

Web of Destruction

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Course: English 101 – Section 14

Assignment: Research Paper

Date: 7 August 2011

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English 101 (Section 14)

FWA #3

7 August 2011

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There is no question that in the 21st century we have become obsessed with technology. From cell phones to Smartboards to Kindles, gadgets have become central to our everyday lives, and we cannot seem to function without them. Our attraction to technology is so powerful that our lives seem to revolve around our devices while our minds lay dormant and our relationships founder. Though every new innovation in technology professes to make our lives simpler and easier, in fact, they may pose unsuspected dangers to our well-being. There is emerging evidence of serious side effects to our minds and bodies associated with technology abuse. When we succumb to the temptation to incessantly use our gadgets, we may be placing ourselves at risk of social disconnection, an impairment in our ability to focus and problem-solve, and an increase in our addictive behaviors.

The overuse of modern technology may be a significant contributing factor to the increase of social disconnection among humans today. There is considerable evidence to suggest that isolation resulting from heavy technology use can have substantial negative effects on our mental health. In fact, researchers from Carnegie Mellon University conducted a study that investigated the psychological effects of extensive internet use. The results were baffling; the findings revealed that test subjects experienced symptoms of loneliness and depression when exposed to the internet, and that those symptoms only intensified as their screen time increased (Adlar 84). When face-to-face contact is replaced by emoticons in instant messages, we may be left feeling dissatisfied without even knowing

why. It seems that real human interaction is essential to our well being, and cannot be substituted with digital voices from virtual worlds. Nevertheless, as technology progresses, it becomes easier to lose ourselves in a bubble of gadgets. These advancements enable the constant availability of alternative communication and may cause us to further distance ourselves from personal contact, leaving us exposed and vulnerable to the mental side effects of social disconnection.

Furthermore, seclusion from human interaction could potentially affect our ability to understand and relate to others, hindering personal growth and development. According to a recent *New York Times* article, the most concerning issue of excessive technology use is that our capability to empathize with one another is at risk (Richtel 11). Communications professor, Clifford Nass, says, “The way we become more human is by paying attention to each other” (6, 11). Nass implies that our ability to identify with one another is what sets humans apart from other species (11). If increased technology use is decreasing social practice, it can be presumed that relationships are disconnecting or not even forming at all. When human connection is lost, so is the opportunity to learn from others and relate to others in meaningful ways. It is not difficult to understand how this could be damaging to our emotional development. There is myriad evidence that firmly stresses the importance of relationships. For example, in a report entitled *Social Isolation, Psychological Health, and Protective Factors in Adolescence*, it is stated that, “[c]hildren and adolescents with close and supportive friendships report higher levels of peer acceptance, increased social competence, higher levels of motivation and active school involvement, and lower levels of behavioral problems as well as increased levels of self worth, social competence, leadership skills, and improved school performance” (Hall-Lande 265). The psychological benefits that result from normal

social function seem to indicate that human attachment profoundly influences every aspect of human development.

The overuse of novel technology may also result in an impaired ability to focus and problem solve. With the ever-increasing capabilities of state-of-the-art technology, it's easy to understand how a person could become engrossed in the digital world. However, despite the many conveniences that technology brings, there are disadvantages as well. The distractions created by our devices have scientists arguing that our cognitive skills may be in jeopardy. To test this theory, Eyal Ophir, a researcher at Stanford University, conducted a study involving a group of heavy multitaskers and a control group. Both groups were given a number of tests that challenged their reasoning skills. The results of this experiment found the multitaskers to be less competent in processing information and solving problems than the control group (Richtel 4, 5). One reason multitasking may affect a person's ability to be fully effective and efficient could possibly be because multitaskers are never really giving any one task the attention it is due. Instead, they are dividing their attention among several duties at once. This type of scattered thinking may distract a person from fully focusing and may muddle their concentration. Additionally, these distractions may result in errors that cause the individual more work. By way of example, Mrs. Campbell, who was featured in the *Times* article, burnt two batches of cookies after being interrupted by phone calls. Refusing to attempt a third batch, she ran to the store and bought cookies instead (11). What should have been a fun thirty minute project was turned into a two hour ordeal.

Technology is short-circuiting our brains in other ways too though. For instance, we are turning to our devices for answers rather than thinking problems through for ourselves. Just because the answers may be available to us with just a click of the mouse, doesn't necessarily mean that there are not more beneficial methods of learning. Our minds are

useful powerful engines capable of great things. This suggestion is exemplified in the article entitled, *The Lost Art of Building with Your Hands*. In the article, author, Mitch Albom tells the inspirational story of a 14-year-old African boy named Kamkwamba who used his imagination and creativity to design and construct a windmill that ultimately saved his “drought-plagued village” (30). Even more, with Kamkwamba’s success came the true benefits associated with independent thinking and problem solving: pride, gratification, appreciation, and the most important gift of all – joy (30). With technology becoming so sophisticated, the amount of people who exercise creative problem solving skills seems to be dwindling. It’s unfortunate to think that progressions in technology could prompt such adverse regressions in our mental capabilities.

Addictive behaviors may also be associated with excessive technology use. There is supporting evidence to suggest that technology has become a destructive force, disrupting the lives of those who can’t resist the lure of incessant social connections, entertainment, and information. For these people, family, careers, and sleep may be replaced by a virtual world of sex and gaming (Potera 66). The likely consequences of these compulsive behaviors may include rifts in family life and relationships, job loss, as well as financial and legal issues. For instance, New York Representative Anthony Weiner made recent headlines after sending sexually explicit photos of himself to several women online (Barrett A-4). His vulgar online acts cost him his career, threatened his marriage, and caused public humiliation to him, his family, and the entire Democratic Party (A-4). It seems as though addiction can grab hold of anyone, regardless of social status, if they are not cautious; and once the addiction strikes, it may not be that simple to quit.

Like any other addiction, technology addicts may experience withdrawal symptoms when devices are not available. A study conducted by Kimberly Young, an assistant

professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburg, revealed that individuals dependent upon computers admittedly insisted that they could not go without the internet (Potera 60). As a matter of fact, a few test subjects actually discarded their computers in an effort to quit, but their urges to use were so intense that they eventually purchased new P.C.'s and gave into their addiction (60). Moreover, smokers in the group stated that their internet cravings were harder to resist than their urge to smoke (60). It's hard to believe that a piece of equipment can have that much control over a person; but it's harder to believe that such a useful tool can become such a destructive force.

Despite the multitude of emotional dangers linked to technology, there is little we can do to stop it. Technology is moving full force ahead, ready or not. Although it is too soon to tell exactly what the future holds, preliminary research seems to suggest that there are personal choices that we can make each day to ensure that technology does not override traditional human nature. First and foremost, researchers are stressing the importance of preserving our identities. Rather than letting technology shape our characters, social scientists are warning us to reconnect with ourselves and take time to discover what it is about us that makes us unique; in other words, what makes us human. Additionally, we should always value the potential of the human mind. There is great evidence indicating that abounding benefits are associated with creating and discovering on our own. Furthermore, social observers are urging us to reclaim the old joys of traditional human nature in our lives – cherish the human touch, tell someone you love them with your own voice, play with your children, laugh with old friends, hand-write a letter, acknowledge a stranger, create, imagine, and most importantly, let us make a difference in each other's lives rather than allowing technology to make that difference for us.

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