

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Decades of social distancing

Along with wearing masks, social distancing has become a palpable factor of American life.

Schools, churches, cinemas, restaurants and sporting events have all been affected. Except for those in our household, we are supposed to stay at least six feet from each other.

But the pandemic is just the most dramatic instance of a trend that's been going on for decades.

People have become ever more socially distant beginning with the decline of traditional towns in the 1950s and the rise of technology that has diminished human interaction.

Pottstown was a socially and economically healthy town until the early 1970s. But as middle class and affluent residents migrated to the lower density suburbs, where everyone drove cars to all their activities, the percentage of low income and minority residents rose in Pottstown.

Segregated housing made it possible for people to live their lives without interacting with those from a different social class. Kids went to school with others who were just like them.

Suburban children rarely went out to play in the neighborhood because there was no neighborhood to play in, just isolated subdivisions and large single family lots. Play dates had to be scheduled and children had to be driven to their destinations.

The rise of retirement homes and "villages" separated the old from the general population (and made it much easier for covid-19 to spread to vulner-

able people).

The advent of answering machines allowed people to screen their calls, so they didn't have to talk to callers they didn't know ahead of time.

Pay-at-the-pump technology eliminated interaction with gas station attendants who would wash your windshield and check your oil, which you now did yourself.

Bar code scanners made it easier and faster to buy groceries and other items without talking to a cashier.

The rise of cable television gave viewers a plethora of channels to watch, but it meant fewer people watched the three national networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. Tens of millions of people who once shared the same news broadcasts and other programming now saw different versions of reality.

The Internet not only diminished broadcast news, it also crippled local newspapers, which for the most part dealt in facts.

The proliferation of social media meant more people lived in echo chambers and seldom interacted with people whose views were different from their own. The lunatic fringe blossomed.

Even email, which is convenient and efficient, diminishes telephone conversations which are more immediate, interactive and less prone to misunderstandings.

Social distancing is an important tool to bring a pandemic under control, but it's harmful to other aspects of society. It may have lingering negative impacts.



Commentary by
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AT ONE TIME people got their news from general circulation newspapers and magazines, and the Big Three radio and television networks. No more.