

## Apart together

Our American culture is undergoing a massive transformation thanks to a number of factors, not the least of which is the outbreak of the rapidly-spreading Coronavirus, but we'll get back to the virus in a minute. In the 1980s, the Internet opened the door to the use of the personal computer. Shortly thereafter, mobile phones became all the rage, followed by the introduction of global messaging services like MSN and Compuserve to name just two. The number of subscribers to these services increased, dramatically (I was one of them and still have my numeric email address), and the number of email messages being sent around the world exploded. According to the most current statistics available, as of 2018, there were about 124 billion business emails sent and received each day while about 111 billion consumer emails were sent and received each day. Reports indicate that the average office worker received 121 emails per day.

Then came social media, and text messaging began to replace email. It's estimated that on average, American adults send and receive 32 texts per day, totaling 18 billion texts every day, 541 billion texts every month, and 6.5 trillion texts every year. This is in addition to the number of postings on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. It would seem that as a society we are in much closer and more frequent contact with each other than at any time in human history. That's the headline, anyway.

The smart phone burst on the scene along with the tablet computer, making the connection to the Internet, seamless. It's estimated that Google receives over 63,000 searches per second on any given day. That's the average figure of how many people use Google/day, which translates into at least 2 trillion searches/year, 3.8 million searches/minute, 228 million searches/hour and 5.6 billion searches/day. The Internet and Internet search engines effectively made the old staple of the American family, the encyclopedia, obsolete. Instead of taking down a five-pound volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica from the family bookshelf, little Johnny now taps his question into the keypad of his smartphone and presto, within a few seconds he has an answer on the screen along with hundreds if not thousands of links to other sources that relate to the same subject. Instant gratification.

No more tedious searching, cross referencing or doubt. The Google Genie has granted his wish. His only challenge now is to sift through all the data to find the TRUTH. While the truth is not always clearly evident in the first answer that's given, it's oftentimes accepted by the searcher. (The information is generated via sophisticated algorithms put in place by the search engines that respond to the Boolean search. The irony of the modern age is that while information is at our very fingertips, the truth is more elusive.

The rapid acceleration of technology has also enabled the growth of the modern website for companies, organizations (both for-profit and not-for-profit) and individuals. Anyone with a couple hundred dollars can buy a domain name and build a website. As of January 1<sup>st</sup> of this year there were about 1.7 billion registered websites about 200 million of which are active. Add those sites to the 42 million Facebook pages which are both commercial and non-commercial in nature and you can see that we have an 'embarrassment of (communication) riches' that should mean that we're all connected at the digital hip.

While that may be true in absolute terms of access, it begs the question, "What are we doing with all this communication?" What is it contributing to our closeness? Is it bringing us together or tearing apart one important aspect of our social fabric...human, one-on-one interaction? Twitter has replaced the picket fence over which we would share information with our neighbor and it has decimated the personal letter and the letter to the editor of the local paper. Twitter has elevated gossip above local consumption and made it an international medium to be reckoned with. Anyone, head of state, head of household or head of nothing at all can weigh in on any subject and anyone can read the postings and comment on them. Facebook postings are similar.

While all are tied to the individual, they are, essentially, 'unaccompanied luggage' - disembodied messages - that zoom through the ether without benefit of a face to go with them. Now that we are in the midst of the worst worldwide pandemic in modern memory and are being told to distance ourselves, socially (physically at least), we are being forced to retreat to our electronic devices to communicate even among family members that may be living in the same house but are sequestered because of their risk to others. On the one hand, I guess we should all be grateful for the Internet and our smart devices, but I am worried that this new challenge will make us even MORE dependent on digital communication and create an even GREATER more profound human divide when it comes to actual personal contact.

Being apart, together, has dramatically changed the way we view our neighbor and those in our community. Fear of contagion is rampant as our government has warned us to stay home and not enter some public spaces or gather in groups larger than ten, all the while keeping a safe, six-foot distance from each other. Even houses of worship are off-limits, depriving Americans from exercising their right to worship. Some city governments are taking unprecedented steps to wrest power from their individual citizens as the City of New York did by closing all of its bars and restaurants to sit-in patrons. Smaller cities like Albuquerque recently gave its mayor far-reaching authority beyond what he already had under civil emergency situations to close streets and limit gatherings under a new 'health emergency' declaration.

There is something very troubling about this tendency to give more authority to local governments, especially when many state governments already have broad power over their states' populations. This 'power creep' may look helpful and necessary on the surface, but it also looks like an ideological decision based on an elitist, "we know what's better for you than you do" approach to governance that is frequently practiced by the Left to exercise control over the individual, who they believe is unsuited or incapable of making their own decisions.

Either way, our society is in for a very bumpy ride these next few months, one that will throw many of us off balance and even kill some among us who are unprepared for it. One thing is for certain. Now is not the time to take partisan shots at our leaders in Washington who are doing what they can to protect us. Put the politicking aside until after we've come out on the other end of this crisis. We owe it to each other to stand together even if we are apart while doing it.

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