

We need to get personal

The loss of human contact in the internet age is shortening our lives

SOCIETY

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THE VILLAGE EFFECT

Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters

by **SUSAN PINKER**

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Total assets amounting to trillions of dollars depend on you not believing a word of this book. What *The Village Effect* shows, in a nutshell, is that “we’re lonelier and unhappier than we were in the decades before the internet age”. Life online goes against human nature, providing only a thin, fake version of real contact, real life. We should – we must – turn away from the seductions of Silicon Valley.

Susan Pinker – the sister of the celebrated evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker – is a developmental psychologist turned author and journalist. This book, being research heavy and stylistically light and readable, draws on both aspects of her career. But, though pleasantly mild-mannered in tone, it is an urgent polemic directed at the virtualisation of our lives.

There are two sides to Pinker’s argument. The first is to show the distinctive values of real-world, face-to-face contacts; the second is to show that these values are absent in virtual contacts. Intuitively, most people who are not employees or fans of the internet and mobile-phone industries will have grasped these ideas before they read this book. But Pinker brings a weight of learning and good sense to the case and, no matter how mild-mannered, she swings a wrecking ball through the virtualists’ house of cards.

Where to start? Well, dating websites don’t work, their good outcomes are no better than chance; loneliness, in spite of the new connectivity, is getting worse;

online time is cutting into family communication, reducing literacy and worsening the behaviour of children; cyberbullying is lethal and seemingly unstoppable; heavy media use makes children less happy; email makes office communication more problematic... And so on.

These are, I should say, not opinions but institutionally grounded research. Nevertheless, they go unnoticed. Two extremely severe warnings from the American Academy of Paediatrics, saying that no child under two should get any screen time and warning that television and video are useless as educational tools, have been ignored. By the age of two, 90% of American babies are watching electronic media.

The simple, obvious point is that hours of daily screen-watching reduces the time available for real-world contacts. This is bad for business, as companies are now realising. A Harvard study in 2012 found that companies that cut down on work-force costs actually become less profitable, a finding that detonates decades of management theory.

Worse still, absence of face time is potentially fatal. Pinker tells the story of a rock drummer called John McColgan who needed a new kidney. In general, such transplants come from families; in only one in 3,000 cases does somebody from outside offer to donate. McColgan had four non-family offers simply because he had a spectacularly strong and loving real-world network.

But, more commonly, lack of real face time is fatal for reasons we don’t fully understand. One study found that socially isolated women



were 66% more likely to die of breast cancer than women with 10 reliable friends. Indeed, friends, in this case, seem more reliable than families, though spouses are important. Unmarried women are 50% more likely to die young; single or divorced men are 250% more likely to check out early from their allotted span.

Most spectacularly, there is the village of Villagrande Strisaili in Sardinia. Here people live 20 to 30 years longer than in the rest of Europe and North America, and the usual longevity difference between the sexes does not exist: men live as long as women. Ten times as many males live past 100 as men who live elsewhere. Some lately fashionable reasons for this (red wine, the Mediterranean diet) are, it turns out, wrong. Controlling all these factors, statisticians have concluded, is the intensity of community and family interactions in the village.

At the same time, as Pinker notes during her visit to Villagrande, many in the aspiring, individualistic urban agglomerations of Europe and beyond will find such systematic nosiness intolerable. "Hell is other people," said Jean-Paul Sartre, and deep within the contemporary sensibility there is the suspicion this might be true. But, says Pinker, Sartre was wrong, other people are our only hope for salvation.

So far, we have not listened to this wisdom. One shocking study of American dual-income, two- or three-child families found that a third of them were never in the same room at the same time. "In short evolutionary time," writes Pinker, "we have changed from group-living primates skilled at reading each other's every gesture and intention to a solitary species, each one of us preoccupied with our own screen."

The book ends with some common-sense advice on how to reverse this process. But, against the noise of those trillions of dollars, it is likely that this, too, will go unheard. All of which leaves us with an odd situation in which human reason and ingenuity are creating a world that is antipathetic to human nature. No wonder we talk so much about robots; only



they will be able to live in this hell.

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Dating sites don't work; loneliness is getting worse





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