

Crossing the Digital Divide Volume 8

“Realtime Communications”

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for the Observer

I was born in a big city and grew up in the Bay Area. As a young person, weekends were often family time, and my parents loved exploring the wonders of California. My Dad loved the ocean and my Mom, the mountains. Many a weekend was spent with my sisters and I suffering through various extremes of motion sickness. I got to know Highway 17 early on, and later spent much of my time living in the mountains above Los Gatos/Soquel, and the beaches around Monterey Bay. Mendocino County, in many ways, has much in common with the coastal range communities of the 70's.

1970's:

You could find a public phone, in a phonebooth in most communities, and bulletin boards were common in smaller towns.

In-home phones were inexpensive, rotary dial and provided free local calling, along with usurious long distance charges. Calls mostly went unanswered if no one home, answering machines weren't generally available until after the break-up of AT&T in 1984.

2016

No phone booths.

Community bulletin boards primarily social media, requiring smart phone or computer
Calls usually end up in voice mail, despite the fact most phones are with their owners 24/7
Information exchange typically asynchronous.

My truncated summary of technology changes (in the last 40 years) may not fully convey how it has served to isolate rather than integrate people in a community. In some regards, rural life assumes “technology gaps”: we don't represent a viable market for most purveyors of today's technologies (not enough customers to support the required investment), and those of yesterday are no longer economically viable, spare parts are often no longer produced and/or the talent to repair is scant or non-existent. History has proven, especially with technology, there will be options down the road. Here are some of the ways ‘real time’ and ‘real communication’ can be had while living in a paradise.

** Assumptions:

- * You have a computer or tablet or Smart phone with Wifi capabilities
- * You have an email account (Google, Yahoo, Hotmail, Outlook, whatever)
- * You have friends or family with whom you'd like to communicate and visa versa
- * You may or may not have the resources for some form of broadband accessed

Short definitions:

async = one-way communications/email/voice mail/private message

synchronous = two-way communications like video conference and telephones

Your smart phone, your computer, your tablet should have, at minimum, a browser, a microphone, and optionally a camera. Without any monthly service plan, you can:

- * email friends, family and co-workers, exchange information in an async mode
- * Facetime, Skype or Googletalk synchronously, in-real-time

There are a number of local businesses and resource centers with free wifi. Public places suggest polite and discrete conversations, use a headset/microphone, and respect the ambiance of the environment. Not all business Internet connections are robust enough for video calls, and not all libraries have suitable space for talking. If you're frequenting a business with free wifi, let them know you appreciate it, buy a sandwich, a second cup of coffee, something. The restaurant business is tough, places to sit expensive (rent/heat/staff), and really skinny margins on most products. Wifi is far easier to turn-off than it is to enable. Be a welcomed visitor to the businesses with free wifi.

If you've been following my column, and have Internet access in your home, and enjoy video chats with friends and family, here are a few pointers that will make your Video call smoother:

Quiet space/room. Limit background noises. Keep the pets elsewhere.

Get some light to your face, be in front of a monotone wall, avoid v-blinds, open windows, patterned walls, and limit your movement, focus the camera on your face and shoulders.

Use 'old school' say something, stop. Let the other party talk. Have them stop. Try not to talk over each other.

If you ("near end") and the "far end" follow these simple guidelines, your video calls (Skype/Facetime, etc.) will almost look like television, almost. Television, High Definition Broadcasts and live video transmissions use massive amounts of "bandwidth". To the best of my knowledge, fiber speed broadband does not exist in Mendocino County (that a retail customer might access). Working with what we've got, reducing the amount of data REFRESHED will improve call quality – movement is new data. Keeping the camera focused on your facial expressions, the microphone on your voice, the video application can optimize an otherwise limited Internet connection. Check it out – good video calls take practice!

Next week: Is it worth fixing? Is it junk?