

# Convenience of technology comes at a cost

November 29 2013, by Bruce Newman

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As he rose to his feet from a knuckle-dragging crouch, primitive cave man wrapped his newly evolved opposable thumbs around the handy tools of his time - a club or spear - and instantly his life got easier. Two million years later, we have ascended from the apes to the apps. With a fierce, prehensile hold on the bedrock tool of our time, 21st century man wraps his life around a most modern convenience - the smartphone - and begins his day, thumbs flying.

These portals in the palm of our hands are passports to a nearly friction-free online world, where long lines are banished with a few keystrokes, where Bach and the Beatles (and Wiki bios about both) wait to be summoned from our pockets, and where global positioning satellites descend from the cloud with maps that get us where we're going.

That kind of [convenience](#) was the inevitable destination of the technological revolution all along. The upheaval has reordered our lives around easier, faster and more impersonal ways of doing almost everything. We've been swept up in a global "service economy" that values bandwidth over balance, and distributes entire industries into new categories of digitally-enabled winners and brick-and-mortar losers: the click and the dead.

It also has upended the relationship between [digital natives](#), who find all this convenience so natural, and their graying elders, warily embracing technology's possibilities, while missing quaint, analog modalities like face-to-face conversation. "It seems to be more complicated in so many ways," said Bill Moore, 58. "We're able to accomplish things more

quickly, which means the expectation level of what you should accomplish goes up."

As the Moore family wakes up in the morning, eyes blink open and screens blink on in every room of their San Jose, Calif., home. Randy, 18, sleeps with his iPhone, the stored narrative arc of pictures and text messages orbiting his slumber like a 16-gigabyte dream. In the bunkbed above him, Dylan, 14, doesn't know where his mobile phone is, and doesn't care. But they would have to get up pretty early to keep up with 12-year-old sister Alyssa, who sleeps with her iPhone under her pillow. "In case there's a fire," she reasons, "that's the first thing I can grab."

Or even if there's not a fire. When her father comes to wake her, he often finds her in bed, phone already in hand - thumbs flying. "Which is somewhat disturbing to me," Bill said.

He has been pulled along by his family - sometimes reluctantly, often kicking and screaming - into a world of e-commerce, e-vites and just enough convenience that he has surrendered. "We spend a lot of time convincing Bill that it's easier this way," said wife Sandra, 44, holding up her iPhone.

By 7 a.m. on most days, Bill has already answered emails and texts from employees at his construction business. He used to have to drive all over the San Francisco Bay Area to deliver design plans to prospective customers; now he texts them, and usually gets an annotated response within minutes.

He describes himself as a "digital dinosaur," but recently he opened a PayPal account to accommodate a young customer. "It was crazy simple," he said. "I almost felt like patting myself on the back."

He recently discovered it was possible to buy nail guns, compressors and

even jackhammers from Amazon, saving time-consuming trips to local hardware stores, but also, inconveniently, starving local businesses of revenue.

In its infancy, the technology of convenience wasn't all that slick. Text messages were composed on cellphones as big as a brick, and you had to press the number keys until the desired letter began flashing. But with more than half of all Americans using smartphones - at the Moore home, that number rises to 100 percent - and fewer than 1 in 10 homes still tethered to a landline, the technology of convenience may have arrived at a tipping point. And families like the Moores represent its fulcrum, with two children who are digital natives, and an older cohort that is adapting to a simplicity that sometimes seems to come with great difficulty.

That's likely because evolution encodes humans with genetic material at an imperceptible pace, but technology's changes arrive in revelatory, revolutionary bursts. It took millions of years for living organisms to develop eyes, and yet in the six years since the iPhone became the Apple of our eyes, we have turned them increasingly toward our smartphone screens. In a blur that began with the creation of the personal computer in 1977, accelerated with Apple's three-i'd triclops of convenience - the iPod, iPhone and iPad - technology has removed the points of friction, one by one, that for centuries held us in check.

We can shop for diapers in our underwear, buy a new car in the middle of the night, download "War and Peace" (for free), play the video game "Total War" (for a fee), and create a collage of classic war pictures on Pinterest. All before getting out of bed.

"These devices are extraordinarily compelling," said Mathias Crawford, 30, who studies digital media in society at Stanford University. "It's great to have your social network at your fingertips. When you're on the network, you flow very easily from one nice place to another. The

problem with that is, you start to pay attention to the things that are on the network because they're on the network."

Those networks are largely controlled by vast corporations, such as Google and Yahoo, that shower customers with conveniences - free email, free applications, free maps - all of which come at a price: They are laden with advertising, turn your personal data into a revenue stream, or both. "Don't make the mistake of thinking you're Facebook's customer," said Internet security expert Bruce Schneier. "You're not. You're the product."

Still, most of us don't mind being slightly commodified if it means living in a world in which our phone is transformed into a stock-tracking device, a video camera and a flashlight. A billion people have decided Facebook ads are a small price for watching cat videos in our underwear.

When she was pregnant with their eldest child 20 years ago, Sandra Moore was under orders from her worried husband to call the pager he carried for the occasion, then he would run to a pay phone every time the baby kicked. By contrast, until Alyssa tried calling a radio station to win a prize, she had never gotten a busy signal in her life. "I had to explain to her what that was," Sandra Moore said.

Unlike her children, who are bewitched by apps, Sandra still thinks of the phone as a phone, not a digital magic wand. She checks in regularly with her family. Staying connected is what makes the high cost of convenience - an average of \$3,300 a year for the Moores' 10-gigabyte AT&T data plan - seem well worth it to them. When Apple's iPhone came on the market in 2007, average annual spending on telephone service was \$1,110 per household, according to Labor Department data.

It's actually the keening chorus of social media, and the online devices that seem to have no offline, that exacts a higher cost on the family. Bill

and Sandra Moore are "driven nuts," he said, by their younger kids watching TV, talking to friends on FaceTime, while texting others - all at the same time. "The younger ones are getting wrapped up in this technology," he said, "almost to the point where they're not sure what to do with their lives anymore."

Alyssa has a laptop computer and a Kindle Fire that she saved for, although as soon as she bought herself an iPad 3 at 11, the Kindle was retired. You could call her a multi-tasker, but she doesn't view anything she does on her devices as tasks. Just as breathing out and breathing in are not considered multi-tasking, Alyssa's generation has adapted so completely to the convenience of technology that they find it difficult to do just one thing at a time.

"I usually do one thing at a time 'cause my dad doesn't like me doing two things at a time," she explained. "He won't let me watch TV while I'm going through my Instagram. I could, but my dad doesn't like me to, so I don't really do it. Well, I don't do it all the time. But I could."

That sort of multi-track life is horrifying to Bill Moore, who said he was only able to attract Sandra's attention when they met in 1990 because she was sitting in a Santa Clara, Calif., music club with nothing else to distract her. He began discussing stories in a newspaper, a handy prop in the early '90s that he would be far less likely to use as a conversation starter today.

Dylan is the only one of the Moore children who occasionally looks at a newspaper, and then just for sports scores. In truth, he can get them more easily on his phone's sports app, but it makes his dad feel good to share the paper with him at the breakfast table. The kids get their news from Instagram, Jon Stewart's "Daily Show" and Twitter. But mostly not at all.

Like most American newspapers, the one their father reads -the San Jose Mercury News - has experienced a steep decline in its earnings from classified ads since Craigslist came online in 1999, creating a free marketplace for just about everything. The dot-com revolution put a premium on labor-saving devices, many of which turned out to be epic failures as stand-alone businesses, but went on to become muscular smartphone apps.

The introduction of Apple's iTunes in 2001 upended the music industry's business model, which had been based on the sale of physical objects for nearly a century. When convenience elbowed its way into the marketplace, the friction generated by hours spent hunched over record and CD bins at chains such as Tower was removed, almost overnight. But the lifelong joy of record store junkies also was snuffed out.

There have been other losses in the name of convenience that don't please Bill Moore, and people like him who aren't comfortable in an online world where there is little serendipity, and before anything can be found, it must first be "searched."

In part because it lost lucrative advertising, the paper he reads eliminated most box scores in the sports section, shrank the comics and dropped stock indexes to save money on newsprint. Bill and Randy Moore still make sentimental stops at record stores like Rasputin in Campbell, Calif., where they pore over new vinyl releases together. Vinyl records were assumed to be extinct when compact discs and audio files made "platters" seem hopelessly analog, but they have become part of a counter-insurgent move toward the "authenticity" of craft beers and slow-cooked food.

With a cellphone camera holstered in almost every pocket or purse, photography has become an irresistible way of broadcasting our lives. Nothing is too small for the spinning and weaving of social media,

meaning every dazzling dinner must now be mediated first through Instagram, then a fork. A Pew Institute survey found that 82 percent of cellphone users take pictures with their phones, which suggests that an unexamined life - as opposed to one examined with an 8-megapixel sensor, and seen by thousands on Facebook - is not worth living.

Once the domain of hobbyists who sprouted zoom lenses like potato eyes, pre-convenience photography was controlled by companies such as Kodak (which filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2012) and Polaroid (Chapter 11 in 2001 and 2008). Expensive rolls of film produced even more expensive prints, which were tossed directly into shoe boxes and rarely seen again. That was how Bill and Sandra documented their wedding, and the memory of that friction is what still keeps them from taking even half as many pictures as their 12-year-old.

Looking at pictures of herself and her friend Tori Romine is one of Alyssa's favorite things to do. "That's where my dog licked my tongue," she said, pointing to one of the 1,039 images in her iPad photo album. She never worries about running out of film because she's never seen a roll of film. If she wants to take 20 pictures of the family dog licking her tongue, she is unconstrained by anything but her own imagination.

Like many families, the Moores are adapting to the technology of convenience at different speeds. Even mom and dad are learning to let go of friction and enjoy the ride. Sandra's favorite iPhone app is the camera.

The ability to freeze on film what photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson once dubbed "the decisive moment" imbued images with a certain power. But with a camera now in practically every hand, the billions of pictures shot every day enter a roaring photo stream notable mostly for its randomness. Sandra has found a more practical purpose for the pictures she takes at the Campbell preschool where she teaches. "I've had

parents upset because they have to leave their child crying," she said. "So I'll snap a picture of the child and send it to the parent, and let them know their child isn't crying anymore."

Snap. Send. Soothe. What could be more convenient than that?

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