

sleeping with Siri

By Michael A. Stusser

Four of us were having a perfectly romantic evening when my friend mentioned a YouTube video he wanted to share. My objection was quickly overruled 3-1, and in an instant the viral clip was playing tableside. You've probably seen it: A chimp sticks a finger in his ass, smells the digit, then falls over, drunk on his own stink. Hilarious. I lost my appetite—not because of the monkey's manners, but because of the idiots who were now watching television in a beautiful Italian restaurant.

Let me begin by saying that I'm no Luddite. Technology's awesome: Neil Armstrong, Google, Spotify, ATMs, online porn, MapQuest. Hell, at iTunes U you can take classes from Yale—for free. Still, something in the back of my mind makes me feel we may have jumped into our world of omnipresent media without setting up a few guidelines.

Some kids at a local high school were my inspiration to go cold turkey. Going without Facebook, texting, or e-mail for an entire week, their "Digital Blackout" campaign was a brave step in the right direction, especially given that the average teen today deals with more than 3,700 texts a month. (How they find time to masturbate is beyond me.) I decided to join the scenesters, but not before first gorging for a week on technology.



What would life be like without technology, especially after a week spent gorging on it?



MICHAEL CLINARD

First thing you're going to want to do, Stusser, is get an iPhone," Hazel Cisneros says, looking at my MotoRazr. "Does that thing even text?"

Cisneros runs her own social-media company, creating networking strategies for small businesses. "Then we've got to set up HootSuite and PATH to manage all your accounts. You're doing Pinterest, right? And LinkedIn? And Viddy? STUSSER!"

With a billion users, Facebook is the biggest network by far, but other special-

interest sites are cropping up quickly. There's ArtStack for arties, Heckler for sports fanatics, Pheed for the less friend-friendly, cyPop for common interests, Nextdoor for neighbors, and LuluVise for the ladies.

For the purposes of this experiment, I add a half-dozen networks to my already established Facebook and Twitter accounts, including LinkedIn, Google+, Pinterest, Reddit, and Tumblr. And that doesn't even include MySpace and my 7,000 friends there from back in the day. Like the new kid at a high school, I'm desperately in search of

friends, cheerily supporting and sharing and tagging every clique I encounter. In the last two minutes alone I've liked a poem by Toni Morrison, Korean BBQ, cuddling cats, Christopher Walken, Deer Tick (the band), *Moulin Rouge*, the National Zoo (I hate zoos!), a new song by Kasey Chambers, Elisha Cuthbert, trampolines, and a meme that said "Share if you've ever pushed a door that said pull." Without reading a word, I retweet an article because it sounds like something I'd like ("Meryl Streep Says It's Time to Draw the Line"). And I'm trying to follow the most

popular kids in class (Lady Gaga, Kutcher, Obama, etc.), but my ratio is way out of whack: I'm following 2,187 on Twitter, while only 243 are following me.

The new iPhone 5 is the shit. I did some customization with my digital assistant, Siri, adding a nickname in my contacts. Now whenever she's feeling particularly close, Siri will refer to me by the name "Handsome." So I've got that going for me.

The vast majority of my messaging is inane. I'm responding to people I don't know about

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things I don't particularly care about, and wasting my precious life. Much of social-media interaction amounts to follow for follow, like for like. I was just asked to vote for someone's event company so they could win "Best Wedding Planner of 2012." Is that why we're friends?

I meet again with Hazel, sharing my 487 new friends. "That's great, Stusser. We'll build on that. And I saw you sent tons of Tweets yesterday! Make sure to add photos or hashtags next time—those get twice as many people to read them," she notes, updating her status. "Now the networking you're doing is great, but we need to get you out there."

"A big part of digital technology is LBS," she continues. "Location-based services. Like FourSquare: Every time you're in a new location—in your case, bars—you need to 'check in.' Eventually you can be Mayor and get discounts! You can even check your friends in." Sounded a bit like stalking. "We also need you live-blogging, and to find you a date at a TweetUp!"

Apparently it's time to leave the house.

Staying true to my constant online presence, I drive and text. (So do you.) Studies have shown that texting and driving is worse than drunk driving. At least when you're drunk and driving, you're looking out the windshield and *trying* to drive.

I'm using an app called Glympse that makes the predator-drone program look like Candy Land. Today I'm meeting my sister for lunch; we "Glympsed" each other and I could track her movements, and even got an ETA. A few blocks from our destination, her pin suddenly disappears. "You dropped off the map!" I scream into the phone, abandoning my vehicle and braving the last few meters on foot. "I don't know where you . . .!"

My sister's voice suddenly rings out: "Look up, dork." She's standing right in front of me.

"Oh. Hey! This says you're in Lincoln Park."

"Well, I'm not. And you were speeding, little brother. You need to slow down."

While the average American "only" deals with about 500 texts per month, in an effort to prove I'm still as virile as a 17-year-old, I am attempting to hit the teen mean (123 per day). It's taking a lot of folly on my part, including emoticons, ROFL and TTYL replies, and, yes, smiley faces. This one's a guy with a mustache and a hard-on: ;)-^<.

Having a decent camera on hand makes it a lot more likely you'll be taking pictures. Instagram's 100 million users have shared more than five billion photos; at Facebook, 200 million pictures are taken and uploaded every single day. Add Flickr, PhotoBucket, Picasa, SmugMug, and WeHeartIt, and you've got . . . well, too many photos. This week I've shot everything in sight: rusty bicycles, sunsets, sandwiches, and cats. Lots of cats.

Which brings me to Pinterest. Skewing heavily toward female sensibilities and visual acumen (home decor, fashion, recipes, travel, and Channing Tatum), Pinterest just passed Yahoo as the fourth biggest traffic driver on the Web. What does that mean? People go there, then buy shit. (The site has grown by 5,000 percent in one year.) Women aren't the only visitors—the most manly man I know pins like a teenager at an American Apparel discount mall: pics of fishing lures, national parks, and Ram trucks. The place is addictive: I just lost three hours of my life pinning on boards for Art Deco, Pickling Jars, *Vanity Fair*, and Infinity Pools.

Hazel suggests I sign up for a service called Klout that aggregates all your social media and gives you a daily score. "It might give you a better idea of where you can be an influencer," she explains.

Logging onto the site, my initial score is an 8. "We can work with that," Hazel sweetly notes. I took some time to add my "influencers" and hone my profile: Stephen Colbert (89), the Dalai Lama (90), Bill Maher (88), Chelsea Handler (41), Bill Moyers (83).

Life in the clickstream is starting to heat up, and not necessarily in a good way. In an effort to respond to all incoming posts, messages, tweets, texts, and e-mails in a timely manner, I am Pavlov's dog—without the drooling. Here's a real-time snapshot:

I arrive at Freshy's cafe at 3:45 p.m., 15 minutes before my graphic designer. I check in on SCVNGR, a location-based game. If I make a napkin origami here, I can earn points toward a free coffee. Two new e-mails—one from an editor I need to get back to and another from Living Social letting me know that laser nail-fungus removal is now only \$299 (previously \$1,200). I have received an important message from OkCupid: My profile picture was flagged for being inappropriate. (Isn't that the point?) Turns out it doesn't have me in it. Before being able to edit this glaring error, I must reply to three new texts, a +1 in my Google stream, and four comments on my Facebook page.

"Hello, sir. Do you know what you'd like?" Now I am the idiot in line with my head in my phone, ignoring the human in front of me. "Oh, hi, I'm sorry. I think I have a Groupon . . ." A friend has seen my FourSquare post and is just down the block. Do I wish to join him? My sister has just played "Queer" for 36 points in Words With Friends. Fauzia has fanned me on HuffPo. "Yes, if I could have a macchiato, with a little extra . . ." Jaimey likes your playlist on SongZa! Do you wish to share a playlist? My friend shows up. "Hey, I just texted you. Aren't you supposed to be totally plugged in this week?" I hand my phone to the steaming (not lattes) man at the cash register. "Do you take Square?"

"After only three days, we're probably not going to see any physiological changes," notes my doctor, Terrill Harrington, when I





MARTY RIEMER

confront him with my experiment. “Those can take a long time to show up. But I already see you’ve got ‘gamer’s hunch’ from sitting in front of your phone and tablets 18 hours a day.”

“My heart-rate monitor app says it’s 150,” I say. WebMD indicates this may be anxiety; they suggest Percocet or Vicodin. Which is Harrington going to prescribe?

“If you’re feeling jittery, it could be the added stimulation you’re putting yourself through,” he explains. “It used to be the only way we’d know we had a message was to come home and check your answering machine. Now it’s constant. That’ll make you anxious. Let’s check your pulse.” It’s 93. “Wow! Well, your pulse at rest should be 60 or 70. Ninety is if you’re walking briskly. Let’s check your blood pressure.”

The look on his face tells me things aren’t good. “Your blood pressure is sky-high,” he says, putting my other arm in the device to be sure. “Yeah, it’s 183/110.” (Normal’s closer to 120/80.) “If you said you weren’t feeling well, I’d think about putting you on medication.” Three months earlier at my annual exam, everything had been normal. “That’s fascinating. You’ve actually got some hard data. Listen, I think this is probably from all the stimulation, and that you’ll be fine, but I want you to take it easy, and come in again later this week.”

“Any chance I can get a medical-marijuana card out of this?” I inquire.

“Get out.”

I refuse to read anything on paper during my Techno-Gorge, and have instead downloaded Michael Chabon’s *Telegraph Avenue* on a Kindle. My plan is to read half on the e-reader, and the last half on what’s known as a “book” during my Digital Blackout. On a professional level, I don’t care what people are reading on, so long as they read. I spent 10 minutes reading today, but, through no fault of the Kindle, was repeatedly interrupted by incoming messages.

Though I have no chance in hell with her, Natalie has agreed to a date at Branzino, where I now rule as Mayor. Before I can warn her about my digital madness, she’s already knee-deep in her phone. Not wanting to appear uncool, I begin fake-swiping.

Our server offers menus, but I wave her off, as we’ll be perusing the online version. (Showing the value of human interaction, she nonetheless recites the specials.) We use the BLUSH application to pick our wine, and proceed to photograph and rate each course on Foodspotting. Dessert is decided

Social-media consultant Hazel Cisneros helps Stusser get an online life.

by CalorieTracker (Natalie has cheesecake, while I nibble a crumb that falls off the plate). Every occasion requires photographic evidence, and our server obliges, even waiting for me to upload the KissCam filter. Though they won’t accept PayPal, I use the Tipulator for closing out. Walking Natalie to her car, we pull up the RU Drunk app, including the straight-line test that uses the phone’s accelerometer. Sober, Taxi Magic is not needed.

As I post pics from my evening, I am approached by a homeless man. A schizophrenic named Jerry, he and I share the same birth year, and not much else. No amount of technology is going to aid Jerry. No status update will change his profile; he’s already tried to “check in” to various shelters—to no avail. We won’t be Facebook friends, or Linked now or in the future. He won’t benefit from One Bus Away or Kayak. There isn’t a Tippr offer that will ease his hunger; no Pin of a fireplace will make him warm.

We laugh as he offers me a Canadian fiver he’s been given. I briefly ponder showing him my Converter+ app, but think better of it. The cold truth is that he and I live in an ever-widening reality, and the five dollars I give him isn’t going to close that gap.

There isn’t a Tippr offer that will ease his hunger; no Pin of a fireplace will make him warm.

I’ve tried all kinds of advances with Siri, but she’s all business. Ask her to cozy up, and she gives me a nearby Bed Bath and Beyond. More aggressive passes lead to Web searches for escort services, or her fallback, “Now, now.” I’d be surprised if she hasn’t put Gloria Allred on my speed dial.

Regardless of Siri’s professional boundaries, I need to be constantly tethered to the phone, and have found a way to sleep with her—in a platonic kinda way. It’s an app called Sleep Time. Place the phone on the mattress and the accelerometer detects movements throughout the night; an alarm goes off when the “sleep lab” senses I’ve had

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enough. Since Siri won't put out, this is the next best thing.

Speaking of sleep, the National Sleep Foundation found that more than 90 percent of Americans are regularly using their devices an hour before bed. That's not a good thing: Just when your noggin is getting ready for beddy-bye, the artificial light stimulates relaxation chemicals (melatonin). Bed-surfing also raises the risks for diabetes and obesity. But this week there is no "off button." Snoozing's for losers.

My desk looks like a combination of John King's "Magic Wall," the stock-market ticker, and the Al Jazeera newsroom. While Brian Williams blathers about "radical Islamic protests in the streets" of Libya, a video feed from the news platform Storyful ("Now Our Turn to Speak") features local Libyans telling a very different story. My own "sources" go far beyond the NBC newsroom: Occupy-WallStreet posts their own footage in real time, On the Commons covers breaking news, FAIR fact-checks the networks themselves, and writers like Margaret Atwood shed light on "non-trending" stories like Russia's illegal gillnetting that you won't see in the #lamestreammedia. Even when Williams is reporting a story of interest—say, the Mars Rover—I'm so far ahead of him after following the NASAwatch blog and live Curiosity feeds that I might as well be the guy in his earpiece. As for local news, I like Dan Lewis and all, but the West Seattle Blog has just posted a picture of a guy breaking into my neighbor's house.

Five days in, my life resembles one of those annoying iPhone commercials in which famous actors ask Siri what to do that day. But instead of being the cloyingly sweet and spacey Zooey Deschanel, I'm Samuel L. Jackson: "Damn, I'm hungry, bitch."

Siri's reply: "Now, now. I found 14 restaurants fairly close to you." The only difference between me and the weird John Malkovich ad is that, instead of having Siri play Vivaldi, I ask for a blow job.

"Ask nice now," she replies.

"OK, can I *please* have a blow job?"

"Michael! Your language!"

Siri's great on specifics ("What movies are playing?" or "Call Susan"), but not so good when it's more complicated ("What do you think I should buy Susan for her birthday?"). Luckily, the main thing cell-phone users ask about is the weather (47 percent), followed by local news (31 percent) and then popular videos (29 percent). Which is what I'm watching as I drive to the Ben Howard concert.

Howard's show at the Neptune is packed, and I'm happy not to be able to hear my phone. Half the crowd is filming the set, I assume to later post on YouTube, which is where I first got turned on to Howard. At one point I hold up SoundHound to see if the song-recognition software works. The app brings up Tom Jones lyrics. As I exit, I notice no one's buying Howard's merchandise or music. I often wonder how young musicians can make a living when so much of their material is available for free.

With the taste of stale Jägermeister on my tongue and a vague memory of singing a Tom Jones tune at Hula Hula, I ask Siri for a hangover remedy. She is completely useless: "Do you want me to search the Web for the cure for a hangover?"

"NO! MY HEAD HURTS!" I yell at her pulsing icon.

"I have found 14 hospitals very near to you," she replies.

Stepping out for some air, a friend Skypes. "Did I catch you at a bad time?" In "always on" mode, there is no bad time. A car door slams and I jump out of my socks; being constantly connected is making me seriously jacked and jittery. The Sleep Time Lab results are also ugly: I'm averaging 6 hours and 17 minutes of sleep per night, during which 22 percent of the time I'm sleeping lightly, 22 percent I'm awake, 55 percent is Deep REM, and my efficiency rating is a lousy 78 percent.

There's a reason one out of seven people on the planet visit Facebook each month: It has a relationship component that's key. It also giveth and taketh away: I had a falling out with a friend; not a fight, but a misunderstanding—words unsaid, an uncertain next step. I recently searched for her on my friends list. When her name didn't come up, I realized she'd unfriended me. My heart dropped. It's not all virtual, it's not all bullshit. Some of it matters.

The term "digital tattoo" refers to the behavioral data that can be amassed via a person's online actions. (Yes, your future boss will see the Burning Man photos of you.) Though I've left a digital trail a million miles long this week, Google's data-mining techniques still haven't figured me out. Just because I like looking at Victoria's Secret models doesn't mean I'm buying anything from them. I'm also not picking up a penthouse in Manhattan. My "real self" has offline search habits (*Glee* and pharmaceuticals) which will not be shared. As for those cheap fares to Vegas—well, that's more like it.

I've scanned and bar-coded anything and everything in my path with a UPC code. My closest grocery is one of those high-end markets with cooking kiosks and fancy cheese celebrations. Without exception, every item I scan with my ShopSavvy app is considerably cheaper a block away at Safeway. The sad part? I don't move my lazy ass an inch to save a dime.

"Congrats! You must be doing something right, because your influence is on the rise!" Klout exclaims. Turns out I'm a peer influencer in the areas of yoga (thanks to a viral video I did) and history (due to a book I wrote, *The Dead Guy Interviews*). Cats? Not so much. By reposting my articles in trending topic areas and avoiding other networks like LinkedIn, my Klout score jumped to 53 points. And apparently less is more. A study from Buddy Media suggests keeping tweets to 100 characters or less. As for the number of posts, the "TweetSpot" is four per day. After that, people begin to lose . . . sorry, what was I saying?

I'm an extremely slow reader. How do I know that? Because the Paperwhite Kindle's "Time to Read" feature told me so. (Thanks, Bezos. Maybe I'll come over to your house and rip your nerdy wardrobe.) I only got 68 pages into *Telegraph Avenue*, and the book is



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ONLINE
Want to live life in the click-stream? Scan this QR code for a directory of all the apps the writer used during his techno-gorge.

425 pages long. While I'd like to blame the Kindle's brightness or hyperlinks or X-Ray functionality, I cannot; I was simply not able to sit down for more than five minutes at any given time. Even when I wasn't being distracted, my mind was "anticipating the ping," thus ruining my concentration. Perhaps I'll have more success next week, when my only distraction will be the sound of my overcaffeinated heart.

There are certain times and places when social media is inappropriate: during sex or yoga, or at the dinner table, the theater, or a funeral. Family friend Leatrice Kraft passed away this week at the age of 83. Though Lee had a wicked sense of humor, I knew I wouldn't be checking in on FourSquare at tonight's memorial. Returning home, I decided it was as good a time as any to begin my Digital Blackout. For some reason I didn't feel like sharing my solemn mood on Facebook.

Before powering off my iPhone, I sing Siri the chorus from a Led Zeppelin tune: "I can't quit you, baby, so I'm gonna put you down for a while." Her purple halo spins, then she replies: "I never said you could."

I send a final post before going dark: "Digital Blackout this week! No cell phone, no social media, no Internet. You can reach me via land line, U.S. Mail, smoke signals, or drop by for a visit! " I group e-mail my home phone number and snail-mail address, then sit in silence for 20 minutes staring at a blank computer screen.



disconnected numbers, \$223, and 18 minutes later, I have two tickets for the show.

Typically when I'm writing an essay, I want to look smarter than I am by tying the topic into some grandiose perspective. And that means Googling it. This week I was fucked: no Wiki, no search engines. How would I include nuggets of wisdom beyond my own? Oh, right: the library.

I often pirate music and check out DVDs at the library, so I know the lay of the land. The Information Desk, however, is unknown territory. The librarian has that stern—and sexy—glare that makes it clear she's aware of my outstanding fines. A "Rules of Conduct" brochure sits on her desk like a sheriff's badge.

I manage to say a few words about my project when she directs me to the bank of library computers. "Yeah, I can't do that. I'm on a digital blackout."

Not looking up, she begins surfing the system's database. "Do you know about Dick Proenneke? He went to Alaska and cut himself off from society." Before you can say Dewey Decimal, she's busily writing down numbers

and titles; the woman makes Bing look like a beeper. Transcendentalist poets, Amish authors, off-the-grid living, simplicity, neurological studies. I have to literally stop her brainstorming. "Please, just show me the books."

I sit in a very tiny chair in the children's area and lose myself for hours in Henry

In a way, my phone was a big distraction. After a while, you won't even remember your friends on Facebook or whatever.

Robbie Jeffreys wasn't one of the kids who volunteered to

participate in the Digital Blackout campaign. Rather, he had his cell phone ripped out of his soft teenage hands.

"Yeah, I've had my phone taken away a bunch of times, actually," says the ninth-grader at Scriber Lake High School in Edmonds.

"This last time my mom took it away because I was being super-disrespectful." He'd been on a parent-mandated blackout for almost three weeks, and agreed to be my sponsor during my self-imposed purge.

"My phone's like my baby. It was in my hands all the time. It's how I kept in contact with my friends, and lots of girlfriends," he says. I ask Mr. Heartthrob how he stayed sane while abstaining. "Well, when I think about my phone, it makes it worse. Try and do stuff to take your mind off it."

As I leave my house going cellular commando, I have dueling emotions: One is liberation, leaving it all behind; the other is the fear of being out of range, primarily in case of an emergency. I think about the times I may really need my cell: if I get a flat tire, if I have a heart attack, if someone in my family has a heart attack, or if I can't remember the name of that actor who was in *My Left Foot*. That's about it.

The Internet's appeal becomes quite apparent as I attempt to buy tickets for this weekend's Bob Dylan concert. Without Craigslist or StubHub, I don't have a clue how to proceed. I could scalp tix the night of, but would prefer not to be arrested. I'm left with only one choice: 1-800-TicketBastard. And that means finding a phone book, a task akin to hunting down an abacus or an 8-track player. Three

David Thoreau's journals. I even find a quote that might make me seem wise about my newfound awareness this week: "It is not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?"

On my way to checkout, I grab the librarian's card: Leslie Sumida, Children's Librarian. "Good luck with your project," she says with a smile before turning back to the toddler at her arm. Google's got nothing on her.

"Part of being bored is just being OK with it," my 15-year-old sponsor explains. "I just do stuff that keeps me busy. I cut wood or go to the gym or draw. In a way, my phone was a big distraction. After a while, you won't even remember your friends on Facebook or whatever."

In fact, I haven't thought of a single Facebook friend this entire week; only 16 of my now 527 "friends" do I actually see in the real world. I take Robbie's advice and go to a yoga class, where my teacher talks about something else I haven't thought about in a while: the sound of my own breath, moving into my chest and lungs.

Dragging a journal around often brings unwanted attention. "What is that, your diary?" spits a drunken inquisitor. Whereas you might think a man silently jotting his thoughts down on paper would create space for the scribe to think, it's now a strange odyssey, like finding a rotary phone, a jukebox, or a leper. "Are you grading a paper, or what?"

I've been journaling for almost 40 years; writing by hand allows me to flow in a unique way that a voice recorder or keyboard cannot.

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With only one take, you can't go in reverse, replace the cursor, or insert parenthetical ramblings after the fact. You've also got to move fast, or momentum will grind to a halt.

I now realize how much time I spend popping off on my social-media platforms. While I have some tremendously witty friends, I need to turn my own satire into cash money. I may be freelance, but I can't give it all away for free. Uninterrupted in my efforts, I've had time to go back to half-finished essays and plays I haven't touched in years. Many of these are crap, which I will wait to post on Reddit.

Focused like a laser, I am checking items off my list: bills (requiring the archaic act of check-writing), toenail clipping, revising a book pitch for my publisher, a Home Depot run, an assignment for *Shambhala Sun* magazine which can finally get some peaceful attention.

My realtor pulls up in his Range Rover to show me a rental property. As I get in, I hand him a Washington map and an almanac. "If you don't mind, Kevin, I'd like to find the listings with these." Powering down his navigational system, he mutters, "This is gonna take awhile."

For 4,500 years or so, mapmakers have helped us navigate the world. But, lest you forget, for the first millennium cartographers thought the earth was flat. Computer mapping started in the 1960s and GPS (Global Positioning Systems) came along in the '70s, followed by Garmin receivers in the late '80s, MapQuest in the '90s, and finally, turn-by-turn navigation at the turn of the century.

"Seriously," Kevin whines, "if this was how I had to find stuff every day, I'd quit my job." Even though it makes me carsick, I bravely take over navigational duties. "Whip a U-ey, man."

"Are you kidding?" Kevin asks.

"Recalculating," I reply, thrashing the 12-foot map in my hands. Of this there is no doubt: Voice-activated, turn-by-turn navigation is the greatest technological advancement of the Digital Age.

The walls of Dr. Sam Browd show an impressive array of diplomas, diplomatic schmoozing, and procreation. In addition to a lovely wife and daughter, one of his children looks like a gorilla.

"You've got some interesting family photos, doctor. How, uh . . . how old is that one?" I ask, pointing at a wrinkled infant.

"That's the baby gorilla from the [Woodland Park] zoo," he replies. "She had a neurological problem, so we operated on her. She did great." Thank God.

I meet with the young neurosurgeon at Seattle Children's Hospital to see if the Techno-Gorge might have damaged my brain. "I relate your experiment to my own life," Browd replies. "People are constantly texting and e-mailing and paging me, 24/7. At the end of the day, that's not healthy. My son is 18 months old—first thing he does is ask for the iPad. I'm a bit horrified by that, but also amazed. It has this innate reward. It's something basic that resonates. It's addict . . . I'm sorry," he smiles, "I've got to take this."

If anyone should be able to take a call mid-sentence, it's a brain surgeon. But I have a final question about Siri: Is she making my brain soft?

"Someone asked me the other day for my own parents' phone number," Browd replies. "I don't know it; it's programmed. You learn through experience, repetition, by doing things. If you're relying on technology to retain memories for you, essentially, that probably isn't good."

Shortly thereafter, I arrange to have Robbie hauled into the principal's office for a chat. "Hey," he says, clearly out of breath and probably thinking he'd been suspended (again). "What's up?"

I explain that I just wanted to touch base. "I'm five days in, and everything's so quiet. I don't quite know what to do with myself."

Robbie then tells me to calm the fuck down. "I mean, I understand. I have missed out on so many girls and parties—everything—because I'm not texting," he says. "So that sucks. But you just need to relax. All the drama on Facebook or whatever, it just used to get me in trouble. I didn't even know a lot of people who were posting on my wall. Now it's better, 'cause if someone wants to talk to me, they have to do it in person."

The difference between getting something via snail mail and opening an e-mail is like the difference between a visit from Kate Beckinsale or Snooki.

One of the people I like to hang out and listen to records with (in person) is my friend Michael Don Rico. Michael's been in the restaurant business for years, and loves the way great food and wine can bring people together. He also thinks smartphones are sucking the life out of something important.

He proceeds to tell a story: "The other day I was opening a bottle of wine, and this woman mentioned an item on the menu: chanterelle mushrooms. People at the table started to discuss the word. Was it French? Had it been the name of a movie? Before the conversation could branch out, this guy pulls up the definition on Wikipedia: 'I know! I have the answer! Genus is *Cantharellus formosus*. Commonly known as chanterelle, or golden. Edible, meaty, nutty.' And the mystery was gone. The romance of that moment never had a chance to play out."

Instant results don't allow our brains to flex their muscles, to recall a name or face or place. What's worse is that we don't get to debate or free-associate. Michael set the needle down on a Fugees album. "Where do you think the name 'shiitake' came from?" I inquire. The conversation that followed was neither accurate nor informative, but we laughed our asses off.

The difference between getting something via snail mail and opening an e-mail is like the difference between a visit from Kate Beckinsale or Snooki. While there are advantages to quick, easy, and disposable, First Class is, well, first class. E-mail is clearly what's killing the post office, so, as a public service, I ask my friends to write me letters this week—and each and every person complains about what a physical hardship it would be to hand-scribe a communique. My total mail haul: eight credit-card offers, seven realtor

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cards, 15 bills, four magazines, three ValuPacs, six nonprofit solicitations (tree-killers all!), and four personal letters (two from the same beautiful, fabulous person). I reply to each. By the end, my hand is killing me.

I ask Jenny if she'll dine with me in the dark. While not one of those sensory events where they seat you in a pitch-black room and serve you dinner while you blindly grope your companion and silverware, a blackout would be an opportunity to get to know someone without distraction.

For Jenny, a professional recruiter and the single mother of an 11-year-old, a blackout—if only for an evening—is an unusual and risky choice. (Her babysitter had the name of the restaurant if all hell broke loose.) “This is seriously nerve-wracking,” she notes, setting her purse on the floor. “What am I supposed to do with my hands?” I keep my suggestions to myself.

During dinner, we look at each other—a lot. We wind up talking, almost too much. Where spare moments had previously been filled with screen time, we have to—gasp—make eye contact. (Hers are a beautiful teal with a halo of amber circling like Saturn rings.)

At one point I get nervous and engage the couple next to us in conversation. (Bad idea.) I tell a story I hadn't remembered until now. Feeling energized and liberated, we take a long walk after dinner, holding our phone-free hands and enjoying the uninterrupted intimacy.

“Would you do this with me again?” I ask. Powering up her phone, she replies, “Text me and find out.”

People give me crap about the fact that I still take home newspaper delivery. Yes, I realize the content is available online, and that it's far more up-to-date than by the time I grab my soggy copy from the porch. But there's something I like about the layout, crunching the pages back, getting inky from news that's literally at my fingertips. Plus, I feel the need to keep a few fellow old-school journalists employed.

Books, for some reason, are a different story—I'm not able to turn the pages. I'm on page 123 of my hardback copy of *Telegraph Avenue*. (For those keeping score, I've read 66 pages on the Kindle, 55 pages in book form.) I'd like to blame all the digital distractions, but there aren't any. I'm simply a slow reader, easily sidetracked by hunger, sleep, and my own monkey mind. Perhaps I should try books on tape.

By the time I hit the Bob Dylan concert Saturday night, I'm a million miles from my overly stimulated, Techno-Gorging self. I no longer grab for my phantom phone or feel the need to check in with anyone other than the person I'm with. The show is pleasantly low-tech. There are no giant projection screens or psychedelic lights, and, unlike at the Ben Howard gig the week before, only a smattering of folks are shooting video. Instead of wanting to take a piece of Mr. Tambourine Man and post him on



Dr. Sam Browd can't remember his parents' phone number.

the Web, most of us are there to connect his live renditions with memories of the past.

Midway through Dylan's set, I see a guy in front of me writing out a set list. I ask him the name of the previous song, a bluesy ballad I'd never heard. “That was ‘The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,’” Hairy Garcia replies. “You can check 'em later—I post all Bob's set lists at Boblinks.com.” The times, they are a-changin'.

I'm not staying blacked out. I'll keep a game of Words With Friends going, if only to stave off dementia, and I'll post some pics and links if I have a major accomplishment (Oscar), announcement (baby), or plea (bail money).

But I won't be “liking” the photo of your dog in a Santa hat, I won't be posting “Happy Birthday!” on your wall (if you're a real friend, you'll get flowers), and I won't poke you unless we're lovers, in which case our relationship status should be obvious. I won't invite you into my Circle or Stream unless we've met in person, and I won't follow you unless you're a mentor or someone ahead of me on the trail. I'm not checking in, unless it's to rehab, in which case I'm hoping you'll see it on *TMZ*. I'm done Digging and Pinning and Yelping and Blogging and Tagging and Stumbling. If I'm going to be “part of the conversation,” it'll be from across the table. I'll still be linked in, but to my life, not my network. And my Klout score will definitely fall, but so will my blood pressure.

During my two-week experiment, I asked every person I encountered what they love about technology. My good friend Marty put things in perspective: “I was driving down to Portland with my family, and someone mentioned that Venus was going to be bright in the night sky—right above the North Star. Well, I had no clue where the North Star was, so I got this app that shows all the constellations. I got out of the car with my kids and held up the phone, and—boom!—it pointed out exactly where the North Star was, and Venus, and all the constellations around us. That was super-cool.”

That's the perfect balance: Let technology help point you in the right direction. Then, once you have your bearings, set the phone down, put your arm around your kids, and stare in wonder at the stars.

Indeed, “the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” Who said that? Google it. ■

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