

Connection is easier with 'social evolution'

It's as if the inhabitants of Iowa, 97 percent of which has wireless service, are all scratching the same, unconscious itch.

One of Bugeja's colleagues at ISU sees nothing wrong with it.

"These tools allow us to stay connected in ways we never could before," said Scott McLeod, director of a technology leadership center at ISU. "Active texters don't feel less connected. It augments or supplements our interactions. Not only can I see you over lunch, but when I can't see you I can communicate. Geography has been removed as barriers to staying connected."

But what about the friend at lunch who is texting during the rousing conclusion of your funny story?

"That's learned social etiquette, not the downfall of society. It's new social adaptations that we need to make," McLeod said. "This all came on so fast. We should not expect society to come along as fast as our tools."

One in five of the 255 million U.S. wireless users now own "smart" phones that can more easily text, browse the Web, shoot high-quality photos and load numerous applications.

Heads buried, we're not only texting.

"We're seeing devices capable of doing what people did with laptops a few years ago," said Dennis Dohrmann, Iowa sales manager of Verizon Wireless, the nation's top carrier.

He sees even more on the horizon. Already people locators are used to tell others your location, and bar code applications to compare prices. Soon advertisers will be able to map your location and provide coupons when you pass your favorite coffee shop.

The cell phone industry is selling more socially conscious benefits, as well.

After the Haiti earthquake, \$32 million was raised for relief via text messages.

And at a recent trade conference, the topic of discussion was using mobile devices to treat chronic illness, said John Walls of the CTIA-The Wireless Association in Washington, D.C.

For example, a blood reading from a person with diabetes can be fed into a mobile glucometer and the results sent to a database for tracking and advice.

"I look at it as social evolution," Walls said. "Is it better or worse? It's just different. And it depends on how you use it."

The mobile also has a very powerful function — an off switch.

After a day of watching some students text-message during her lecture, Sarina Chen nearly runs over students who walk right in front of her car, heads buried while typing on their phones.

'Couch potatoes' have power to get involved

"Users will fully let technology run their lives. The immediacy made possible by the technology does not mean you have to use it all the time," said Chen, associate professor of communication studies at Northern Iowa. "The immediacy has bred impulsive communicators who embarrass themselves with less-than-thoughtful messages. We use technologies; technologies do not use us."

Although Chen doesn't own a cell phone because she wants her time to be her own, she is a technology enthusiast.

Since the advent of the printing press we all once were passive passengers on the media ride, she said.

"For the first time in media history, couch potatoes occupy the driver's seat, and that surely is exciting," Chen said. "Cell phones awakened media users' innate desires to communicate, connect, socialize and place themselves in the spotlight, which used to be the privilege of elites and celebrities."

Social media and tools such as Twitter, she said, are the "sanctuary of exhibitionists," which can lead to people spreading information without knowledge or ethics.

But that information glut, fed and consumed by millions on their cell phones, has many more positives — such as an enlightened, knowledgeable population.

It's called the Swiss Army knife of communications for a reason, she said. "I often joke that as soon as someone could pack a one-bedroom apartment and a fridge in the cell phone, we could instantly become completely nomadic, as people were in the prehistoric era."

In Panera Bread in Jordan Creek Town Center, two girls face each other in a booth, eating. First, they unholster their phones and set them on the table, like modern cowboys. One girl types on her phone four times in 10 minutes while her friend talks.

Devices used to bypass unpleasant discussions

Has personal interaction suffered?

We break up with mates via text message or send nasty notes we don't have the courage to do face-to-face.

"I say people first, then technology," said Patricia Tice, an etiquette expert from West Des Moines known as Iowa's Miss Manners who runs the Web site EtiquetteIowa.com.

She scolds against texting during public performances or during most face-to-face conversations.

"It's our own conceit," she said. "Cell phones make us feel important."

Texting really is a 19th-century mode of communication, insists Bugeja, akin to using the teletype, more laborious and less personal.

"You could hear them or even Skype them," he said. "It baffles me. Texting is used for cheating in schools and to avoid discussing things. We use this technology as much to not interact as to interact. I predict that sooner or later we will have doorbell waiting services that give us a picture of who is at the door and we decide if we want to answer. The idea is we can block people out of our lives. It's an escapism that has afflicted the younger generations."

"The key issues in our lives, jobs or apologies, require eye contacts or hugs."

He suggests you leave the technology at home for one day. You might talk to the checker at the grocery, say hi to another on the street or notice the spring flowers blooming.

"We've lost contemplation, to think through our problems," he said. "These are things we have to recapture, you can't legislate them."