# "Conversation stopper

- The downside of mobile telephony and the internet "
COMMENTARAO: S.L. RAO

In my column some weeks back I had written about the new revolution that is upon us as a result of the transformation in communications. Mobile telephony has made Indians well connected to each other. Information on anything is available to anyone almost instantaneously through the internet. The farmer knows the ruling prices in different *mandis.* Remote manipulation of household equipment is becoming common. So is the remote control over machines and equipment. Factories and offices have all the data they need at any time, without special effort. Organizations have eliminated a layer of middle management because ERP (Enterprise Resource Programmes) analyze and present up to date information to top management at any time. Manufacturing complex products can now be scattered and without the volumes that were required today. "3D printing", a technique in its early days, enables smaller volumes and will diffuse manufacturing geographically. This could make pastoral living a reality for many. Election campaigns and fund raising for them are changing with the use of the internet. Technology is transforming lives in many ways.

There are negative aspects to this transformative process. My argument here has been bolstered by the same technology which gives me the ability to instantly get different views on any subject. Expertise is available at the touch of a computer keyboard.

The internet and the mobile telephone have made human interchange much easier. Are they also reducing people's personal and physical interactions through meetings and letters? This diminution of social interchange is a growing feature of societies experiencing this revolution. What will it do to societies that have been based on such interactions?

Many parents are aware of the deleterious effects of these technologies particularly on children. So apparently was Steve Jobs, founder of Apple, who famously said that he did not permit his children to use the computer, I pod, I pad, I phone, on which he made his fortune. Unless strictly rationed there is a fear that children will lose the habit of personal interactions and even the capacity for play and sport.

Not just the number and duration of human interactions, but also their quality, suffer. Attention spans decline as people keep looking at their mobile screens for messages and mails, instead of being fully focused on the conversations. I am told that in many campuses, the coffee shops which would have boys and girls in boisterous or scholarly companionship at all times, are relatively deserted as the students go back to their rooms to check their mails.

In my school days over 70 years ago, it was common for children when taught arithmetic, to mug tables up to 30x16. I believe that this almost universal school practice was one secret for the mental agility with numbers of many Indians. We are in danger of losing it as children use calculators and computers to make their calculations.

This extends itself to writing by hand, as laptops and ipads replace paper and writing instruments. People stop writing letters. They send emails or call on their mobile phones instead. A hand written letter has a personal touch that no email can have. So social interchanges become more superficial and impersonal.

Salman Rushdie told an interviewer that he experienced a significant improvement in the quality of his writing when he was writing "A Moor's Last Sigh". This was after he began frequently changing his residences after "Satanic Verses" made Ayatollah Khomeni put a price on Rushdie's head. The computer has certainly improved the quality of language in much writing. The writer is able to frequently review what he has written, and add or subtract in any portion, because the computer allows hm to do so without ugly pen strikes or blotches from erasers. Writing is also much quicker, since referencing is so much easier and comprehensive through the different Search engines.

The down side is that students and scholars are much freer to plagiarize. A reader or examiner has to be very alert

and well-informed on what is available in these "searches" so that he can penalize plagiarism.

It is said that there are also adverse health effects because of the computer and the mobile. Depression, deteriorating eye sight, radiation effects, hearing problems, and other less obvious ill effects will surface in future years. As these devices become universal, and new versions keep getting introduced, disposing off electronic waste has become a growing problem. Indian urban concentrations already have a major problem in disposing off human waste. Electronic waste is more difficult because of the lack of biodegradability. There is also the problem of Security.

Individuals have to design pass words for almost every application to secure their information. Hackers keep trying to out think them and break into private data, credit card information, and into bank accounts. Corporate, government and other organizations keep looking for ways to improve the security if their data, while hackers organize themselves to break into them. As the "Cloud" becomes a growing store for information, there are thieves who are trying to break in and steal the information. Intelligence agencies need more and more people with powerful skills.

The rise of the terrorist group (ISIS) Islamic State of Syria, has brought concerns to the fore of the internet as a means to attract followers, recruit terrorists, and even give them a sense of being modern but linked to fundamentalist beliefs. Many youth (boys and girls) from many countries in the West

and Asia, including India, are believed to be flocking to join this movement. Such mobilization, and so speedily, would not have been possible before the communications revolution.

A whole new industry  has exploded into the world because of the mobile telephone and the internet. It is e-commerce. It offers services that were otherwise time consuming and not comprehensive. Today naukri.com is the largest recruitment agency in India for all types of jobs. Shaadi.com has become the major matrimonial matchmaking agency. Flipkart and others of that ilk are replacing old-fashioned shopping with internet shopping. Already in many cities it is believed that shopping malls are losing business as people shop and get deliveries on the internet. This will lead to a major change in life styles. Most shopping could then be by the family instead of the mother trudging to the shop and carrying groceries home. Book shops have begun closing as online purchases at cheaper prices  become possible. With more books, magazines and newspapers in electronic form, second hand bookshops and circulating libraries will replace te old fashioned new book shops. (One example: the iconic Strand Bookstall in Bangalore has shut down because of this competition). As electronic reading replaces the feel of the paper in publications, there will certainly be effects on family and social interchanges.

We must think of the implications for societies and what adjustments are needed, as this revolution goes deep.

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