

Our Invisible College

“Technology brings us together” is an oft-touted argument of the modern age, yet we all know, deep down, that it is also, at best, only partially correct. I know from my travels that the phenomenon of people eating and drinking while staring at their devices in pubs or restaurants is rather oddly not yet considered universally rude. Once common, highly enjoyable, speculative debates over a meal get destroyed by someone whipping out a phone to use a search engine as the “deciding vote” despite the fact that they only retrieve someone else’s ideas. The irony in this transformation seems to have escaped most. In the UK we refer to this subculture of those technologically addicted as “phone zombies”, something that seems even more deeply appropriate when I try to cycle through busy streets without knocking them down.

You may conclude I’m a Luddite. And that might be fair as I grew up in Nottingham, the home of the original movement. But the thing that perhaps grieves me the most is not the technology itself, but its misuse which is in fact the same thing that worried the Luddites. Where I feel this problem rears its ugly head most blatantly is the reduced effective communication that it can breed. Across all society, even those in academic institutions, there is a resistance against simply talking, whether face-to-face or on the phone. We have moved from an era where letters, phone calls, and personal conversations provided clearly defined layers of formality and importance, to another where email is everything and provides a flat, hard-to-navigate landscape of urgency. Ill-judged emails can be quite destructive, in part due to our multiple use of this medium (formal and informal, trivial and vital)—all in the same virtual maelstrom. We try to delineate importance with tags, bolding, the dreaded all-caps, but these are crude instruments of intent compared to inflections in the human voice, facial expressions and body language. Coupled with “apps” and online social fora designed to further trivialize communication, then, we live in an era with greater noise. Consequently, the signal is harder to pick out. This affects anyone who loves true signal—that scholarly and intellectual depth and the joy of an idea that is transformative.

If I am right, what is to be done? The answer is in our hands. We could reasonably question what we need



The self-described Luddite shows his favorite “low tech gadget” for communication. Credit: Benjamin G. Davis.

technology to do for us. I may also be a technophobe, but I still have a gem of 1990s electronics, a Sony-Ericsson T610 that to me is happiness itself. It only effectively allows speaking and the odd message and nothing else.

I may not be constantly “wired in” but I hope and believe that my colleagues find my engagement with them professional and effective. Here are some of the tricks and technologies (I am only a partial technophobe) on which I do rely:

- Skype/Facetime etc. allows face-to-face meetings that can be almost as passionate, intimate and nuanced as being together.
- Use of email footers to remind people that if they don’t get a reply immediately then it doesn’t mean that I am willfully ignoring them and there are other ways to get hold of me quickly.
- Pad-based, scrawled pdf annotation allows deep analysis of emailed papers, manuscripts and reports that can be almost as immediate as scrawls shared on a blackboard.

All of this is useful but for me nothing comes close to the shared passion, the exchanged glances and the infectious enthusiasm that comes from direct transmission of science person-to-person. These technologies simply keep alive for me the link of common intellectual cause between these meetings but are never fully a substitute.

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As a graduate student watching the wave of technological change in communication cresting, I had imagined, naively, that we might by 2016 have stopped traveling to meetings and conferences completely. I realize now that the reverse is true; there has never been a time in which they were more important. This realization is apparent to me every time I see my colleagues in person. Although it cannot be measured quantitatively, as there is no easy metric to be gathered and reported, we all know the power of such gatherings. The power to inspire, drive, mold thought, trigger lingering subconscious ideas is, for me, a source of aesthetic joy akin to that gained from a good art gallery.

So, this year (if I may patronize you), go to meetings. Life is short, so pick them well. It will bring you closer to the essential backbone of intellectual life—your peers giving you their honest, respectful view of your ideas. Of the things in which I take pride, the fact that a gaggle of wonderfully eccentric and passionate scientists yearning for rigor created a learned scientific society more than 350 years ago as a vehicle for peer review fills me with the greatest warmth. The “Transactions,” “Proceedings,” etc. from not only the Royal Society make for joyful, historical reading that highlights what a powerful engine for good such gatherings have been. While we may often feel we don’t have enough time for meetings, such real-time peer review, eye-to-eye exchange is truly magic.

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