

We're plugged in – but checked out

By [John Sanbonmatsu](#) / June 3, 2011 – *Christian Science Monitor*

Boston

At the playground, a toddler struggles to get her father's attention, eager to share a small personal triumph with him. But the man is too busy checking e-mail to notice. She finally turns away, crestfallen.

Crossing the street on a well-marked crosswalk in broad daylight, I am nearly run over by a police cruiser. The officer glances up from her on-board computer just in time to see me.

At a memorial service for a friend's mother, a Holocaust survivor who lived a quiet life of service to others, the rabbi is suddenly interrupted by the loud, jaunty tune of a cellphone. We all wait while the woman struggles to silence the ringer.

Strangely disconnected

Welcome to life in the Distracted Society.

Even as our world burns – as species wink out of existence at an accelerating rate, the climate heats up, and billions struggle without medical care, running water, or even a toilet – people seem strangely disconnected from the real world, and strangely obsessed with their gadgets.

Our heedless technological narcissism is proving dangerous. Last year alone, cellphones were implicated in more than 1.6 million car accidents in the [United States](#). In 2009, a trolley operator texting on the job in [Boston](#) ran a red light, injuring 49 people. In 2008, the engineer of a Metrolink passenger train from [Los Angeles](#) was too busy texting to notice a warning signal. The train collided with a freight train, killing 25.

But such headline-grabbing accidents barely hint at the extent to which we all find ourselves enmeshed within a technological order that is fragmenting our consciousness and keeping us from attending to the things that matter most – big things like global warming and the erosion of our constitutional rights, and smaller ones like the subtle weather of our children's emotional lives.

And those children? American children between ages 8 and 18 now spend more than 7-1/2 hours each day in front of a computer screen, TV, or other electronic display (a figure that jumps to nearly 11 hours if you count multitasking). Undeterred, public school systems are increasingly embracing computers in classrooms, even while laying off teachers.

Poor substitutes

As the virtual world becomes our substitute for direct, spontaneous experiences in the real one, we and our children are finding ourselves bereft of genuine connection. In place of conversations with friends, we have [Facebook](#) status updates. In place of genuine democracy, we have online polls and high-tech public relations firms manipulating public opinion through "astroturf" campaigns. In place of a thriving public sphere, we have an anonymous online culture of voyeurism and bullying. In place of intimacy, we have degrading

pornography. In place of meaningful labor and the right to privacy, we have insecure employment and corporate surveillance of our spending habits.

When did we consent to this new, inhuman world order? We didn't. Instead, a small number of corporate technologists at powerful firms like [IBM](#), [Microsoft](#), [Apple](#), and [Google](#) did the deciding for us, making us the subjects of a radical social experiment to reengineer the human personality.

And if now we demur, if we object that *Homo distracticus* is not the stuff of an informed and conscientious citizenry, not conducive to the sort of thoughtfulness and maturity our republic needs right now, the technologist can truthfully reply:

That's because it was never intended to be. Like industrialization before it, computerization was meant to increase worker productivity and to create new mechanisms by which human beings might be incorporated into a system of mindless consumption. Who said it would make us better people?

Enmeshed in machines

In fact, even as our machines become more "friendly" and "intelligent," we are becoming more machinelike and docile, more comfortable facing a computer screen than showing up for our town meeting. The more enmeshed we become in our machines, the more we forget our moral duties to one another and to the larger world.

But we are too distracted to notice. Overworked or unemployed, frightened and overwhelmed by national and world problems that seem ever more beyond our or anyone's control, we withdraw into our own private iUniverse, curling up inside our electronic cocoon, rather than risk "getting involved."

My government may be unresponsive, the world economy may be teetering on the brink of collapse, but at least I can download the latest killer app for my [iPhone](#), or mow down hordes of virtual enemy soldiers in [Call of Duty 2](#).

Resisting the tyranny of a technological culture that has insinuated itself into the very marrow of our being won't be easy. Only by reorganizing society and economy around human-centered rather than machine-centered principles might we begin to push back the engulfing technological sea.

In the meantime, we can turn off our cellphones, get off Facebook, disconnect the [Xbox](#), engage our kids in more outdoor activities, and oppose the technologization of our schools. These are small steps, and they won't solve the larger problem of technology. But they would give us some space and quiet to reflect on what is to be done about it.

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Comment by Meris Michaels

Your article discussed the sociological and psychological effects of "gadgets": disconnection from the real world, obsession with these devices, the fact that we are becoming more "machinelike and docile", and distracted from our moral obligations to one another and the larger world. While I note that nearly every issue of your weekly newspaper advertises cell phones, more mention should be made and more articles written in reputable media such as the Christian Science Monitor to inform people about the biological effects of wireless devices (including Wi-Fi and cell phones) on human health: risk of certain brain tumors, perturbation of the immune system, DNA rupture, sleep disturbances, concentration and memory problems, behavioral disorders ... We can no longer ignore the warnings of independent scientists now that the World Health Organization has classified cell phones as "possibly carcinogenic" and the Council of Europe, which comprises 47 European countries, has adopted a resolution on the dangers of the electromagnetic fields emitted by these "gadgets", to protect particularly children and pregnant women.

Maudet Presents Free Wi-Fi

Mobile benches show evidence of furnishing free access to the Internet

By Marc Moulin / 2-3 July 2011 – *Tribune de Genève* (translated from French)

These are yellow wooden benches which invite you to sprawl, in the image of the Mayor of the city of Geneva, Pierre Maudet, who yesterday presented this new piece of furniture. These horned-shaped benches are located near Grange Park villa and will travel this summer to diverse locations in the city. What these sites have in common: they are all served by the Wi-Fi network, this access to the Internet by waves that the city supplies for free in parks, museums, libraries and along the lakeside.

The benches that the mayor has placed are for the purpose of "drawing attention of the Genevois to the immaterial presence of waves", explains Pierre Maudet. The radical is revealing a leitmotif of his year as mayor, begun in June: emphasize the details which will make Geneva more attractive for the Genevois who are quick to express anger. "I've had enough of hearing and reading complaints for a whole year", says Pierre Maudet. "I would like to show people what is working well and the potential of this city."

The municipal Wi-Fi network does not, however, need promotion. The number of its users doubles each year. There were 17,000 in 2008 while the figure of over 100,000 was reached during the first half of this year.

Comment by Meris Michaels

The pleasure of Wi-Fi in Geneva

The mayor of Geneva is presenting free Wi-Fi, an amenity for the Genevois. Wi-Fi causes health problems for certain persons who are sensitive to the electromagnetic waves it emits. WHO declared these waves possibly carcinogenic. They have an impact on human health. This demonstrates a lack of responsibility on the part of our authorities, especially to have installed Wi-Fi in museums and libraries which are more frequented by children. Children are more susceptible to such pollution. An amenity for some, but not for others. I would like to

draw the mayor's attention to the recent resolution of the Council of Europe, of which Switzerland is a member, on "The potential danger of electromagnetic fields and their effects on the environment". It suggests the creation of "white zones" not covered by wireless networks for "electro-sensitive" persons and determination of sites for placing all new Wi-Fi, Wi-Max, UTMS, GMS antennas in agreement not only with the persons responsible for the community but also with the inhabitants concerned.