

Is Technology Helping or Hurting us?

by Leigh Donaldson

An October, 2016, New Yorker cartoon by Ed Koren shows a group of children wearing backpacks walking near a street, staring into their smart phones. The traffic warning sign reads: “SLOW: DISTRACTED CHILDREN.” “Black Mirror” and “Westworld,” two newly popular television shows, dramatize troubling questions about technology’s pervasive influence on daily life. Documentaries on web obsession such as “Web Junkies” are on the rise.

Not so long ago, life had a slower pace. Messages were less confusing. There were moments we could devote to reflection and idleness. Technology has completely changed all of that. We are now inexorably bound to the Internet with regard to our jobs, professions, social interactions and creative endeavors. There is no longer any privacy in the workplace or in our living rooms.

Technology has also jeopardized our awareness of what is going on immediately around us, our sense of civility and our moral duty in service to humanity. There is too much information, too easily obtained

and too much of it only scratching the surface of reality.

The excessive use of cell phones, iPads and computers encourages impatience and indifference to the people in our lives. Social media is not especially social. Texting and tweeting are borderline anti-social. There is too little real interaction. Human contact has almost become too superficial to ever be lasting.

We now live in a society where friends, music, videos, games, shopping items, and news information can all be accessed without leaving our homes, armchairs or beds. The very definition of technology includes the notion of machines and devices that can be operated without the user needing any knowledge of

their actual workings. We no longer even care how these things work. They control us. Perhaps originally conceived as an instruments that could augment the quality of our lives, they have become a grim obstacle to normal communication between friends, family and significant others.

The University of Texas/Dallas has dedicated a website to computer addiction called ReSTART, an Internet

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addiction recovery program. To date, there are more than 100 website and offline groups related to gaming addictions. Many therapists and counselors have petitioned the American Psychological Association to list technology addiction in their Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, used by professionals to diagnosis mental disorders. Researchers have found that heightened technology use triggers the same sites in the brain that are activated through substance abuse and other addictive activities such as gambling.

In the United States and abroad, there is growing professional belief in the concept of technology addiction. A 2009 survey conducted by David M. Levy, professor at the University of Washington's Information School, discussed how American society has become obsessed by a "more-better-faster" perspective that jeopardizes people's ability to reflect and engage in intuitive, contemplative thinking. Levy's research targets digital and other technological devices as being significantly responsible for social disconnection between people.

For too many people, constant use of and exposure to cell phones, iPods, Blackberries, Facebook, texting, big-screen entertainment centers, telemarketing, and radio talk shows have increased attention deficient behaviors. It seems likely that these technologies are making people cognitively lazy and shortening their attention spans.

In China, where parental expectations of achievement might be higher than typically in Western societies, boot camps with a militaristic/de-tox/tough love approach are addressing

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youths' addicted to online games, cyber pornography, chat rooms, etc. In every corner of the Earth, young and older individuals view the virtual world as an escape from reality, and often a source of perceived achievement, importance and sense of belonging.

We are being systematically stripped of our ability to think independently and distinguish truth from fact, as might be reflected in recent political elections. Overuse of technology tends to encourage an already fragmented and fragile society. It ultimately deprives us of the excitement of simply living in genuine time and space.

Technology absorption can affect a person's ability to pay attention in

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a casual conversation or to learn something new that isn't displayed on a large screen or presented in a quick and easy format. Workplaces and classrooms can be fertile ground for the perpetuation of technological mania. In an ever competitive business environment, many office workers are expected to perform like multi-faceted machines. Being forced to multi-task often means suffering from data overload along with all the other job-related stressors. Being tethered to cell phones, pagers and laptops, conference calls, webinars, Skype, is a recipe for a nervous breakdown.

"Given the powerful economic forces that have a self-interest in colonizing our consciousness ...devising effective ways to protect our contemplative consciousness is going to be a formidable challenge indeed," writes David Bollier in his article *More, Better, Faster!: How Our Spastic Digital Culture Scrambles Our Brains*. "When commercial values such as productivity and efficiency become so pervasive and internalized, they crowd out other ways of being."

Despite any claims, technology is not primarily created, designed and promoted with the consumers' best interest in mind. It is pay dirt for the companies who create it, first and foremost. Technology is driven by market and profit-making forces. Advertising makes many ravenous for the latest and hippest techno-gadgetry. We extravagantly buy into the electronic communication industry's planned obsolescence for products we become dependent upon, and later pay enormous recycling fees to get rid of last year's models, which are full of poisons, dangerous metals and chemicals. What is the logic in that?

It can be argued that individuals have a choice about what they consume through websites, as well as television and radio. Indeed, media can be used to both inform and entertain us without turning us into compliant robots. But, in the United States and abroad there is growing professional belief in the concept of technology addiction.

Not every tech user is hooked, but we all may be beginning to think less and less on our own. Not being hurried by electronic devices that beep and flash is vital to the mind, soul and imaginative spirit. The world that surrounds us can appear to be an ugly, hopeless

and bleak place when we rely on objects instead of ourselves to comprehend the human condition.

Resources

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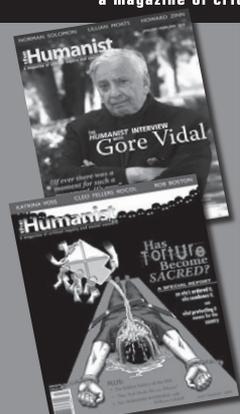
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