

DECEMBER 27

Tailgated by media technology

The last few days of every year bring a heightened sense of time passing, never to return. "Not always so," the end of a calendar reminds us. When Time recently invited readers to pick up their mobile phones and participate in a "wireless poll," the question was: "Who's your pick for Person of the Year?" The magazine offered three choices in addition to George W. Bush. Those options — Kofi Annan, Martha Stewart and the Boston Red Sox — were certainly eclectic enough, typifying the grab-bag qualities of mass media. If there was any kind of common thread to the list (other than fame), I couldn't grasp it.

In fact, every day the array of mass-media fixations is a very big swirl of disconnects. The news terrain provides us with cornucopias of incongruities. We can be kept busy thinking about anything from the latest car-bombings in Iraq to Julia Roberts' twins. Often, media outlets seem to be weapons of mass distraction, trained on our brains.

The year's end is a good time to pause and reflect. For many of us, at least for a few days, the usual treadmill of clocked obligations has receded. There may be more time to think. And that might involve becoming more dismissive of news media.

People who want to keep up with "the news" are apt to become overloaded with too much input and scant insight. Meanwhile, technology doesn't necessarily supply any solution. For most Americans, checking for the latest on the Web is apt to mean navigating a continually expansive — yet corporately circumscribed — universe of hyperlinks. A visit to a heavily trafficked site like CNN is scarcely more adventurous than tuning in to the cable network counterpart.

The limited content and political outlooks of mainstream media are huge ongoing problems. So are the information — or, if you prefer, "disinformation" — overloads. This is not a Luddite complaint. It's no surprise that many who disclaim interest in utilizing modern technology still end up choosing to rely on it. (One back-to-the-land advocate, a well-known poet, extolls the virtues of writing with a pencil. It turns out that his wife types his verses and essays.) That's our "techno-future," and most people want to be part of it.

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But while a large number of choices beckon consumers beyond basic cable — and a trip to a single Web site can keep people clicking for hours — the expansion of TV channels and cyberspace has done nothing to expand human memory. It may sound like the unremarkable obvious, but we really ought to keep reminding ourselves that we have the same basic brains now as we did before computers came along. The digital age has changed a lot, but human physiology is another matter.

One of the big challenges we face on this planet, as individuals and as societies, is to reconcile the exponential growth of communications techno-systems with the infinitesimal growth of our thinking systems. Let's face it — we can't keep pace. Even teeny-weeny handhelds, let alone gigabyte desktops, are now doing so much so fast that it's all a lot more than one brain could possibly handle. You can't exactly pull out a credit card and get yourself a gray-matter upgrade.

We might fall back on the simple observation that most technology is not "good" or "bad." We ought to evaluate its merits on the basis of who dominates it and to what ends it is harnessed.

"The traditional notion of the 'neutrality' of technology can no longer be maintained," social theorist Herbert Marcuse pointed out 40 years ago. "Technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put; the technological society is a system of domination which operates already in the concept and construction of techniques."

As 2005 appears, some inner voices in the wind are telling us: Think for yourself. And don't let the latest media technology stampede you like some speedster who's tailgating you along a convoluted road.

Sometimes faster is downright dangerous to our health. The refusal to try to keep up with the latest technological fixations can be understood as a labor issue and a human-rights concern. Most of all, perhaps, it will come down to a matter of sanity.

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