

The Invention of Loneliness

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American society has been a world leader in technological innovation. Much of our economic growth stems from the development and implementation of new technologies. Enthusiastic acceptance of new technologies, however, also has its down side, as is evident in the electronic media. Over ten years ago, Neil Postman, a secular, social critic, warned that we were “amusing ourselves to death.”* Similarly, Jenkin Lloyd-Jones rehearsed his postoperative, five-day odyssey watching commercial television. And, having pushed the off-button, he warned that this audiovisual Niagara had the potential to erode our humanity and drive out thinking.* *

Since these warnings, estimates of television watching have exceeded an average forty-five hours a week for families at all income levels. Family conversation has fallen casualty to our obsession with the one-eyed Cyclops. Video stores have sprung up to meet a huge demand for video cassettes and video games. We have produced a bumper crop of “couch potatoes.” And, our public schools have foundered producing a generation of inarticulate graduates who cannot make change should their computer crutch crash. As the so-called Christian Century ends, the family is under deadly assault in areas of drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, abortion, child abuse and teen suicide.

Now, the rush onto the “information highway” has prompted Douglas Groothuis to warn against idolatrous fixation with cyberspace. His user-friendly book, **“The Soul in Cyber Space”** (Baker:1997), introduces neophytes to arcane terms and acronyms commonly used on the Internet. Thus, cyberspace is space “in which computer-mediated communication occurs” (p 13-14). A MUD “is a multiuser dialogue or dimension or dungeon, depending on whom you talk to. Participants, called users, interact by posting messages . . . MOOs are all fantasy worlds . . . such as the occult Dungeons and Dragons” (pp 24-25). A flame “is a vicious insult that is sent through e-mail, posted in a chatroom or database” (p 48). Hypertext is a technology that “allows users to have access to various parts of a document, or several documents at once, by merely pointing and clicking” (p 65). Finally, “A bot is a computer program that impersonates a person in cyberspace” (p 134).

Groothuis devotes a number of chapters to “virtual” pitfalls of cyber space. In “The Fate of Truth in Cyber Space,” he observes that “Cyberspace may be the greatest temptation yet offered to humanity to lose its soul in diversion” (p 82). He also points out that “The mightiest hard drive, the fastest modem, the most sophisticated word processor, and the most powerful Internet search engine on the planet will not download wisdom into the human soul” (p 87). In his chapter “Cybersex: Eroticism Without Bodies,” Groothuis accurately concludes that “AMERICAN CULTURE AT THE END of the millennium is close to sexually insane. . . Restraint is the price of civilization, and we are casting off restraint” (p 91). Or, in the words of Solomon, “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he” (Proverbs 29:18).

But, cyberspace provides more than an occasion to express sexual and other idolatry. “The screen becomes the window of the soul, exposing a vista of previously unavailable or hard-to-find information” (p-51). Groothuis recalls the case of Zhu Ling, a comatose chemistry student in Peking, China, whose symptoms were diagnosed and treated using the Internet to interface with doctors in the

West. He also recounts the good Samaritan work of some computer technicians who set up e-mail links enabling the development of an online support group for those burdened and socially isolated by having to care for a spouse or relative suffering from Alzheimer's disease. "Moreover, the Internet makes important resources more easily available. In researching this book, I have downloaded dozens of articles and online interviews concerning cyberspace" (p-53). Unhappily, however, the value of this book is somewhat limited by the fact that it lacks an index making it difficult for a reader of hard copy to locate pithy quotes distributed throughout the text.

For Groothuis, some trends in cyberspace are counterproductive to the advance of scholarship. "Because texts in cyberspace are so malleable and moveable, we can easily lose the sense of a unitary author as the source of meaning. . . . Instead of a text rooted in an identifiable life, there remains only a free-floating text literally without author-ity" (p-68,71). Groothuis also argues against the creation of "virtual classrooms" and "virtual universities." "When education goes online it tends to get off track simply because the interpersonal dynamic is either lost or diminished. . . . As a seminary professor, I cannot translate myself into a CD-ROM or hope to influence souls in cyberspace the way I can in the classroom. . . . Human interaction at the deepest level involves at least two participants who acknowledge and respond to each other's spoken questions, comments, and exclamations as well as the nonverbal language of embodied articulation - the raised eyebrow, the squinting eye, the furrowed brow, the misty eyes, the nodding or shaking head" (p-151-152).

Finally, the rise of "virtual community" in cyberspace has been associated with a perceived loss of civility needed to sustain community in American society. Further, "A common social practice called 'cocooning' isolates individuals from others by keeping them safe and snug in front of their home entertainment centers and computer screens when they could be playing with their children, talking to neighbors over the fence, or attending . . . houses of worship" (p-122). Further, Groothuis notes that "I may 'connect' with terminals around the globe but know nothing of the pains, joys, and mundanities of the souls next door. As we remove ourselves from those around us physically, we attempt to compensate for our loneliness by connecting with those present only digitally" (p-125).

In our latest invention of loneliness through obsession with cyberspace, we resemble the ancient Israelites, who were condemned by Isaiah. "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth" (Isaiah 5:8)!

Groothuis, for all his expressed concern about the ethical use of cyberspace, is not "a modern day Luddite - that is one who wants to smash the machines so to restore a better society, as did the original Luddites during the earlier stages of the industrial revolution in England" (p-155). For good or for ill, cyberspace has become a growing part of American culture. If we fail to heed the warnings contained in **The Soul in Cyber Space**, lonely, individuated Americans will increasingly be plagued with "the sounds of silence" of which Simon and Garfunkel complained. "People talking without speaking . . . People hearing without listening . . . within the sounds of silence."

* Neil Postman, "**Amusing Ourselves to Death**," (Viking Penguin Inc. 1985).

** Jenkin Lloyd-Jones, "**Five Days Before the Big Eye**," (L.A. Times: Sept. 1978)

