

2013-2014 Topics

Social Isolation

PP1

Feelings of social isolation have increased in populations around the world since the early 1900s. The disabled, the mentally ill, and the elderly are especially susceptible to feelings of isolation and loneliness, as are those in rural areas, those with low self-esteem, and those without a confidant. Recent research points to deleterious effects on the brain from social isolation, which in turn contributes to a myriad of health problems. Those who are socially isolated have shorter life spans and suffer from more illnesses than those with active social lives. Is our fast-paced society contributing to this increase in isolation or do our busy lives allow for more social interactions? Is the internet permitting more social contact through social networking sites or interfering with it by limiting more intimate friendships? What measures need to be taken to reverse this trend? How will advances in technology open up possibilities for increases or decreases in social isolation?

Desertification

PP2

Desertification describes the desert-like conditions that exist in regions, often as a cause of human interaction with the environment. According to the United Nations Development Programme, "Over 40 percent of the world is drylands, where about 2.3 billion people live in nearly 100 countries." Drylands are defined as regions where rainfall is low and evaporation is high. Desertification is one of the most serious ecosystem changes facing people who live in poverty. Two-thirds of the world's poor live in areas that are susceptible to desertification, and over half of them depend on the land for their livelihoods. Many of desertification's causes are human in nature (deforestation, overgrazing, poor irrigation systems, changes in population density), but the problem can also be exacerbated as severe weather events increase in frequency and severity due to climate changes. The continued degradation of drylands results in a 'feedback loop': the arid land exposes carbon captured in the soil and releases it into the atmosphere with significant consequences on global climate systems, in turn, leading to desertification. As human interference and climate change continue to cause land degradation, how will governments and landowners respond to the ever-changing condition of their lands? What will be the effect on lifestyles and livelihoods as changes resulting from desertification occur?

Surveillance Society

QP

Google Earth aims to photograph every street in every country on Earth, surveillance satellites can photograph a person walking down the street from space, and cities are increasingly being blanketed by closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras both indoors and outdoors. People use cameras in their houses to watch for burglars or even to survey how their babysitters are looking after their children. CCTV cameras can also be used to monitor environments that are not safe for humans. In London it is estimated that there are at least 1.5 million CCTV cameras in city centers, parks, stations, airports, shops and so on. There is little evidence that these cameras deter crime, with police in the UK saying, "Police are no more likely to catch offenders in areas with hundreds of cameras than in those with hardly any." A 2008 Report by UK Police Chiefs concluded that CCTV solved only 3% of crimes. Do CCTV cameras keep people safe? While "surveillance" has traditionally referred to camera surveillance, it now includes the interception of electronically transmitted information such as phone calls or internet history used for data mining and individual profiling. How do you know when and where you are being watched? Who controls the data that is gathered? Who can view it? How might it be used? Should the need for public and personal safety outweigh an individual's right to personal privacy?

Land Transportation

AB

Innovative and efficient transportation from one place to another has been the inspiration for inventions and new technologies for hundreds of years. Since the creation of the first car, automobile ownership has allowed humans to commute to better jobs, travel to exciting places, impress others, and cover distances more quickly than ever before. Rising fuel prices and anticipation of stricter emissions regulations are forcing people to rethink how best to travel from point A to point B. Some areas invest more heavily in public transportation than others and those who live in sparsely populated areas are often left unconnected to commuter rail services and other forms of public transportation reserved for the benefit of those in more densely populated areas. Are hybrids and fuel-efficient vehicles the answer? Will regional air travel be a cheaper, quicker, safer, and more environmentally-friendly alternative to trains and buses in the years to come? What new methods of land transportation may be introduced, and how might they fit into our everyday lives?