

Opinion: The world needs more darkness

By Joe Mathews

Remember the good old days when Californians were scared of the dark? When Hollywood was king and we all knew there was no monster or ghost scarier than the one we couldn't see—the one lying somewhere in the dark?

Those days are over. Today, the light is scarier than the dark ever was.



Joe Mathews

It's not just because the sun shines so hot that California is drying up. Or because growth has brought lights into once dark and undeveloped inland valleys. Or that Californians' days are so full of traffic and meetings that if you want to get anywhere or get anything done, you have to travel or work at night.

What's scary is that Silicon Valley rules us now, and the lights it shines never really turn off.

They are the lights of the smartphone and the tablet and the router, keeping us up with their glow. They are the lights of digital appliances, informing their manufacturers about our consumption. And they are the lights of social media, luring us to share and read and step into the light of a community,

when we'd be better off exercising or seeing friends or making love.

And they are the lights of transparency, that new god. The best companies are transparent. We demand that our governments be transparent. We, they, all pledge to be transparent—let the light shine everywhere.

But we pledge transparency so often we've turned it into a club. Woe to anyone who won't disclose—you must be hiding something! Let's convene a grand jury or a legislative hearing. Or file a ballot initiative to force disclosure.

It's scary how much we can see now. At the same time, there is so much out in the light that we can't see it all. So we struggle to prioritize what's most important. And it's frighteningly hard to tell, in all that light, what information is correct and what's perilously wrong. There's too much dangerous stuff out there where credulous people can see it. And so they might believe that immigrants are criminals or vaccines threaten children or that having a gun in the house makes you safer.

Remember the Night Stalker? Remember when danger came with crime or violence or drugs in the night? Well, murders are less common, and drugs are on their way to being legal. Now we most fear exposure, the scary reality that all our personal information is out there for someone to grab. Identity theft is the crime of these sun-splashed times.

It's not only the bad guys who can get you in the light. It's the good people, too.

They want to give us fair warning of everything, and so our lives have endless forms to fill out, boxes to check, labels to read, means of confirming that we have acknowledged what they are disclosing.

If we miss anything, if we forget anything, if we read too

fast—well, it's our own darn fault, isn't it? And so we toggle between all the screens and lists and emails we're supposed to monitor, anxious that we'll miss some message we're not supposed to miss.

Online communities grow like weeds—every organization and hobby has one. In my own life, with a wife and three kids and a 21st century job that's really five different jobs, I'm supposed to be signed into and contributing to a couple dozen permanent online huddles—for preschool, elementary school, after-school, Little League and two different soccer teams, and my main work (with its different email lists) and a global democratic forum I run and the university where I teach.

The light swallows up time and everything, even Halloween. Remember when costumes were black and covered your whole body? Today—call me a prude if you like—the nurses and witches expose so much skin there's nothing left to the imagination.

With the light revealing so much, I love the dark now. And I bet you do, too.

The dark doesn't cause sunburn or skin cancer. The dark allows you to think, and maybe, if the weather is good, search the sky for a few stars.

My favorite moments now are when I leave the mobile phone at home and steal away for a short walk after the kids have gone to bed. At work, I treasure sneaking out to lunch for a few minutes without telling colleagues where I'm going. I love hiding in the shady corners of theaters and coffee shops where I can feel safe from the light, in dark anonymity, for just a moment.

I hope you find some dark place like that during this big and very bright Halloween weekend.

I hope I don't you see there.

Joe Mathews is California and innovation editor for Zócalo Public Square, for which he writes the Connecting California column.