

The digital disconnect

Alistair Lloyd

Too much information, in our hands, all the time, can distance us from what really matters – establishing and maintaining relationships.

The ways in which we are able to create, publish and consume media content are changing rapidly, becoming increasingly personalised and inward looking. How, then, do we mitigate the risk of loosening our sense of family, community and fraternity connections?

Peter Bregman wrote an article for the *Harvard Business Review* entitled '[Why I Returned My iPad](#)'. In it, Bregman shared his insights about his realisation that the constant use of his new toy was creating 'noise' that filled the quiet space that he would otherwise share with his daughter. A month earlier, he had written about why [multitasking is unproductive](#), due to its constant distractions and interruptions that preclude any time to think and reflect.

Communication is something that humans excel in. We are built to sense, respond, and show our feelings and thoughts. Our eyes can detect a full range of colour (a trait shared by chimpanzees, but few other animals). Our ears prick up when we hear our name mentioned in a noisy crowd. And in many ways, computing and technology have augmented our natural ability to communicate, allowing us to extend our range of hearing and seeing. We no longer have to be physically close to another party to communicate with them.

However, we are also social animals. We live in cities. We work in companies. We play in teams. Millions of us tune in, simultaneously, to watch a favourite chef or a winning goal.

We share our status on Facebook. We write blogs. We tweet.

Increasingly, the content we create is becoming localised, personal, verging on parochial. Increasingly, the content we consume is drawn through a narrow filter: what we want to see, when we want to see it. No balancing context. No opposing views. No other voices. Because of this, we run the risk of consuming and therefore responding to content that is skewed by our bias – anchored in what we believe we want to know, with no 'irritants' or challenges to our world view.

The victims of our constrained perspectives and lack of space for contemplation are the people we have around us. Family, loved ones, friends, team mates, colleagues. Blogger Alison Vassallo recounts a night spent in an [email](#)

[conversation with her husband](#) ... from the other sofa in their lounge room. She concludes that there is a need to make the space to communicate with the ones we love. In person, preferably, or – if required – electronically.

We are in the process of creating a series of '[weak link](#)' relationships, writes Kristin Burnham – connections with people we have never met in person, but have interacted with using social networking tools. The risk this presents is the conversion of our 'strong link' relationships, with the people we have around us, into 'weak links'. We are isolating ourselves from those that we love.

We do this by putting technology, and our choices about how we use it, between them and us. We constrain what we consume, choose technology-enabled over in-person conversation, or become engrossed and distracted by a constant 'feed' of personalised communication.

The next time you have something to say, have a think about doing it in person. The next time your smart phone buzzes, practise control over checking it 'right now'. The next time you are relaxing with loved ones and feel the gravity-like pull of Twitter or Facebook ... just stop, reach out and pull those loved ones a little closer instead. It's a simple, non-technological communication, but it can make a real connection.

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