

100 Seconds of Solitude

(With apologies to Gabriel García Márquez)

When Amazon was only a river and Blackberry was a jam

Trying to settle on the best baseball teams or U.S. presidents of all time will create endless debates. The same holds true for listing the greatest innovations ever, though this latter parlor game may be a more intellectually stimulating exercise and lead to some genuine head-scratching.

The wheel, the printing press, the internet? Crop rotation? Whitney's cotton gin and McCormick's reaper in agriculture? In commerce, the use of money instead of barter and the ability to insure against loss? For medicine or health, perhaps the smallpox vaccine and penicillin (or antibiotics in general)? In a modern service economy like ours, Wal-Mart and Amazon.com have enhanced productivity and reduced consumer prices with their stunning retailing innovations.

Advances generally create both winners and losers. The printing press eliminated the need for scribes, DVDs rendered VCR tapes obsolete, and machines have displaced unskilled labor. The gains to the winners and the sheer number of them tend to swamp out those drawing history's short straw. The same holds with respect to the tremendous, far-reaching benefits in electronics—cell phones, iPods and MP3 players, digital photography and ATMs. But in our highly urban society, the disadvantages seem to be giving the advantages a run for their money.

Not all that long ago, if we encountered an individual seemingly talking to himself on the street, we would assume that he was

By Allen R. Sanderson rehearsing for an upcoming audition for a play or a job interview—or he was simply mentally disturbed. Today, of course, the same thing would be quickly interpreted, confirmed with complementary visual clues, as merely talking on a cell phone or singing along with Beyoncé. Nowadays on public transportation, at sporting events and in restaurants, we are forced to be privy to—at least one-sided—intimate conversations, business transactions, real-time commentaries or nightclub wannabes.

In earlier, lower-tech, static societies, one quickly learned not to mow the lawn at 7 a.m. on a Saturday morning or to keep quiet in a movie theater. Common courtesies prevailed and frequent reminders were unnecessary, unlike our ubiquitous “please silence your cell phones” admonishments before movies or symphony concerts today.

On a commuter train or bus, reading a (physical or Kindle) book



or tabloid newspaper is far less invasive of space than carrying on a phone conversation; being a texting addict or relying on earbuds for a musical fix fall somewhere in between. Why? Because the latter examples constitute in part what economists call “negative externalities.” That is, uncompensated costs are being imposed upon someone who was not part of the original transaction or agreement. Externalities are more prevalent in urban areas, largely because of higher population densities and the fact that we come into contact with many more strangers and have less repetitive interaction with others than would be true “down on the farm” or 50 years ago.

Annoying your neighbor is one thing, endangering her is quite another. Talking on a cell phone or texting from a park bench or sidewalk is significantly different from doing it while behind the wheel of an automobile. Empirically—as measured by accident and fatality rates—there is an order of magnitude difference between changing the radio station or sipping coffee and carrying on a phone conversation or texting while driving.

We prohibit drinking alcoholic beverages and driving for similar reasons. The same rationale holds for smoking in public places.

But even if one's habits are only annoying as opposed to deadly, we appear to be turning into a coarse society hell-bent on domination by self-absorbed individuals engrossed in and defined by what appear to be extreme innovations and narcissistic attitudes. Unlike in 19th century Iowa, or late-20th century Chicago, we now have the capability to stay in constant touch with others. But that hardly means that we have to!

At Soldier Field, the United Center or U.S. Cellular Field, there seems to be a need for non-stop stimulation and diversion as well. (The Cubs draw a pass here because antiquated systems prevent some of the more egregious manifestations.) Between plays or pitches, merely bringing the ball up the court or at every stoppage of play, scoreboard distractions and blaring exhortations prevent reflection or even simple conversations. And watching a game on television would give the impression that announcers are paid by the number of (inane) sentences they can string together, a far cry from the well-known and revered commentators of the past.

Can't we take time to smell some roses without having to tell our BFF—or the whole world via a Facebook posting or Tweet—about it? And whatever Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are thinking about at this very moment, it's not you! □

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOON HAN