mobile phones, social media and email is vast. Watson says that with this connectivity 'we tend to be alone even when we're together'. He talks about observing a couple out for an anniversary dinner who are both constantly texting which, suffice to say, supports his statement.

You would assume that the inability to know when to switch off could potentially damage our personal relationships, but the general feeling appears to be that it has enhanced the way we communicate and interact with loved ones and with new faces we come into contact with.

'It helps eliminate the barriers of time and distance. I know that a quick text message saying, "I'm running late" has saved me from being in the doghouse with my wife,' says Erik Qualman, author of *Socialnomics* (Wiley) and an international speaker. Leadbeater reiterates this point, agreeing that in general, relationships have

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been enhanced because technology now allows more people to be connected in more ways. 'Watching my kids use it – from the 27-year-old who as a teenager orchestrated her entire social life through texts, like an electronic herd, to my 11-year-old – I am struck by how much more diverse and stronger their relationships are than mine,' he explains.

Bringing us closer is a definite advantage we have. With social media and programs such as Skype, video-chatting from opposite sides of the world has never been easier. The real problem lies in knowing when to unplug, as Markus Albus, a freelance journalist who is the Berlin correspondent for *Monocle* and editor-at-large for *The Iconist* magazine, discusses.

'It's two sides of the same coin. Given how easy it is for me to work with people all over the country and even all over the planet, and to stay in contact with friends and relatives over long distances, I would say that relationships have been enhanced by technology. When my parents, who live in a city far away, want to see their grandchild they simply Skype with my little daughter – and she loves it. This is wonderful. At the same time, for her nothing is so boring as when Daddy is glued to his iPhone, answering emails. She was the one who made me realise that I have to turn the damn thing off more often. Most things can wait.'

IT WAS HER THREE TEENAGERS WHO GAVE SUSAN MAUSHART THE IDEA OF PUTTING her family through a digital detox. Her book *The Winter of Our Disconnect* (Profile Books) takes the reader through their six-month adventure where lessons are learned and changes are made, as they go cold turkey from the technology that engulfs them day in, day out.

'I wanted my kids to experience this,' she writes, 'and I wanted it in exactly the same way and for exactly the same reasons that I wanted them to travel overseas, or practise yoga, or learn a foreign language, or take sailing lessons: to enlarge themselves. To discover themselves. To become human beings more fully alive.'

It's clear to see that having a break from our digital appliances is still a very important aspect in ensuring we don't lose a sense of face value. 'No-tech' policies in some of Berlin's restaurants and clubs mean that people are made to switch off their phones and disconnect for the duration of their lunch, or while socialising with friends. Conforming to this means you cast aside that chaotic lifestyle that consists of you continually multitasking and placing your focus on the task at hand.



Richard Watson uses the example of ironing a shirt while wanting to speak to your mum on the phone. 'If you want to iron a shirt and call your mum at the same time that is achievable, but even then are you being distracted? I think the conversation would be deeper or richer if you just made the call.'

Albus believes that there are tech-free places within the UK and the US, but that they could become more widespread. 'People look for areas without morons shouting into their mobile phones. The market simply demands it, so those places will come to exist.'

IT'S HARD TO SAY HOW THE POPULATION OF THE UK AND US WILL REACT TO A POLICY like this being put in place, but from what is already established, it seems that people are willing to switch off. Eric Meade recalls a speech given to cadets by a writer where they were advised to take time out to be alone and think, which is an important aspect of leadership.

'You're not developing your own views, and you're not developing the wisdom that's required for leadership, so to the extent of people finding themselves unbalanced and doing too much online, there is a natural process whereby someone would say, "Wait a second, I'm following all these Twitter feeds and these blog discussions, but I do need to sit back a little bit,"' he says.

Though Meade describes the measures in place to restrict use of mobiles in Amtrak trains and agrees that it's a reasonable expectation, Justin Bergman, a freelance journalist based in Shanghai, is less optimistic about Americans accepting this possibility.

'I don't think it would go over well at all. Americans are super-tied to their personal electronic devices; there's no way anyone would voluntarily turn them off to go into a restaurant or bar. They would just find another restaurant or bar that allowed them instead. Americans are texting addicts – and they hate anything that appears to impinge on their personal freedoms. This would become a "freedom of expression" issue very quickly, without a doubt,' he explains.

Writing about China's relationship with the internet, having banned Twitter in 2004, Bergman sheds some interesting light on the way the traditionalists aim to hold on to maintaining face-to-face relations.

'Considering there are now Twitter-like copycat sites in China with millions of members that the government has allowed to continue to operate, I don't think this was a consideration when it decided to ban Twitter. That said, there are many in China – traditionalists – who think that the younger generation are too addicted to their computers and their online lifestyles, and would be better off having more personal, face-to-face relationships.

This older generation is helping in one small way to make this happen. Every weekend, a marriage market pops up in People's

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Square in Shanghai where the parents and grandparents of young people meet to try to play matchmaker and find a suitable marriage partner for their children. You won't see any young people, just the older lot. They're the ones trying to keep personal relationships alive in such a fast-paced, electronically driven city.'

So while the older generation in China tries to achieve more face-to-face, more and more of the mature population across the UK and US are jumping on the PDA bandwagon and are developing an understanding of the new digital age we've entered.

Could it be that our judgement of the way technology shapes and structures our lives and relationships is blurred by the sheer power it holds? Connecting you to people thousands of miles away has made it easier in terms of communication, but as a result the rise of 'text talk' has enveloped the next generation. They don't simply laugh, they LOL.

GIVING US THE CHANCE TO MULTITASK HELPS US GET BY DAILY BUT AS A RESULT of that, we may find the idea of stepping back and slowing down rather alien. With the industry showing no signs of letting up on development, there's the lingering thought about how the world and the next generation will be shaped.

'Many say that Generation Y and Z cannot concentrate any more and will never learn to read a book. I would disagree,' Albus says. 'Young people today probably read more than the generations before them – it's just that they read onscreen. Doing your homework collaboratively with Skype-chat trains you for the demands of modern jobs, where people will not go to the office from nine to five any more but will communicate electronically.'

It seems as though taking charge and controlling the way you allow technology to affect your home life could be the only aspect in which you have the upper hand, as technology is encompassing business, politics and finance. With the environment changing, Albus points out that 'society will be split down the middle, so that Luddites and people who don't even want to try social media will simply earn less and will not take part in most of the relevant discussions shaping our future.' ■