

The Electronic Shut-Ins:
Some Social Flaws of the Information Superhighway

by Herbert J. Gans

Do not quote without the permission of the author.
c. 1994 Columbia Institute for Tele-Information

Columbia Institute for Tele-Information
Graduate School of Business
809 Uris Hall
New York, NY 10027
(212)854-4222

The Electronic Shut-Ins

Some Social Flaws of the Information Superhighway

HERBERT J. GANS

THE AMERICAN BUSINESS COMMUNITY believes firmly that technological progress cannot and should not be halted, and its promoters paint glorious utopias for every new technological breakthrough. The promoters of the latest breakthrough, the information superhighway, come with their own utopia, which portrays an ever more comfortable, convenient and enjoyable culture of consumption.

Being promoters, however, they forget that many past breakthroughs and utopias failed to satisfy the demands (old or new) of actual consumers and are now ignored even by technological museums. The notion of technological determinists—that if you build new technology people will come—is assured only in the movies, where such people can be ordered from Central Casting.

Unfortunately, media professionals and researchers are sometimes also overly infatuated with new technologies and their associated utopias, and a considerable amount of media theorizing is a spin-off from technological determinism. Nonetheless, whether the superhighway's promised innovations in activities such as home employment, shopping, banking, interactive television (including television socializing) and the 500-channel television menu, will actually be salable to real people remains to be seen.

Herbert J. Gans, Center senior fellow in 1985-86 and 1986-87, is Robert S. Lynd Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and author of *Popular Culture and High Culture* and *Deciding What's News*.

good deal of regular social contact, of various degrees of intensity and closeness, in order to function properly. In fact, other people are good medicine, for we know from health research that adequate "social support" is an important factor in recovering from serious illness, and the lack of such support is correlated with higher rates of mortality.

Some of that regular social contact comes from the activities that the superhighway promoters now want to move into the living room. Shopping, albeit a chore for some, is an opportunity or an excuse to meet friends, neighbors and even just familiar-looking strangers. That opportunity, immortalized by the mythic country general store, is still available even in the giant shopping malls, but it would shrink severely if people do as much of their shopping at home as the highway promoters hope. In addition, electronic home shopping would require an increased trust in the merchants who sell basic necessities and in their merchandise, at least until programmers find a way to computerize squeezing the tomatoes.

Even fully interactive television is not the same as face-to-face social contact. The belief that in the future, people would hold many of their gatherings on interactive television seems dubious, except during snowstorms and floods. For one thing, the social equivalents of squeezing the tomato, such as face-to-face interaction, gestures and other body languages, do not come across so well on television. For another, today a lot of people still associate social gatherings with the sharing of food or drink, an ancient way of expressing closeness that would be fatally diminished by transit through optic fiber.

Admittedly, the superhighway could make life more pleasant for those already shut in, as well as for the socially isolated and people with distinctive interests who already crowd today's computer highways. However, traditional social gatherings continue to be immensely important. For example, virtually all the studies indicate that the frequency of family visiting today has not decreased, despite all the changes in the modern family and the punditry about its decline. Television viewing may take up more hours in people's leisure time, but it is a routine activity, while visiting remains a more special one.

Even the 500-channel TV set has some unrecognized social flaws.



NICULAE ASCIU

As a routine activity, television viewing is also a low-intensity one, for people often watch while they are talking and conducting other family or household business. (This may help to explain why interactive television schemes have taken off so slowly.) But choosing one of 500 channels is not a low-intensity activity, and I wonder how many people are willing to expend the time and energy to make such a choice. The breakfast food industry today supplies lots of alternatives for the morning meal, but it has not yet required customers to choose from among 500 alternative cereals, granola bars and egg dishes.

Ultimately, even in its most prosaic forms, social life is not only a basic necessity but a basic pleasure. Perhaps the new technology, or other as yet unpredictable future events, will end people's dependence on today's social life and social support systems, but I am skeptical. Actually, the highway promoters' utopia is currently a staple of

The Electronic Shut-Ins

dystopian fiction. Novels set in futuristic cities or among survivors of a nuclear war are often populated by characters who are shut in their dwellings to protect themselves against inhospitable climates or rampaging mobs of one kind or another.

Last but not least, the promoters of technological utopias, and even the theorists of technological determinism, rarely mention the price tag attached to many innovations. But if the highway is to be successful, it has to make a profit. In the economy toward which we seem to be moving, however, in which the reasonably secure and decently paying job is on the decline, disposable income and impulse spending, on which the living room sectors of the highway depend, will become scarcer for many. At that point, the financially strapped may rediscover a truth from an earlier era: that the cheapest leisure-time activity, other than "free" television, is visiting with the neighbors.