

Visions of Vision Pro
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It's only been a short time, but we are already several stages into the discussion cycle on Apple's latest product introduction, the Vision Pro headset. Stage 1 was pre-presentation mockery with comments like "Google glass was awful" and "Headsets are only for weirdo nerd gamers, and even for them they're not very good" and "I can't believe a great company like Apple has been reduced to this nonsense!"

The second stage of discussion came after journalists had an opportunity to each spend a half hour demoing the device. The reaction: "Holy crap, this thing is amazing! Even by Apple standards, this is a stupendously polished product with an incredible, intuitive interface."

Stage three was the social commentary. "OK fine, progress is great, but it's going to murder us all! Basically, what we have here is a device to help us watch television and movies in incredibly immersive high-quality 3-D, which is only going to exacerbate the crisis of loneliness in society as we all move into our own little, tiny bubbles." The word "dystopian" appeared in almost every post about Vision Pro I read in this period.

And stage four is the revisions to the stage three take, with the notion that "People aren't understanding what this product is really for. Sure, folks will watch TV and movies with it, but the big important use case is something else."

I agree with that part, but the articles I've seen so far on what the true and real importance of this product is, have been, in my humble opinion, far off base. The excellent Kara Swisher focused on her ability to get work done effectively on planes and in hotel rooms. While this is certainly a valid use case, Apple is not going to sell one billion of these that way, especially since talented road warriors are already pretty handy with a laptop. An article on the Harvard Business Review website thinks the main importance is for sophisticated design and manufacturing work, i.e., work that is video-based and requires multiple inputs, text, and images, to our brains at once. Again, while this is a powerful and niche use case, it is not the reason Apple will make zillions off this product.

I believe The Apple Vision Pro is a step on a path that will have enormous impacts on society and will change the way we work and live every day. In reaching this conclusion, I assume only the most obvious and modest advances to what Apple showed the other day. The product will get smaller and lighter and somewhat less expensive, plus there will be a need for ancillary cameras to achieve what I suggest.

Matthew Iglesias wrote a series of excellent posts on his Substack recently exploring the concern that increasing media technology may be driving a loneliness epidemic. He notes that every new piece of media tech has received this criticism - radio, television, the Internet, smartphones, social media, heck, people probably said this about books back in the day too! Each time, there was probably a tiny bit of truth to it, even though this school of thought is generally mocked in retrospect since friendships and romantic relationships still form in our society, despite the existence of new gadgets.

Sometimes the cumulative effect can be a lot larger than the effect of any individual piece. Now, you can

sit on your own couch with your own popcorn and your own remote control, in front of your own giant screen television, and watch any movie that was ever made, plus, your kitchen and your bathroom are just steps away! With this experience at home, why would we venture out in the cold and rain to sit on Sprite-sticky seats at a movie theater ten miles away? It's understandable that lots of us watch films alone instead of getting together with a group of friends, and while it might be the obvious correct short-term decision, it may be costly long-term as we don't feel the bonds we did when we went to shows in groups.

If this new headset makes movies into an incredibly realistic 3-D experience, the temptation to watch via this mechanism alone, rather than go out, becomes even stronger. And it's not just that we lose our movie nights, maybe the experience is so good that it starts to cut into our pub trivia nights and even our evenings hanging out with the gang just shooting the bull.

So far, so correct and wise. But I think there's a piece missing here. And that is this sort of technology can bring us together instead of, or in addition to, pulling us apart. If you look at data comparing now to the turn of the century, you'll see that time spent watching TV and movies is not up, as the preceding paragraph would lead you to believe. In fact, it's down. Of course, screen time is up! But the thing is, lots of that screen time is communal, with people messaging with friends or playing video games, screaming into their headsets as they work to stay in synch while moving in for the kill.

In other words, to properly evaluate this issue we must think about three types of activities, not two. The original two are solo activities like reading and TV watching, and communal activities like going out for lunch together. The third category is "remote but communal" through Netflix parties, multiplayer video games, live group chats, etc.

The mistake here, or at least the oversimplification, is analogizing the Apple Vision Pro to television, when in many ways, the closer analogy is to a different long-ago invention, the telephone. Did the ability to call your sibling across town and catch up on the latest family news reduce people's tendency to actually head over and sit down with their sibling in person? Of course, it did! But did the telephone increase loneliness as a result? While I have not seen the research, I'd be shocked if it weren't the reverse -- meaning phones actually cultivated connection. It seems safe to say the telephone involved a tradeoff. Perhaps before we had 20 in-person sibling meetings a year, and with the telephone, we moved to eight in-person meetings and perhaps 60 telephone calls. As to whether that's an upgrade or a downgrade, your mileage may vary, but it sounds pretty good to me. (Though I am aware that, as a blind person, while I find in-person calls superior to telephone calls, it may not be by as great a margin as for the sighted.)

Suppose your beloved sibling is not across town but across the country. With the telephone upgrade, maybe seeing them three times in person with no phone calls changes to seeing them twice in person with dozens of phone calls. Of course, if your sibling's child has a party for their fourth birthday, there's not much the telephone can do to help you participate without getting on a plane. Maybe you could pick up the phone and talk to your sister and her four-year-old for a little bit, but that's about it. Through Zoom and FaceTime, you can at least see their faces when you talk to them, which is a small -- medium-sized?! -- improvement.

But now consider the situation where everybody has Apple Vision Pro and a camera in their living room. Well, now what happens is, we all put our glasses on and... You are at the birthday party! Sure, you will not be able to hug anybody or shake their hands, and you can't eat the cake (if you want cake, you'll have to get some on your own). But in every other way, all the sights and sounds, you really can be a participant. This is the promise and the excitement of virtual reality. Tell me now... has human contact increased or decreased? Are we helping or hurting the loneliness epidemic? The question answers itself!

And it's not just big events like birthday parties. Here's a personal example: my brother lives far away and a major source of joy and community for us is our beloved Philadelphia sports teams, especially the NFL's Eagles. When there's a game on, we each follow it on TV or radio and we simultaneously text with one another. Often, we will talk on the phone after the game. It's pretty great! But you know what would be a lot greater? If we could watch the game together! But how can that happen when we're hundreds of miles apart? Well, if we each put on an Apple Vision Pro headset, it's going to feel like he and I are sitting right next to each other watching the game, just like we did when we both lived in Philly. That will be a major, major enhancement to my life satisfaction. And of course, it doesn't have to be just him and me, we can get our dad and a bunch of our other friends from around the world to watch with us at the same time. No more of what Robert Putnam memorably termed "Bowling alone"!

My colleagues have explained to me that this sort of post is not an appropriate space for random musings about society and culture, but rather a place to discuss business and markets. So, let's do that! Even though what excites me most about the promise of Apple Vision Pro resides on the personal side, it's also a game changer for business. I refer of course to the "remote work" or "work from home" revolution that I wrote about in my last post. CEOs in recent times have taken to telling their workers they need to come back to the office by explaining that we just cannot properly know each other through tiny little squares on the zoom screen. And I agree, but at the same time, many workers really do have a preference to commute three days a week, or even zero, rather than all five. Can we have the best of both worlds? Well, if we're all wearing our Apple Vision Pro headsets, perhaps we kinda sorta can!

Of course, it's not going to be an exact replica of the experience of working in a physical office with someone, and I think we'll see a lot more offices doing three or four days in person a week rather than zero, but if the headset is comfortable enough to wear all day, and if wearing it means that it feels to everybody like they're all in the room together, that makes work from home a far more palatable option from both worker and employer perspectives. The problem of shirking can be minimized since you can see what other people are doing as well as or better than you would if they were in the office, and there are opportunities to get to know your colleagues that are superior to what's available under old-school remote. Again, not saying it's better (or even as good as) being in person or that it is easy to create casual interactions and bonding, but it sure is better than 90% fully alone spiced with 10% Zoom calls!

All of which is to say, if we flash forward five or ten years and imagine a lightweight, comfortable, affordable version of this product that is improved on 50 other dimensions in the way that technology generally, and Apple specifically, always improves, you have a huge impact on productivity, not because images and data are streaming into your head Terminator style, but because of the human element, because it enables you to be wherever you need to physically be but still feel like you're right there with your colleagues being productive and bonding.

By the way, a quick comment on the form factor... I was surprised and a little irritated to see folks complaining that the format resembles ski goggles, rather than being a sleek pair of sunglasses. I grew up reading tons of science fiction, and I always imagined the day would come when we would have some kind of virtual reality headset, though I thought it would be further in the future than it's turning out to be. But I thought it would be an Iron Man-style helmet! The fact that it's merely a pair of ski goggles rather than something a knight in shining armor would wear seems remarkable and wonderful to me. Of course, we want it to look more like sunglasses, and someday it will, but let's give these miracle-working engineers a week or two a vacation before we demand that, shall we?!

So to summarize, I think the Apple Vision Pro and its successors, some of which will come from Apple and some of which will come from competitors, (though on a side note, I should mention that a smart Silicon Valley friend suggested to me that Apple may be the only company in the world good enough at enough different things to make a product of remotely this quality), are going to be huge game changers for both our social lives and our work lives.

Predicting all the consequences is difficult and I am certainly not saying all will be positive. For example, for the people who make good friends in high school, what will happen when they head off to college? Will we discover they're spending most of their time still talking to their high school friends because they're just a finger pinch away?! Obviously, it's wonderful that they can keep those friendships, but maybe it will prevent us from spreading our wings as we should.

These are hard and complex problems. My point is not to oversimplify, but rather to highlight how easy it is to miss the heart of the matter by focusing on edge cases. The heart of the matter is this: if you think that no matter how realistic a simulation is, nothing that isn't physical presence counts as true human connection, then my point, like Rick Springfield's love confession to Jesse's girl, is probably moot. But, if you feel that communication and interaction and intimacy fall along a spectrum, where, in general, texting is better than nothing, the telephone is better than texting, FaceTime is better than the telephone, the Apple Vision Pro is better than FaceTime, and in person is best of all, then it's entirely possible that these technologies improve our social bonds and decrease loneliness rather than the other way around.