

THE TECHNOLOGY DISTRACTION¹

Wendy Strgar[©]

Years before the full-scale takeover of technology that now consumes our society and is rewiring the brain function of our youth, Albert Einstein remarked that, “It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity.” He may have been referring to the atom bomb at the time, but were he here to witness the distraction media that dominates our lives, he may well have sounded a louder warning. Recent research from top neuroscientists have confirmed that the combined effects of extensive digital multitasking and the speed of interaction are creating in kids a continuously increasing need for more stimulus with a significantly decreased attention span and ability to focus. Becoming habituated to constantly switching tasks and being bombarded with multiple media at once impairs the core abilities required in learning to learn. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that over 50% of students are using other media during their study times some to most of the time.

Worse still is the fact that for many teens and even adults, the gadgets never turn off. From the thousands of texts that often run through the night to the computer gaming that fills endless hours, to the fascination turned obsession of Facebook stalking, our technologies are increasingly something that directs our lives instead of us directing the technology. “Downtime is to the brain what sleep is to the body,” said Dr. Rich of Harvard Medical School. “But kids are in a constant mode of stimulation.” Unlike the preceding technology of television, university studies have found that video games and interactive technologies led to both a significant decline in memory and sleep quality.

One teen interviewed in a recent New York Times expose on the subject said: “Facebook is amazing because it feels like you’re doing something and you’re not doing anything. It’s the absence of doing something, but you feel gratified anyway.” He concludes, “My attention span is getting worse.” This distracted brain is changing the course of relationships too. Rarely are teens hanging out together these days and actually focused on the people they are with—video games, texting and Facebook dominate social interaction as much as it does in time alone.

The tendency toward cruelty and insensitivity is higher in digital communications. People will say things to or about others on a Facebook feed that they would never have the nerve to say face to face. A recent hard loss for the Boise State football team turned into a nightmare of social media taunts for the kicker who missed some field goals. As if he wasn’t feeling bad enough already. A recent Seventeen magazine poll said that 1 out of 10 girls was publicly dumped on Facebook.

Learning how to have relationships is a steep curve of communication skills, building trust and expressing intimacy. The added dimension of reported relationship status simultaneously dilutes and complicates the work of learning to relate. Using Facebook’s relationship status as a tool is as bad as text message break ups, maybe worse because then everyone else gets to witness the pain and humiliation of failed relating, often before the people involved.

We need to grow our humanity to catch up to our technology

¹ Care2, healthy & green living, Dec 1, 2010 3:01 pm