

PERSPECTIVE



MYRIAM BABIN/GETTY

While public bathroom etiquette allows for biological necessity, it does not allow for private-made-public conversations.

No phones on the throne

By TOM MONTGOMERY FATE

I recently walked into a public bathroom at a nearby college to do one of the two private things that people usually do in bathrooms. I took my position three urinals down (as far away as possible) from a well-dressed, 50-something man, who stood at his urinal doing a third thing: talking on his cell phone to someone (his financial planner?) about putting money in an S&P index fund.

“Yes, but can I really count on a 7 percent return post-retirement? If not, I may move it into bonds. I need something I can count on.”

Don't we all — like a bathroom that doesn't double as your home office!

That's what I wanted to say.

The guy wasn't whispering, after all, but nearly yelling, with no concern for the unspoken (i.e., no talking) etiquette of the public bathroom.

While public bathroom etiquette does allow for biological necessity, it does not allow for private-made-public conversations.

So please, stop talking. I do not want to know. Please do not include me. We are not in the steam room at your health club.

Another problem is that some people now confuse the toilet stalls with a similar metal cubicle from days past: the phone booth. There was a reason

they didn't put pay phones in toilet stalls — in order to keep private things private.

I would suggest new signage in all public bathrooms: “No Phones on the Throne.”

On my recent visit, some guy, Stall-talker No. 1, locked away in the corner stall, was also doing the third thing: loudly arguing with someone (I assume his ex-wife) about who had the kids for the upcoming weekend.

“Mary, this is the second time you've bailed this month. I have other plans. I don't care how depressed you are; get over here and pick them up, or I'm driving them over to your place.”

Sheez, take it easy on her. Parenting is hard, and a divorce can make it excruciating. Anger doesn't help. Chill out.

That's what I wanted to say.

Then one of those familiar sounds I mentioned earlier erupted from the stall, a sound now intolerable because it was connected to a voice, someone responsible, who I really didn't want to know.

Please stop talking. Please do not include me. I went to the sink to wash my hands.

While soaping my hands, a silky smooth voice (I presume from an iTunes account) echoed from the center stall; it was “I Don't Mind” by Usher:

“I don't mind when you work until 3/If you're leaving with me/Go make that money, money, money/Your money, money, money ...” A red backpack was sticking out from under his door. So this guy was doing at least three things at once, maybe four. Stall-talker No. 2 also had an annoyingly loud voice: “I got a 62 on the midterm. (Five seconds of silence.) No, the teacher said I wouldn't pass. I also missed a bunch of assignments. (More silence.) I

The anonymous sound of a rustling newspaper or a book page being turned was impersonal; there was no voice or identity.

don't know; I might just drop out. (More silence.) No, I can't talk anymore — got to get to work.”

Then the flush. I dried my hands and rushed out.

I do not want to know. Please do not include me.

More suggested public bathroom signage: “No Rappin' While Crappin'.”

It's not that I'm unsympathetic, or that these people's problems don't matter. But why can't they do the “third thing” that we always used to do: quietly read.

The anonymous sound of a rustling newspaper or a book page being turned was impersonal; there was no voice or identity. Back then, we knew that a public bathroom is not a game show, that no one really wants to know who or what is behind Door No. 1 or 2 or 3.

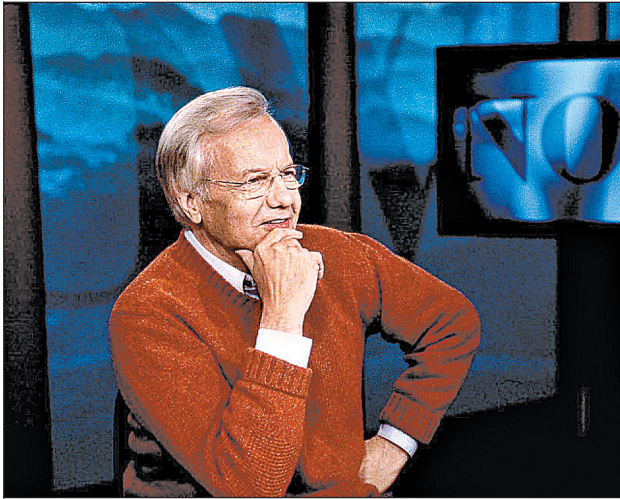
If this rather nostalgic argument against phones on the throne doesn't convince you, here's a more practical one. A recent Google study revealed that 39 percent of American smartphone owners use them in the bathroom.

A related Plaxo study found that 19 percent of Americans have dropped those phones in the toilet. That means roughly half the people who use their phones in a toilet end up dropping them in.

Kerplunk goes the iPhone 6.

So why not sacrifice 15 minutes of access to YouTube and Instagram and Twitter and a few thousand “friends” in order to avoid the risk of flushing away all those years of stored data — all those gigs of video and audio and photos and emails that represent how hard we have worked to document and record and preserve our multipresent lives of frenetic convenience? Why would anyone risk such a loss?

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ROBIN HOLLAND/PUBLIC AFFAIRS TELEVISION 2004

Bill Moyers distinguished himself as a journalist by refusing to be a stenographer for the powerful.

As Bill Moyers retires, we lose a friend

By KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL

After more than 40 years on the air, Bill Moyers has turned off his microphone. While the longtime face of public broadcasting had threatened to retire in the past, this time he has assured us that we have heard his final farewell. His voice and regular presence will be deeply missed, but his legacy, and his impact on public life, will surely live on.

During his storied career, the former White House press secretary and newspaper publisher produced groundbreaking reports on subjects ranging from the Iran-Contra scandal and the Iraq War to economic inequality and the corrosive influence of money in politics. His relentless commitment to the truth made Moyers the target of vicious attacks from Republicans, who for decades have sought to dismantle the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, but he never backed down. Always fearlessly independent, Moyers provided an invaluable counterpoint to Washington's conventional wisdom.

Yet his true legacy is far greater than the stories he covered or the politics he espoused. Indeed, Moyers constantly reminded us of journalism's indispensable role in our democracy.

Moyers distinguished himself as a journalist by refusing to be a stenographer for the powerful. Instead of providing yet another venue for the predictable preening of establishment leaders, Moyers gave a platform to dissenting voices from both the left and the right. Instead of covering the news from the narrow perspective of the political and corporate elite, Moyers gave voice to the powerless and the issues that affect them. “We journalists are of course obliged to cover the news,” he once said at an event hosted by The Nation Institute in Washington, D.C. “But our deeper mission is to uncover the news that powerful people would prefer to keep hidden.”

As politics became a spectator sport, Moyers, guided by his abiding belief in journalists as truth-tellers, refused to play along. “These ‘rules of the game’ permit Washington officials to set the agenda for journalism, leaving the press all too often simply to recount what officials say instead of subjecting their words and deeds to critical scrutiny,” he explained in 2005. “Instead of acting as filters for readers and viewers, sifting the truth from the propaganda, reporters and anchors attentively transcribe both sides of the spin, invariably failing to provide context, background or any sense of which claims hold up and which are misleading.”

And when the media failed to report the truth — most notably as the Bush administration built the case for the war in Iraq — Moyers demanded to know what had gone wrong. In 2007, Moyers produced “Buying the War,” an extraordinary documentary

that explored the role of the media in the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq and featured tough interviews with prominent media figures, including Tim Russert and Dan Rather, about the mistakes they made. “How mainstream journalists suspended skepticism and scrutiny remains an issue of significance that the media has not satisfactorily explored,” he said at the time. “How the administration marketed the war to the American people has been well covered, but critical questions remain: How and why did the press buy it, and what does it say about the role of journalists in helping the public sort out fact from propaganda?”

Moyers understood that one of the most pernicious threats to journalism, and indeed democracy, is a media dominated by corporations that prioritize profits over the public interest. He was a longtime modern-day Thomas Paine, warning against the perils of media consolidation — in print, on radio and television, and online — which he said “can take the oxygen out of democracy.” And he inspired and encouraged a movement of media reformers to fight for a free and independent press, including those of us at The Nation, where he was a regular contributor.

Above all else, Moyers treated his audience, in the words of Eric Alterman, a columnist for The Nation, “as adult citizens of a republic, who bear collective responsibility for the society we share” — a reflection of Moyers' deep and humane thinking about the roles of media and government.

“I don't harbor any idealized notion of politics and democracy. Remember, I worked for Lyndon Johnson. Nor do I romanticize ‘the people,’?” he said. “But there is nothing idealized or romantic about the difference between a society whose arrangements roughly serve all its citizens (something otherwise known as social justice) and one whose institutions have been converted into a stupendous fraud.”

Upon receiving the Freedom of Speech Award from the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute in 2007, Moyers recalled FDR's influence on his childhood. “I don't know quite how to explain it, except that my father knew who was on his side and who wasn't, and for 12 years he had no doubt where FDR stood,” Moyers said. “The first time I remember him with tears in his eyes was when Roosevelt died. He had lost his friend.”

For anyone who tuned in to his programs over the past four decades, there was no doubt where Moyers stood. We knew he was on our side. He was our friend.

Washington Post

Katrina vanden Heuvel is the editor and publisher of The Nation magazine.

QUOTABLES

“I don't understand how on one hand they can be such doting parents and so careful about the intake of everything — how much broccoli they eat and where they go to school, and making sure they're kind of sheltered and shielded from so many things. And yet they don't see anything that might not be suitable for either a preteen or a teen in some of the lyrical content and choreography of Beyonce.”



ELSA/GETTY

— Mike Huckabee, former Arkansas governor and presidential candidate, slamming President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama for allowing their daughters to be fans of Beyonce, above

“I'm not sure that he has what it takes to lead this new group of Republicans (which is) more conservative, more pro-life, more pro-family than any other legislature in the recent past. I'm just not sure John has what it takes to lead them into an aggressive agenda.”

— Phil Burress, who lives a few doors from John Boehner in West Chester, Ohio, and is chairman of the Citizens for Community Values, on the Ohio Republican securing a third term as speaker of the House