



A Quiet Riot: The Information Divide and the Cultural Revolution

I woke up one morning only to find that the whole world changed around me. ...

For 20 years, I collected fountain pens. The beauty and shape of the pen, the fine detail of the nib, and the careful balance of the design introduced a sense of importance to every stroke and every word I wrote. Writing to me is an art, but the reality is that I just don't practice my handwriting as I did in the past. The last addition to my collection was just over seven years ago. Not only is my penmanship deteriorating, the pen feels foreign in my grasp. I'm realizing that with every day that passes, I lose simple muscle memory that took most of childhood and young adulthood to train. Now, my thumbs are far more dexterous on a mobile phone than my index finger adjoined to my thumb on the best of my fountain pens.

The reality is that almost everything I write these days is composed on either a PC, mobile phone, tablet, microphone/webcam, or anything with a keyboard. One day soon, I'm sure I will only have to think what I want to say and it will appear before me on screen.

This is just the beginning of how communication is changing. A simple pinch of the thumb and index finger is now more agile and capable, thanks to Mr. Steve Jobs and the iOS team at Apple. The pinch is becoming the standard for interacting with devices and content. While it's something most of us have adapted to, younger generations view this motion as second nature. They don't think twice to pinch a screen to enlarge the text. Nor do they have to think about how to scroll through pages of content. Because the technology is so accessible, it is one of the first methods they learn.

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Displacing landlines is one thing. The cell phone's impact on behavior is something different altogether. For years, we frowned on bringing anything to the dinner table that might detract from the interactions that meals foster. But then cell phones quietly took over our attention one by one, until the table was surrounded by people with their heads focused downward and their thumbs texting away. To an outsider, this conduct would appear nothing less than rude. In her book, *Table Manners for Kids*, published in 2009, Emily Post says bluntly, "Do *not* use your cell phone or any other electronic devices at the table."¹

Unraveling the reasons behind why this behavior has become acceptable will help us bridge the digital and cultural divide. While some people use their gadgets to escape conversation, there are usually other factors at work. In some cases, it's a symptom of introversion or shyness. In other cases, it's simply how certain people cope with a pervasive feeling of missing out. The world moves much faster with every generation, and rapid-fire text messaging and social networks allow people to stay connected. This statement seems contradictory in nature. However, people are balancing virtual and real-world relationships in the moment. Perhaps they need a constant sense of belonging and outside reinforcement to reinvigorate the here and now.

With that said, it is the responsibility of the host to realize the changing nature of human interaction to not discourage outside interaction, but to steer the experience to include everyone in one's own way. Are you encouraging distraction? Are you enabling distraction? You betcha. Controlling the moment is so last decade. It's now up to the host, or in the world of business, the brand, leader, or champion, to create moments that are nothing short of engaging. Yes, that's right. Attention is distracted and there's very little that you can do to reverse the evolution of the human psyche. Instead, you can steer experiences to your benefit by becoming the focal point or creating one.

In these cases, a smartphone can enhance conversations rather than inhibit them. In a piece that ran in the *New York Times* in December 2010, Bruce Feiler explored the advantages of using Google during meals to foster engaging dialogue:

*If you could invite any five people from history to dinner, who would it be? That game seems to have lost popularity of late, and I'm beginning to think I know why. These days, everybody I know invites the same guest to dinner. Who's this ubiquitous invitee? The answer is sitting in your pocket. Google. ... What if a few clicks of the smartphone can answer a question, solve a dispute, or elucidate that thoughtful point you were making? What if that PDA is not being used to escape a conversation but to enhance it?*²

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Banning the phone from the table is easier than it sounds. The need for constant connectedness is reshaping what we consider acceptable behavior. The constant desire for interaction comes down to shared experiences and staying connected.

The truth is that we're always on.

There I was, in Lisbon having dinner with 20 of Portugal's leading digerati. I had no choice but to leave my phone in my bag as the international data functions were down at that time and the establishment did not offer Wi-Fi (but they did serve great food!). Without the ability to check emails, text, or update social networks, I channeled all of my attention on the people at the table. To my surprise, I found a table surrounded by new friends with their heads pointed down toward their laps. Some were live tweeting the event. Others were texting with friends. A few were checking email. Others were checking Facebook updates and searching for real-time mentions of their name online.

Without a phone, I took it upon myself to unite the table around good old-fashioned conversation, but not just with those in the room, those to whom they're also connected online. I asked guests to ask their online friends questions to see how we can channel a discussion with greater reach and input. I also played the role of sociologist and asked questions that explored the reasons why each immediately took to their iPhones and BlackBerrys before placing their napkins on their laps. I learned something interesting. To engage an entire table and prevent them from mobile temptation is impossible. It was the beginning of a realization for me that would affect my work. If I could steer experiences, I could connect with people at the table as well as those they're engaging with on the other side of the device.

Had my phone worked, I probably would have joined them. The fact that we're becoming an always-on society combined with the responsibility of hosting very public online presences (Facebook, Google Plus, Twitter, LinkedIn), we are now all full-time brand managers—even if that brand is just our individual online presence. Now we're paying attention to what others are saying about us.

People will always talk about you, so give them something to talk about.

But this conversation is not just about whether you choose to stay connected through meals. The access to people and information, whenever, wherever is powerful and addictive. Students are focusing more on their smartphones than the lessons they are being taught in the classroom. Drivers are paying less attention to the roads and instead, are interacting with friends and associates at the risk of crashing into those nearby.

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Texting was an early culprit. Then the world was diagnosed with BlackBerry thumbs. And now Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks constantly vie for our attention as well. Bringing electronics to the table, the classroom, or our cars is a symptom of our always-on society. We indeed bring our connections with us everywhere we go. The experiences and sentiment we share are just a different, but no less meaningful, way we invest in our relationships. It's how we maintain relevance within our social network, which is our society. The question is, where's the balance? Or, better asked, how can this be used more productively? How can we keep people engaged and encourage the sharing of meaningful and beneficial experiences? How can outside interaction strengthen real world interaction?

Again, this behavior is already beyond the attention Rubicon. As heads of households, educators, friends, and peers, it's our responsibility to find opportunities to stay engaged in person, and when necessary, digitally. But there is an informational and digital divide that still exists within greater society and it extends across generations and demographics. Whether consumers are online or offline, technology is evolving faster than the majority of businesses or consumers can adapt or assimilate.

■ THE HUMAN GENOME MEETS DIGITAL DNA

There's an expression that's often used to explain why we perform the simplest, uncommonsensical, or most mundane of tasks, over and over: it's because "we're just wired that way."

As difficult as it can be to accept, things around us are constantly changing, causing society, life, and humanity to change along with them. We initially question or resist the events unfolding before us until they either recede or prevail. We then adapt, constantly changing our routines, even if in the slightest of traces. Every so often though, the events that emerge and play out before us are so transformative that evolution is disrupted, giving way to a revolution. The effects affect social development, human behavior, and ultimately, the course of history.

How we were wired is quickly becoming outdated. The new models of us are wired for the modern lifestyle. How we interact, learn, and mature is different. Everyone else is left feeling antiquated, out of touch, or simply unaware of the differences. But for those who get it... like you... you're constantly looking for ways to get rewired to keep up. The simple truth is that things, and people, are changing right before us. We live in interesting times and the change we're experiencing now is nothing less than historic.

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The more I study technology and its impact on behavior, the more I find myself revisiting a widely accepted notion: technology changes, people don't. But nowadays, I'm not so sure. Technology is indeed changing, but it is also changing us along with it. Whether it's through social networks or digital lifestyle products such as iPhones, iPads, and Kindles, we are adapting and evolving as a result. Technology has become a form of self-expression. What we use and how we use it says everything about us ... and we want it to. We no longer live in an era in which we make decisions based solely on form or function; we're moving toward a genre of picking the electronics and online services that define our persona. Are you an iPhone or Android person? Either way, they're extensions of our identity, who we are today and who we want to be tomorrow.

With the pervasiveness of iPods, iPads, and other digital devices, everyday people now march to their own soundtracks, moving throughout their lives quite literally to the beat of their own drummer. In curious ways, we're creating an introverted nation of *earbudsmen*, small armies of people with white earbuds absorbed in what they're listening to, the people they're texting, and the videos they're watching, all while moving.

It's not just about the iGeneration of earbudsmen either. With the universality of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter and the rise of geolocation networks such as Foursquare, we are learning to live our lives online, revealing a bit more about ourselves with every status update, check-in, tweet, and social object we publish.

■ DON'T BLAME IT ON THE YOUTH

With the rise of the Golden Triangle of technology (mobile, social, and real-time), technology is not just for the geeks; it's now part of our lifestyle. How we use this technology says everything about us, and we're starting earlier and earlier.

A study by security company AVG and Research Now surveyed 2,200 mothers in North America (the United States and Canada), the EU 5 (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain), Australia/New Zealand, and Japan, and found that 81 percent of children under the age of two currently have some kind of digital profile or footprint, with images of them posted online.³ Ninety-two percent of U.S. children have an online presence created for them by the time they are two years old. In many cases, a digital presence is born before the child, with sonograms (23 percent) actively published and shared on social networks and blogs. A digital presence is now just

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a way of life. For these children, managing their online persona and relationships is all they know.

■ CH-CH-CHANGES

The rapid evolution in technology is completely transforming society and human behavior. Technology is changing us, and as it does, it can improve how we learn, share, and communicate.

The result ultimately affects and alters our personal and professional worlds. Human relationships, interaction, consumerism, education, media, government, and business are all forever changed.

To reach this always-on consumer, we can no longer continue operating under a banner of business as usual. Instead we must appreciate that we don't understand all that is changing, but we must learn to understand and eventually become part of the (r)evolution.

As change is omnipresent and sweeping, time is of the essence. The only way to understand new culture and behavior is to go native. Going native refers to the process of observing, learning, and deepening the involvement of an anthropologist with their hosts and their hosts' cultures through long-term fieldwork and participation.⁴ In the process, we become digital natives, uncovering the facts we need to improve our communication, customer relationships, and overall business opportunity.

One way to go native is through immersion.

To best understand the effects of human behavior on business, it is best to be immersed in new consumerism directly. Through immersion, we'll gain perspective and develop the empathy needed to later make meaningful connections and shape productive experiences worth sharing.

Understanding the connected consumer requires sincerity. By identifying their challenges, we actually go beyond observing their behavior to become part of their society. Though this is the end of business as usual, this is the beginning of a new genre of business, one that presents an opportunity to earn customers by becoming relevant to their needs and aspirations.

Centers of Attention

- We need to explore avenues to shape and steer experiences rather than discount how technology is changing behavior.
- Mobile is becoming increasingly important in how people, regardless of generation, find and share information.

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- We are becoming brand managers and are responsible for managing our online reputations.
- How people are connecting is setting the foundation for a powerful distribution network that rivals the greatest of news and broadcast networks.
- To succeed in the business of the future, we have to become the very people we're trying to reach.