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Lonely Sounds: Sonic Self Sufficiency, Personal Control, and Social Shields

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Abstract

In the winter of 1979 Sony introduced a hand-held cassette player called the Walkman—a device that catered to a mass culture that had come to demand personal control over the musical experience. The Walkman’s mobility allowed for unprecedented individual control over the environment: a barrier that kept unwanted sounds or unwanted others out. In the post World War II era, loneliness and recorded popular music became linked. For both the performer and audience, the musical experience had become more solitary and mediated over time. This separation occurred in the context of a historically individualistic culture that was placing ever-greater emphasis on the self. By the 1970s the celebration of the autonomy and sufficiency of the individual had been taken to new extremes with consequences for all aspects of American life. The story of popular recorded music’s journey out of the public and into the personal, therefore, represents only one part of a larger national story that includes privatized leisure generally, the expansion of the suburbs, the emergence of niche marketing, individualized spirituality from “born again” Christianity to New Age mysticism, and the emphasis on control over the body. It is a story that also includes the collapse of political consensus, increasing cynicism, and the rise of the new right. The lonely listening style of the late twentieth century therefore should concern anyone interested in the American experience.



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Moe Berger, a rig-building fanatic, “set the cart before the horse” and attended his first live concert in 1957. Years earlier, Berger had become a high fidelity enthusiast following a successful sonic simulation of an earthquake on a “rig” composed of high priced audio equipment. Since that moment his desire to simulate sounds had expanded to include music, and in a humorous contribution to *Popular Science* he related his disappointment when he showed up live and in person to experience the real thing with musicians and an audience. He realized that for the first time in his adult life he could not “adjust the damping control on the amplifier or set the equalization curve on the pre-amp.” Even worse, for someone who had spent years allegedly seeking to recreate the magic of the real thing, the concert hall “strings lacked presence,” and “the music lacked the depth of stereo.” Berger wondered, “where was the explosive force from the percussion?” It dawned on him that he was a captive, powerless, and ultimately unhappy audience member. He felt alienated even though he was surrounded by his fellow concert-goers. “The concluding applause,” he noted glumly, “did not stir my emotions.” It was easy to hear—high fidelity was simply “better sound.” Pondering the fantastical works Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms would have created had they had access to modern recording equipment, Berger concluded that he would not trade “my twin triaxial speaker systems for the best seat in Carnegie.”¹

Berger’s position remained heretical for most true believers in high fidelity, but for those novices entering the world of quality sound in the sixties and seventies, his position was hardly radical. This was especially true for young consumers, who through their experiences with Top 40 radio and rock records understood that music could be merely sound alone and that it was best experienced alone in its recorded form. The applause and the audience were irrelevant, or at best kind of local color. As the hopes for social renewal faded and national frustration rose as the 1960s transitioned into the 1970s, Berger’s attitude toward personal control over recorded would become widespread. As a result, the music listening experience transformed.

In the winter of 1979 Sony introduced a hand-held cassette player called the Walkman—a device that catered to a mass culture that had

come to demand personal control over the musical experience. The second generation—Walkman II—released three years later, would sell over 2.5 million units, and in the process become a cultural phenomenon. Sony's success lay in that it recognized the appeal of the Walkman to the late 1970s consumer. The initial ad campaigns celebrated the diversity of Walkman listeners. According to the company's advertising, Walkman users ranged the spectrum from young and liberated women to tradition bound Buddhist monks. Unique individuals consumed in the Walkman a vision of themselves that the machine not only reflected but also enhanced. By the mid 1980s, Sony was designing different Walkman's for separate niche markets—it had “lifestyled” the Walkman.² Control and privacy, shaped Sony's marketing efforts and the product became associated with the young, the physically fit, and the tragically hip, all of whom could at any time and in any place summon any sound their heart desired.

The popular demand to have personalized sound follow the individual into public space was not new in 1979; transistors had made that possible with radio in the early postwar era. What had changed was the amount of control Americans possessed over the sound and the meaning of listening alone in public. Whether in their room or in the public, Americans shaped their sonic environment, seeking music, solace, protection, and empowerment through recorded sound.

Retailers began noticing in the early 1960s that playing music to customers on headphones, rather than via a traditional speaker arrangement, resulted in doubling the sale of records.³ By the 1960s listeners found that there was something desirable about being immersed in sound that no one else heard. *High Fidelity*, the grand organ of audiophiles, kept a close eye on portables—as it did on all aspects of sound recording technology. The magazine, however, tended to see portables as an afterthought—something an audiophile might take on vacation, but only because hauling the rig along was not practical.⁴ Other portables of the 1970s marketed their wares as psychedelic mind benders. “It's like listening with your whole body,” declared an advertisement for the “Boom Box.” Bass notes came with a “blast of air” allowing one to not only hear but also “feel the boom box.”⁵

Sony, on the contrary, never claimed that the Walkman would overwhelm the individual, or that it was a pale imitation of a stationary audio system in one's room. The Walkman instead was better than all other music systems because its mobility allowed for unprecedented individual control over the environment. Not only did the user get a soundtrack, but a barrier that kept unwanted sounds or unwanted others out. Sony marketed the Walkman as a device that would enhance the powers of or protect the user—making the listener more of who they already were. Music as shield and music as performance enhancer—this was the twin appeal of the portable for joggers and postmodern urban flaneurs.

Sony's chairman and public spokesman/philosopher, Akio Morita saw the success of the Walkman—before it was a fact—as the inevitable result of the cultural zeitgeist. Everyone, he told *Rolling Stone* in a 1980 interview, would soon have their own personal stereo. Those in rural areas, or those who spent the day out doors would no longer have to suffer sounds not of their own choosing. It is hardly surprising that Morita would predict the overwhelming success of his company's product. What is striking, however, is his assumption, apparently one shared by *Rolling Stone*, that the best music was enjoyed privately. It was understood that those outside and in the public—though certainly not living in silence—had nonetheless been missing something essential and would welcome the chance to more completely manage their sonic environment and in the process seal themselves off from the distractions, including other people, who currently surrounded them.⁶

The portable cassette player was, in Morita's view, the logical next step in the ongoing sonic fight to combat seventies feelings of individual weakness and powerlessness. Unlike the room-bound high fidelity rig, it did not keep one cooped up indoors, yet neither did it expose one in the unpredictable public realm. Its private noise and public silence gave one the opportunity to be both among people and yet remain apart—making the Walkman simultaneously (and seductively) subversive and safe. "We do not return to individualized or privatized emotions when we use the Walkman," Rey Chow said extolling the device's liberating and revolutionary aspects, "rather the

Walkman's artificiality makes us aware of the impending presence of the collective, which summons us with the infallibility of sleep-walker." That presence, however, is not forced upon the individual by "the loudspeakers of history" that radio or the public address systems of the past had.⁷ It did not overwhelm, rather the Walkman at last permitted the listener to resist the siren song of the collective without having to hide away in one's room. One could be public without the fear of losing one's individuality. The mobility, the smallness, and the accessibility of the Walkman were its greatest assets, allowing it to obliterate any lingering traditional understanding of music that emphasized the social nature and sense of collective obligation inherent in a live performance.

Personal control was the defining feature of the 1970s listening style—the proponents of portable stereo sound argued that the new technologies of control expanded democracy and empowered the individual at the expense of the powerful corporate machinery. They continued the revolutionary struggle of the 1960s. That former counterculture mainstay, *Rolling Stone*, displayed an especially intense late-seventies obsession with the modern technology the promise of control. Equalizers, micros, and something as sinister sounding as Advent Corporation's "Sound Space Control" excited the former revolutionaries at *Rolling Stone* more than any Springsteen record. "So, at your option," *Rolling Stone* explained to its readers, "you could make, say, *Abbey Road* sound as if the Beatles were performing it in your bathroom (two-millisecond delay, wet) or in Albert Hall (sixty-millisecond delay, dry)."⁸ Given *Rolling Stone's* youth culture roots, this desire to manipulate that culture's heroes is significant. The Beatles no longer were the avatars whose messages required one's complete attention, but sonic clay in the hands of the modern listener. Technology provided the listener with the choice to accept the Beatles (or Beethoven) as intended, piecemeal, or not all.

Electronics companies often claimed listening to recorded sound on expensive equipment also provided overwhelmed listeners with an escape from social obligations. Stanton Corporation's 1977 playful advertisement for its quadraphonic headphones featured a series of photos in which individuals wearing the headphones avoided dealing with

a variety of domestic problems. In one, a woman stood with her eyes closed blissfully unaware of the crying baby in her arms. The man in the next photo smiled while working a chain saw over what appeared to be house beam, and in a series of three photos, a woman in curlers harangued a man sitting peacefully reading a newspaper. A pair of Stanton headphones had relieved these three lucky individuals and allowed them to enjoy the music being piped into their ears and, most important of all, their own privacy. If, as Jean-Paul Sartre claimed, hell is other people, Stanton offered a tool toward isolated salvation.⁹

The poverty of a modern life lacking recorded sound was illustrated in an advertisement featuring a stark picture of an empty room with four white walls, one narrow window, and hard wood floors. The copy read “At Technical Sound Industries There’s Never a Day Without Music.”¹⁰ The empty room not only appeared lonely, but intimidating. Private space was a prison in which modern Americans were trapped and alone. Good speakers, and by extension the electronic media in general, capable of delivering high fidelity sound counteracted the free-floating fears of isolation and loneliness and transformed the reality of an alienated existence into something tolerable, even pleasurable. And this miracle occurred not just occasionally but every day. Instead of feeling a powerless prisoner, the owner of a high fidelity system was awash in sound over which he exercised complete control—making the kings and lords of the baroque era look like mere pikers. The Walkman, in this context, appears as an a predictable innovation.

High fidelity offered virtual reality before the home computer industry had even began. Not only music, but also “natural sound” and “white noise” had become available to listeners. *Popular Mechanics* claimed that many listeners used such noises to improve the functioning of their “left brain.” Besides helping out a tired cranial hemisphere, recorded sounds of frogs croaking and tides crashing could improve one’s love life, quality of sleep, and concentration.¹¹ The author identified psychoacoustics as a new pharmaceutical, a quick and enjoyable curative for neurosis.

As the above examples suggest, the 1970s obsession with control of one’s sonic and social environment was not an indication of

the individual's strength, but rather its opposite. Sociologist Richard Stivers has labeled devices such as Walkmans "stimulus shields." By creating a sonic bubble around the individual in the public sphere, a stimulus shield protected a weak individual from loneliness as well as from the perception of being alone. These devices became increasingly necessary to postwar Americans. In a competitive and individualistic society, face-to-face were more ambiguous, threatening, and undesirable. Relationships mediated by communications technologies protected the individual. The more one was disconnected from face-to-face interaction and conflict, however, the more one needed protection. Thus the existence of the stimulus shield fed the need for ever-stronger shields.¹²

The Walkman, which was marketed from its inception as a tool for the self-confident, instead can be better seen as one of despair and a symbol of a culture beset by insecurity and alienation. Embattled individuals lacking the resources or the public space in which to reconnect turned instead to the very devices that are pushing them further apart. The desire for sonic self-sufficiency has resulted in an era of lonely sounds. Wrapped in their own sonic environment, the Walkman user was a microcosm of his culture.

In the post World War II era, loneliness and recorded popular music became linked. For both the performer and audience, the musical experience had become more solitary and mediated over time. This separation occurred in the context of a historically individualistic culture that was placing ever-greater emphasis on the self. By the 1970s the celebration of the autonomy and sufficiency of the individual had been taken to new extremes with consequences for all aspects of American life. The story of popular recorded music's journey out of the public and into the personal, therefore, represents only one part of a larger national story that includes privatized leisure generally, the expansion of the suburbs, the emergence of niche marketing, individualized spirituality from "born again" Christianity to New Age mysticism, and the emphasis on control over the body. It is a story that also includes the collapse of political consensus, increasing cynicism, and the rise of the new right. The lonely listening style of the late twentieth cen-

ture therefore should concern anyone interested in the American experience.¹³

Americans' relationship to popular recorded music and its technologies provides a window through which to understand how electronic media and information technologies have effected social behavior. Along with stereo rigs, televisions and personal computers have long been identified, among a host of other things, as hedges against loneliness and tools to banish unpleasant moods. As with recorded music, Americans used these devices at home and often alone and in the process altered their relationships with their families, friends, neighbors, and citizens. A wide cross-section of observers have agreed that in the postwar era growing, social disconnection was related to the peculiar uses for which Americans created for their media and the technologies, with impressive psychological, social, cultural, and political consequences.¹⁴

In psychology and communications studies, scholars have blamed media technologies—from the radio, to television, the to computer, for degrading social connections. Brian Spitzberg and Daniel Canary noted that Americans had incorporated the electronic media into their lives as a form of private practice in ways that potentially exacerbate the growing problem of loneliness in American life. Most Americans, the pair contend, spend their lives moving in and out of loneliness and are thus "situationally lonely." This is a normal, or at least transitional, state. A smaller group of Americans, however, are trapped in loneliness—the chronically lonely. They are alone, or feel that they are, and have become resigned to a reality in which reintegration is no longer possible for them. The chronically lonely also tend to be heavy users of electronic media. This is despite the fact that they do not believe, as the situationally lonely do, that television or radio has any socially therapeutic qualities.¹⁵

Electronic media pose a problem for the situationally lonely, however, because they replace other activities, and offer a new and relatively stress-free style of relating to others as well as to internal emotions. If a television or a record collection is used "instrumentally" to help extricate one from loneliness, the media may in fact end up producing the opposite result in the long term. "It is feasible," Spitzer

and Canary suggest,” that as social skills deteriorate, people engage in reutilized behaviors that exclude, inhibit, or diminish functional behaviors. As loneliness persists, people become more habituated and less instrumental users of media.”¹⁶ The use of electronic media, on the rise for a number of “instrumental” reasons at home and work, holds the potential to damage or distort the social fabric.

Along with deteriorating interpersonal bonds, the social disconnection associated with using electronic media has weakened the nation’s political culture. Robert Putnam has argued television arrived in the postwar era and ensured that Americans stayed put in their new suburban homes. Television not only ended nightly visits, it turned the outside world into an abstraction, privatized leisure and civic activity, and encouraged the formation of “pseudo connections” that required little effort and dissolved all too easily. By watching television—no matter its content—Americans learned how to cultivate loneliness, and community and civic institutions withered along with everyday civility. As television viewing replaced social and civic activities, it led inevitably to a diminution not only of the viewer’s social skills but also his political inclinations. A chronic television viewer, Putnam maintained, became passive and convinced of his own powerlessness. After its effects had been internalized by the baby boom generation by the 1970s, the consequences of television viewing manifested themselves in numbers that showed skyrocketing rates of depression, falling rates of voter participation in national elections, and individual engagement in local government. Television, along with suburbanization, provided the context in which a political culture dominated by fear, apathy, and well-funded corporate interest groups developed: a culture of lonely and alienated individuals. For Putnam, the future of American democracy depends upon Americans changing their present relationships to the electronic media and with each other.¹⁷

Systematic psychological inquiry into television’s relationship to loneliness began in earnest in the 1970s, when researchers revealed that television had replaced a number of social activities and seemed to have degraded the expression of the affect in the American household. Not only did television lead to less conversation, but it reduced the number gestures and behaviors normally associated with socia-

bility: smiling, eye contact, “forward lean,” touching, and conversation. By 1978, television owners reported spending more than 10 to 15 percent more time watching television than engaging in conversation. Time spent on household rituals, from family meals, to bedtime activities, and holiday celebrations similarly declined. Television viewing in this context could be regarded as an addiction, a compulsion not unlike alcoholism.¹⁸

Outside of McLuhan, few observers placed any great social value in television, but the same cannot be said for personal computing and information technology. According to their progressive advocates, computers would empower individuals and the web would bind them together in voluntary and democratic associations creating a revolutionarily holistic social ecology.¹⁹

A counter-critique, however, also exists. In a pioneering and provocative study of the subcultures that developed around personal computing, Sherry Turkle argued that the individual personal computer of the 1970s and 1980s offered disillusioned 1960s male seekers a realm in which they gained the power to realize their social and personal visions on their own terms. Theirs was a style of computing “characterized by transparency, simplicity, and a sense of control... The computer clubs that sprang up all over the country were imbued with excitement not only about the computers themselves, but of the new kind of social relationships people believed would follow in their wake.”²⁰ Yet, just as with music and television, the obsession with control would produce greater social distance.

Echoing the early *Rolling Stone* at its most messianic, the organs of the early computer movement adopted as an article of faith that information technologies associated with the Internet would create “knowledge cooperatives,” which would induce an inner revolution among the technologically linked up, bringing into existence participatory democracy and a postmodern and enlightened community. The missionary zeal of men like Apple founder Steve Jobs, whose company would in 2000 release iPod—a Walkman for the twenty-first century—stems from their channeling of their disillusionment with long-player style social renewal into the equally solitary pursuit of building hardware and writing software.²¹

The actual communities that sprung up organically around computers and connected themselves together in the Web were quite different than the dreams in *Byte* or *Whole Earth Catalog*. The young men who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s and became enamored with computing technologies and used their understanding of and control over computers as markers to set them apart. These young men were more familiar with machines and, perhaps as a result, less at ease with other people. Their mastery of the computer, though it often blocked them from the majority of the peers, allowed them entry into the community of “hackers.” Unlike the disillusioned revolutionary but similar to Canary and Spitzberg’s chronically lonely individual, the hacker put little faith in restored social relationships. Rather he invested himself in the machine itself. Most of the hackers Turkle encountered were socially awkward and feared the unpredictability of social situations over which they had less than absolute control, as one hacker concluded about he and his companions failures in dating,

I think computer hackers tend to get very strongly involved in relationships. This is because they are used to having this very close, clear, intimate relationship with the computer and they expect to have the same kind of relationship with a girl. They expect to understand the other person more than is reasonable. People just don’t work like computers.²²

Not only did hacker culture contain within it antisocial and anti-romantic elements, but it was distinctively anti-sensual. In the same way television reduced reality to an abstraction,²³ and recording technologies reduced the performance and to sound waves. Computing when combined with the Web reduced experience to information and offered in its place “virtual reality”—a life on the screen. For Turkle, however, the hackers did not represent an isolated group of cultish individuals, but a canary in the cultural coalmine.

... [T]he computer offers hackers something for which many of us are hungry. Hysteria, its roots in sexual repression, was the neurosis of Freud’s time. Today we suffer not less but dif-

ferently. Terrified of being alone, yet afraid of intimacy, we experience widespread feelings of emptiness, of disconnection, of the unreality of the self. And here the computer, a companion without emotional demands, offers a compromise. You can be a loner, but never alone. You can interact, but never feel vulnerable to another person.²⁴

The computer, by being personal and by at least mimicking the most rudimentary aspects of thought was an acceptable stand-in for human contact. It also possessed the important virtue of being under the user's control. It was a machine that would not expose or hurt the user. Like the well-set up rig or the Walkman, it was a sanctuary where the self could feel more itself and allow it to connect. Its anti-sensual nature, however, and its relentless reductionism only exacerbates the anomie Turkle describes.

The World Wide Web, which enjoyed a great deal of favorable press and some wild-eyed utopian dreams, has also exhibited the same pattern as the television, the computer, and recording technologies. The act of learning how to use the Internet and the Web has been shown to increase loneliness, even if the users were directly communicating with another person over the Web. "...[E]ven social uses of the Internet were associated with negative outcomes," concluded a famous 1998 study of the Internet and loneliness, "for example, greater use of electronic mail was associated with increases in depression." The Internet, the researchers discovered, substituted weak ties in place of strong ones, where on-line associates, detached from the day-to-day environment of each other, cannot effectively connect or sympathize with each other. Despite the disturbance it had caused in the lives, most of the study's Internet users returned to the technology because of the ease of escape and connection it seemed to offer.²⁵

The personal listening devices that became common consumer items by the 1980s are a key element in a much larger history. Post-war Americans, living under the threat of atomic annihilation and often in subdivisions of strangers, desired a safer world in which uncertain human relationships that were ever more distant, were held

at arms length. The individual having lost connections to others, sought technological empowerment. Music listening devices offered, just like the computer, the personal control that seemed to be rapidly disappearing in all other areas of their lives. Shielding the user from social obligations even down to the innocuous “hello,” and by bestowing upon the listener the power to bring into existence a unique sonic environment, personal listening devices seemed to satisfy the late twentieth-century’s radical individualism. The problem was they also only made the desire for control stronger, making the machine ever more necessary.

Musical performance continues, of course, but it is safe to say that most of the time Americans do not hear music from other human beings, but call it into being from a host of different technological devices. Cheerful Luddites, such as the former rock and roller Jonathan Richman, still travel from place to place performing for small audiences, but his music, like that of other popular musicians, is much more accessible as digital information on iTunes.

Opportunities for collective musical experiences remain, but most Americans opt for the solitary or the technologically mediated. In the spirit of Top 40 radio format founder and market populist Todd Storz, the music and electronics industry have given them what they demanded. That demand will remain strong for the foreseeable future because the social anxieties and anti-sensuality of the current culture show no signs of abating. It would seem that the psychological ill health of Americans is one of the key elements powering economic growth, technological innovation, and musical artistry

Notes

- 1 Moe Berger, "How I Made A Big Discovery, Hi-Fi is Better Than Live Music," *Popular Science*, June 1957, 151-52.
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- 3 Earphone Doubles Music City Sales," *Billboard*, November 6, 1961.
- 4 Stephen Traiman, "Quality Portables for Vacation Entertainment," *High Fidelity*, May 1977, 66.
- 5 Advertisement, *Rolling Stone*, July 13, 1978, 6.
- 6 Akio Morita: Sony's Chairman, Part Businessman and Part Visionary, Offers a Look Into the Future of Consumer Electronics," *Rolling Stone*, October 2, 1980, 79.
- 7 Rey Chow, "Listening Otherwise, Music Miniaturized: A Different Type of Question About Revolution," in *Doing Cultural Studies, The Story of the Walkman*, Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, Keith Negus, eds. London: Sage Publications, 1997, 139.
- 8 Peter Black, "The Ultimate Audio-Visual Marriage," *Rolling Stone*, October 5, 1978, 84; Mikal Gilmore, "Excitable Noise," *Rolling Stone*, July 12, 1978, 60.
- 9 Advertisement, *High Fidelity*, January, 1975, 3.
- 10 Advertisement, *High Fidelity*, June 1977, 127.
- 11 Dave Sagarin, "Ear Conditioners: Shape Your Own Sound Environment," *Popular Mechanics*, 90
- 12 Richard Stivers, *Shades of Loneliness: Pathologies of a Technological Society*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004, 55.
- 13 For an interpretation of the 1970s as the apotheosis of many postwar trends, see Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Popular Culture, Society, and Politics*. Cambridge, Mass. 2001.
- 14 See Phillip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, Boston Press, 1970; Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York, Norton, 1978; for more positive evaluations of the popular postwar focus on the self, see Peter Clecak, "America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the '60s and '70s, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983; Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," in *The Purple Decades*, New York: Berkeley Books, 1983, 265-296.

- 15 Daniel J. Canary and Brian H Spitzberg, "Loneliness and Media Gratifications," *Communication Research*, December 1993, 801-802.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 817.
- 17 Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000, 224, 229, 242, 258-263.
- 18 James P. Flanders, "A General Systems Approach to Loneliness," in *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy*, eds. Letitia Anne Peplau and Daniel Perlman, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982, 176-77.
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- 20 Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984, 171.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 173.
- 22 Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self*, 218.
- 23 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 242.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 25 Robert Kraut, Michael Patterson, Vicki Lundmark, Sara Kiesler, Tridas Mukopadhyay, and William Scherlis, "Internet Paradox: A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-being," *American Psychologist*, September, 1998, 1017-1029.