

## The Growing Obsession with Technology

Americans today are much busier now than ever before. From work, to errands, to driving, to shopping – we are constantly on the go. Because we are always “on the go,” our ability to communicate with one another is compromised because we simply don’t have the time to sit down and meet with business partners, friends, and family. Manufacturers have recognized this, and as a result, technology has adapted to our busy lifestyles. Today’s Smartphones enable us to make phone calls, surf the web, send e-mail, and send text messages all with one small device that easily fits in a pants pocket. Thanks to technology, we are now always connected.

While the use of Smartphones and other socially interactive technologies have been very convenient in our everyday lives, we have become addicted to our technologies as a result. A DoubleClick poll recently found that as many as four in ten Americans consider their high-speed Internet connections “essential” to their daily lives and another two in ten said they felt the same way about their CD and DVD players, along with their cable subscription (Bosworth, 2005). Our technologies have become a necessity rather than a convenience. Because of our reliance on technology, text messages and e-mail are replacing face-to-face interaction, which is negatively impacting our home life, work life, and interpersonal relationships. In light of this, I believe we need to set the gadgets down and increase our face-to-face interaction.

According to the beliefs of some psychiatrists, an addiction to technology and the Internet does indeed exist. Psychiatrist Dr. Jerald Block has found that excessive use of text

messaging and e-mail may be a sign of mental illness. Block states that there are four specific symptoms: “suffering from feelings of withdrawal when a computer cannot be accessed; an increased need for better equipment; need for more time to use it; and experiencing the negative repercussions of the addiction.” People with this illness show signs of “a loss of sense of time or a neglect of basic drives, withdrawal, feelings of anger, tension, and/or depression” when deprived of access to computers and other technologies (Cavaliere, 2008, p. 13).

This “addiction” to technology not only has the potential to affect our mental well-being but has also caused us to be nearly intolerable to others around us, especially when in public. We are undoubtedly becoming very rude because of our use (or overuse) of technology. This rudeness and lack of manners can be observed nearly everywhere – from phones ringing during movies, to aggressive driving while we are on the phone, to offensive language during phone calls in public. In 2001, Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization, surveyed approximately 2000 Americans via telephone in order to examine Americans’ attitudes regarding moral and ethical behavior. Almost half of the participants say they often see people using cell phones in a loud or annoying manner in public, yet only 17% of cell phone users admitted participating in this annoying behavior (Shortman, 2006). The results of this poll conclude that Americans are unaware of their lack of manners or are just simply in denial. According to another poll conducted by Associated Press-Ipsos, nearly 70% of adults said that Americans are ruder now than 20 or 30 years ago and blamed this rudeness on their busy lives and the use of new technology (Carter, 2006).

Our “techno-rudeness” can be directly linked to the fact that our technologies are always available to us. The amount of time we spend immersed in the media environment affects the way we behave and interact outside of that space. The businessman who spends nearly 30 hours a week on his Blackberry will be prone to taking a phone call during a meeting, when out to dinner, or at other inappropriate times. The high school student who has a video game downloaded on his iPhone is the one most likely to be playing Tetris under his desk during class. According to Professor Michael Bugeja of Iowa State University, the availability of media invites abuse, and when these abuses become habitual, these actions cease to be taboo. Bugeja calls this phenomenon “digital displacement” and defines this “as what happens when the demands of the real-world conflict with those of the virtual, resulting in too many people paying too much attention to gadgets and ignoring reality” (Tucker, 2007, pp. 12-13).

These examples of rudeness due to technology usage are especially apparent among teens and college students. College students bring their laptops to class to take notes. However, most students are not just taking notes; they are on the Internet updating Facebook, checking their e-mail, and chatting with friends. Instead of paying full attention to the teacher and actively participating in class, students can be found engaging in these other activities. It is also a common sight to see teens place their phones on the table when at lunch or dinner with friends or at a business meeting. Whenever they hear a beep or a buzz, all of their attention is diverted to their phone. What is this reaction conveying to the other people at the table? Essentially, by not giving those they are with their undivided attention, they are letting others know that they are not a priority. This does not sound like a great way to do business or build personal relationships.

Clearly, the use of socially interactive technologies (SITs) is most popular among teens than any other age group and the rate at which teens use these technologies is on the rise. Teens are constantly using socially interactive websites such as Facebook and MySpace along with their cell phones in order to socialize. According to Pew Internet, the number of teenagers using the Internet grew 24% from 2001 to 2005 and 87% of those between the ages of 12 and 17 are online (Lenhart, Hitlin, & Madden, 2005). One major reason why so many teens use technology and the Internet to communicate is their shyness or social anxiety. Human beings are often motivated by a need to feel a sense of belonging; however, teens who experience social anxiety fear having face-to-face conversations and turn to the Internet to fulfill this need (Pierce, 2009).

Tamyra Pierce, a professor at California State University, examined the use of SITs among 280 high school students and how social anxiety influences technological versus face-to-face interaction. The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that contained questions pertaining to their usage of SITs and their comfort level in face-to-face conversations. On average, 35–40% of teens reported using cell phones/text messaging and online social sites between one and four hours daily and 24% reported using instant messaging one to four hours daily. In assessing social anxiety, analyses revealed a positive correlation between social anxiety (not comfortable talking with others face to face) and talking with others online and text messaging (Pierce, 2009).

Today's teens have had some type electronic device at their side their entire lives; however, this may take a toll on their adult lives. As a college student, I am part of this

generation and see young people's overuse of technology firsthand on a daily basis. And I can also admit that I'm guilty of overusing my technologies at times as well. I have found myself e-mailing my professor when I have a question, rather than just going up to him or her after lecture and having a face-to-face conversation. But why do I do this? Is it because it is more convenient or because I'd rather hide behind a computer screen to avoid talking to my professors in person? Young people's habit of constantly relying on technology in order to communicate will end up coming back to bite them when they enter the "real world" and have jobs that require face-to-face interaction. College graduates who are hired for management positions or other jobs that require human interactions will struggle because they will lack the communication and leadership skills gained through experience with non-technological communication.

The integration of different communication technologies has also carried over into our family lives. Our uses of information and communication technologies have had both positive and negative impacts on several aspects of family life such as communication, family time, and family functioning. The cell phone has enabled us to stay connected to our loved ones constantly. Time spent waiting in line or traveling has become an opportunity to connect with family members. Cell phones have also provided the freedom to busy parents, enabling them to engage in family activities with their children during work hours (Lanigan, 2009). The integration of computers into homes has allowed us to keep up with relatives at opposite corners of the world with just the click of the mouse thanks to e-mail and social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace.

While technology has provided us with instant access to our family members, we become further isolated from our loved ones as a result. Conversations that were once held at the dinner table are now being replaced by cold text messages. While the medium effectively relays the message, it lacks the substance that a face-to-face conversation provides. Furthermore, because of Americans' busy lifestyles, quality family time is hard to come by, yet when we do find time to spend with our family, it is often spent in front of a screen and planned around media, such as TV shows. While family members do spend time together by using media in proximity to one another, they often engage in separate activities (Bugeja, 2005). For example, it is a common sight to see a family in a car on a family vacation with the parents making a business call on their cell phones while the kids in the backseat are watching a DVD (Tucker, 2007).

Our habit of using technology on a daily basis has caused us to spend more time looking at computer screens than at each other and visiting homepages rather than homes (Bugeja, 2005). This occurs because we convince ourselves that we are interacting responsibly with family members based on the fact that we are simply keeping up with their lives. We often marvel at the convenience of technology, remembering how time-consuming it was to write letters and visit relatives during holidays. For example, writing a simple Facebook message or e-mail to a loved one is much faster and convenient than taking the time to sit down to pen a letter. While using a medium such as Facebook or e-mail may be more convenient, the substance of a hand-written letter simply cannot compare (Bugeja, 2005).

One major problem that presents itself when one uses technology to communicate with family, friends, or anyone is the miscommunication that occurs in e-mails and text messaging.

The major limitation of text messages and e-mails is their “narrow bandwidth.” These messages only consist of text and therefore lack the tonal and nonverbal cues that provide context and meaning in our conversations. When having face-to-face conversations with others we can hear changes in pitch, stress put on certain words, the pace of their speaking. We can also see their eyes, their expression, and their body language which help determine whether other people are angry, sad, or sarcastic. All of these nonverbal cues provide us with an understanding of what a person is actually “saying,” preventing major miscommunication *faux pas*. Some experts report that more than 90 percent of human communication takes place in these tonal and nonverbal cues—leaving very little real communication in an e-mail message (McCormick, 2009). According to Justin Krueger of New York University, as few as 50% of users understand the tone or intent of an e-mail or text message and most people overestimate their ability to comprehend e-mails accurately.

Miscommunication in the workplace can be especially costly. E-mail and videoconferencing have been incredibly useful tools in the business world, allowing companies to complete deals instantly, without their staff having to leave the office. When e-mail, so prevalent in business, is not used appropriately, miscommunication occurs. E-mail is great for sending out information that needs to be broadcast to large groups and notifying employees about upcoming events and meetings; however, e-mail is not so great for relaying complex instructions or critiquing job performance (McCormick, 2009).

Technology in the workplace also opens the door to conflicts and negotiations occurring over e-mail. Experts on anger in the workplace encourage employees to “be direct” which often translates into “react via electronic messages” (Bugeja, 2005). Employees habitually fear the

face-to-face conflicts and resort to using e-mail, even when their co-worker is a few cubicles away. Nearly half of e-mail conflicts do not end well while nearly 80% conflicts conducted over phone or face to face are resolved successfully (McCormick, 2009). All in all, e-mail communications fail to build the trust and rapport between persons which results from face-to-face or even phone conversations. These examples of e-mail miscommunication seem so silly and are often avoidable, yet these blunders continually occur.

Luckily, some CEOs are recognizing the problems that e-mail presents and are coming up with solutions that are resulting in quicker problem solving, better teamwork, and happier customers. Scott A. Dockter, CEO of PBD Worldwide Fulfillment Services, has launched “no e-mail Fridays” and instructed his employees to pick up the phone or meet in person every Friday while also cutting back on e-mail usage the rest of week. While several employees struggled with this new rule, production and customer satisfaction increased after just four months following the initiation of the new rule. Dockter’s solution has changed PBD’s culture by reducing e-mail usage by nearly 80%. Despite this solution being less high-tech, it produced a much more successful company (Brady, 2006).

This idea of using technology less and using basic communication more in the workplace needs to be incorporated into all aspects of our lives. Technology has undoubtedly done wonders for our everyday lives; however, the art of conversation is becoming a thing of the past and we have become heavily reliant on our technologies. Rather than banning technology, or attempting to cripple it, a better solution is creating a balance between our technological use and face-to-face time. Bugeja states that the key to this is to nurture interpersonal intelligence which is “the ability to know when, where, and for what purpose technology is appropriate or

inappropriate” (Tucker, 2007, p. 13). Despite the fact that a perfect solution to this problem does not exist, we need to emphasize the need for more basic communication between people and set aside times to “unplug” which will surely lead to a fuller and socially healthier life.

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