

Technologically disabled

V.S. Sunder

How often have you seen a five year-old pick up a mobile phone or a remote control, and soon start surfing the possibilities with the aplomb and dexterity of a born engineer? Likewise, you must have seen how gingerly a 60 year-old picks up the same object, almost afraid it might explode at any moment. I want to talk about the technologically disabled, typically post-middle aged person who is often treated like an imbecile for not knowing how to take to these electronic gizmos like a fish to water, and some of the ways modern society tends to alienate such people!

As I have been invited to a conference to be held in Wales in about a month's time, I would like to take this opportunity to rent a car and take my family on a driving holiday to Scotland. While this seems a great notion on paper, one needs to undergo the grim realities of the visa procedure. In the past, I have exercised a stoic patience as I filled three forms (one each for my wife, my daughter and me), each with anything up to 10 pages of questions of the most annoying kind. (For example, there is always the question which asks if you have travelled anywhere out of your country in the last 10 years, and if so, to detail when, where, and for what reason you went to each of those places - and typically leaving only enough space in the form for three such visits. So you will have to get out current and past passports to answer these questions faithfully and omitting no details, however minute, lest you be accused of falsifying data!)

This time, when I tried to locate the necessary forms with the help of Google, imagine my horror when I found that people from 'some countries' have to fill their forms 'online'. I wonder how much experience you have with people or organisations leaving you no way other than doing things 'online', especially when the home-pages of these organisations are a maze where locating information is virtually impossible. And one is always scared lest one mistakenly presses some wrong key and the 'on-line form' would have vanished before you printed out a copy! Why, one wonders, is such a treatment reserved only for people from 'some countries'. Is it because Jairam Ramesh and Abdul Kalam should be expected to be more computer savvy than Mitt Romney and George W. Bush?

One of my brothers refuses to use email, but he does use a mobile phone. My wife, on the other hand, never uses email or a mobile

phone, and is quite happy to never have to use the computer. But how long will our ultra-modern society permit anachronistic beings like my brother or wife to exist thus? Maybe such existence will soon be proclaimed to be an act of treason.

While explaining the concept of Universal Design to me, a friend once told me: *At its core is inclusion, which demands of people to practice values that include diversity and difference as adding richness to life. The phenomena of 'survival of the fittest', religious faith and language have, in some way, contributed to alienating human beings from this value.* Or putting it slightly differently, and less elegantly, **Can you imagine Thoreau's plight if he were forced to make Walden pond wifi enabled?**