Is There Anybody Out There?
Observations by Alan Sadowsky

In the Fall of 1938, Orson Wells and a small group of radio actors and actresses did a live broadcast performance of H.G. Wells' (no relation to Orson) "War Of The Worlds". The "reality" broadcast depicted an invasion of Earth by Martians bent on destroying the human race. In the final minute of the broadcast, listeners heard a lone survivor on a ham radio asking; "Is there anybody out there?" The only response was the static of dead air on the radio.

I have personally listened to recordings of that broadcast, and to say the least, the closing seconds are very unsettling. Most people in those circumstances would share the same feelings of emptiness, helplessness, and isolation conveyed by that ham radio operator. Putting science fiction aside for the moment, there is still the sense, if not the truth that man is by nature a social animal. Our personalities and our overall mental health are rooted in human interaction. From early childhood through adolescence and beyond, we rely, develop, and in many ways thrive on the interaction between ourselves and other people. And yet we find ourselves becoming more and more shut out from this basic necessity of life by those who would put profit above all else. Consider the following…

- You call the airlines for flight arrival information, and find yourself connected to an automated voice response system.

- Your company not only starts but also encourages a "work-at-home" policy.

- The majority of your interaction with friends and colleagues take the form of emails and online chat sessions.

- The majority of characters in the latest film you've seen are computer generated.

- The "Contact Us" information on the preponderance of company websites is an email address (typically labeled "Support@" or Info@), rather than a real person's name and phone number.

- The pre-flight safety information once given by flight attendants is now conveniently provided in a Hollywood-style video.

Technology is a wonderful thing, and we blindly embrace each new advancement because we're led to believe that our lives are better as a result. But when you take into account the loss of human contact for the sake of financial gain, I have to wonder what the long-range effects might be.

We find ourselves in a world where we increasingly shun contact with other people. Acts of terror have made us suspicious of our neighbors. Acts of crime have led us to restrict our movements. Acts of financial deception have forced us to radically alter our lifestyles

and our goals. As a people we are driven by the actions of a few. As a nation we are subjected to the deficiencies of our leaders. As a global population, we are at the mercy of our fears and prejudices.

Years ago when the industrialized countries moved to automate production lines in an effort to reduce costs, there was a general consensus that machines were taking away jobs. It is true that the elimination of product defects was a benefit, and there's no argument that the business world reaped significant financial rewards. The price for this however was paid in human terms. People did lose their jobs and their livelihoods to the machines, and while the door was opened to new employment opportunities, those opportunities were fewer in number to compensate for the losses on the other side of the equation. The doomsayers decried a world run by machines, and those without a strong enough voice were quickly swept aside by the giants of industry and their partners in government. We now stand on the threshold of the 21st century, and when we look at the technological "advancements" that have been made, we should also look at where these advancements are leading us.

- We joyfully purchase our airline tickets, groceries, and books, even our automobiles on the Internet.

- We smugly manage our financial transactions via online banking.

- We sidestep our face-to-face business dealings opting for the impersonal conference call.

- We solicit our customers with CRM software, Excel spreadsheets, and PowerPoint slides.

- We supervise our children by way of cell phones, pagers, and web-cam equipped daycare facilities.

- We dispense with going to the movies, choosing cable Pay-Per-View entertainment.

- We shun the board games of our youth, and embrace the solitude of the PlayStation and the X-Box.

In every case we move further away from each other, and in doing so, we eliminate personal contact and our ability to interact with each other. In a world where we still face the horrors of illiteracy, famine, disease, and nuclear annihilation, the last thing we should be doing is throwing up obstacles that prevent us from solving these problems.

And yet, a small clique of insatiably powerful people whose only goal in life is to make more and more money has carefully manipulated our lifestyles and our habits. Chasing the promise of more leisure time, a shorter workweek, and a better life for our families,

we have played right into the hands of the technocrats, and they're laughing all the way to the bank.

We are convinced that the preaching's of Microsoft are necessary to keep us "connected". We are bombarded with the warnings by IBM that our businesses are doomed to fail without their solutions for success. We are reminded that our inadequacies make us less competitive. In fact in some cases we are completely at the mercy of the marketing wizards, through the use of End User Licensing Agreements (EULA's), maintenance agreements, and the potential threat of litigation.

Without questioning the reasons or the costs, our society has chosen to follow rather than lead; to conform rather than question; to upgrade rather than disinvest.

<u>The prophets of technology are driven by the profits to be made from technology.</u>

I can't possibly imagine a world run by machines, at least not in my lifetime. On the other hand, there are lessons to be learned from stories such as Blade Runner, Millennium Man, and Terminator. We should never forget who we are, and we should never forget what we as human beings are capable of. When we embrace technology at the expense of our humanity, we change what we are and who we are. In many ways that may be a path from which there is no return, and as such, we should consider the risks very carefully.

What concerns me the most is the possibility that these words, like those of a fictional ham radio operator, are lost in a cloud of inexplicable static. And so I sit at my word processor and wonder; "Is there anybody out there?"