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Professor worries that cell phones, etc. are dictating our lives and not vice versa

By Mike Sullivan

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Anyone out there enjoy going into hiding on occasion? No, I'm not talking about joining the witness protection program and moving to deepest, darkest Montana. I'm talking about just sneaking away for a few hours to where nobody can track you down. You know, like at a sports bar three towns away.

Is that just me? Sorry.

Regardless, it's difficult to do if you have others you claim on your tax form, and especially challenging in this age of technology and constant communication. Yep, to become invisible even for a couple of hours in the year 2006 is a tall order. Not only can people reach you by telephone, candygram, telegram and skywriting, but there's also instant text messaging via cellular phones. And if you're at a computer, there's e-mail, instant messaging and poltergeist activity.

Make no mistake - you can and oftentimes will be found. But is this because people are stalking us or we're stalking them? The answer is both.

But don't take my word for it. Go to a college campus. Go undercover. Sit. Watch.

I did some people watching recently at the University of New Hampshire in Durham and St. Anselm College in Manchester, and what I saw was unnerving: The invasion of the cell-phone clones; I know, it almost rhymes and it sounds like the title of a cheap "B" movie that you find

in the \$1.99 previewed movie bin at Blockbuster.

But honestly, at least half the people I saw were walking around talking on cell phones or standing still, typing away, most likely to text message somebody. When did contacting people every free moment we have become essential? What could possibly be so important that we have to contact everyone we know in between classes? Sure, there are exceptions, but there's no way a majority of those people are solving the world's problems in between puppeteering class and medieval history (go ahead, substitute the college courses of your choice there, it's fun).

William Farrell, the longest tenured faculty member at St. Anselm and a professor of sociology, has seen the communication overload developing for some time and, quite frankly, the progression of technology is unsettling to him.

"Students don't go to the library anymore; they Google everything," Farrell said. "I'm really afraid that 20, 50, 100 years from now, people won't be using books anymore."

Farrell, too, has seen the cell-phone clones in and around his neighborhood.

"I see so many people using cell phones and they're just kind of like, 'Hey look at me, I have a cell phone.'" Farrell said. "I see guys in the supermarket talking on them, kids on campus ... it's everywhere."

The worst part, according to Farrell, is that things like cell-phone use and text messaging are making us lazy socially.

"We don't have enough face-to-face communication," he said. "I envision a time when people will be walking around, talking on cell phones and they don't stop and say, 'Hi, how are you,' because they're already talking to you on the phone."

Text messaging is an interesting phenomenon, really, kind of like Pez or fiddlesticks in their semi-respective heydays. For those unaware of this technological phenomenon (I always wanted to write that), it's almost like e-mail, except you can send the message from your phone and it will be received just like a cell-phone call.

There's a whole other dialect people use for text messaging, too. On www.netlingo.com, there is a list of commonly used text-messaging terms ranging from the blatantly obvious to the obscure.

Take comfort in knowing that "XOXO" is still hugs and kisses after all these years, but "HAK" means the same thing. Another acronym, "GTH," is meant for that special person in your life. It means "go to hell." One can only wonder if the great Dick Tracy could have cracked that code.

Here's one I don't get. The premise, it would seem, of these acronyms is to save time and

keep those fingers from developing carpal tunnel syndrome from too much typing. So if you think someone is cute, instead of calling them "cutie," you type QT. Wow, that's saving three letters of work. Impressive.

Some other terms on the site are rather puzzling, like "GSOAS." That means "go sit on a snake." An uncomfortable endeavor, I would imagine, but I suppose that depends on what you're into.

There is also the ever-popular phrase "POS," which the kids all use. It means "parent over shoulder." Uh-oh, better log off, they might actually find out we like things like dating, junk food and going to parties.

But I digress.

Instant messaging online is pretty much the same concept, except maybe you're less strapped for time if you're in front of the computer rather than on a cell phone.

Joshua Meyrowitz, professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, recently published a paper titled, "The Rise of Glocality: New Senses of Place and Identity in the Global Village." In it, Meyrowitz explains we can only do so much with technology. Ultimately, he tells us, nothing can replace physical presence and interaction.

"As much as we may flirt with others over the telephone or Internet, we cannot consummate a loving relationship or produce offspring - at least through the most common and pleasurable method - without bringing the space and time coordinates of two human bodies into synchrony."

Farrell, aside from being a college professor, also serves as the public address announcer at St. Anselm College men's and women's basketball home games, so by default he does more than his fair share of people watching.

"All this technology is making us an inward kind of society. Is where we are where we should be as human beings?" he asked. "We're becoming robotic in that we've gotten to a point where technology controls us instead of us controlling technology."

OK, gotta go. My cell phone is ringing. Or maybe it's beeping 'cause I have an instant message. Or maybe that's my e-mail. Or is it the doorbell? Regardless, someone has successfully tracked me down.

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