A Passage to Doomsday

By Theodore Dalrymple

In 1909, Edward Morgan Forster published a story, "The Machine Stops," which now seems astonishingly prescient. One does not normally associate E. M. Forster with science fiction: he is considered more a chronicler of the etiolated emotional life of the English upper-middle classes of the Edwardian era. But his one foray into science fiction seemed to foreshadow exactly the kind of scenes that followed last month's brief disruption to 3 million computers worldwide by the intrusion of a faulty new update into Microsoft programs.

In the story, set at an indefinite time in the future, humanity lives in individual underground cells, like those of a honeycomb. A governing mechanism exists, the Machine, but no one knows its location or how it functions. The air is centrally controlled; food in the form of tabloids is delivered at the press of a button. Music is relayed also at the press of a button. Human communication is entirely by means of a screen, and more direct physical contact is viewed with horror and even disgust, as is the prospect of reaching

or walking on the earth's surface, where the air is now regarded as dangerous. Any experience unmediated by a screen is avoided as unnecessary and even distasteful. Lectures keep people amused, but they are delivered in a manner exactly like a Zoom meeting. They last ten minutes, indicating reduced attention spans.

You can't read certain passages of "The Machine Stops" without pinching yourself to remember that it was written 115 years ago. Here is Vashti, one of the two main characters, in her cell, called by her son, Kuno, who has been allocated a cell in the other hemisphere (reproduction is by license, and parental duties cease when the child is taken into the Public Nurseries):

> *An electric bell rang. The woman touched a switch and the music was silent.*
>
> *"I suppose I must see who it is," she thought, and set her chair in motion. The chair, like the music, was worked by machinery and it rolled her to the other side of the room where the bell still rang importunately.*
>
> *"Who is it?" she called. Her voice was irritable, for she had been interrupted often since the music began. She knew several thousand people; in certain directions human intercourse had advanced enormously.*
>
> *But when she listened into the receiver, her white face wrinkled into smiles, and she said:*
>
> *"Very well. Let us talk, I will isolate myself. I do not expect anything important will happen for the next five minutes—for I can give you fully five minutes, Kuno."*

Everyone now lives, it seems, in a world of constant virtual communication, but without actual human contact. As with WhatsApp, Vashti can see Kuno, her son, on the screen, or not,

as she chooses; and he do the same.

Kuno tells her that he would like to visit the earth's surface. She is appalled that the Machine will overhear this almost heretical wish, for while officially speaking, religious superstition has been overcome and replaced by total rationality, Kuno has an attitude both of fear and reverence toward the Machine. Kuno tells Vashti when he first had his strange idea:

> *He broke off, and she fancied that he looked sad. She could not be sure, for the Machine did not transmit nuances of expression. It only gave a general idea of people—an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes, Vashti thought. The imponderable bloom, declared by a discredited philosophy to be the actual essence of intercourse, was rightly ignored by the Machine, just as the imponderable bloom of the grape was ignored by the manufacturers of artificial fruit. Something "good enough" had long since been accepted by our race.*

Toward the end of the story, the Machine, supposedly self-repairing, begins to break down. Human beings, long accustomed to having everything delivered to them, from their air to their food to their entertainments to their sleeping arrangements, are at a complete loss. They do not know how to do anything for themselves, except via the Machine. They panic and die by the thousands, indeed millions.

The sign of things to come? Not only flights delayed, hospital appointments cancelled, trains halted, millions of messages not sent—but also apocalyptic food shortages, desolated cities, total financial and therefore economic collapse, and civil war everywhere? How we enjoy such visions—though not the reality of them.

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