



Too Connected in a Wireless World?

*He's feeling so connected
But he don't talk to a soul*

... ..
*Nobody here anymore
Nobody mindin' the store
They've all gone to another dimension
Nobody here anymore.*

—John Fogerty, *Nobody's Here Anymore*, 2004

When in college, Creedence Clearwater Revival was a favorite band of mine and I still get a kick out of listening to their songs, as well as those of the band's founder, John Fogerty, some four decades later. This illustrates an interesting sociological phenomenon, namely that music is a great connector of the human race in the sense that even before all the technological advances in communication had occurred, many kids in India were listening to the same songs that teens in the western world were tuned to. The Beatles revolution swept across the globe well before the advent of cable television and the Internet. Besides being a child of the Woodstock era, I also grew up in India on a steady diet of Hollywood movies, comic books, and magazines; fortunately the American fast food craze had not hit countries in the Far East (like India) in the 70s. However, this particular column is not about music, media, movies, or even food. Instead I want to explore the pros and cons of being "too connected" in a technical and pedagogical context.

Today we are so used to sitting around a conference table or in a seminar room where most of the "participants" or "attendees" are hardly paying any attention to the speaker but are busy fiddling with their personal digital assistants (PDAs), checking their e-mail, or surfing the Web. I would also venture to claim that instant messaging has become an addiction to many, especially the teenage population. The most extreme example of this was a joke I heard of three teens sitting in adjacent dorm rooms, merrily texting one another! Couldn't they have simply walked across to the neighboring room(s) to chat?

While teleconferences and webinars are laudable on many levels, I for one would not like to see the day when they become a substitute for old-fashioned live gatherings. My colleagues, especially those on academic campuses, have undoubtedly followed the dialogue on the merits and shortcomings of distance education and the concern with the proliferation of so-called universities dishing out education and degrees online. I do not believe anyone is advocating against the appropriate use of technology especially designed to accommodate the changing needs and flexibility demanded by working professionals seeking career advancement by enrolling for classes simultaneously. At the same time, I for one do not believe that human, face-to-face interactions in a classroom setting can be substituted by wireless technologies. On the other hand, teaching effectiveness can certainly be enhanced by new technology.

I have heard from many colleagues that the ECS meetings are popular from precisely this perspective that they afford the opportunity to re-connect face-to-face with old friends and colleagues at least twice a year in hospitable surroundings. By the same token there is the lament that many organizations have grown too big and impersonal. While growth is inevitable and social networking technologies must be used, as needed, by any organization to reach new generations, I hope that we never lose sight of the importance of the human touch. Stay tuned.

Raj K.

Krishnan Rajeshwar
Editor



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65 South Main Street
Pennington, NJ 08534-2839, USA
Tel 609.737.1902
Fax 609.737.2743
www.electrochem.org

Editor: Krishnan Rajeshwar, rajeshwar@uta.edu

Guest Editor: Peter Hesketh, peter.hesketh@me.gatech.edu; Jing Li, jing.li-1@nasa.gov

Contributing Editors: Donald Pile, donald.pile@gmail.com; Zoltan Nagy, nagy.z@email.unc.edu

Managing Editor: Mary E. Yess, mary.yess@electrochem.org

Production & Advertising Manager:
Dinia Agrawala, interface@electrochem.org

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