

Q&A

Tech Attack

With every keystroke, mouse click and SMS, life moves faster—but not always smoother

For some, the consequences of around-the-clock communication technology can be jolting. Take the parents of 13-year-old Sydney schoolgirl Tarni Sutton. She disappeared on May 3 after striking up a relationship in an internet chatroom. Although she returned unharmed the following Friday (she spent the time in the flat of a 27-year-old Canberra man), the notion that adult strangers have access to children via the net struck a chord with parents around the nation. But chances are those same parents have their own problems with technology. Mobiles, SMS, email and the internet may make life easier, but research shows technology also brings more stress. WHO's Michael Crooks spoke to University of Sydney cyber-psychology expert Dr Andrew Campbell about changes in human relations.

What's the big effect communication technology is having on us?

We've got too much accessibility. Work hours are somewhat inconsequential. Nine-to-five doesn't exist when you have access to email 24 hours and SMS and mobile phones. You can't distinguish between a work life and a private life.

Is it harder for us to relax in our leisure time?

There's evidence to that. In the past when you left the house the first thing you thought was, "Where's my wallet? Where are my keys?" Now it's, "Where's my mobile phone? Where's my Palm Pilot?"



So there is definitely an added stress of, "How many bits of technology do I need to stay in contact with everybody?"

Why do we spend dollars on an SMS conversation when we could make a landline call for under 30c?

Email and SMS allow people to communicate things they would not normally communicate face-to-face. They allow a person to plan what they say and convey perhaps more emotion.

Are internet chatrooms really so dangerous?

They are dangerous because children are having more conversational access to older people.

What can we do about it?

If the need arises, there should be ads on radio, TV and in print to say, "This can happen; stalking can happen online."

How common is cyber-stalking?

It's been around for some time in the US

to the point there are police agencies devoted to finding online stalkers and, in particular, those focused on paedophilia. In Australia it's a growing concern because of the access children have to the internet through schools, libraries and so on.

Are we communicating too much?

Possibly, and we're learning to communicate ineffectively because of that. Before SMS, how many times a day would you think, "I'll drop a quick note to somebody," to tell them about an experience? Instead you'd sum up everything at the end of the day when you saw that person. Now we summarise experiences quickly and send them on to people while not necessarily communicating anything intellectually stimulating or effective.

Is the art of conversation dying?

It's changing. Modern technology is certainly killing the art of socialising in the face-to-face context. ■