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Society Is Dead: We have retreated into the iWorld”

By Andrew Sullivan

I was visiting New York last week and noticed something I’d never thought I’d say about the city. Yes, nightlife is pretty much dead (and I’m in no way the first to notice that). But daily life—that insane mishmash of yells, chatter, clatter, hustle and chutzpah that makes New York the urban equivalent of methamphetamine — was also a little different. It was quieter.

Manhattan’s downtown is now a Disney-like string of malls, riverside parks and pretty upper-middle-class villages. But there was something else. And as I looked across the throngs on the pavements, I began to see why.

There were little white wires hanging down from their ears, or tucked into pockets, purses or jackets. The eyes were a little vacant. Each was in his or her own musical world, walking to their soundtrack, stars in their own music video, almost oblivious to the world around them. These are the iPod people.

Even without the white wires you can tell who they are. They walk down the street in their own MP3 cocoon, bumping into others, deaf to small social cues, shutting out anyone not in their bubble.

Every now and again some start unconsciously emitting strange tuneless squawks, like a badly tuned radio, and their fingers snap or their arms twitch to some strange soundless rhythm. When others say “Excuse me” there’s no response. “Hi”, ditto. It’s strange to be among so many people and hear so little. Except that each one is hearing so much.

Yes, I might as well own up. I’m one of them. I witnessed the glazed New York looks through my own glazed pupils, my white wires peeping out of my ears. I joined the cult a few years ago: the sect of the little white box worshippers.

Every now and again I go to church — those huge, luminous Apple stores, pews in the rear, the clerics in their monastic uniforms all bustling around or sitting behind the “Genius Bars”, like priests waiting to hear confessions.

Others began, as I did, with a Walkman — and then a kind of clunkier MP3 player. But the sleekness of the iPod won me over. Unlike other models it gave me my entire music collection to rearrange as I saw fit — on the fly, in my pocket. What was once an occasional musical diversion became a compulsive obsession. Now I have my iTunes in my iMac for my iPod in my iWorld. It’s Narcissus heaven: we’ve finally put the “i” into Me.

And, like all addictive cults, it’s spreading. There are now 22m iPod owners in the United States and Apple is becoming a mass-market company for the first time.

Walk through any airport in the United States these days and you will see person after person gliding through the social ether as if on autopilot. Get on a subway and you’re surrounded by a bunch of Stepford commuters staring into mid-space as if anaesthetized by technology. Don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t overhear, don’t observe. Just tune in and tune out.

It wouldn’t be so worrying if it weren’t part of something even bigger. Americans are beginning to narrow their lives.

You get your news from your favorite blogs, the ones that won’t challenge your view of the world. You tune into a satellite radio service that also aims directly at a small market — for new age fanatics, liberal talk or Christian rock. Television is all cable. Culture is all subculture. Your cell phones can receive e-mail feeds of your favorite blogger’s latest thoughts — seconds after he has posted them — get sports scores for your team or stock quotes of your portfolio.

Technology has given us a universe entirely for ourselves — where the serendipity of meeting a new stranger, hearing a piece of music we would never choose for ourselves or an opinion that might force us to change our mind about something are all effectively banished.

Atomization by little white boxes and cell phones. Society without the social. Others who are chosen — not met at random. Human beings have never lived like this before. Yes, we have always had homes, retreats or places where we went to relax, unwind or shut out the world.

But we didn’t walk around the world like hermit crabs with our isolation surgically attached.

Music was once the preserve of the living room or the concert hall. It was sometimes solitary but it was primarily a shared experience, something that brought people together, gave them the comfort of knowing that others too understood the pleasure of a Brahms symphony or that Beatles album.

But music is as atomized now as living is. And it’s secret. That bloke next to you on the bus could be listening to heavy metal or a Gregorian chant. You’ll never know. And so, bit by bit, you’ll never really know him. And by his white wires, he is indicating he doesn’t really want to know you.

What do we get from this? The awareness of more music, more often. The chance to slip away for a while from everydayness, to give our lives its own soundtrack, to still the monotony of the commute, to listen more closely and carefully to music that can lift you up and keep you going.

We become masters of our own interests, more connected to people like us over the internet, more instantly in touch with anything we want, need or think we want and think we need. Ever tried a Stairmaster in silence? But what are we missing? That hilarious shard of an overheard conversation that stays with you all day; the child whose chatter on the pavement takes you back to your early memories; birdsong; weather; accents; the laughter of others. And those thoughts that come not by filling your head with selected diversion, but by allowing your mind to wander aimlessly through the regular background noise of human and mechanical life.

External stimulation can crowd out the interior mind. Even the boredom that we flee has its uses. We are forced to find our own means to overcome it. And so we enrich our life from within, rather than from white wires. It’s hard to give up, though, isn’t it.

Not so long ago I was on a trip and realized I had left my iPod behind. Panic. But then something else. I noticed the rhythms of others again, the sound of the airplane, the opinions of the taxi driver, the small social cues that had been obscured before. I noticed how others related to each other. And I felt just a little bit connected again and a little more aware.

Try it. There’s a world out there. And it has a soundtrack all its own.

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