SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

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Earlier this month, Thomas Friedman began his column in *The New York Times* with a story about being chauffeured from Paris Charles De Gaulle Airport by a young, French-speaking African driver who chatted on his mobile phone the

entire trip, while simultaneously watching a movie on the dashboard. Friedman, for his part, was writing a column on his laptop and listening to Stevie Nicks on the iPod.

Friedman wrote, "There was only one thing we never did: Talk to each other. . . . I relate all this because it illustrates something I've been feeling more and more lately—that technology is dividing us as much as uniting us. Yes, technology can make the far feel near. But it can also make the near feel very far."

This is the lament of iPod Nation: we've built elaborate tools to connect us to our friends—and introduce us to strangers—who are spread across the planet, and at the same time, we've embraced technologies that help us block out the people we share physical space with, technologies that give us the warm cocoon of the personalized soundtrack. We wear white earbuds that announce to the world: whatever you've got to say, I can't hear it.

4   Cities are naturally inclined to suffer disproportionately from these trends, since cities historically have produced public spaces where diverse perspectives can engage with each other—on sidewalks and subways, in bars and, yes, in taxicabs. Thirty years ago, the typical suburban commuter driving solo to work was already listening to his own private soundtrack on the car radio. (If anything, cell phones have made car-centric communities more social.) But for the classic vision of sidewalk urbanism articulated by Jane Jacobs, the activist and author, the bubble of permanent connectivity poses a real threat. There can be no Speaker's Corner if everyone's listening to his own private podcast.

I take these threats seriously, but let me suggest two reasons I am a bit less worried than Friedman is about the social disconnection of the connected age. One has to do with the past, the other the future.

First, there's a tendency to sentimentalize the public spaces of traditional cities. More than a few commentators have remarked on the ubiquity of the white earbuds on the New York City subways as a sign of urban disconnection. (Steven Levy summarizes and rebuts these objections elegantly in his recent book *The Perfect Thing*.) I rode the subways for almost 15 years before Apple introduced the iPod, and I can say with confidence that the subway system, for all its merits, was not exactly a hotbed of civic discourse even then. On the good days, most everyone was engrossed in their newspaper or their book. (On bad days, we were just trying to steer clear of all the subway vigilantes.) Now at least we have an excuse for not talking to each other.

It's telling that Friedman draws upon that very distinct form of social contact— the cabbie and the fare—since there are few other conventional urban situations that regularly produce substantive political conversation between strangers. The barstool conversation and the public hearing also come to mind, but I'm fairly sure the iPod hasn't infiltrated those zones yet.

8   Then there's the question of where all this technology is taking us. Friedman rightly celebrates "having lots of contacts and easy connectivity." Still, there's an underlying assumption in his piece—appropriate for someone who writes so powerfully about globalization—that connectivity is largely a matter of bringing disparate parts of the planet into closer contact. Yet that is not the whole story. Connectivity—in most instances the specific form of connectivity offered by the Web—has also greatly enhanced and amplified the kinds of conversations that

happen in real-world neighborhoods. "Placebloggers" are writing about the micro-news of shared communities: the new playground that's just opened up, or the latest the city council election. The discussion forums at Chowhound are dissecting every change of menu in every hot restaurant in most American cities. Real estate blogs dish about last week's open houses, and trade statistics debating the inevitability of the post-bubble dark ages. (Full disclosure: I have, as James Baker likes to say, a dog in this hunt, in form of a new Web site I helped create called *outside.in*, which tries to organize all those conversations.)

So the idea that the new technology is pushing us away from the people sharing our local spaces is only half true. To be sure, iPods and mobile phones give us fewer opportunities to start conversations with people of different perspectives. But the Web gives us more of those opportunities, and for the most part, I think it gives us *better* opportunities. What it doesn't directly provide is face-to-face connection. So the question becomes: how important is face-to-face? I don't have a full answer to that—clearly it's important, and clearly we lose something in the transition to increasingly virtual interactions.

But just as clearly, we gain. I think of the online debate over the Atlantic Yards project here in Brooklyn—hundreds of voices working through their differences in sometimes excruciating detail. I've made a few volleys in that debate, and while it's true I haven't had face-to-face encounters with the other participants, the intensity and depth of the discussion has been far greater than any conversation on any topic that I've ever had with a stranger on a subway. The conversations unfolding across these sites are, for the most part, marvelous examples of strangers exchanging ideas and values, even without the subtleties of facial expressions and vocal intonation, and the ideas and values they're exchanging all eventually come back to a real-world place. Yes, they can sometimes get contentious. But so can Speaker's Corner. Contentiousness is what it's all about.