



Life in the Real World by Robbie Tarpley Raffish

Where's the "Off" Switch?

I am hardly the first person to rant a bit about the poor state of customer service in America and/or our country's obsession with technology, but a recent vacation had me wondering if the two are connected.

A funny thing happens when you work hard, save up for and then spend a ridiculous amount of money for a weekend at a resort, all on a quest to relax. Let's just say my family became **committed** to relaxing. No TV. No phone. No game system. No email on the resort's free station. No work. Just sun, water, food, drink and toasting marshmallows.

It was bliss.

But when you stop emailing, phoning, channel-surfing and networking a bitterly ironic thing happens: you realize many others cannot. **They have no "off" switch.**

There was the man who could not wait a literal 90 seconds for the woman ahead of me at the Concierge Desk to take her hand off the menu she had just set down (under her hand) in order to speak with the concierge – he had to pull it out from under her hand.

There was the valet who had to answer his cell phone while taking keys to a \$200,000+ Mercedes. I thought the owner was going to have a heart attack as he watched the kid, still on the phone, drive off.

There was the man on his cell giving his secretary orders about what to order for lunch the following week while, ironically, ignoring his kids eating lunch in the hotel restaurant.

There was the woman who spent *six hours* (I kid you not) on a lounge chair by the pool editing a legal document while emailing her office and talking on her cell. All while her kids played in the pool without her.

It made me wonder: what is technology doing to our personal relationships and interactions?

As I sadly re-entered what I think of as "real life" the following week, the truth continued to stare me in the face: technology is making us completely thoughtless of other people. The inability to turn off has turned us into selfish "techaholics." (Maybe we need a 12-Step plan. But would anyone look up from their cells and Blackberrys to participate?)

It was all around me: in the bathroom of the Barne's & Noble when in a 90-second period, one young woman (not a child, mind you) entered the stall to my left, sat down and began playing a video game on a Game Boy (anyone with children would recognize those bongs and bings) while in the stall to my right the woman not only answered the phone but actually held a conversation, without apology to the caller, over the sounds of, well, you get the point.

That week, in rapid succession: the teller at my bank continued a conversation with another teller, while looking at her computer screen, never once speaking to me (not even "hello" or "goodbye") during a near three-minute transaction... the cashier at Wal-Mart had to finish her email to her husband about their dinner plans before she could ring up my groceries (although in her defense she kindly thanked me for my patience)... a police officer directing traffic was speaking to his wife on his cell phone about a problem they were having with their son while shepherding school children across the street... and the woman next to me in line to board an airplane had a loud, intrusive and protracted conversation about a party she was planning while on her cell phone (I asked to be invited).



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What has happened to personal space? Where the heck did customer service go?

Where, I ask, is the @#\$\$%! "off" switch?

Life is going by at bits and bytes and no one seems to be able to divorce themselves from the screen in order to look around. Did people feel this way during the Industrial Revolution when all sorts of automation came into use? Did they feel this way during the Space Era when we took to the skies? Is it the normal human response to take a leap in technology and then be overwhelmed by it? Will anyone look me in the eye ever again?

I am not a sociologist – I can't begin to measure the impact that technology has on social behavior. But I do know this – when folks are having cell phone conversations while going to the bathroom, emailing document edits while sunbathing, and ignoring customers while counting that very customer's hard-earned money – it's time to find the "off" switch.

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