

Virtual Addictions: A Very Real Problem

Robin Zhang Xu, Buchholz High School, 11th grade

We are currently witnessing one of the great turning points in human history. The technological renaissance that began in the mid-18th century has undergone many evolutions to become what it is today. The development of the computer in the 1940's has led to a host of new technologies, many of which have become integral parts of our modern infrastructure and the lives that we live. In one study from the University of Glasgow, researchers found that half of the participants in their study check their email at least once an hour. Some individuals check up to 30 to 40 times an hour. Technology clearly plays a huge part in the lives of these subjects and the people they were meant to represent. It is undeniable that the symbiotic relationship between humans and technology has been, for the most part, positive and mutualistic. However, it is also important to keep in mind the very real negative effects that our dependence on technology has on our health, socially, physically, and mentally.

Before we can examine the effects of technology addiction, we must first have a solid understanding of what differentiates past technologies with new ones and how these differences have made technology addiction such an extreme problem recently. The first piece of information technology that really invaded homes across the country and around the world was the radio. While the radio certainly possesses many of the hallmarks that one would associate with addictive technology, such as varying content and portability, it really wasn't as addictive as you might expect. For one, radios only operate in one medium: audio. While the topics of its programming may change, the fact of the matter is that radios could, for the most part, only entertain in a single way. Secondly, radios offer a limited variety of content. It is simply not possible for most individuals to create their own radio broadcasts. As a result, listeners were (and oftentimes still are) restricted to the few channels run by broadcasters in their local area.

Compared to older technologies, like the radio, modern ones offer a much wider range of content, and are more accessible. Improved production methods have made consumer electronics more affordable and attainable. Most personal computers and smartphones now also provide internet access, granting the user an almost unlimited treasure trove of information and activities to explore. Furthermore, much of the content on the internet is user generated. As a result, the internet is much more fluid than past sources of entertainment; its content literally changes in real time to match the trends and interests of the moment. Interaction on a more personal level is also possible as acquaintances can directly contact each other across the internet. These addictive features are also found in many other modern technologies, particularly in cell phones. Cell phones not only provide internet access, but they also allow for quick interpersonal contact in the form of text messages (it seems that no one actually makes calls anymore). As a result, it is now possible to communicate with nearly anyone at any time. Because of the lack of monotony in many current technologies, addictions have started to become a problem.

So, what are the true costs of technology addiction and what can be done to mitigate the damage? While the negative effects of an addiction to technology may not be as tangible or directly detrimental to an individual as those from other, more traditional addictions, such as alcoholism and smoking, it is undeniable that they are present. The constant "itch" that comes

with living in such a wired world has led to a host of health issues. Increased stress levels and insomnia are common among those who feel compulsively obligated to take in the non-stop stream of information that is being produced at every moment of every day. Multitasking, which is becoming more and more common as a result of the portability of new devices, can cause the brain to “overload”, decreasing longevity, weakening the immune system, and increasing the risk depression. More immediate and sudden consequences of technology addiction also exist. Talking on a cell-phone can make a young driver’s reaction time as slow as that of a 70 year old and answering a text can distract a driver for up to 5 seconds, long enough to travel the length of a football field. Modern communications technologies may be entertaining and informative, but they are also posing a silent threat towards the health of many.

People who are addicted to technology may also exhibit decreased social abilities. For one, constantly checking for new emails or text messages can be annoying to family, friends, or other acquaintances in the real world. The anxiety that can result from being separated from technologies like internet or cell phones, even for short period of times, can make users appear distant, limiting their ability to communicate with others in person. Studies have shown that impatience, impulsiveness, forgetfulness, and even narcissism are common side effects of technology addiction. Any one of these attributes could wreak havoc on a person’s ability to create the interpersonal relationships that are necessary for success in today’s world.

It is quite clear that the tolls of technology addiction can be extremely steep. Action must be taken quickly to avoid the escalation of this insidious infection. Parents need to be stricter and less willing to dole out electronic goodies like computers and cell phones at their children’s command. Education on the effects of technology addiction must also be integrated in school curriculums and public campaigns on the costs of addiction must be undertaken; it is impossible to address such a public and pervasive issue if the public does not even know that a problem exists. Ultimately, technology addiction is an issue that is fully under our control. We just need to have the willingness to address it. Doing so would maintain the social, medical, and educational standards that are essential for success in the present and the future.