

HEALTH LIFESTYLE

# Q&A: Christine Rosen on what we lose by not being together

5 years after the COVID-19 lockdowns, we're less connected to each other, more connected to technology. This scholar wants that to change

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**By Mariya Manzhos**

Mariya is a staff writer based in Boston. She writes profiles of interesting people and stories at the intersection of religion and culture.

Christine Rosen has long been fascinated by how technology subtly reshapes human behavior. As the mother of twin boys, now 18, she saw firsthand how experiences she once took for granted — handwriting, sitting still without entertainment, reading a map — were vanishing from her children’s lives. “In some ways, we weren’t even noticing the change,” Rosen told me recently.

Her curiosity deepened when she came across an essay by naturalist Robert Michael Pyle, who wrote about “the extinction of experience” — a phrase Rosen borrowed for the title of her latest book. “What struck me about this phrase,” Rosen told me, “was his argument that if we don’t notice what’s going extinct as it’s happening, by the time we get to a point of extinction, no one will care.”



In her book "The Extinction of Experience," author and historian Christine Rosen explores how certain human experiences, now mediated by technology, are going extinct. | Beowulf Sheehan

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Rosen, who is a historian and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, saw this playing out in real time: online interactions replacing face-to-face ones, convenience becoming paramount — all accelerated by the response to COVID-19. “Here are some choices we’ve made without even realizing it,” she said. “And what is it doing to us both as individuals, as families, as communities, and broadly as a society and a culture?”

And can we reclaim what we’ve lost without rejecting technology altogether?

As a co-founder of the journal *The New Atlantis* and a frequent contributor to *Commentary*, *National Review* and other news outlets, Rosen has spent decades analyzing cultural shifts and how technology alters human behavior. She recently spoke with the *Deseret News* about what we lose when so much of life is filtered through screens — and what we might still reclaim. The interview was edited for length and clarity.

**Deseret News:** *You make a point that technology has made life more comfortable and convenient but at a cost. What do you see as the most urgent and significant losses we’ve suffered due to our increasing reliance on mediated experiences?*

**Christine Rosen:** The first one I’d pick is the decline in face-to-face communication. Think about how many times you now have a screen between yourself and another person or there isn’t another person there anymore — instead, there’s a self-service kiosk to check out in line or an automatic check in at the gate to your airport so that you don’t deal with a human. We’ve outsourced the human relationship to a machine because it’s cost efficient and convenient. And we also don’t have to deal with people.

Face-to-face interactions are important, because from childhood, we practice learning how to read each other’s faces and expressions. It’s how we connect with each other and understand that someone might be a danger to us or an opportunity for friendship, and also it’s how we practice basic civility. Now, we’ve made life so convenient and so mediated that we don’t have to practice those skills as often.



And we've seen a rise in complaints about impatience, rudeness, road rage. We tend to choose the convenient mediated option because it's easier. And if you make things easier for humans, we will choose the easy path every time.

The second one — somewhat linked to that — is the transformation of public space. Public space in this nation, and in a lot of places around the world, has been completely colonized by technology — screens everywhere or everyone is on a screen. So there used to be more places — a public square, a coffee shop, a tavern, bowling alley — where people from all walks of life, who didn't necessarily know each other were all under one roof and they had to learn how to get along. There were norms that developed over time, and those were a really important glue in society. That has come apart, because we now choose to be in our own digitally mediated worlds all the time as opposed to noticing the people around us in public space. Devices transformed the quality of public space in ways that I think have been detrimental to helping us all get along as human beings.

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**DN:** *It also removes the spontaneity and serendipity from those spaces that as you point out are so important for our growth and experience. Devices allow us to assert control over our mundane experiences.*

**CR:** But it's deceptive kind of power and control – because underneath it all, if you become dependent on that way of doing things, everything else seems super risky and so you're just going to avoid it. And because we've created a society where we can largely avoid those risky, potentially serendipitous, but also potentially not fun interactions, we choose to avoid them. You can't manufacture serendipity, but it requires people with the character and judgment to be willing to take very small risks in their daily lives and interact with other people who might be friendly, but also might not be — and to learn to judge the range of human behavior.

**DN:** *I was fascinated by your ideas on waiting and how we've become impatient and intolerant of any kind of slowness. Why has waiting become so intolerable and how does our culture reinforce the hurry at all times?*

**CR:** I grew up in Florida and I went to Disney World as a child on “Florida days” — they would have these discount days and Florida families could go. And so we would always go and it was horrible, the lines were terrible and there was nothing to do, but just wait and wait and wait to get five minutes on a ride. As an adult, I took my sons to Disney World and I was shocked at the redesign and the choices made around line waiting. There was much more sophisticated queuing, there was constant entertainment, screens if you waited inside for a ride — there were all these bells and whistles.

So I started looking at how technologists look at waiting — that it’s this huge problem that they want to constantly solve. That’s why your Google search now happens in a split second. People will abandon a shopping experience online if it’s more than a split second of time. We are habituated to do this now. Most of our interactions through the screen have been optimized to diminish waiting.

So when you leave the screen and you go to the real world, nothing’s optimized. You have to wait. People are slow. Things are dodgy about working the way they should. And we’ve been habituated to a different level of speed and optimization on the screen. So then how do we act in the real world? We act more impatiently. We act frustrated. We voice our anger and become quicker to anger.

I looked at road rage rates, which have skyrocketed, and now we have air rage and all these other ways people express frustration and impatience. Even when we have to wait, the phone becomes a portal to instantly alleviate boredom. It doesn’t let our minds rest or wander, and mind-wandering, turns out, leads to all kinds of interesting observations, creativity, insight.

Slowing down is super important because we have to remember that our minds and our bodies have a very slow evolution and our stubborn human natures have not caught up to our amazingly powerful technologies.

**DN:** *How can we begin to turn the tide and return to more human experiences, on both individual and collective level?*

**CR:** For those of us who work on a screen — reclaim your leisure time away from the screen. Always choose the in-person human activity and try to choose something that

isn't mediated at all, whether it's a hobby or a craft or hanging out with friends and family face-to-face.

Obviously individuals and families can have a whole lot of control over what they allow into their private worlds. I would encourage parents in particular to really think through what kinds of boundaries they want in the home.

At the community level — always choose the face-to-face if possible for any sort of meeting. There are a million reasons why it's difficult to meet face-to-face, but when you have a conflict at the community level, you will have a far greater chance of resolving it in a civil and humane way if everybody's in the same room together. There's something called the "online disinhibition effect," when you've got that screen between you and another person, even if you can see them, you're willing to really push the boundaries of civil engagement because you feel protected from consequences.

At the social level, we can use the law and the power of regulation with a very gentle touch that will at least set some standards for safety. For kids, we need to age-gate social media platforms. For adults, it becomes tricky. I don't think adults should have any restrictions, with one exception — and that is how employers are starting to survey their employees. The kinds of monitoring and surveillance that's now brought into the private sphere eroded people's expectation of privacy at home because their employers are tracking a lot of their behavior. People's behavior starts to change because they assume they're being watched. And in a free society, that is not what we want.

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**DN:** *Church seems to be one of the few places where having a phone is less culturally acceptable, and therefore, you end up being with people in a more authentic way.*

**CR:** Yes, church creates a boundary, a norm — it inculcates habits of mind and an understanding of our duty to each other when we are in that space. Some churches have been a little too lenient with technology, like when everyone's reading their



scripture on their phone. I'm very opposed to that — I think sacred spaces should remain sacred from technology.

We really need to protect those spaces because they encourage community and they are now an escape from an everyday world that really threatens our attention and our ability to think clearly and freely about the way we want to live our lives.

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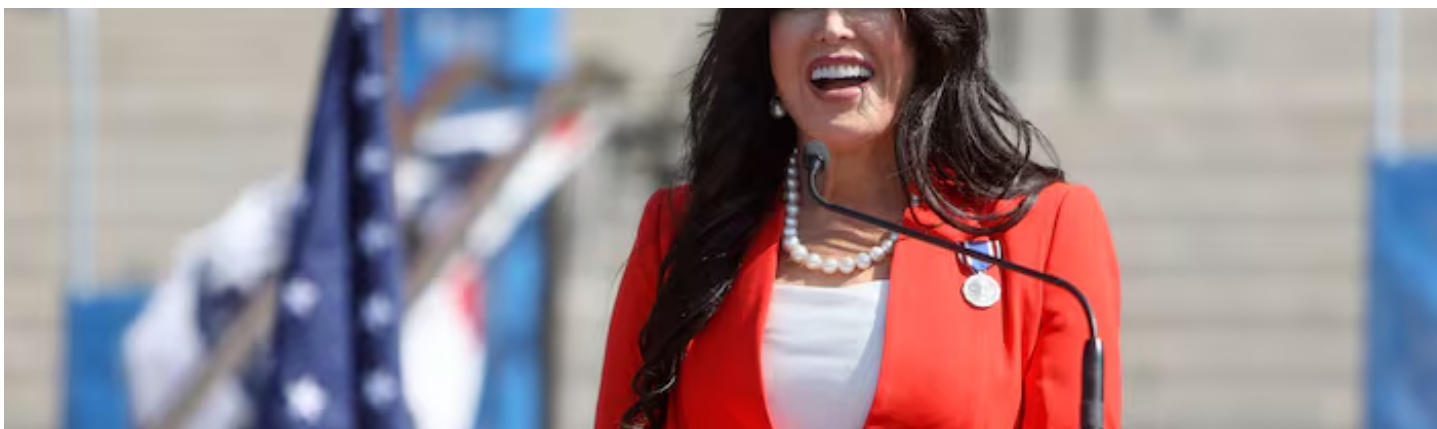
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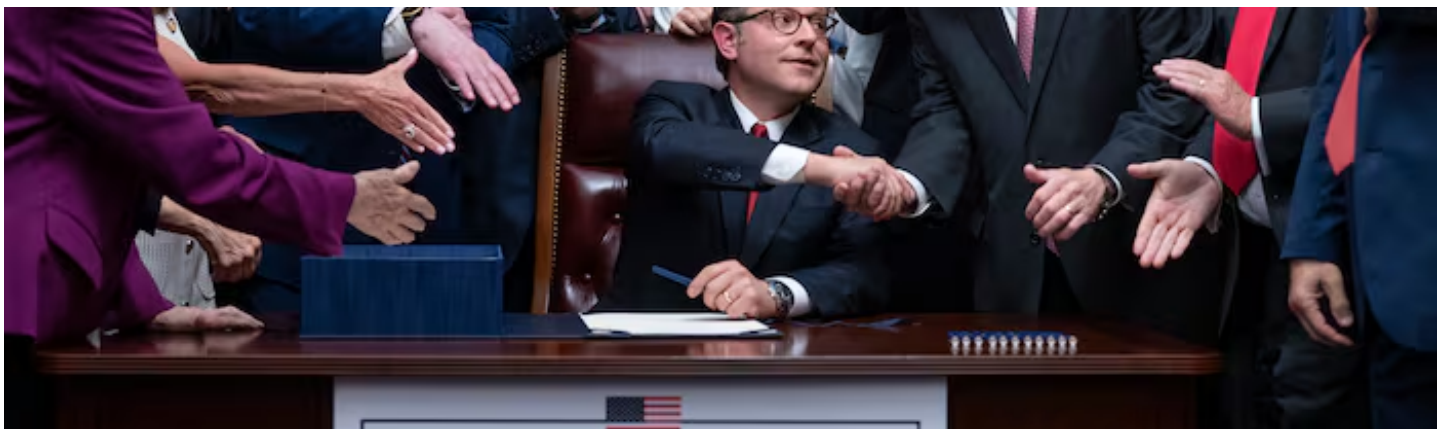
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