Finding our own little worlds has never been easier

March 4 2009, By Mike Cassidy

What an author won't do for a book. In 2004, San Jose State University associate professor Andy Wood decided to embark upon an experiment: He would fly from San Jose to New York, rent a car and drive back the 3,000 miles to San Jose without saying more than 10 words a day to those he encountered.

Turns out he didn't need anywhere near 10. In the end he uttered only five words on the five-day trip through airports, motels, restaurants and gas stations - "Andy Wood," "Andy Wood" and "sauce."

Crazy? Well, no. The trip confirmed for Wood that he was onto something - on to something that ultimately resulted in the release this week of Wood's book, "City Ubiquitous: Place, Communication and the Rise of Omnitopia" (Hampton Press, $24.95).

It's a scholarly work that tackles some fairly esoteric and philosophical notions of how we interact - or don't - in all manner of places, including shopping malls, motels, hotels and airports. It explores Wood's definition of "omnitopia," a place and state fueled by the sameness of experiences in modern public places and enabled by personal technology. I'll leave the deeper discussion to Wood, a communication studies expert, and other scholars. (See www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/omnitopia for more.)

What fascinated me was Wood's road trip, which he relives in the book's introduction.

"I wanted to find myself in the continuum of experiences," Wood, 41, tells me, "where speaking with people was neither good nor bad, but it was superfluous."

It turns out that that superfluous place is almost anywhere in America, depending on how you choose to experience it. With the help of Silicon Valley, we have grown into a society where it's possible to quite literally live in your own little world. So much of what we do, we do alone, even while surrounded by people.

ATMs, cell phones, laptops, credit card readers, ticket kiosks, iPods, online shops. They make it so much easier to get on with life while ignoring those around us. And in that way, they make it more acceptable.

One of Wood's most creative tricks was to rely on what social scientists call "anticipatory disengagement," - in his case putting his cell phone to his ear to avoid conversation. (Tell me you've never tried it on a panhandler.)

Wood had other tricks, too. He avoided gassing up in New Jersey. They had mandatory full service there. He made online reservations at extended-stay motels. They leave the key for you in a lock box after hours and guests help themselves to meals. He ate at fast-food restaurants that offered kiosks through which customers ordered food.

In fact, it was at a Wawa sandwich shop kiosk where Wood ordered horseradish with his roast beef. "Real horseradish or sauce?" the counter clerk filling the order wanted to know. "Sauce," he said.

Wood also broke his vow of silence when the rental car clerk asked his name. Twice.

Yes, he talked to himself. He fell in love with talk radio. He felt terrible

not saying "please" and "thank you." And he confirmed something we already knew. Going through life cut off from those around you is no way to live.

"It's like being a deep sea diver gasping for air," Wood says. "I really yearned for that contact."

It's our choice, of course, to build barricades of personal technology around ourselves. To wall ourselves off. To anticipatorily disengage. But it's a choice that we may well be unconsciously slipping into more often.

Among other things, Wood's book is a warning that we might want to think seriously about what we lose by living in a bubble.

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