

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Staying Sane Under Coronavirus Lockdown? Thank Silicon Valley

Chelsea Follett

March 29, 2020

Not long ago, many people decried screen time as an epidemic. But now that humanity finds itself in the midst of an actual disease pandemic, screens are proving to be a boon to the species. Progress in digital technology has perhaps never been more evident than in this moment of widespread social distancing measures.

Without today's technology, "social distancing" would have meant isolation. From work, education and errands to leisure activities and socializing, technology is making "social distancing" possible with minimal sacrifice compared to what previous generations would have had to endure to achieve the same degree of physical separation.

It is of course true that looking at screens for prolonged periods has its downsides and that moderation is important. But the use of technology to help people stay connected and keep society running smoothly during this pandemic is turning the narrative that digital technology threatens human interaction and happiness upside-down.

Widespread reports have emerged of virtual dinner parties (warranting coverage in *The Washington Post*) and other virtual gatherings. It has become increasingly clear that social distancing should more aptly be called physical distancing — because those practicing it can still be social.

As bars temporarily shut down to prevent potential virus transmission, virtual cocktail parties and happy hours are taking off, meriting recent articles in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* covering the phenomenon. Happy hour gatherings, those fixtures of many young professionals' lives, have transformed into digital social events involving split-screen video chats between participants as they each raise a glass from their respective locations.

Virtual gatherings, enabled by digital platforms like Zoom, Google Hangouts, Facebook Live, FaceTime and others, are helping socially-distanced people across the world to engage with one another and socialize.

Activities that normally involve congregations of people, ranging from book clubs and fitness classes to religious services and group meditation, are going online.

Physical distancing also does not mean cultural deprivation. Many of the world's museums, including the British Museum in London, the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Louvre in Paris, offer virtual online tours. For those who prefer the presence of a tour guide, it is

now even possible to take a live guided virtual tour at some museums (such as the third U.S. president Thomas Jefferson's historic home Monticello), asking your guide questions and receiving answers in real time as you tour.

Unable to hold live concerts, musicians ranging from pop star Miley Cyrus to country singer Willie Nelson are holding virtual concerts. In a similar vein, theater-streaming services are stepping in to offer plays, ballets and Broadway performances online. New York's Metropolitan Opera House now offers "Nightly Met Opera Streams" of past performances, set to continue for the duration of the opera house's pandemic-induced closure.

And of course, movie streaming services can bring the magic of the cinema into your home. Technology has made it easier than ever to hold a physically-distanced "watch party" synchronized so that viewers in different locations see the same part of a movie at the same time. For those who like to discuss movies as they watch, technology also enables a running group commentary of each scene in real time.

If you miss traveling, know that Google has created an online experience whereby five U.S. National Parks can be toured virtually. Without leaving home, birdwatching enthusiasts can enjoy a live view of the birds of the Panamanian rainforest thanks to Cornell University's lab of ornithology or watch puffins off the coast of Maine, courtesy of the private non-profit National Audubon Society. Similarly, live zoo webcams can bring the fun of observing nature's creatures, from majestic lions to playful sea otters, into your living room.

What about errands? Shopping at home is easier than ever, and now that regulations on the production of hand sanitizer have loosened, perhaps it will even become available again soon. For those who prefer to try clothes on before they buy, many retailers now offer a free trial period for clothing purchased online and delivered to the customer.

Telehealth is being utilized on a scale never seen before, allowing patients to connect with medical professionals without leaving home. It may soon be possible to order a COVID-19 test online, with a medical professional remotely reviewing your symptoms, as some companies have already promised. (The FDA has just announced that it has moved to ban in-home tests, but hopefully it will reverse that decision given the testing shortage). The internet can also help with more mundane health concerns. For example, it is now possible to take an online eye exam to update your lens or contacts prescription, and multiple companies will ship sample frames to you to try on at home.

And, of course, online learning platforms let students learn without risking their health, while remote work similarly allows employees to keep being productive while slowing the spread of the pandemic. Even internships can be conducted remotely.

Some recent changes, like greater workplace flexibility toward remote work and improved accessibility of telehealth services, may prove enduring. "This is an inflection point, and we're going to look back and realize this is where it all changed," Jared Spataro, a Microsoft executive, opined in an online press briefing, referring to more organizations shifting toward openness to remote work amid the pandemic. "We're never going to go back to working the way that we did," he predicted. Whether he is right or not, it is clear that the pandemic has pushed humanity to use technology in innovative new ways, and that technology has made severe social distancing measures much more bearable.

Chelsea Follett is the Managing Editor of HumanProgress.org, a project of the Cato Institute which seeks to educate the public on the global improvements in well-being by providing free empirical data on long-term developments.