iPod World: The End of Society?

Andrew Sullivan

Andrew Sullivan was born in 1963 in South Godstone, Surrey, England, to Irish parents. He earned his B.A. degree in modern history at Magdalene College, Oxford, and his master's degree and Ph.D. in government at Harvard. Sullivan began his career in journalism at the New Republic and later wrote for The New York Times Magazine. A gay, Catholic, conservative, and often controversial commentator, Sullivan has made history as a blogger. His The Daily Dish became very popular post-9/11 and was receiving over 50,000 hits a day by 2005. After nearly five years of blogging and writing books and articles, he decided to take a break from journalism. Later, in 2007, he accepted an editorial position with the Atlantic. Sullivan has written several books: Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality (1995); Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex and Survival (1998); and The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How to Get It Back (2006).

In “iPod World: The End of Society?,” which was first published in the New York Times Magazine on February 20, 2005, Sullivan examines the effects, both positive and negative, of the proliferation of iPods in our society.

PREPARING TO READ

If you are an iPod owner, what is attractive to you about the device? What does it allow you to do? What does it prevent you from having to do? Do you feel any sense of isolation in using your iPod? Do you think that your use of an iPod represents anything unique in our history? If so, what? If you do not have an iPod, what has prevented you from entering “iPod World”?

I was visiting New York City last week and noticed something I’d never thought I’d say about the big city. Yes, nightlife is pretty much dead (and I’m in no way the first to notice that). But daylife—that insane mishmash of yells, chatter, clatter, hustle and chutzpah that makes New York the urban equivalent of methamphetamine — was also a little different. It was just a little quieter. Yes, the suburbanization of Manhattan is now far-gone, its downtown a Disney-like string of malls, riverside parks, and pretty upper-middle-class villages. But there was something else as well. And as I looked across the throngs on the pavements, I began to see why. There were little white wires hanging down from their ears, tucked into pockets or purses or jackets. The eyes were a little vacant. Each was in his or her own little musical world, walking to their own soundtrack, stars in their own music video, almost oblivious to the world around them. These are the iPod people.

Even without the white wires, you can tell who they are. They walk down the street in their own MP3 cocoon, bumping into others, deaf to small social cues, shutting out anyone not in their bubble. Every now and again, some start unconsciously emitting strange tuneless squawks, like a badly-tuned radio, and their fingers snap or their arms twitch to some strange soundless rhythm. When others say, “Excuse me,” there’s no response. “Hi.” Ditto. It’s strange to be among so much people and hear so little. Except that each one is hearing so much.

Yes, I might as well fess up. I’m one of them. I witnessed the glazed New York looks through my own glazed pupils, my own white wires peeping out of my eardrums. I joined the cult a few years ago: the sect of the little white box worshippers. Every now and again, I go to church — those huge, luminous Apple stores, pews in the rear, the clerics in their monastic uniforms all bustling around, or sitting behind the “Genius Bars,” like priests waiting to hear confessions. Others began, like I did, with a Walkman — and then another kind of clunkier MP3 player. But the sleekness of the iPod won me over. Unlike previous
models, it actually gave me my entire musical collection to rearrange as I saw fit — on the fly, in my pocket. What was once an occasional musical diversion became a compulsive obsession. Now I have my iMusic in my iMac for my iPod in my iWorld. It's Narcissus' heaven: we've finally put the "i" into Me.

And, like all addictive cults, it's spreading. There are now 22 million iPod owners in the United States and Apple is now becoming a mass market company for the first time. Walk through any U.S. airport these days, and you will see person after person gliding through the social ether as if on auto-pilot. Get on a subway, and you're surrounded by a bunch of Stepford commuters, all sealed off from each other, staring into mid-space as if anaesthetized by technology. Don't ask, don't tell, don't over-hear, don't observe. Just tune in and tune out.

It wouldn't be so worrisome if it weren't part of something even bigger. Americans are beginning to narrowcast their own lives. You get your news from your favorite blogs, the ones that don't challenge your own view of the world. You tune into a paid satellite radio service that also aims directly at a small market — for New Age fanatics, or liberal talk, or Christian rock. Television is all cable. Culture is all subculture. Your cell-phones can receive email feeds of your favorite blogger's latest thoughts — seconds after he has posted them — or sports scores for your own team, or stock quotes of just your portfolio. Technology has given us finally a universe entirely for ourselves — where the serendipity of meeting a new stranger, or hearing a piece of music we would never choose for ourselves, or an opinion that might actually force us to change our mind about something are all effectively banished. Atomization by little white boxes and cell-phones. Society without the social. Others who are chosen — not met at random.

Human beings have never lived like this before. Yes, we have always had homes or retreats or places where we went to relax or unwind or shut the world out. But we didn't walk around the world like hermit crabs with our isolation surgically attached. Music in particular was once the preserve of the living room or the concert hall. It was sometimes solitary but it was primarily a shared experience, something that brought people together, gave them the comfort of knowing that others too understood the pleasure of that Brahms symphony or that Beatles album.

But music is as atomized now as living is. And it's also secret. That bloke next to you on the bus could be listening to heavy metal or Gregorian chant. You'll never know. And so, bit by bit, you'll never really know him. And by his very white wires, he is indicating he doesn't really want to know you.

What do we get from this? The awareness of more music, more often. The chance to slip away for a while from everydayness, to give our lives our own sound-track, to still the monotony of the commute, to listen more closely and carefully to music that can lift you up and keep you going. We become masters of our own interests, more connected to people like us over the Internet, more instantly in touch with anything we want or need or think we want and think we need. Ever tried a stairmaster in silence? And why not listen to a Haydn trio while in line at Tesco?

But what are we missing? That hilarious shard of an overheard conversation that stays with you all day; the child whose chatter on the sidewalk takes you back to your own early memories; birdsong; weather; accents; the laughter of others; and those thoughts that come not by filling your head with selected diversion, but by allowing your mind to wander aimlessly through the regular background noise of human and mechanical life. External stimulation can crowd out the interior mind. Even the boredom that we flee has its uses. We are forced to find our own means to overcome it. And so we enrich our life from within, rather than from the static of white wires.

It's hard to give up, though, isn't it? Not so long ago, I was on a trip and realized I had left my iPod behind. Panic. But then something else. I noticed the rhythms of others again, the sound of the airplane, the opinions of the cabby, the small social cues that had been obscured before. I noticed how others related to each other. And I felt just a little bit connected again. And a little more aware. Try it. There's a world out there. And it has a soundtrack all its own.

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT THE TEXT

Sullivan's title asks whether iPod world represents the end of society. Do you think Sullivan answers his own question? If so, how and where in the text does he do so? If not, why might Sullivan have left the question for us to answer? Explain.

QUESTIONS ON SUBJECT

1. What is Sullivan's thesis in this essay? (Glossary: Thesis)
2. What does Sullivan see as the benefits of iPod world? What does he see as the drawbacks?
3. What does Sullivan mean when he writes in paragraph 5, "Culture is all subculture"?
4. What suggestion does Sullivan make at the conclusion of his essay? Is his suggestion an appropriate conclusion for his essay? (Glossary: Beginnings/Endings)

QUESTIONS ON STRATEGY

1. What particular features of the iPod lead to the effects Sullivan points out?
2. In paragraph 3, Sullivan equates iPod world to a cult or religion. How does his analogy work? (Glossary: Analogy)