

THE ATROPHY OF SOCIAL LIFE

D. Stanley Eitzen

Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam has written a provocative book entitled *Bowling Alone*, in which he argues that we Americans are becoming increasingly disengaged from each other. That is, we are less likely than Americans of a generation or two ago to belong to voluntary associations such as the Rotary Club, to play bridge on a regular basis, to participate in a bowling league, to belong to the P. T. A., or to vote. In short, Putnam maintains that in the past 50 years or so social life has changed dramatically throughout the United States as various social trends isolate us more and more from each other. The effect, he suggests, is that the bonds of civic cement are disintegrating as we become increasingly separated from each other, from our communities, and from society. Consequently, the social glue that once held communities together and gave meaning to individual lives is now brittle, as people have become more and more isolated.

I am a sociologist. We sociologists focus on things social, the most fundamental of which is social interaction. This is the basic building block of intimate relationships, small groups, formal organizations, communities, and societies. I am concerned and I believe we should all be concerned by some disturbing trends in our society that hinder or even eliminate social interaction, and that indicate a growing isolation as individuals become increasingly separated from their

neighbors, their co-workers, and even their family members.

Moving Away

Ours is a mobile society. We move, on average about every five years. We change jobs (14 percent of workers in a typical year leave their jobs voluntarily) or we lose jobs involuntarily (a recent survey indicated that 36 percent of Americans answered “yes” to the question: “Has anyone in your immediate family lost a job in the last three years?”). It’s important to note here that the bond between workers and employers is badly frayed as employees are no longer loyal to our employers and employers are clearly not loyal to their employees as they downsize locally and outsource their jobs and operations to low-wage economies.

We are also moving away from intimate relationships. With 1.25 million divorces occurring annually in the U. S., 2.5 million move away from their spouses. Immigration has the same consequence, creating transnational families, where families are separated with some members living in the U. S. and one or more members back home in another country.

When we move out of relationships or to new geographical areas, or to new kinds of work, we leave behind our relationships with former neighbors, co-workers, and friends. If we anticipate moving, we act like temporary residents, not making the effort to join local organizations, to become acquainted

with our neighbors, and invest our time and money to improve the community.

Living Alone

In 1930, 2 percent of the U. S. population lived alone. In 2000, some 10 percent (27.2 million) of the nation’s 105 million households were occupied by single people without children, roommates, or other people. People are living longer and the elderly, especially older women, are most likely to live alone. Divorce, by definition, initiates living alone, with 2.5 million former spouses annually moving into separate living arrangements. Another source for living alone is the phenomenon of commuter marriage—an arrangement where wives and husbands maintain separate households as a way of solving the dilemmas of dual-career marriages.

Technology and Isolation

Modern technology often encourages isolation. Consider the isolating consequences of air conditioning, certainly a welcome and necessary technology in many places. Before air conditioning, people spent leisure time outside increasing the likelihood of interaction with neighbors and friends. Now they are inside their homes with doors and windows shut enjoying the cool air, but isolating themselves from their neighbors. Television, too, along with VCRs, DVDs, and video games entice us to stay in our homes more and more.

Before refrigerators, shopping was done every day. This meant that people would see the same shop proprietors and their fellow shoppers daily. This created a daily rhythm, a set of interactions, and the sharing of information, gossip, and mutual concerns. Thus, refrigerators, while reducing the spoilage of food and the necessity of going to the store every day, changed interaction patterns.

Because of computers and telecommunications there is a growing trend for workers to work at home. At last count 28 million Americans worked out of their homes, using computers or telephony instead of face-to-face interaction. While home-based work allows flexibility and independence not found in most jobs, these workers are separated from the rich social networks that often give rise to numerous friendships and make working life enjoyable or at least tolerable.

With the new communications technology, you don't even have to go to a funeral to pay your respects. A new company is now broadcasting funerals on the Internet and you can even sign an electronic guest book and e-mail condolences to the family. Similarly, one can take college courses without attending classes, just using the Internet to communicate with their instructors. Missing, of course, is the face-to-face interaction with fellow students and professors.

Paradoxically, the current communications revolution increases interaction while reducing intimacy. Curt Suplee, science and technology writer for the *Washington Post*, says that we have seen tenfold increases in "communication" by electronic means, and tenfold reductions in person-to-person contact. The more time people spend online, the less they can spare for real-life relationships with family and friends. In effect, as we are

increasingly alone before a computer screen, we risk what former U. S. Secretary State Warren Christopher has called "social malnutrition." John L. Locke, a professor of communications, makes a convincing argument in his book, *The De-Voicing of Society*, that e-mail, voice mail, fax machines, beepers, and Internet chat rooms are robbing us of ordinary social talking. Talking, he says, like the grooming of apes and monkeys, is the way we build and maintain social relationships. In his view, it is only through intimate conversation that we can know others well enough to trust them and work with them harmoniously. Most face-to-face communication is nonverbal. Phone communication reduces the nonverbal clues, and e-mail eliminates them entirely. So the new information technologies only create the illusion of communication and intimacy. The result, according to Locke, is that we are becoming an autistic society, communicating messages electronically but without really connecting. In short, these incredible communication devices that combine to network us in so many dazzling ways also separate us increasingly from intimate relationships. Sometimes we even use the technology to avoid the live interaction for whatever reason. Jeffrey Kagan, a telecom industry analyst, sums up the problem: "We are becoming a society that finds it easier, and even preferable to hide behind our computer screens and chat with a faceless, nameless stream of words from across the country or across the globe rather than deal with people face to face and all the complexities, good and bad, of the human relationship."

Geography and Isolation

There is a strong pattern of social homogeneity by place. Cities are arranged into neighborhoods by

social class and race. This occurs because of choice, economic means, and the discriminatory behaviors by neighbors, realtors, and lending institutions. Among multi-racial societies, only South Africa exceeds our rate of segregation—a problem that concentrates poverty, social disorder, and dysfunctional schools as well as diminishing social cohesion. The degree of racial/ethnic segregation by neighborhood is higher now than in 1990. A Harvard University study found that about 2.3 million African American and Latino children attend "apartheid" schools, where virtually all students are minorities. Similarly, some neighborhoods are segregated by age. Some retirement communities, for example, limit their inhabitants to persons over 55 and those without minor children. Some 6 million households are in neighborhoods that have controlled-entry systems with guards and electric gates. These gated communities wall the residents off physically and socially from "others." Regarding this exclusiveness, sociologist Philip Slater said that we need heterogeneous neighborhoods: "A community that does not have old people and children, white-collar and blue-collar, eccentric and conventional, and so on, is not a community at all, but [a] kind of truncated and deformed monstrosity..."

Even in non-gated communities, we isolate ourselves. One in three Americans has never spent an evening with a neighbor. The affluent often belong to exclusive clubs and send their children to private schools. Two million children are home schooled, which isolates them from their peers. Some people exercise on motorized treadmills and use other home exercise equipment instead of running through their neighborhoods or working out with others.

The suburbs are especially isolating. Rather than walking to the corner grocery or nearby shop and visiting with the clerks and their neighbors, suburbanites drive somewhere away from their immediate neighborhood to shop among strangers. Or they may not leave their home at all, working, shopping, banking, and paying their bills by computer. For suburban teenagers and children almost everything is away—practice fields, music lessons, friends, jobs, schools, and the malls. Thus, a disconnect from those nearby. Suburban neighborhoods in particular are devoid of meeting places. The lack of community and common meeting places in our cities and especially in the suburbs compounds the isolation of those who have experienced a divorce or the death of a spouse.

Isolation within Families

An especially disturbing trend is the separation of family members from each other. Many spouses are either absent or too self-absorbed to pay very much attention to their children or each other. A recent cover story in *Newsweek* noted that many dual-income couples no longer or rarely have sex because they are too exhausted and too stressed. On average, parents today spend 22 fewer hours a week with their children than parents did in the 1960s. Part of this is because both parents are working outside the home. But it also results from children being overscheduled with outside-the-home activities. These children have little time for play with other children and their activities replace parent-child interaction. To amplify the last point, American children spend more than half of their waking hours in supervised, child-centered environments. This causes economist Ellen Frank to ask: “What happens to parents, to children, and to the rest

of us when children are stored out of sight?”

Although living in the same house, parents and children may tune each other out emotionally, or by using earphones, or by engaging in other solitary activities. A survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that the average child spends five and one-half hours a day alone watching television, on the Internet, playing video games, or reading. Some 30 percent of children under 3 have a television in their bedroom. Some older children even have their own rooms equipped with a telephone, television, VCR, microwave, refrigerator, and computer, which while convenient, isolates them from other family members. Many families rarely eat together in an actual sit-down meal. Family members are often too busy and too involved with their individual schedules to spend quality time together as a family. These homes may be full of people but they are really empty.

The Architecture of Isolation

Another contemporary trend—the increased number of megahouses in the suburbs—results in what we might call the architecture of isolation. These huge houses, built, ironically, at the very time that family size is declining, tend to isolate their inhabitants from outsiders and from other family members. They provide all of the necessities for comfort and recreation, thus glorifying the private sphere over public places. Moreover, the number and size of the rooms encourages each family member to have their own space rather than shared spaces. Thus, the inverse correlation between house size and family interaction.

Contemporary house and landscape design focuses interaction in the backyard, surrounded by pri-

vacy fences, some of which make our homes and lots to resemble medieval fortresses. Back yards are inviting with grass and flowerbeds, barbeque pits, swimming pools, jungle gyms, and trampolines. The front of the house no longer has a porch. In the past, families spent time on the porch, relaxing and visiting with neighbors. The front yard, too, is less inviting than the back, often with rock instead of grass. It is important to note that the more affluent we are, the more likely our homes and consumer goods promote social isolation.

Consumerism and Isolation

Sociologist George Ritzer in his recent book, *The Globalization of Nothing*, argues that the social world, particularly in the realm of consumption, is increasingly characterized by “nothing,” which he defines as a social form that is generally centrally conceived and controlled and comparatively devoid of distinctive substance. The “something” that is lost is more than likely, an indigenous custom or product, a local store, a familiar gathering place, or simply personalized interaction. Corporations provide standardized, mass-produced products for us to consume and become like other consumers in what we wear, what we eat, and what we desire. We purchase goods in chain stores and restaurants (Dillard’s, McDonalds) that are efficient but devoid of distinctive content. A mall in one part of the world may be structured much the same in another location. We bank at ATMs anywhere in the world, but without social interaction. The same is true with shopping on the Internet.

Increasingly, Ritzer says, adults go through their daily routines without sharing stories, gossip, and analyses of events with friends on a regular basis at work, at a coffee shop, neighborhood tavern, or at

the local grain elevator. These places of conversation with friends have been replaced by huge stores (Wal-Mart, Home Depot) where we don't know the clerks and other shoppers. The locally owned café has been replaced by chain restaurants. In the process we lose the intimacy of local stores, cafés, and hardware stores, which give their steady customers sense of community and the comfort of meaningful connections with others. Sociologist Philip Slater said that "community life exists when one can go daily to a given location at a given time and see many of the people one knows."

Implications for Society

There are several important implications of increasing social isolation for society. First, the disengaged do not participate in elections, leaving a minority to elect our leaders as occurred in the 2000 presidential election when George Bush was elected with 24 percent of the votes of those eligible. This means that the voices of outsiders will be faint if heard at all while the voices of the affluent and their money are heard all the more. All of these consequences support the conservative agenda, as sociologist Paul Starr notes: "These trends could hardly please anyone who cares about the republic, but they have been particularly disturbing to liberals. The most intense periods of liberal reform during the past century—the Progressive era, the New Deal, and the 1960s—were all times when the public was actively engaged, and new forms of civic action and participation emerged. Reforms in that tradition are unlikely to succeed again without the same heightened public arousal, which not only elects candidates but also forces them to pay attention once they are in office."

Second, the breakdown in social connections shows up in everyday sociability, with pernicious effects for social relations as people are less and less civil in schools, at work, in traffic, and in public places.

Third, when people focus only on themselves and people like themselves, they insulate themselves from "others" and from their problems. Thus, we favor dismantling the welfare state and safety net for the less fortunate. We oppose, for example, equity in school funding, allowing rich districts to have superior schools while the disadvantaged have inferior schools. We allow this unraveling of community bonds at our peril, as the walls become thicker between the "haves" and the "have-nots," crime will increase and hostility and fear will reign.

Implications for Individuals

As for individuals, the consequences of this accelerating social isolation are dire. More and more Americans are lonely, bitter, alienated, anomic, and disconnected. This situation is conducive to alcohol and drug abuse, depression, anxiety, and violence. The lonely and disaffected are ripe candidates for membership in cults, gangs, and militias where they find a sense of belonging and a cause to believe in, but in the process they may become more paranoid and, perhaps, even become willing terrorists or mass murderers as were the two alienated adolescents who perpetrated the massacre at Columbine High School in a Denver suburb. At a less extreme level, the alienated will disengage further from society by shunning voluntary associations, by home schooling their children, and by voting against higher taxes for the public good. In short, they will become increasingly self-absorbed, caring only about themselves and ignoring the needs of their neigh-

bors and communities. This translates into the substitution of accumulating things rather than cultivating relationships. In this regard, we should take seriously, the admonition by David Wann the co-author of *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic*, who says "We need to acknowledge—as individuals and as a culture—that the best things in life really aren't things. The best things are bonds with people..."

What to Do?

I am not a Luddite. I appreciate the wonders of technology. I welcome change. There are good reasons to move and to change careers and to live in nice houses. But we must recognize the unintended consequences of societal trends that deprive us of our shared humanity. Once we have identified the downside of these trends and our complicity in them, what can we do to reverse their negative effects? I don't have all the answers, but I believe that a few structural changes will help to reduce their negative consequences. As a start, we need to rethink urban design. We must reverse urban sprawl, increasing urban density so that people live near their work, near their neighbors, and within walking distance of stores and recreation. Second, as a society we need to invest in the infrastructure that facilitate public activities such as neighborhood schools, walking and biking trails, parks, the arts, libraries, and community recreation centers. Third, communities need to provide activities that bring people together such as public concerts, fairs, recreational sports for people of all ages, and art festivals. And, fourth, since U. S. society is becoming more diverse, we need to break down the structural barriers that isolate us from "others." We need to affirm

affirmative action in legislation and deed, eliminate predatory lending practices and other forms of discrimination, and improve our schools so that equality of educational opportunity actually occurs rather than the present arrangement whereby school systems are rigged in favor of the already privileged. You will note that these proposals are opposite from current policy at the community, state, and federal levels, resulting in a descending spiral toward social atomization. We allow this to occur at our own peril.

At a personal level, we need to recognize what is happening to us and our families and work to counteract these isolating trends. Each of us can think of changes in our lives that will enhance human connections. To those changes, may I suggest the following: Engage in public activities. Have meaningful face-to-face conversations with friends on a regular basis. Get to know your neighbors, co-workers, and the people who provide services

for you. Join with others who share a common interest. Work to improve your community. Become an activist, joining with others to bring about social change. And, most of all, we need to moderate our celebration of individualism and our tendency toward self-absorption and develop instead a moral obligation to others, to our neighbors (broadly defined) and their children, to those unlike us as well as those similar to us, and to future generations. If not, then our humanity is compromised and our quality of life diminished.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

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