

The Dark Side of Digital

Mass media is wonderful, but real community occurs when we are face to face.

The Los Angeles Times' recent reporting on cell phone use in South Korea revealed remarkable information about where our digital culture may be heading. A survey showed that Korean teenagers make up to 90 cell phone calls a day, and social scientists are now beginning to correlate high usage with rising rates of depression.

For some time I've noticed that many young people value their digital life as much as, if not more than, their real life. A friend of my daughter's sent 2,500 text messages one month. That's more than 83 messages a day!

Add to that another recent study released by the American Sociological Association that found Americans have fewer close friends today than 20 years ago. Pollsters reported in 2004 that the average person had two close friends, down from three in 1985. And the number who say they have no one to discuss important matters with has doubled to one in four.

The social implications of the findings are significant—no friends to visit people in the hospital, weakened bonds during crisis, fewer watchdogs to deter neighborhood crime and a lack of community.

Technology has brought wonderful changes into our lives. Computers, cell phones and other devices all have helped our personal lives, businesses and even evangelism.

But at the same time we need to be aware of the impact the

digital universe is having on our relationships. Thanks to the media, we're already aware of online predators who directly target minors for sex, Internet scams that prey on seniors and the explosion of online pornography. But one of my biggest concerns is how media is affecting our everyday behavior.

I used to enjoy the radio or CD player while driving, but now when I'm in the car I feel compelled to do business on my cell phone. I have met businessmen who couldn't even use the restroom without checking their e-mail—at the same time!

So what's to be done? Are we destined to live our lives in isolation? Although the situation is certainly getting worse, here's what we can do to get our lives back:

Fast from the media for a while. I love movies, television and the Internet, but from time to time it's important to take a break. When you get the urge to check your e-mail during the pastor's message or text-message the person in the cubicle next to you, it might be time to abstain. Take a day or two off and see what happens.

Recently, an e-mail glitch deleted about 30 messages in my inbox. I was horrified. But guess what? Nothing happened. I didn't lose any clients, no projects missed a deadline, and no one else even noticed. Learn to turn it off.

Aggressively develop relationships. In a world where few people have close friends, expand your community and get to know people. Enlarge your network of really close friends.

Build community through church. The church is the original community, and the Bible spends a great deal of time talking

about the fellowship of believers. Create more face-to-face activities that foster friendships and develop deeper relationships among church members.

Where are we going as a culture if our digital life replaces our real life? The lure of technology means that we must be active in developing personal relationships. Remember, mass media is a wonderful tool, but ultimately, real community occurs when we have personal interaction with one another.

Phil Cooke, Ph.D., is a media consultant to ministries and churches worldwide. He publishes a free monthly e-mail newsletter, Ideas for Real Change. Find out more at [www.philcooke.com](#). To read past columns in Charisma by Phil Cooke, log on at [www.charisma.org](#)