New Technologies: annoying, amazing, worrying

There is a mystery in my life that I am far from understanding. That mystery happens just after I get on a bus. You see, no matter where I decide to sit, the person sitting next to me always decides to use their mobile telephone. This happens every time, without fail. Why is this so? Why can't the person next to me simply sit quietly, enjoy the journey and allow me to get to my destination still feeling calm and relaxed? What makes matters worse is that my fellow passenger does not choose to talk quietly. Rather, they prefer to shout in to their mobile phone with the result that everybody on the bus can hear their conversation. Of course for me, sitting right next to them, the noise level is greatest. It does not matter whether they are speaking in Cantonese, English or any other language, the impact on me and everyone else on the bus is the same.

Over forty years ago, the American space agency, NASA, put a man on the moon. Since that time, many countries have been sending astronauts and scientists to work at the International Space Station. If we have had the technology for many years to send men and women into space, why don't buses and MTR trains have the technology to block mobile phone signals so that they cannot be used on public transport? Surely, in today's age of high tech gadgets, this is a simple solution to the problem?

If you have traveled overseas during the past year, you will have noticed that the airline pilots now allow people to use their mobile phones onboard the airplane right up to the point of takeoff and also immediately after landing. This was certainly not the case only two years ago. Will the time come soon when people may use their mobile phones throughout the flight? If I find my journey to Causeway Bay on the number 23 bus annoying, I am not looking forward to a flight from Hong Kong to London in the future.

However, I have also been thinking about the people who are making telephone calls on buses and trains. Who are they talking to? Who is on the other end of the line? If they are talking to friends who are at work, then their friends ought to be doing just that, working. If they are talking to members of their family who are at home, then what will be left to talk about when they get home? Or are they simply talking to people on another bus or train? Sadly, I believe that some people are not talking to anybody. They are simply pretending to use their mobile phones because they do not want

others to know that they have no friends, or that they are lonely, or that they are feeling depressed.

Last week I was working in the Library at the University of Hong Kong across the road. I noticed that the young man sitting at a computer terminal nearby was sending an email. He has typing very quickly and writing what appeared to be a long message. What is interesting about that, you may ask? Well, the point is that he was typing using only his right hand. This was because at the same time as writing an email, he was sending a text message on his mobile phone using his left hand, just as quickly and just as long a text message as the email message. Incidentally, he was also listening to his MP3 player. I was absolutely amazed and watched him for many minutes achieving what I thought would be impossible. In fact, later that afternoon when I had returned to my office, I tried writing an email and sending a text message at the same time; with absolutely no success. I didn't get further than the first two words.

However, I will admit that my life is becoming more and more influenced by new technology. The first thing I do when I arrive at school each morning is turn on my computer and check for any emails that have come in overnight. I shouldn't expect there to be any new messages for I always check my inbox just before going to bed. Apart from messages from people living in different time zones to Hong Kong, plus the small number of SPAM messages that have managed to avoid the school's firewall, there are no new messages. The next thing I do is go online and look at the news headlines in the London Times and the New York Times newspapers, just in case there is any additional news that I might have missed while I was watching the BBC news on cable television during breakfast. After this morning ritual, I am ready to start my day at St. Paul's.

We all know that the pace of change in the area of new technologies is astounding. It is so fast that often I do not find out about what is new until it is in fact old. For example, I did not know about the on-line music sharing site, the original Napster, until one week before it was forced to close down in 2001. I have not looked at the Limewire music sharing site. Similarly, I did not know about YouTubes, established in February 2005, until last week when its two young creators sold YouTubes to Google for a staggering $1.65 billion US dollars (in Google stocks). I have yet to listen to my first Podcast and I have certainly not done any blogging.

But I also know that it is important to maintain a balance in our lives. We must not get to a stage where new technology simply consumes us and everything that we do. It is too easy to turn to Google and Yahoo for all the answers in life. Internet search engines are wonderful tools for finding answers or background information on topics quickly and easily. But search engines are no substitute for reading or carrying out your own research and coming up with your own findings and conclusions. Similarly, internet chat lines, text messages, emails and telephone calls are not replacements for talking to others face to face. Electronic conversations alone must not become the way of the future.

I would ask each of you to think about how much time you spend at home, during the evenings and at weekends, in on-line chat rooms or texting classmates. The free time that you have at home, before and after homework, ought to be spent talking to your parents, or your grandparents, or brothers and sisters. I have a concern that new technologies are creating a generation of lonely people who have lost the skill of inter-personal communication. Surely, we would all agree that there is far more to life than a computer screen and a mobile telephone.

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