SOCIABLE SOCIAL MEDIA

By Charles Day

MY WIFE RACKED UP ENOUGH POINTS ON HER CREDIT CARD EARLIER THIS YEAR THAT THE CARD COMPANY OFFERED HER CUT-PRICE MAGAZINE SUBSCRIPTIONS. AMONG THE TITLES SHE SIGNED UP FOR WAS OUTSIDE.

From its editorial offices in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Outside covers the world of outdoor recreation. Flip through the book and you'll find stunning photos of rock climbers, cyclists, and kayakers; articles about backpacking in exotically remote locales; and ads for high-tech running shoes and other equipment. (ECCO's neon green and gray BIOM sandal “hikes like a boot” and looks like a spaceship.)

Besides the typical fare, June's issue also included a report by Madison Kahn entitled “Fit Club.” It begins:

Why do an Olympic track star and a Stanley Cup-winning defender for the Boston Bruins don neon and go meet a bunch of bartenders, moms, and yoga instructors at the crack of dawn? To hug them. Also, to stay in shape.

Those auroral athletes, Kahn explains, participate in the November Project. Three times a week, they receive a tweet from the project's organizer (a former rower called Brogan Graham) that specifies a location in the Boston area where they'll gather a few days hence to run or do calisthenics. Sessions begin with a command from Graham to hug.

What's so special about exercise with a tweet and a hug? The answer, according to Graham, is that people want interaction. The November Project, he tells Kahn, is both a fitness group and a rejection of “anonymous, device-driven urban life.”

Soon after reading Kahn's story, a Facebook post from a friend of mine alerted me to another Boston-based online project that promotes real-life social interaction, Postwork. Founded by Mia Scharpie and Jennifer Ly, Postwork helps people meet and do creative things after work.

When I spoke to Scharpie and Ly on the phone, they told me why fellow members of Generation Y and their successors, the Millennials, might need such a service. There's a gap between socializing online, which is easy but solitary, and joining a real-life club, which provides face-to-face interaction but requires commitment. Caught in that gap, young people end up socializing in bars. Postwork curates events that are low pressure and fun. You sign up online.

What do the November Project and Postwork represent? As Charles Dickens depicted it in Our Mutual Friend, life in Victorian London was not less anonymous than it is today. His characters had small, even nonexistent social circles. Contrary to Graham, whatever works against socializing in cities, it's not “devices.” In fact, devices and the software they run are making our world more sociable, not less. Thanks to online messaging, reconciling peoples' schedules to arrange social events is so much easier now.

The woes of Detroit and Stockton aside, city life is becoming more attractive. The population of Washington, DC (where I live) has risen 11 percent since 2000. Books and articles are documenting cities' resurgence, one of the latest being Leigh Gallagher's The End of the Suburbs: Where the American Dream Is Moving.


Charles Day is the Web editor at Physics Today. You can read more of his musings in his blog, The Dayside (http://blogs.physicstoday.org/thedayside).

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