JWT

## WORK IN PROGRESS THE NEW ANTISOCIAL

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Right around the time that Elvis was singing "I'm so lonesome, I could cry," Jean-Paul Sartre was writing the immortal words "L'enfer c'est les autres" (Hell is other people). There you have the two extremes. Across time and geographies, people have had to find a balance between their need for contact with others and their need for personal space, a balance between their individual interests and the interests of the wider community they live in.

Today, it seems that the balance is tilting toward individual interests. Whether it's bling-loving urban youth, the spoiled "little emperors" of China, singletons around the world or the pleasure-seeking older SKI (spend the kids' inheritance) consumers in mature economies, consumers are embracing self-expression, self-development and self-indulgence. With more consumer choice than ever before and the widespread availability of new technologies, they're choosing self-gratifying products and services. And these increasingly self-centered attitudes have antisocial effects that may be detrimental to communities and to people's longer-term interests.

It's not only old contrarian Luddites who are concerned about the antisocial impact of modern technology and consumerism. Howard Rheingold, a pioneer of virtual communities described by MIT Press as "the first citizen of the Internet," wrote in 1999: "Technology is my native tongue. I'm online six hours a day. I have a cell phone, voicemail, fax, laptop, and palmtop. I'm connected—and lately, I've been wondering where all this equipment is leading me. I've found myself asking a question that's both disquieting and intriguing: What kind of person am I becoming as a result of all this stuff?"

There are few prominent people asking that kind of question, and even fewer established communities. Rheingold is one of several pioneers who have looked at how a famously traditional religious community, the Amish, decides which technologies to permit. As he reports it, their core question when considering any technology is: Does it bring us together or draw us apart? In other words, is it a benefit or a detriment to the community?



Key developments in business, technology and society are widely believed to be drawing people apart from each other, and this is generally seen as a troubling development. This belief is reflected in Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. But while the book was generally acclaimed, its critics argue that this trend is not particularly new—that people have been warning against the decline of community life since the 1920s. And they note that the doomsayers are just not able to see or evaluate new forms of social connection that are springing up. At the same time, some disappearing forms of community had negative aspects too: bigotry, cliquishness and xenophobia being just a few.

As this issue of *Work in Progress* demonstrates, "the New Antisocial" is increasingly a fact of modern life—for better or for worse. The hissing and thumping of earphones, personalized ring tones and loud cell phone conversations are just part of the soundscape of public life today. We examine what's driving the rise of the New Antisocial and how this trend is affecting the market spaces in which brands play. We also look at what's happening from different perspectives and in different global contexts. And we take into account the notion that the New Antisocial may contain the beginnings of something else: the New Social.



Think of the word "antisocial" and you may imagine an abusive person in a fit of road rage or maybe a loud-music-playing neighbor. Or, worse still, muggers, burglars and drug dealers. Certainly, their behavior is "opposed or detrimental to social order or the principles on which society is constituted." These people bother others, and they may even harm others. Britain has even issued ASBOs, or Antisocial Behavior Orders, to try to curb them.

But antisocial can also mean being reclusive and unwilling to participate in society. And when there are many reclusive people in a society, there's not much community. Our consumer choices can also be antisocial, when they only take into account personal needs and disregard any impact on others. And the fact is, technology and the whole thrust of modern consumerism encourage us all to indulge our self-interest.

Individually, each little choice for self-interest is trivial. But now that many more individuals have access to so much more power—purchasing power, communications power and horsepower, to name three—their actions aggregate and have far wider impact. Those actions can add up to trends that are detrimental to the welfare of others.

It can be tricky, however, to decide between what is truly antisocial and what just seems to be. For example, just a few generations ago, bigger families with many children were the norm. Children were expected to work for the good of the family, to bring home money and to look after their parents as they aged. Now, many couples are opting not to have children at all, and most have only a few children in whom they invest a great deal of money. Yet fewer parents count



on their children caring for them in old age; they invest in their children not out of self-interest but because they think it's the right thing to do. So who is being selfish and antisocial—people with children or people without?

Some might argue that people who choose not to have children are being selfish and antisocial, putting personal convenience ahead of social contribution; they are not adding to the pool of workers who will finance future social services. Those who choose not to have children may equally say that parents are being selfish and antisocial by adding more consumers to a heavily populated planet.

The fragmentation of demographic groups is also a hot issue with antisocial implications. Groucho Marx famously commented, "I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member," and now in 2007, U.S. presidential hopeful Barack Obama has made it clear that he doesn't identify with the politics of the baby boomer generation of which he is a part—demographically, at least.

As people become more educated, self-aware and self-focused, they are becoming less inclined to align their interests with groups and more intent on finding their own way. At first glance, aligning with a group or a cause undoubtedly seems like the social thing to do, while doing your own thing appears antisocial. Yet not every grouping ends up having beneficial effects for the wider community. And when being part of a group involves suspending judgment, then the results can be detrimental to many.

In his best-selling book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, *New Yorker* staff writer James Surowiecki describes the conditions under which being part of a crowd leads to a herd mentality and even mass hysteria. Crowds are at their wisest, he says, when people have access to their own information and can make up their minds without pressure to conform with those around them.

Traditional notions of what is social don't automatically lead to wider social benefits—they can end up having negative effects. And what is traditionally seen as antisocial may actually benefit society.



While they bring plenty of benefits, free markets and consumer culture also encourage consumers to seek ever-increasing personal benefit at ever-decreasing personal cost.

When rock icon Jim Morrison growled, "We want the world, and we want it now" in 1967, it sounded like the threat of a wild generation demanding social and political change. Respectable people didn't think such things, let alone say them—it sounded spoiled and selfish, especially to generations that had lived through the privations of the Depression and World War II.

Forty years later, "We want the world, and we want it now" sounds like only a slight exaggeration of consumers' expectations. So brands are doing their best to create products that do offer it all, right now. After all, people are usually more motivated by the prospect of immediate pleasure than pleasure at some future point. "Why wait?" is the thrust of countless sales pitches. As the launch



advertising for a U.K. credit card said, "It takes the waiting out of wanting." Business is more or less forced to promise consumers immediate gratification.

But while many consumers tend to seek instant gratification, they also recognize that it may have long-term costs. That's why many a New Year's resolution involves quitting smoking, eating or drinking less, or indulging in fewer shopping sprees. Delaying gratification can save money and improve one's health, among many other benefits.

Few industries, however, have any interest in delaying consumer gratification; when people buy fewer packs of cigarettes or stop ordering dessert with dinner, it's bad for business. On a bigger scale, governments sometimes have an interest in encouraging consumers to spend—when millions of consumers rein in their spending, whole economies slow down, as happened in Japan and Germany for much of the 1990s. Of course, consumer spending can also fuel inflation, so sometimes governments seek to curb it.

So for two of the three players in the consumer economy—government and consumers—resisting the urge to splurge is good at least some of the time. But for the third player—business—the more consumers spend, the better. Brands say: "Buy now, pay later." They do their best to stimulate consumers' self-gratifying impulses.

Today's global economy is helping them achieve that. Thanks to cheap outsourced manufacturing, cheap bulk transportation and lean, low-cost operations, there's fierce competition between corporations to trump each other on features and undercut each other on price. And it's easier than ever for today's credit-equipped consumers to fund instant self-gratification.

It would all be very simple if instant gratification were just about getting hold of stuff quickly and consuming it. But in many product areas, the gratification comes not just from the physical attributes of the product itself but from what consumers think and feel about the product in relation to their self-image and their values. As people become more educated about the wider implications of their consumption (e.g., environmental impact, fair trade), new ethical factors enter into purchasing decisions. At the same time, brands are building these considerations into their offers, thereby reconciling instant gratification and good conscience.



The major technology developments over the last several decades have been driven by consumer markets in which "personal" and "personalized" are the key goals (personal computers, personal digital assistants, etc.). Indeed, most big consumer technology advances of recent years have encouraged people to become more distant from each other.

Take entertainment. For most of recorded history, live stage shows involved the audience as active participants. They moved around, called out comments, threw things, laughed or booed. With the advent of movies, audiences started to





become passive viewers; this was one-way entertainment, although it was also a communal experience. Then along came television, allowing people to consume "all you can watch" entertainment in private.

And now, within the home itself, people are becoming isolated from each other—everyone is watching a different channel on a different screen in a different part of the house, perhaps scanning TiVo selections, watching a DVD or playing a video game. And with video-on-demand and DVD-mailing services such as Netflix, there's no longer even a need to leave the home to obtain almost any kind of movie or TV show.

Musical entertainment has gone through a similar process. Gramophones and then radio brought music out of performance venues and into the home. Then came personal stereos like Sony's Walkman, which allowed listeners to move around in their own personal bubbles of sound. And with the advent of the iPod and other digital music players, these bubbles of sound have greatly multiplied. At the same time, technology has made it easy to find whatever song or CD one wants online—it's not necessary to go out to a physical store and interact with other music fans face-to-face. People now buy music remotely and consume it in perfect isolation even in the midst of a crowd—no wonder iPod's advertising features self-absorbed lone individuals grooving to their own beats.

Telephony has also become more personal, and more selfish. The cell phone has largely ousted the fixed-line phone that once served all household members. Now each person can have his or her own conversation concurrently. Out of the home, the cell phone allows us to carry our personal communication space with us. Or rather, to feel as if we're in a personal communication space, even if we're actually on a crowded train.

And with convergence, entertainment and telephony come together. Leadingedge devices such as the upcoming iPhone from Apple or N95 from Nokia allow people to make voice calls, e-mail, surf the Web, listen to music and watch video all on the same small machine. With a pair of earphones, we can remain absorbed in our personalized media and communications environment, oblivious to whatever happens around us.

Retailing has also become more personalized, with fewer opportunities for community. Many of the world's great cities and towns grew up around marketplaces, where people came to sell their goods, buy essentials and seek out rarities. Today, a lot of that commerce takes place online, and many necessities can be delivered to one's home. And on eBay, one can auction off goods or bid up a storm without leaving one's desk.

Telecommuting or teleworking is another example of today's individually customized lifestyle. Cheap flights and high-speed interactive technology make it possible for people to live where they like, moving to lower-cost areas while staying connected virtually. Some are doing this out of choice, others by force of circumstance.



None of these factors alone is a gross threat to communities or a woeful example of antisocial behavior. But together, on a massive scale, they amount to a powerful tide pulling toward the pursuit of self-interest and away from the sort of ties that used to constitute community. Yet there are counter-trends on the rise.

The Internet has enabled a vast outpouring of personal publishing that enables people to connect with others in completely new ways. Many of the hottest Internet brands are those that facilitate conversations. Millions share a bit (or a lot) of themselves online via social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Sites such as Flickr and YouTube encourage users to share creativity, uploading their photos or videos and commenting on others'. On sites like Amazon and Netflix, people share opinions on books, films ... and any number of other things. And a host of online chat and VoIP services such as Skype, MSN and AIM enable people to connect with text, voice or video, person-to-person or in conference. Massive Multiplayer Online Games involve many thousands of people in the same virtual space at the same time. Even traditional media such as newspapers and television are encouraging online dialogue and connections, with their content as the springboard.

By traditional standards, any form of social interaction that involves individuals staring intently at a screen is clearly antisocial and keeps people more physically isolated. But interacting with others—even if they are mostly anonymous, virtual beings—is more social than reading a book or passively watching a TV screen. The fact is, it's too early in the evolution of the online space to say whether the Web brings us closer together or makes us more antisocial.

#### A CLOSER LOOK CONFUCIANISM MEETS CAPITALISM IN KOREA

On one November morning last year, students at the prestigious Korean Minjok Leadership Academy assembled in front of a building of traditional Korean design. Standing in neat rows, Korea's future leaders bowed in reverence before their teachers. It was a Confucian act of filial piety, practiced across the country day after day for centuries. Hours later, two high school students approached an elderly man in Seoul, the South Korean capital, and asked for cigarettes. When he rebuked them for their lack of respect (in Korea, young people tend not to smoke in front of their elders for this reason), the boys assaulted the 77-year-old, first punching him, then kicking the man when he was knocked to the ground.

These scenarios are extreme examples of South Korea's new dichotomy: On the one hand, it's a traditional Confucian nation—emphasizing community and obedience. On the other, it's a rapidly accelerating capitalist society, fostering a generation of individuals who operate in isolation and eschew those same traditions as affronts to their own wants and needs.

It's clear that in South Korea, the New Antisocial is most apparent in the generational divide. Yee Jaeyeol, a sociologist at Seoul National University, tells the *South China Morning Post* that there's a decline in the "power distance": the extent to which the less powerful (the young, the poor) are willing to accept their station and their limited power. According to a UNICEF poll, only 20 percent of young Koreans respect their elders.

Throughout the republic, young Koreans are answering cell phones in classrooms, in movie theaters, at weddings. It's so bad that one of the country's largest mobile providers, KTF, has launched a campaign called "Motiquette" that calls for mobile users to consider others—talk quietly in public places,



set phones to vibrate (dubbed "manner mode" in South Korea) and avoid having a mobile conversation with someone who is driving, reports the *South China Morning Post*.

Meanwhile, Korea's 17 million videogamers (more than a third of the population) spend hours hunched over keyboards, usually in one of the thousands of PC Bangs—Internet cafés—across the country. They pay little attention to anything beyond their virtual circumstances and contribute little to anything beyond their virtual communities. Infamously, one 28year-old gamer died after playing the videogame StarCraft for 49 consecutive hours; the man had binged on the game after losing his office job for absenteeism. A psychiatrist at the Net Addiction Treatment Center in Korea, Kim Hyun Soo, believes that "Game players don't have normal social relationships anymore. ... Young people are losing their ability to relate to others, except through games."

South Korea has one of the highest concentration of broadband users in the world, and the average Korean spends 47 hours online a month. Koreans are also MP3 converts—marketing agency OMD and Yahoo! found that 64 percent of South Koreans regularly use an MP3 player. Insulating the user from external interaction, personal music systems are perhaps the medium most expressive of the New Antisocial.

It's not just technological trends that point to a culture that's starting to prioritize individual satisfaction over traditional family values—despite the fact that the Korean family unit has served as the fundamental form of community. Cases of divorce, once almost nonexistent in this country, have skyrocketed; within the past decade, South Korea's divorce rate rose by 250 percent. And birth rates have been steadily declining, to levels lower than that of neighboring China, with its one-child-per-family policy.

Indeed, single-person households are on the rise: According to statistics from South Korea's Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs, the number of single-person households rose about seven percent from 2005 to 2006, and they now account for 30 percent of all households. The trend toward studying abroad—according to Seoul's Ministry of Education, the number of Korean students abroad tripled between 1998 and 2003—is contributing to the trend toward isolation. Mothers accompany their children, while girogi appa, or "wild-goose dads," live alone in the family home.

The declining birth rate will surely lead to greater social upheaval, with the country failing to generate enough young workers to support an elderly population both emotionally and financially. It remains to be seen how social boundaries will flex and adapt to new social norms.



Until a couple of decades ago, employers and employees expected a long-term relationship of pooled interests with mutual benefits. That's increasingly less the case, even in high-loyalty cultures such as Japan. With the competition opened up by globalization, few companies can sustain cozy long-term relationships with employees.

The trend toward "downsizing" (aka "right-sizing," "restructuring" or "business process reengineering") was popularized in the 1980s by management gurus such as Tom Peters with his book *In Search of Excellence*. More efficient work practices, greater automation and outsourcing all enabled businesses to cut staff.

If this was the pursuit of corporate self-interest, the flip side was the pursuit of individual self-interest. Switching his focus from corporations to workers, Peters encouraged people to think of themselves as brands. In 1999, he published *The Brand You 50* and wrote in *Fast Company* magazine: "You don't 'belong to' any company for life, and your chief affiliation isn't to any particular 'function.' You're not defined by your job title and you're not confined by your job description. Starting today, you are a brand."



With the push of corporate downsizing and performance benchmarking and the pull of technological advances, everyone from savvy highfliers to past-their-prime staffers is free to build a "portfolio career"—and to think in terms of "me" rather than "we."

In the developed world and much of the developing world, knowledge workers can now equip themselves with sophisticated business tools at relatively low cost. In just a few days, John Doe can transform himself into John Doe International Inc., with a Web site and high-capacity global communications. He can build his brand through blogs, Podcasts and e-books. Business networking sites such as LinkedIn and Monster.com serve as a "shop window" for independent contractors looking to build their personal brand and find their next contract.

At the high end of the market, senior executives are increasingly seen as "talent," much like high-profile athletes or actors. This is spawning an industry of executive talent management. Irish senior executive talent manager Ciarán Fenton, owner of YouBiz, encourages executives to think of themselves as micro-businesses and to work on nurturing their "career equity." "Corporate management teams these days are coalitions of micro-businesses working together for a limited time—there's a big onus on each one to take responsibility for themselves in both hard and soft terms, in terms of the business results they achieve for the corporation vis-à-vis their own personal goals."

At first glance, this "Brand Me" development seems more antisocial than the old model of long-term employment. Certainly, free agents often find themselves socially isolated, with no opportunities for shooting the breeze around the water cooler. But that often serves as an incentive for joining networking groups. And those who stop commuting and work from home end up with more time for family and friends. (And they stop contributing to antisocial traffic jams.)

It's not just management gurus who are advising people to build their personal brand and take charge of their lives. Governments are increasingly preaching greater individual responsibility as health care, pension and Social Security costs rise faster than the ability to fund them. Citizens are advised to sign up for personal health plans and personal pension plans and to do more for their own financial and physical fitness.

The underlying message in many developed countries is that people need to become more self-reliant. That doesn't necessarily mean becoming less community-minded. But in practice, it's easily taken to mean "Every man for himself." In practice, it's thinking less in terms of collective plans and more in terms of personal plans. It's moving away from the old familiar forms of solidarity and into a new and unfamiliar world where people are focused on how best to look after their own interests.



Those people who can afford to do so are increasingly opting to live with fewer people in their home—that means fewer family members, fewer obligations and more personal time and space. And they are choosing to live in areas like gated communities that are cut off from the population at large, minimizing contact with random outsiders.



All over the developed world, household sizes are shrinking. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, for every 100 million of additional U.S. population, the average household size has shrunk by almost one person. Now at a population of 300 million, the U.S. has an average household size of just 2.6 people. In Japan, it's also 2.6, and it's lower still in France (2.3 people) and Germany (2.2 per household). In the U.K., the General Household Survey has documented a decline in average household size and an increase in the number of people living alone over the last 30 years.

It feels less isolating to live alone or in smaller clusters when the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, WiFi and BlackBerrys make people constantly reachable almost anywhere. Another upside is that this technology enables people to take their "world" with them virtually anywhere.

It's perfectly possible to create a home that doesn't depend on the outside environment—a sort of cocoon. The British music producer and conceptual artist Brian Eno describes one such place in New York City: "As my cabdriver wound his way down increasingly potholed and dingy streets, I began wondering whether he'd got the address right. Finally he stopped at the doorway of a gloomy, unwelcoming industrial building. Two winos were crumpled on the steps, oblivious. There was no other sign of life in the whole street. ... The elevator creaked and clanked slowly upwards, and I stepped out—into a multimillion-dollar palace. ... Later I got into conversation with the hostess. 'Do you like it here?' I asked. 'It's the best place I've ever lived,' she replied. 'But I mean, you know, is it an interesting neighborhood?' 'Oh—the neighborhood? Well ... that's outside!' she laughed."

Eno's example of what he calls "The Small Here" is an extreme instance of antisocial living—antisocial in the sense that it's dissociated from the world immediately outside the front door. But there are plenty of less extreme examples. In particular, gated communities have become very popular around the world.

There are three basic categories of gated community, but what they have in common is that they all bar entry to unauthorized people because of a fear of crime and outsiders. Lifestyle communities provide security as well as leisure activities and various amenities to residents. Elite communities are mainly for the rich and famous, and focus on exclusion and status. Security-zone communities are located in inner-city and lower-income neighborhoods where residents see crime increasing.

Other types of residential developments that achieve the same kind of dissociation from the outside world include apartment buildings with doormen and homes or communities that are protected by guards, cameras, creative landscaping or sheer distance.

Gated and exclusive communities are not new. Most ancient cities were built inside protective walls with gatekeepers to regulate the flow of people. But within those walled communities, complete societies shared the space: wealthy merchants, craftsmen, servants, soldiers, builders and market traders. By contrast, modern gated communities tend to be homogenous. Professor Teresa Caldeira of the University of California at Irvine writes of gated communities in São Paolo, Brazil: "They are turned inward, away from the street, whose public life



they explicitly reject. ... They belong not to their immediate surrounding but to largely invisible networks. ... Finally, the enclaves tend to be socially homogeneous environments."

As gated communities are to walled cities, so are shopping malls to downtown areas. In many older urban environments, retail shares the same space as residential and business premises in a mixed community; Italians talk of a local store as being "sotto casa" (under my home). But small local retail outlets are becoming a quaint rarity. In modern developments across the United States, Asia, South America and even Europe, consumers are flocking to shopping malls and superstores. There they can enjoy shopping, seeing a movie, eating in the food courts and generally hanging out and watching the world go by. But nobody lives in malls, and few live within walking distance of them. They are detached from the communities that use them, and in that sense, they're antisocial—certainly when compared with the retail areas in towns and cities.

In pure free-market terms, smaller households, gated communities and shopping malls are what people want. They are responding to hundreds of millions of individual consumer choices. Whether they are beneficial or detrimental to the long-term health of communities is another question.

# WHAT IT MEANS

For some people, current developments in business, society and technology are antisocial, in the pejorative sense of the word. They see consumers choosing to do what they want, whenever and wherever they want it, on their terms, and they fear for the effects. They see younger people especially using technology casually and constantly, and they fear for the wider social consequences. Many of these people are turning earnestly to ethical consumption—the movement for services and products that aim to minimize harmful effects to society and the environment and, where possible, to have beneficial effects.

The trouble is, if you look hard enough and expand the context wide enough, most consumption has potential antisocial repercussions; it's just a question of degree. It's easy to point the finger at gas-guzzling monsters such as the Hummer and resource-gobbling luxuries such as home spas; but even a modest compact car is self-indulgent compared with public transportation, and a simple hot shower uses a lot more energy and water than washing with a basin of warm water.

As the scope of ethical consumption spreads beyond recycling, organic food, fair trade products and locally produced goods, consumers will become



sensitive to the wider effects of how they spend their money and how they live their lives. And they will be increasingly interested in whether their choices are antisocial. "Bowling alone" will become a worrying prospect for more people.

For younger consumers who have never known anything but this hyperabundant, hyper-connected world, the frames of reference are completely different. The Internet and cell phones are just another social space, so why would using them be antisocial? It's part of how they interact, part of how they share their lives and times with each other. So what if posting (sometimes intimate) photos of themselves and their personal thoughts online flies in the face of traditional notions of privacy? So what if they can be Googled by the world now and in years to come? In a MySpace world, it's older notions of privacy that are antisocial. In a MySpace world, it's not being out there in the social space of the Internet that's antisocial.

For the near future, brands and their marketers will be dealing with consumers who are on the continuum between two extremes: Those who are concerned about what they see as the antisocial effects of business and technology and are looking for ways to rebuild social capital and mend society—and those who just want to gratify their needs and desires, with no concern for the wider or the longer-term consequences. The great majority of consumers will be somewhere in the middle, redefining what is social and what's not.

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