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On Call 24/7 Blackberries, Cell Phones and More

In this column, Dr. Chayko answers questions about the impact of modern communication technologies on social interaction and society. Dr. Chayko is author of "Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness" (2008, SUNY Press) and "Connecting: How We Form Social Bonds and Communities in the Internet Age" (2002, SUNY Press).

Why have we as a society become so dependent on cell phones and Blackberries?

Portable devices provide us with an easy, convenient way for us to stay in touch with lots of people at once. They help us make plans, organize and document our lives, and coordinate activities at a moment's notice. And many of them are like mini-entertainment centers: They're fun! They fit so well with our busy, modern lifestyles that they've become, in almost record time, practically indispensable. Many of the people I interviewed for "Portable Communities" told me they felt naked without their cell phones, and that they actually sleep with a phone or Blackberry in the bed!

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What's the effect of people being constantly available to one another?

Well, when there is always someone to hang out with or something to do right there at our fingertips we can start to feel that we're never "off duty." We may be expected to work, or respond to personal requests, day and night. Increasingly, we find ourselves multitasking, trying to fit more and more activity (and social interaction) into every slice of time. This can be a real strain on the psyche and on our personal and professional relationships. Everybody needs space and time to breathe and reflect to "not be found" for a while every now and then.

In "Portable Communities," you seem very concerned about the loss of privacy in the technological age. Why?

My main concern is that our public and private "worlds" are becoming blurred together. Blogs, many of which I enjoy reading, are a good example of this. Things once assumed to be private, like personal conversations, can now be published on blogs and other Web pages for the world to see, whether in written form or photos or videos (that we didn't even know had been taken!). Now, any one of us might be being watched, and any of our behaviors "outed," at almost any time, without our knowledge or consent.

And most troubling, in my eyes, is that bloggers can do all this anonymously! We have to be aware of this and rethink our expectations of privacy. The Internet and mobile phones generate public spaces in which what is published exists indefinitely. We must take special care to remind teens and young people of this, or their MySpace and Facebook accounts may haunt them forever.