ADDICTED TO iLOVE:

The Consequences of Connected Reality

With our digital technologies, we can be alone, but never alone. The flip side to this is: we are together, but never together. Unfortunately, we've tethered our humanity to something without a biological pulse.

by Alison Main

Media and Man

Marshall McLuhan's classic exposition *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* proposes that human modes of thinking are altered by our predominant media of communication. McLuhan's famous expression, "the medium is the message," has prompted us to pause and consider our relationship with prevailing communication technologies over the last few decades.[1] But have you thought of what happens when you can't disconnect from the medium? Who controls the message when the media is everywhere? And is it even within our power to unplug?

In his book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr suggests there is a divide between Net enthusiasts and Net skeptics about the intrinsic value of what the advent of the Internet has offered our civilization. And yet, Carr explains: "what both enthusiasts and skeptics miss is what McLuhan saw: that in the long run a medium's content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act. As our window onto the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it—and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society."[2]

The historical lineage of human communication has moved from oral to written to printed to electric (the telegraph, radio, TV) to electronic (computers, mobile phones, Internet). McLuhan passed away before the start of our smart-tech revolution. But as Carr writes: "Not even McLuhan could have foreseen the feast that the Internet has laid before us: one course after another, each juicier than the last, with hardly a moment to catch our breath between bites. As networked computers have shrunk to the size of iPhones and BlackBerrys, the feast has become a movable

one, available anytime, anywhere. It's in our home, our office, our car, our classroom, our purse, our pocket."[2]

In his *New York Magazine* article "I Used to be a Human Being," Andrew Sullivan writes: "Do not flatter yourself in thinking that you have much control over which temptations you click on. Silicon Valley's technologists and their ever-perfecting algorithms have discovered the form of bait that will have you jumping like a witless winnow. No information technology ever had this depth of knowledge of its consumers—or greater capacity to tweak their synapses to keep them engaged."[3]

We talk about digital detoxing, but we still get cell reception when hiking most mountain summits; there's a Fitbit tracking our pedal cycles on cross-country bike trails; and even yogic ashrams boast "Free Wi-Fi" in their dormitories and gathering rooms. "Om shanti" doesn't have the same harmonic resonance when you're posting your vinyasa sequence on Instagram.

Sullivan contends: "The engagement never ends. Not long ago, surfing the web, however addictive, was a stationary activity. At your desk at work, or at home on your laptop, you disappeared down a rabbit hole of links and resurfaced minutes (or hours) later to reencounter the world. But the smart phone then went and made the rabbit hole portable, inviting us to get lost in it anywhere, at any time, whatever else we might be doing. Information soon penetrated every waking moment of our lives."[3]

Adam Alter, associate professor of marketing at NYU and author of *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, writes: "Tech isn't morally good or bad until it's wielded by the corporations that fashion it for mass consumption. Apps and platforms can be designed to promote rich social connections; or like cigarettes, they can be designed to addict. Today, unfortunately, many tech developments do promote addiction."[6]

The Un-Real World

In 1992, MTV launched *The Real World*, a pseudo-documentary series credited with inaugurating the genre of reality TV. At the beginning of each episode, we were told: "This is the true story of seven strangers picked to live in a house and have their lives taped. Find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real."

The first season captured the minute-by-minute interactions of these seven individuals living together in New York City. As the story developed, the audience witnessed early confessionals of emotional breakdowns and personal breakthroughs. The journey of this group of seven was revealing and heartfelt; vulnerable and illuminating. And yet, watching the show back when it first aired, I felt a nagging disconnect with the premise, questioning, "Can this be real if it's filmed on camera, edited in a studio, and then broadcast on cable TV for our entertainment?"

We now live in a world with more reality TV shows than we can count; where 12-year-olds become career YouTubers; where "Likes" and "Retweets" are more coveted than paper currency; and where marriages often start with an anesthetized "swipe right." In succumbing to our virtual world, we're missing the *actual* "real world." And it's starting to take a toll on our health and relationships.

Studies repeatedly show that technology overuse has a negative impact on many cognitive and behavioral processes, including on our attention, memory, learning, and emotional regulation. Tech addiction can also lead to increased anxiety and depression, and some academics are tracking an uptick in suicide rates to ascertain correlation.

For those growing up in a digitally connected society, research is revealing a significant decline in empathy, as children don't get the chance to learn real emotional and physical consequences to their words and actions.[7]

Increased media exposure also has a negative influence on sleep, particularly for kids. A recent article in *JAMA Pediatrics* highlights inadequate sleep as a mounting public-health concern, with 72 percent of all children and 89 percent of adolescents reporting at least one digital device in their sleep environment. Screen time directly delays, displaces, and interrupts sleep. Plus, a screen's contents can be psychologically stimulating, while the blue light emitted from the device affects circadian rhythms and melatonin production.[8]

Social narratives are also being redefined online (and not necessarily for the better), where virtual "Friends" and fake profiles abound. Romantic relationships are being threatened, with Facebook and other social-media portals acting as a barrier to intimacy.

The Net is also morphing the concept of self and identity. An ethnographic study by Ilana Gershon contends that social media, particularly Facebook, "allows people to present themselves as a compilation of both consumer tastes (preferred movies, books, music) and unweighted alliances (shown through the number of one's Facebook friends, wallpostings, and one's posted photos)."[9]

Are we all becoming narcissists? Alter proposes: "It may be true that Internet use has prompted narcissism; or perhaps that the rise of narcissism has pushed people to share their lives online. Having said that, social media encourages behaviors that at least appear to be narcissistic. Until recently, there was no socially acceptable way for adults to share the intimate details of their lives in exchange for doses of positive reinforcement. Social media allows—even encourages—that sort of behavior, and since people spend a lot of time curating their feeds to impress other people, they're likely to become more narcissistic or self-absorbed in the process."

Electronic Screen Syndrome

In her book, *Reset Your Child's Brain*, Victoria Dunckley, M.D. and integrative psychiatrist, presents "Electronic Screen Syndrome" (ESS), a modern-day disorder that's emerged in children due to the ubiquitous use of interactive-screen devices. Dunckley writes, "Because it's so stimulating, interactive screen-time shifts the nervous system into fight-or-flight mode, which leads to dysregulation and disorganization of various biological systems."

An increasing number of children are being diagnosed with ADHD, bipolar disorder, autism, and other disorders, but treatment and medication often fail to work. Parents wind up confused and frustrated, unsure where to turn or how to help their children. As a proven solution, Dunckley puts forth a specific four-week electronic-fast intervention plan to shift brain function and to improve mood, focus, sleep, and behavior, no matter the child's diagnosis.

ESS Characteristics in Children

According to Dunckley's research, here are some general characterizations of ESS:

The child exhibits symptoms related to mood, anxiety, cognition, behavior, or social interactions that cause significant impairment in school, at home, or with peers. Typical symptoms mimic chronic stress and include irritable, depressed, or labile mood, excessive tantrums, low frustration tolerance, poor self-regulation, disorganized behavior, oppositional-defiant behaviors, poor sportsmanship, social immaturity, poor eye contact, insomnia or nonrestorative sleep, learning difficulties, and poor short-term memory.

ESS may occur in the absence or presence of other psychiatric, neurological, behavior, or learning disorders, and can mimic or exacerbate virtually any mental health–related disorder.

Symptoms markedly improve or resolve with strict removal of electronic media (an "electronic fast"); three- to four-week electronic fasts are often sufficient but longer fasts may be required in severe cases.

Symptoms may return with reintroduction of electronic media following a fast, depending on a variety of factors. Some children can tolerate moderation after a fast, while others seem to relapse immediately if re-exposed.

Vulnerability factors exist, these include: male gender; pre-existing psychiatric, neurodevelopmental, learning, or behavior disorders; co-existing stressors; and total lifetime electronic media exposure. At particular risk may be boys with ADHD and autism spectrum disorders.

Learn more at **ResetYourChildsBrain.com**.

Lost Gen

2007, the year of the first iPhone. The first iPad came on the market in 2010. According to a study by Pew Research, in 2012 the proportion of Americans who own a smartphone surpassed 50 percent.[4] That's quite a technology revolution in a relatively short period of time.

What's terrifying about this acceleration is that a recent research study found that the mere presence of one's smartphone may induce "brain drain," reducing available cognitive capacity, leaving fewer resources available for other tasks and undercutting overall cognitive performance.[5] There's even a new term, "nomophobia," to define the fear of being without mobile-phone contact.

Even when you're not binge-watching Netflix, scrolling through your photo albums, or discerning the efficacy of Snapchat, we're still lured and distracted by our devices' mere proximity. It just has to "be there" for us to lose cognitive focus, even when the device is set to silent, screen turned upside down, hidden under a blanket, with five books on top.

Maybe the temptation is us knowing the potential that these omni-connected devices magically offer us, at any second, day or night. It's the hope that something will arrive by passive ease of digital ping to change our lives, to shift our discontent, to take us away from our innate loneliness—whether that's a job offer via email, a date invite over text, a record contract, a book deal, or a new friend.

Humans long to feel connected. We leave our cribs and our plush toys, but we still cling to a security blanket—and now this one is addictively glowing. There's no other invention that has ever hit the spot so accurately, appeasing our innate fears of isolation and disconnection. With our digital technologies, we can be alone, but never alone. The flip side to this is: we are together, but never together. Unfortunately, we've tethered our humanity to something without a biological pulse.

We justify our pseudo-schizophrenic lack of focus by listing all the ways that connected technologies have made our lives easier. True—these devices have maximized convenience. We have an electronic babysitter for our kids, an Uber when we need a ride, an app that totes groceries to our door, and a GPS so that we're never lost.

But we *are* getting lost—to one another, and to ourselves. And no glittery neon fidget-spinner is going to bring us back together.

Perhaps our society is overvaluing efficiency and productivity. Alter posits: "There are so many books about doing things more efficiently, finding hacks and shortcuts, doing more with less effort. These books implicitly prize efficiency and productivity over, say, savoring life experiences, seeking meaningful experiences even if they're difficult, and generally adopting a slower, more deliberate approach to life."

Alter adds: "Personally, the happiest and most meaningful times are more deliberate times, when I savor social experiences, being outdoors, eating good food. Efficiency and productivity are great, in theory, but our priorities quickly warp when speed and output become our primary goals."

Reclaim Your Attention

Time Well Spent is an advocacy group that seeks to persuade the tech industry to engineer software that does not intentionally cause addiction. They suggest the following apps and extensions to help digital citizens take back power from their devices.

Learn more at TimeWellSpent.io

SLEEP BETTER

Flux *(Mac, Windows)*
Reclaim 15 minutes of quality sleep by cutting the blue light from our screens.

Turn on NightShift *(iOS)*
Like Flux, the Nightshift feature tints the light emitted by your screen from blue to orange, which can improve the quality of your sleep.

STAY FOCUSED

AdBlock Plus *(Chrome, Safari)*
Reclaim 30-40% of your attention with every article you read.

InboxWhenReady *(Gmail)*
Focus your inbox by only showing messages when you click "Show Inbox" instead of getting distracted as new emails arrive.

Freedom *(Mac and Windows)*
Temporarily block specific websites or apps on your desktop computer, tablet, and phone for set periods of time.

SEE WHERE YOUR TIME GOES

Moment *(iOS)*
See how much time you spend on your phone.

RescueTime *(Mac and Windows)*
See how much time you spend on different apps on your desktop along with various websites.

RESPOND QUICKLY

Gboard *(iOS and Android)*
50% faster "swipe" typing than regular keyboards, so you can respond to a message and get off your device more quickly.

Send audio messages
Recording a quick audio message is often faster than typing, and lets many people send a more authentic message.

LESS EMAIL

Enable "Send + Archive" *(Gmail)*
This archives the email right after you send it. The email will reappear in the inbox when the person replies.

Dystopia

Spike Jonze's 2013 movie *Her* imagines a society where a human can fall in love with an artificial-intelligence operating system. Spielberg's 2002 flick *Minority Report* toys with the question of free will versus determinism in a plotline about a futuristic society where tech advancements give media an unchecked reach. Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* book series envisions a world where reality TV has morphed into a real game of life and death, where the value of a human life is relegated to social-media stardom.

Is this where we are heading: A world in which our humanity is reduced to artificial engagements?

Alter says: "No one knows for sure whether we'll end up there—if there's enough backlash, perhaps the technologists who produce these experiences will be encouraged to change tack—but there's certainly potential. I'm no AI expert, but experts seem to think that it's only a matter of time before many of our primary interactions happen in virtual space with artificially intelligent avatars."

Remember, Facebook doesn't love you. It only cares how much you "Like" it. Don't sacrifice your humanity for a techno-utopia.

SEE ARTICLE REFERENCES PAGE 114