

Alone: A social life through the Web

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social, because single people have more free time, absent family obligations, to engage in social activities.

Single people are more likely than married ones to spend time with friends and neighbors, go to restaurants and attend art classes and lectures.

Erin Cornwell, a sociologist at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, analyzed results from the General Social Survey (which draws on a nationally representative sample of the United States population) from 2000 to 2008 and found that single people 35 and older were more likely than those who lived with a spouse or a romantic partner to spend a social evening with neighbors or friends.

In 2008, her husband, Benjamin Cornwell (also a sociologist at Cornell), was lead author of a paper in the American Sociological Review that showed that single seniors had the same number of friends and discussion partners as their married peers and were more likely to socialize.

Surveys also indicate that married parents are more likely than single people to stay at home. Those in large suburban homes often splinter into private rooms to be alone. The image of a modern family in a room together, each member plugged into a smartphone, computer, video game or TV show has become a cultural cliché.

New communications technologies make living alone a social experience, so being home alone does not feel like solitary confinement. The Internet opens up a world of people, information and ideas, and does not seem to cut people off from real friendships and connections.

Today five million people in the United States between ages 18 and 34 live alone, 10 times more than in 1950. But the largest number of single people are middle-aged; 15 million people between ages 35 and 64 live alone. Those who decide to live alone said in interviews that they chose to live alone because they had found there was

Single people tend to go out more and are more social than the married.

nothing worse than living with the wrong person.

In my interviews, older single people expressed a clear preference for living alone, which allowed them to retain their feelings of independence and integrity, and a clear aversion to moving in with friends or family or into a nursing home.

According to research by Deborah Carr, a sociologist at Rutgers University in New Jersey, at 18 months after the death of a spouse, only one in four elderly men and one in six elderly women say they are interested in remarrying; one in three men and one in seven women are interested in dating someday; and only one in four men and one in 11 women are interested in dating immediately.

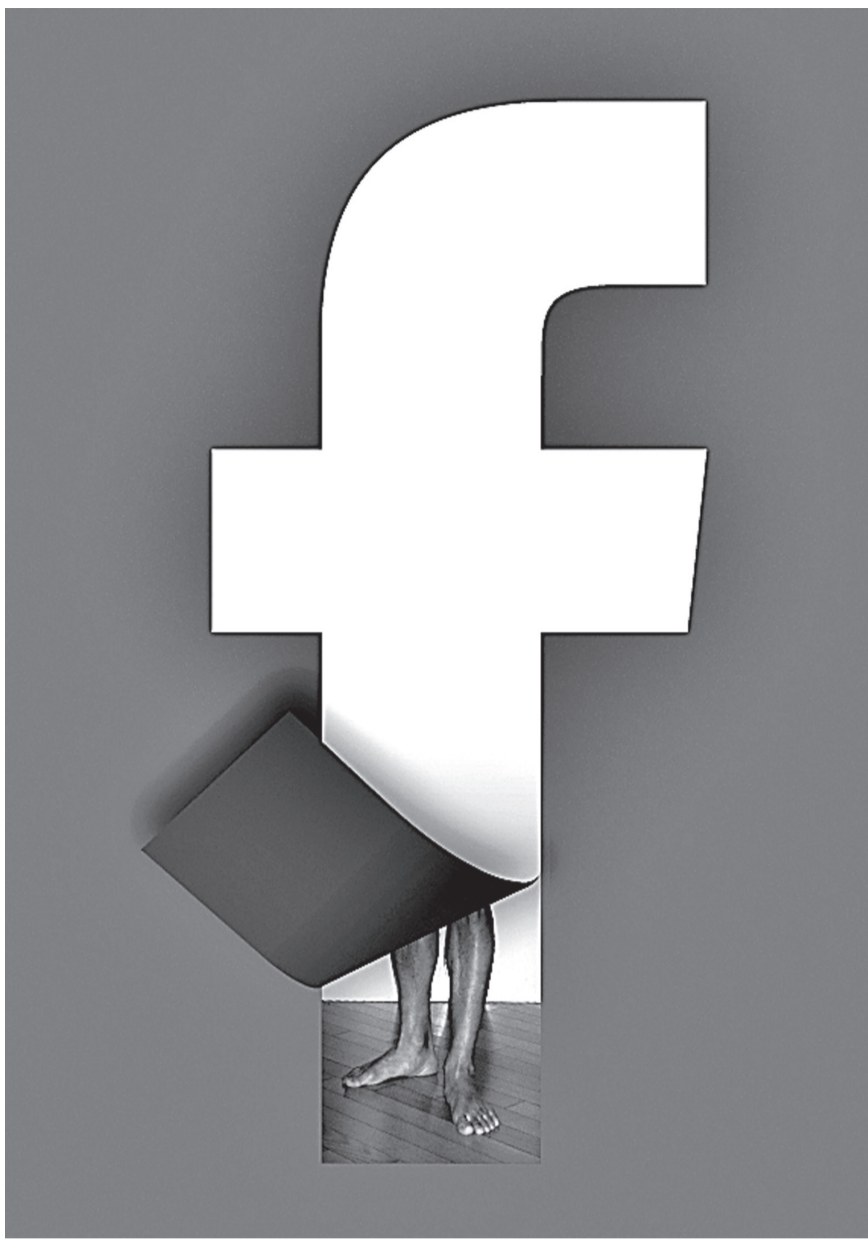
Some unhealthy old people do become dangerously isolated, as I learned when I researched my book about the hundreds of people who died alone in the 1995 Chicago heat wave. Thousands of elderly people died alone in the European heat wave of 2003. But many people over age 65 maintain domestic independence far longer than previous generations did. What's new is that the great majority prefer living alone to their other options, and they're willing to spend more on housing and domestic help for the privilege.

True, the challenged economy has forced more young adults to move in with their parents because they cannot find good jobs; but in America the proportion of those between 20 and 29 who live alone went down only slightly, from 11.97 percent in 2007 to 10.94 percent in 2011. In the general population, living alone has become more common — in absolute and proportional terms.

The latest United States census report estimates that more than 32 million Americans live alone today, up from 27.2 million in 2000 and 31 million in 2010.

All signs suggest that living alone will become even more common in the future, at every stage of adulthood and in every place where people can afford a place of their own.

Eric Klinenberg is a professor of sociology at New York University and the author of "Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone."



JOON MO KANG

Privacy: Europe leads in seeking more rules

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recognition technology. The Netherlands is considering a bill that would require Internet users to consent to being tracked as they travel from Web site to Web site. And last month, the European Commission unveiled a sweeping privacy law that would require companies to obtain explicit consent before using personal information, inform regulators and users in the event of a data breach and, most radical, empower Europeans to demand that his or her data be deleted forever.

"Europe has come to the conclusion that none of the companies can be trusted," said Simon Davies, the director of the London-based nonprofit Privacy International. "There is a growing mood of despondency about the privacy issue."

Every European country has a privacy law, as do Canada, Australia and many Latin American countries. The United States remains a holdout. It has laws that protect health records and financial information, and even one that keeps private what movies people rent. But there is no law that spells out the control and use of online data.

Social mores around privacy vary widely across the globe. In Japan, Google was criticized for being intrusive when its self-driven cars cruised the streets with a camera snapping pictures for Google Street View. In India, the notion of privacy seems

foreign. A shopkeeper might casually ask a childless woman if she has gynecological trouble; school grades are posted on public walls; many people still live in extended families, literally wandering in and out of one another's bedrooms. But a project to issue biometric identity cards to every Indian recently set off a flurry of concern, prompting the government to draft a law that enshrines the right to privacy for the first time.

Part of the difficulty in regulating online privacy is the speed of technological innovation. Just as it becomes remarkably easy for us to share our information with others, it also becomes cheaper and easier to crunch and analyze that information — and store it forever.

Most people may not have much to hide. For a few, not sharing personal information may be vital.

They're the ones who need the protection of the law, argued Rebecca MacKinnon, a fellow at the New America Foundation and author of "Consent of the Networked," a book about digital freedom.

"It may be victims of domestic abuse who don't want to be stalked or tracked, or it could be dissidents in Syria, or someone who has weird opinions and could mistakenly end up on a watch list when they don't deserve it," said Ms. MacKinnon. "If you have a democratic society, the point is not to say whatever is good for the majority is all we need."

Different paths on the road to innovation

By STEVE LOHR
THE NEW YORK TIMES

In the hunt for innovation, that elusive path to economic growth and corporate prosperity, try a little jazz as an inspirational metaphor, says John Kao, an innovation adviser to corporations and governments.

Jazz, Mr. Kao says, demonstrates some of the tensions in innovation, between training and discipline, and improvised creativity. In business, as in jazz, the interaction of those two sides, the yin and the yang of innovation, fuels new ideas and products.

Mr. Kao, who is also a jazz pianist, points to the very different models of innovation represented by Google and Apple, two powerhouses of Silicon Valley, the world's epicenter of corporate creativity.

The Google model relies on rapid experimentation and data. The company constantly refines its search, advertising marketplace, e-mail and other services, depending on how people use its online offerings. It takes a bottom-up approach: customers are participants, essentially becoming partners in product design.

The Apple model is more edited, intuitive and top-down. When asked what market research went into the company's elegant product designs, Steven P. Jobs had a standard answer: none. "It's not the consumers' job to know what they want," he would add. The Google-Apple comparison, Mr. Kao says, highlights the "archetypal tension in the creative process."

Google speaks to the power of data-driven decision-making, and of online experimentation and networked communication.



PETER D. SILVA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

John Kao, an innovation adviser, says successful companies are driven by creative thinkers.

The same Internet-era tools enable crowd-sourced collaboration as well as the rapid testing of products ideas — the essence of the lean start-up method.

The benefits are apparent in markets like Internet software, online commerce and ap-

plications for smartphones and tablets. Yet breakthrough ideas still come from individuals, not committees.

"There is nothing democratic about innovation," says Paul Saffo, a veteran technology forecaster in Silicon Valley. "It is always an elite activity, whether by a recognized or unrecognized elite."

The labs at General Electric are trying to quicken the pace of innovation — but this is long-cycle innovation, since G.E.'s power generators, jet engines and medical-imaging equipment last for decades. G.E. is opening a software center in California to make its machines more intelligent with data-gathering sensors, wireless communications and predictive algorithms.

The goal is to develop machines, such as jet engines or power turbines, that can alert their human minders when they need repairs, before equipment failures. G.E. works with corporations, government labs and universities on hundreds of collaborative projects.

Apple's smartphones, tablets and computers typically have life spans measured in a few years instead of decades, with new

models introduced regularly.

But like G.E., Apple is in the hardware business, where innovation cycles are beholden to the limits of materials science and manufacturing.

Apple's physical world is far different from Google's realm of Internet software, where writing a few lines of new code can change a product instantly. The careful melding of hardware with software in Apple's popular products is a challenge in multidisciplinary systems design that must be orchestrated by a guiding hand — though it will no longer be the hand of Mr. Jobs, who died last October.

Apple has also repeatedly displayed its openness to new ideas and influences, as exemplified by the visit that Mr. Jobs made to the Palo Alto research center of Xerox in 1979.

He saw an experimental computer with a point-and-click mouse and graphical on-screen icons, which he adopted at Apple. It became the standard for the personal computer industry.

Apple and Google pursue very different paths to innovation, but the gap between their two models may be closing.

In the months after Larry Page, the Google co-founder, took over as chief executive officer last April, the company eliminated a collection of more than two dozen projects, a nudge toward top-down leadership.

And Timothy D. Cook, Apple's C.E.O., is likely to be a more bottom-up leader than Mr. Jobs.

"What we're likely to see," Mr. Kao says, "is Google and Apple each borrowing from the playbook of the other."

For \$2 a star, an online retailer gets 5-star reviews

By DAVID STREITFELD
THE NEW YORK TIMES

In the brutal world of online commerce, where a competing product is just a click away, retailers need all the help they can get to close a sale.

Some exalt themselves by anonymously posting their own laudatory reviews. Now there is an even simpler approach: offering a refund to customers in exchange for a write-up.

By the time VIP Deals ended its rebate on Amazon.com in late December for its Vipertek leather case for the Kindle Fire, hundreds of reviewers had proclaimed the case a marvel worth five stars.

Fake reviews are drawing the attention of regulators. "Advertising disguised as editorial is an old problem, but it's now presenting itself in different ways," said Mary K. Engle, the Federal Trade Commission's associate director for advertising practices. "We're very concerned."

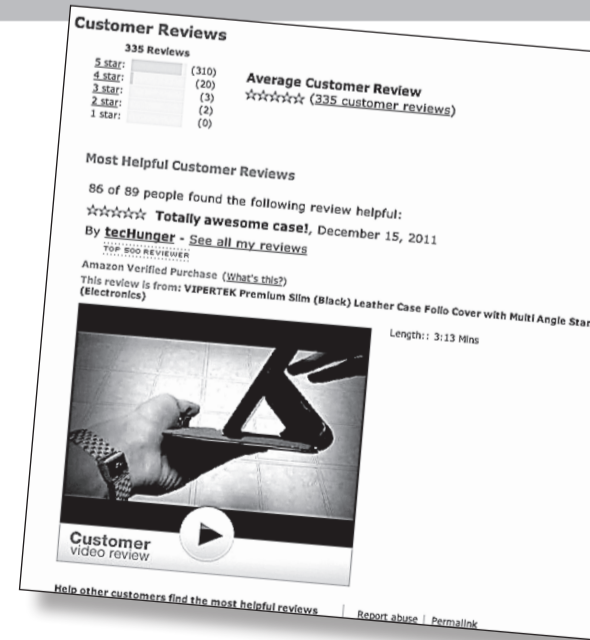
Researchers like Bing Liu, a computer science professor at the University of Illinois at

Chicago, are also taking notice, trying to devise mathematical models to systematically unmask the bogus endorsements. "More people are depending on reviews for what to buy and where to go, so the incentives for faking are getting bigger," said Mr. Liu. "It's a very cheap way of marketing."

By late January, 310 out of 335 reviews of VIP Deals' Vipertek brand premium slim black leather case folio cover were five stars. VIP Deals, which specializes in leather tablet cases and stun guns, denied it was quietly offering the deals. But three customers said in interviews that the offer was straightforward: the VIP page was selling a cover for under \$10 plus shipping (the official list price was \$59.99). When the package arrived it included an invitation "to write a product review for the Amazon community."

"In return for writing the review, we will refund your order so you will have received the product for free," it said.

Anne Marie Logan, a Georgia pharmacist, was suspicious. "I was like, 'Is this for real?'" she said. "But they credited my ac-

JOHN GRESS
FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bing Liu, a computer science professor, is trying to unmask fake product reviews.

count. You think it's unethical?"

The merchant did not respond to further requests for comment.

Under F.T.C. rules, when there is a connection between a merchant and someone promoting its product that affects the endorsement's credibility, it must be fully disclosed. In one case, Legacy Learning Systems, which sells music instructional tapes, paid \$250,000 last March to settle charges that it had hired affiliates to recommend the videos on Web sites.

Amazon, sent a copy of the VIP letter by The New York Times, said its guidelines

prohibited compensation for customer reviews. A few days later, it deleted all the reviews for the case, then it took down the product page. A spokeswoman declined to say exactly what happened to VIP's products, like the Vipertek VTS-880 mini stun gun, which all also disappeared after receiving nearly all five-star reviews.

"I bought one for my wife and decided to let her try it on me," one man wrote in his review.

"We gave it a full charge and let me just say WOW! Boy do I regret that decision."