Virtual Reclusion
or
Virtual Seclusion

Some estimates claim that little more than five percent of the available land in this country has been developed. This shows a desire or need for people to live in close proximity. Why, when so much undeveloped land is available, will Americans live and work in such close proximity to one another? Many may argue that it is a matter of convenience, while most would likely attribute this behavior to the social needs of humans. Whatever the argument, the fact remains that humans tend to live in close proximity to one another even though there are many difficulties associated with this proximity. People living in crowded cities tend to be more agitated, less patient and experience more discomfort as a direct result of the large numbers of others they come in contact with.

As a means of coping with the irritations of living in close proximity, the increasingly technologically-enabled American is utilizing this technology to seclude him- or herself from everyday social activity. Smaller, lighter personal electronic components are allowing users to wall themselves off from their immediate social surroundings. Users of iPods and similar devices are able to load thousands of songs and other audio onto the devices and have themselves constantly plugged in, blocking out the sounds of human activity around them. We've all seen, or at least heard of, the individual sitting in the crowded waiting area or room speaking in elevated tones on his or her cell phone. This too, may be seen as a means to block out the immediate social environment, even while engaging in a remote social activity. Even the use of cell phones while driving may be seen as a means to seclude oneself from interacting with the other drivers on the road.

It is not difficult to understand how use of each of these sorts of technologies enables their users to seclude themselves in a virtual way from their immediate social condition, i.e., *virtual seclusion*. However, many of the technologies, specifically cell phones including text messaging, allow their users to disengage from the immediate social context while engaging in a remote social interaction. As such, I argue that these people are practicing a sort of *virtual reclusion*, in which the users are isolating themselves from close social interaction.

Anecdotally, there is ample evidence that Americans are disengaging from immediate social interaction. We all see individuals walking on city streets, on campuses and through stores with cell phones pressed to their ears. Often behaviors are displayed that show a distinct disconnection these people have from the goings on around them. Bumping into objects or other people and loud speaking voices that ignore impact on others close by, are but two examples of disconnection by users of the technologies.

Virtual reclusion behavior becomes critical as the disengagement occurs when safety is a primary issue. We are all aware of the concerns over cell phone use while driving. I am sure that most, if not all of us can recall all too many instances of drivers drifting out of lanes, making sudden turns or slowing suddenly only to pass them and find the drivers talking on a cell phone or worse, looking down as they are dialing a cell phone. While it may seem odd for me to include operating an automobile a social act, I consider it a distinctly social act. Much of our culture revolves around the ownership and use of automobiles (including pickups, SUVs, and motorcycles). Driving automobiles has much to do with interacting with others on the road. Look at the simple rule of driving to the right of the centerline in a roadway. On most streets there is no physical barrier to keep cars on their respective sides of the road. Instead, we as drivers, rely on a set of rules to allow us to share roadspace. We have established ways to communicate with others on the road, for example with turn signals. All of these items indicate that driving is a distinctly social activity. However, as we see with the users of cell phones while driving, they are disengaging themselves from the immediacy of the social context of driving—watching out for fellow drivers and awareness of their position on the road—in order to engage in the remote relationship.

This short treatise is intended to raise and establish the terms *virtual seclusion* and *virtual reclusion*. As I continue my research in technology in society, I hope that I will find and develop more rigorous evidence of this experience. Humans continue to be ready adopters of technology. A long time ago, it was said that we invented technologies as a result of needs ("Necessity is the Mother of Invention" [attributed to Plato, in *The Republic*]). However, I feel that our ability to invent technologies has outstripped our needs and we invent ways to use them ("Invention is the Mother of Necessity" [attributed to Thorstein Veblen]). Further investigation is certainly warranted.