

Wired Up, Plugged In, Zoned Out

By Tralee Pearce

For many Canadian families at Christmas this year, shiny new electronic devices took centre stage as much as that stuffed golden turkey. There were BlackBerrys, iPods, cellphones with text messaging and MP3 players, laptops, XBoxes and personal video recorders under many a tree -- gadgets, mostly linked to the Internet, heralding the great new age of interconnection.

They promise all the creations, news and thoughts of humanity at your fingertips -- making this generation the most plugged-in and informed in history.

But many observers are concerned this tech-savvy revolution could be leading just the opposite way. The filters and search devices used to make all this information manageable, they say, are isolating people into niches fashioned to their particular tastes and beliefs. Instead of going to common sources, whether newspapers or broadcast TV, to get the daily news, users are getting only the "daily me."

It's a phenomenon U.S. historian Christine Rosen has described as "egocasting."

"We are very pleased by having our prejudices, our beliefs, reaffirmed," Ms. Rosen says. "With these technologies -- starting with the remote control but much more dramatically now with digital video recorders -- we could filter out what we didn't want to hear. And we were happy about that."

With digital recorders that search television schedules and save only programs suiting the user's taste (best known under the U.S. brand name TiVo), for example, "watercooler" conversation about the latest episode of *Desperate Housewives* may become a thing of the past. Ms. Rosen, 32, began to contemplate egocasting when she noticed she would mention a show to her friends and they would say, "I don't have that 'TiVoed,' so I don't know what you're talking about."

In television, first there was broadcasting. Then "narrowcasting" emerged, with niche-fixated, small-audience specialty channels. As the arsenal of gadgets grows, Ms. Rosen says, the field shrinks right down to a single, indulged, audience member. A fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, she coined the term egocasting in a recent piece for *The New Atlantis*, a journal that looks at the intersection of technology and society.

Music downloading has brought a similar phenomenon: Teenagers can often be found sitting in clusters listening to individual iPods, each with their own particular playlist, rather than gathering around a stereo listening to the same albums.

But the biggest danger of fetishizing our own tastes may be to democratic civil society. In the

current Canadian election, more and more people are getting their news via blogs and subscriptions to Web services that align with their own beliefs, so they hear fewer opposing viewpoints.

While it hasn't reached an extreme here, the hazards were evident in the 2004 U.S. election, in which Democrats and Republicans seemed to occupy wholly separate bubbles of data and opinion, while other Americans felt no relationship to politics at all.

Michael Bugeja, who has written about the socially isolating effects of me-first technologies in his book *Interpersonal Divide*, describes an experiment he did with his first-year Iowa State journalism class in the fall.

When the 53-year-old professor asked the aspiring American journalists what they thought of Judge John Roberts's then-recent nomination to the Supreme Court, none of them knew what he was talking about. Then he asked them to place all their gadgetry in front of them.

"Out came cellphones, personal computers, iPods. Gadgets I couldn't even identify that looked like peripherals or accessories," he says. He told them, "You bought or your parents or guardians bought you all of this stuff because they were concerned you would be disenfranchised from the information that is out there.

"Even though you have the power to access information and data all over the world, you do not know about current events, because you are doing something other than what we had hoped you would do in college."

When he said he knew they would remember at least one news story from the year before, the class doubted it. "I asked how many people here know about Ashlee Simpson lip-syncing on *Saturday Night Live*. They all did.

"What they are getting out of these devices is not information to help them become better citizens. Which is all that education is meant to do, so that we will not be had by politicians, we can hold them accountable and make intelligent decisions in the voting booth."

Andrew Potter, co-author of 2004's *Rebel Sell: Why The Culture Can't Be Jammed*, says he has noticed an increasingly "consumerist" attitude toward politics in Canada.

"People are upset that politics isn't more like going to Starbucks," says the 35-year-old visiting scholar with the Educational Policy Institute in Toronto. "They want tailor-made politics that represent their views. In a pluralistic country like Canada, with 30 million people, there's no way a single government can represent [everyone's] views."

Hence, he says, the "alienated" voter, who doesn't vote because no single candidate for prime minister mirrors his or her (no-foam, skinny-decaf) self-image.

Stereotypically, such attitudes prevail only among the gadget-loving younger set. But older

egocasters fare no better under Ms. Rosen's microscope.

"I think that for the middle-aged and complacent . . . the dangers of egocasting are as bad, if not worse, than for teenagers," she says. "Particularly if you start thinking about the political process, and the polarization that, at least in the U.S., has steadily gotten worse over the years, in part because so many people needn't listen to the ideas and opinions of those from the other end of the political spectrum.

"Comfortable-couch conservatives watch Fox News and read National Review. Comfortable-couch liberals watch CNN and read The Nation. And never the two shall meet!"

Mr. Bugeja says the dearth of proper footnoting on the Internet further kneecaps meaningful engagement. "The sad thing about relying on blogs for information about political choices is that they are high on opinion and low on fact and preach to the choir rather than address issues factually, substantively and inclusively.

"We need print newspapers to do that because the issues requiring factual analysis are more complex than ever and cannot be stated simply in a TV sound bite or Internet news brief."

Nevertheless, as election day nears in Canada, Edmonton librarian Jeff Davis will be gleaning his news by e-mail and Web browser, not a rolled-up paper on his doorstep or the nightly news.

Like many Canadians, he will use filtering software such as RSS (Really Simple Syndication), which enables him to subscribe to direct feeds from his favourite news sites and commentators--pogge.ca, Tilting at Windmills (<http://www.la-mancha.net>), James Bow (bowjamesbow.net) and Vancouver's The Tyee.

"I guess they're all kind of leftist, come to think of it," he says. "I am sort of lefty, so that is reflected in what I read."

Perhaps unlike many of his counterparts in the United States, Mr. Davis (who doesn't own a TV or radio) tempers his lefty egocasting by keeping an eye on the multipartisan umbrella site blogscanada.ca, receiving a Canadian-news feed from The Globe and Mail and checking in on the website of Laurie Hawn, the Conservative candidate in his riding of Edmonton Centre.

Mr. Davis, 25, says he hasn't decided how he's going to vote, but he knows it's going to be informed and strategic. He feels that he has traded horse-race-heavy traditional coverage for more commentary and insight, which will be useful come Jan. 23.

"When I was watching TV and reading more papers," he says, "it was coverage of the campaign, rather than coverage of the issues. So that's one of the things that's driven me to the blogs -- more concrete analysis."

Ottawa-based IT analyst Stéphanie E. Amesse, 36, is also a fan of progressive sites. She looks for feedback features enabling readers to participate in debate. "Although I seldom post, I like to know what other people are thinking. It's a little bit like the wired equivalent of commenting on the

newspaper over coffee at your local diner."

Still, despite this potential water-cooler function, even bloggers see risks in elbowing their way into the fourth estate. Tim Gauthier, a manager of public and corporate affairs at Aurora College in Fort Smith, NWT, is part of the group behind the "small-l liberal" pogge.ca, which he describes as "the unofficial op-ed for the liberal side of the country," in the face of what he sees as a more well-organized and well-trafficked right-wing blogging scene.

"One of the downsides of weblogs," Mr. Gauthier admits, "is that you can instantly seek confirmation of every belief you have. Your biases are reinforced."

Like many sensitive Canadian egocasters, Mr. Gauthier, 42, tries to read a wide variety of sources, including "appalling" right-wing sites. "I don't want to be part of an echo chamber," he says.

The dangers of the "echo chamber" seemed apparent in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Stories such as the Swift Boat Veterans' allegations that Democratic candidate John Kerry lied to earn Vietnam war medals, or various 9/11-conspiracy charges against George W. Bush, continued to be spread by ideologically motivated bloggers even after they were discredited by investigative reporters.

These claims were often accompanied by a level of personal invective that demonstrated what Mr. Bugeja calls an on-line tendency toward the "ordinary self" and away from the "best self" that public discourse conventionally demands. In the current campaign, perhaps the best example has been an offensive blog posting by a now-former executive member of the Liberals' Ontario wing, Mike Klander, who compared NDP candidate Olivia Chow to a dog.

More troubling is what this election might have looked like in a fully egocasted world: Would it have been possible for the Liberals to respond to the Conservatives' surges in the polls with a spate of TV attack ads? In future, such ads might simply not penetrate the niche information sources used by Conservative supporters. On the other hand, the Conservative surge itself could not have happened if too many Liberal supporters just excluded Stephen Harper from their news diet.

A more imminent threat (which may be visible on Jan. 23) is that voter participation might decline ever more precipitously, as people increasingly filter out whatever they find dull. Soon, no hint of the value of parliamentary politics may be able to jam the steady stream of Ashlee Simpson or Brad-and-Angelina news.

Yet this is not just a story of culture overtaking politics. Even as aspects of the entertainment universe appear to thrive in the information hothouse -- iTunes music and celebrity gossip -- Ms. Rosen laments the attendant decline in the scope of the arts.

"A few things existed in the fifties and sixties that don't now -- a fairly robust 'middlebrow' culture is one of them," she says. "Part of the philosophy was that people can and should try to improve themselves by aspiring to understand and embrace . . . culture, much of which involved attending

art openings, going to the symphony. It was still separate from the very high culture, but it was more mainstream. And that is completely gone."

Toronto literary agent Helen Heller, 56, calls herself a "gadget kind of girl," with a fleet of laptops, handheld devices and a personal video recorder. When it comes to entertainment, she's not about aspiration, thank you very much.

"I've never watched TV randomly. I like tailoring my recreation," she says. "I'm not interested in being surprised."

Ms. Rosen says that feeling is widespread: "People pursue their niche interests . . . whether it's an indie-film world or an obscure band or music group. We all have our little interests, which is fine. But what I think we're lacking is, in some sense, a broader, shared culture.

"I don't think we'll ever become total narcissists. But these technologies encourage navel-gazing and satisfaction of one's own taste as the pre-eminent virtue, and only secondarily the understanding of others' tastes."

Welcome to the new tribalism: Demarcations of faith and geography seem to be giving way to those of technology and taste.

In her New Atlantis article, for example, Ms. Rosen documented the zeal of TiVo users: "I've converted," said one. "I was a Jew, but not any more. I'm now a TiVo."

From there, we break ourselves down into fans of particular TV genres, websites, music genres and, of course, consumer products.

"It is ironic," Ms. Rosen says, "that the technologies we embrace and praise for the degree of control they give us individually also give marketers and advertisers the most direct window into our psyche and buying habits they've ever had."

Mr. Bugeja argues that through tribalism, we are actually sculpting ourselves into perfectly shaped and willing receptacles for marketers.

Like Ms. Rosen, he has noticed this in his own life. Family time, he found, was replaced by media time, each family member sitting in front of their own computer or video game. "Even under the same roof, we were being segregated according to lifestyle and demographic statistic."

"The idea of randomness -- bumping up against something in the culture that surprises you or enlightens you or angers you -- has been co-opted by the egocasting world," Ms. Rosen says. "Look at one of the iPod advertising slogans: 'Random is the new order.' But of course that's not right. iPods do not promote random listening of music, because you've already selected things for download. Portraying this as random -- with shock and surprise and excitement -- is just very good marketing."

Mr. Bugeja urges people to think about why they bought their electronic devices and how they

are using them: "If you don't ask and answer those two questions, marketing will."

Advertising firms, for instance, are now aiming to use TiVo's data on what viewers watch to begin "hypertargeting" advertising at the individual. Ms. Rosen says it's a logical extension of the recorder's function: "They are 'smart' machines that end up learning more about our habits than we'd like even our casual acquaintances to know. . . . [It] is an extreme but not altogether surprising form of egocasting."

It's precisely when filters misread us, and suggest content that does not actually suit our tastes, that we realize just how one-dimensional the marketing thumbnail sketches are. As early as 2002, Ms. Rosen notes in her egocasting essay, Wall Street Journal reporter Jeffrey Zaslow "mined the dangers of TiVo's taste predictions by talking to baffled customers whose TiVos thought they were gay, or neo-Nazis, or stalkers -- all thanks to their occasionally eclectic viewing habits."

So, while the advertising world continues to refine its techniques, we have a moment to think: Where are we going? And when we get there, will we be citizens in the traditional sense of the word at all?

Certainly, in a Starbucks democracy, party politics is on the wane, Mr. Potter says. "There's no question political parties don't play the centralizing role they used to. All they are now is electoral vehicles. They don't do policy any more."

But he doesn't think a discussion of egocasting need be all doom and gloom. "We're not talking about rampant individualism," he says, but "networked individualism." And it might lead to a new kind of politics.

"Societies have always had models of how they organize themselves. People have been organized around guilds, communities, farms, nuclear families. All that's happening now is the mode of organization has changed. What that means is we're not these isolated monads walking around secure in our own thing. We're all parts of webs of information. Everyone is a node on these webs.

"The system we have dictates that you have to have big parties to succeed. If we move to proportional representation, you might see a much more fluid party system, I suspect. Instead of regional parties, you could have parties arise around ideas, or values or policies as opposed to simply regions.

"That may be good, that may be bad -- I change my mind on it every day."

And as long as that's possible, the pod people haven't won yet.

Tralee Pearce is a feature writer for The Globe and Mail.