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Archives

The Nation: Sounds of Silence; First, Your Water Was Filtered. Now It's Your Life.

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IT'S 11:30 p.m., and my upstairs neighbors are running their washing machine, again, though only the experienced would know that it is not a helicopter landing. Three polite notes have done nothing to stop it. But now, the tap of a button takes me away. I am not in a small Manhattan apartment but in Hawaii. The sounds of waves, far more real than I would have expected from my new Tranquil Moments Plus sound machine, lull me to sleep.

Leaving the house the next morning, I pop on my other new experimental purchase, a pair of noise-canceling headphones. The subway becomes a silent movie, my desk, a muted bubble amid news of war and campaign madness.

No one even looks at me funny. But then, I had noticed a colleague wearing the same headphones in the office the day before, and, after I waved my arms in front of him to grab his attention, he informed me that Colin Powell wears them on planes. If the secretary of state can maintain the world's respect wearing black plastic bagels on his ears, why can't the rest of us?

We have e-mail filters and air filters, noise-canceling machines, noise-canceling headphones, and in one catalog, a wrap-around eye-and-ear pillow that blocks out all light and noise.

Tivo allows you to ignore commercials, and caller ID, your friends. Minivans, the original suburban bubble, now come equipped with DVD screens and headphones that allow parents to effectively wall off the front seat from those squabbling siblings in the back.

With self-serve airport kiosks, A.T.M.'s, online grocery delivery services, clothing catalogs, restaurant reservations, and, of course, the ubiquitous iPod, it has become possible to filter almost every possible human interaction. V-chip your television, V-chip your mom.

Given the uncertainty of terrorism and war, perhaps it's not surprising that people might look for ways to get away from it all. But is filtering the latest form of denial, the latest protective bubble we have blown for ourselves, or are we just becoming better editors of our life experiences?

"It's not about bubbles, it's about figuring out which products work, which ideas work, which relationships work for you," said Robbie Blinkoff, the principal anthropologist at Context-Based Research Group, a consulting firm in Baltimore. "It's partly because of all the stuff that's available out there, the amount of channels you can get it through. You had to create a survival strategy."

So never mind that as I completed a week of experimenting with life on filter, a colleague said to me, "You hate us!" I wasn't a snob or antisocial, but practicing what Mr. Blinkoff calls "critical consumption."

Modern filtering has been around since the most answering machines allowed people to screen calls. But the popularity of Tivo and noise-canceling headphones suggest that demand for filtering is growing -- hardly surprising in an age when people's cellphone conversations and blogs are giving you more far more information than you really wanted. Now, at the supermarket, Mr. Blinkoff said, "the coupon dispensers pop out at you."

As Kristin van Ogtrop, the managing editor of Real Simple magazine, said, "We have noise from the minute we wake up in the morning to the minute we go to bed."

Real Simple has built its readership over the past four years -- circulation has grown from 400,000 to 1.55 million -- largely on people's desire to filter that noise. Each month, the magazine tests products and picks what it considers the best, from a huge array -- 70 types of bandages, 24 can openers, 30 self-tanners.

"We're such a rich country that you have 30 different kinds of paper towels," Ms. van Ogtrop said. "I'm not sure Americans want 30 different kinds of paper towels."

Tivo and filtered e-mail messages are nothing more than a form of organizing, she said, which may have become the new American hobby. A new organizing magazine, Organizing Good Things, by the publishers of Martha Stewart Living arrived on newsstands last month, and The Container Store is expanding across the country.

"As the rest of the world gets scarier and bigger and weirder," Ms. van Ogtrop said, organizing "helps us to feel more controlled."

Bose, which makes a popular high-end version of noise-canceling headphones, first began producing them for pilots and the military. In

2000, it began marketing the product to consumers, in more modest form. As Carolyn Cinotti, a company spokeswoman, said, consumers don't want to wear helmets. At least, not yet.

"Its success surprised even us," Ms. Cinotti said. Most people use the headphones on flights, but, increasingly, they are used to block out the neighbor's lawn mowers, colleagues' chatter, fellow commuters' irritability, or to sleep and meditate.

But do these filters create an alienable world, one too cushioned, too impermeable to surprise?

Janna Malamud Smith, a psychotherapist and the author of "Private Matters: In Defense of the Personal Life," released in paperback last month, said increased mobility has increased people's craving for bubbles.

"As we have infinite space in which to expand, we're sort of finding that self-soothing in these little bubbles seems to be more comfortable," she said. "We're trying to deal with the fact that most of the people we see are strangers. If we have our own music with us, we're creating our own reality. We think, 'I'm going to keep them out, they're strangers, and they're really annoying.'"

But even as she bubbles her walks around her suburb with Italian lessons on her CD player, Ms. Smith worries that all this will become the ultimate form of what the social scientist Robert Putnam famously called "bowling alone." Look, she said, at the decline in participation in things like the traditional New England town meeting.

"A democracy rests on everybody feeling that they have a stake in being part of a conversation," she said. "In running into our bubbles we are abdicating our more public roles in a way that turns the public realm over to people who may not have our interests at heart."

Filtering does make the return to reality all that much harsher -- when I take the earphones off at work at the end of the week, even the clicking of my own keyboard seems too loud.

As for participation in democracy? That one I have figured out. I voted. Wearing headphones.

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