How Technology Cultivates Social Isolation

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Technology is a part of almost everything a majority of us do on a daily basis. Even in a country like Albania, 49% of the country’s population used the Internet in some capacity in 2012 (Cenameri, 2013). While some may view this as a welcomed and convenient way to stay connected, its widespread integration has really become more of an intrusion that is prying us away from reality. Technology has made its users more socially isolated due to their dependence on it and has cultivated a loss of social interaction skills that negatively impacts the health of the persons and the society as whole. People have become preoccupied and distracted by their preference for communication via technologies, which has caused a change for the worse in the way users choose to form relationships and conduct their daily lives.

The changing psyche and attitudes of today’s societies can largely be attributed to the devices we insert into our lives. These devices and technologies are becoming the predominant factors in how we conduct ourselves on a daily basis. In my own experiences, I have seen firsthand how the appeal and convenience of technologies can glue you to them, and how this effect can cause one to lose sight of what is around them. Through research and studies conducted by scholars on the matter, as well as personal opinion and experiences of some other authors as well as myself, I hope to shed some light on the matter of technology taking control of our lives, and the way we are viewing and conducting social interactions. It is only once you become self-aware that you can truly set yourself free from all that which you are allowing to rule your life.

Technologies are powerful tools that can potentially be of great benefit and convenience. They can help connect us to others far away both for personal and business uses by allowing processes to be vastly sped up, and also provide more accessibility to a larger audience. Technologies are designed to be tools for us to use to increase our efficiency and expand our horizons. Everything about technologies, particularly the use of the Internet is about gaining instant access to what you need, when you need it. They provide a world of information, right at your fingertips. But perhaps this ease of access is altering the way humans choose to carry themselves socially.

This notion of “always on, right at your fingertips” is highlighted by cell phones in particular. Vroon (2009) states that mobile phones were originally intended as devices that were meant to help you in a rough situation or an emergency. Now, everywhere you go you see people constantly on their phones, and generally not for productivity purposes. Cell phone use, as one example, is changing the ways that people communicate with each other. Instead of using them as emergency devices, people use them as entertainment devices. When people are using them for communication purposes, it is often done in a non-engaging matter, often times through text messaging. The fact that this technology is “always on, right at your fingertips” creates little effort on behalf of the user which causes them to resort to conducting a large part of their communication via these types of methods. This type of non-engaging communication does nothing to help build the social interaction skills of its users.

Technologies have become so deeply integrated into our daily lives to the point that they have become intrusive, overbearing, and distracting. Everywhere we go there are TVs, radios, computers and cell phones. What these technologies do is cause the user to detach themselves from what is going on around them in order to focus on the “content” that is being provided to them through these mediums. People now have so many other platforms to take up their time that the idea of conversation is being killed.

Technologies require some form of commitment of the users’ senses in order for the user to interact with them. Some, such as the radio, require only auditory senses. As technology advanced we got the television which requires both auditory and visual senses. Now, we have videogames that “require a complete immersion in an artificial world for hours on end and allow for no interpersonal communication while playing” (Cutchen, 2009, p.10). Technologies create a constant need for distraction that turns them more into timewasters instead of the timesavers they are supposed to be.

Peoples’ dependence on and preference for technologies causes them to forgo traditional interactions, which leads to social isolationism. Gordon (1990) presents the notion of “cocooning” in which people choose to stay close to home and not interact very much with the outside world. Technology encourages this behavior because people now feel they have access to a majority of what they need, right in their own homes. Opportunities now exist that allow people to have a bevy of entertainment options at their disposal, right from home. This accessibility alters social preferences and habits, and now causes people to make decisions like watching a movie on demand at home instead of going out to a public theater. Opportunities for social interactions are quickly dwindling due to these choices.

Figure 1: Proposed Student ICT-Use Cycle



*Figure 1:* ICT-use cycle demonstrates how communication via information and communication technologies impacts tests subjects’ (college students in this case) capabilities, causing an increase in their perceived levels of stress. They then seek social support through communication via ICT use. Source: “Information and Communication Technology: Affects on U.S. College Students” by M. Massimini and M. Peterson, 2009, *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, *3*(1), p. 8.

In the study conducted by Massimini and Peterson (2009), it was found that a majority of test subjects openly admitted they prefer methods of communication via information and communication technologies (ICT). However, most of these same subjects also acknowledged that face-to-face communication is more helpful and meaningful than communication via technologies. This is contradictory and creates an unhealthy cycle, as shown in Figure 1, in which Massimini and Peterson (2009) found the person relies on technologies to communicate, which directly causes them to experience loss of sleep, neglect of responsibilities, and increased stress. They then turn to technologies to seek support, and the cycle repeats itself. Their preference for these forms of communication stems from their ability to control how and when the communication happens. The ease and comfort that technology provides causes its users to choose them above all else, which leads to users partaking in less face-to-face communication, thus causing them to become socially isolated.

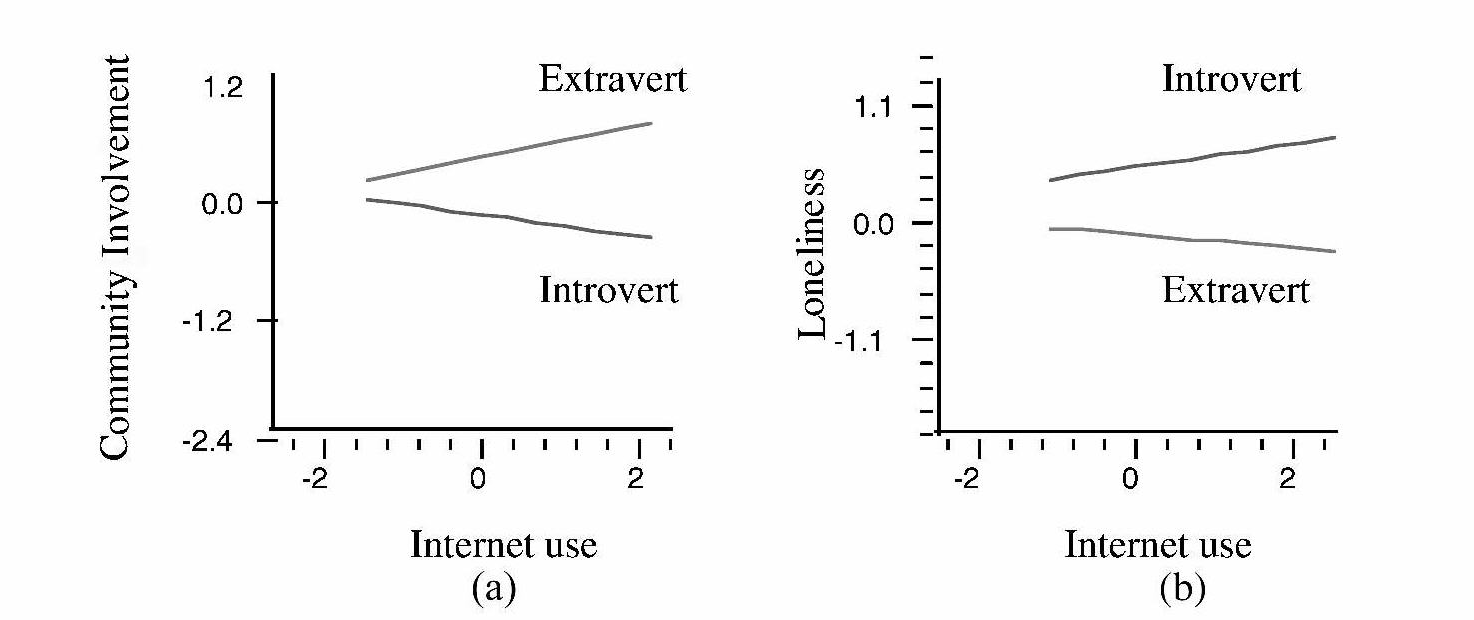
Technologies are changing the ways that people are interacting with and interpreting the world around them. In current day, we are constantly seeing an integration of technologies into all facets of daily life. This integration is often aimed at evolving or enhancing the way we conduct daily tasks, such as learning and/or conducting business affairs. Children now grow up using and being taught via technologies, which has a significant impact on their perception of themselves and their interactions with others. Recently in my home county of Los Angeles there was rollout of a 1 billion dollar plan that aims to provide every teacher and student with an iPad that is meant to enhance and change the ways they conduct classes and learn information. This type of integration that introduces technologies into the classroom is just an expansion of what is already happening in the home. According to Cenameri (2013), “77% of 13-16 year olds and 38% of 9-12 year olds in the European Union have a profile on a social networking site” (p. 571).

While it has been acknowledged that technologies do have the potential to be powerful tools for learning, Cenameri (2013) noted that technology use must be monitored carefully from an early age or an adolescent may run the risk of becoming addicted to technologies, causing them to become socially isolated as well as becoming detached from reality. By using technologies, people are placing themselves into a situation in which human nature may ultimately get the best of them. It’s how we choose to use technologies that determines their effectiveness, or can instead shape unhealthy habits.

In my own experiences, technology has had a deeply profound impact on the way my own social skills and habits have developed. Being a “child of the Internet,” I have spent most of my life glued in front of a computer monitor, TV display, or cell phone screen. The ease of access and common-nature of these devices has given me great satisfaction and always allowed me to feel preoccupied. These technologies have also, simply, made my life easier and more comfortable by allowing me to accomplish a great deal (shopping, entertainment, communication) when it is convenient for me. Gordon (1990) proposed that the “cocooning” this reliance creates keeps people from interacting with each other, and only as I have grown older have I finally been able to realize that all the hours spent on and using these technologies have really led me nowhere and done nothing to prepare me to succeed in “real life.”

Due to technologies having been the predominant time-filler in my own life growing up, I can attest to the studies conducted by Massimini and Peterson (2009) and also boldly say that I, much like their test subjects, now prefer methods of communication via ICT. I simply cannot be bothered with attending social events or even making a phone call to catch up with a close relative. Massimini and Peterson’s (2009) results indicate “almost half of the sample (47.3%) agreed with the statement ‘I use text messaging, e-mail, instant messaging, Facebook or MySpace to avoid talking to someone directly (phone call or face-to-face)’” (p. 4). Technologies simply allow me to control the time and nature of conversations and I am constantly *mis*using them in order to not be troubled to leave the comfort of my own home. What this has really done for me though is it has caused my social skills and relationships to suffer, because I continuously choose to not go out and partake in real life. Through the power of technologies, I can access all the entertainment I need from home in order to combat loneliness and boredom, but still feel as though I have the capacity to stay connected.

The only true way for one to change this dependence on and preference for technologies is by becoming self-aware. Through my own admittance, and through the ideas presented in this text, I simply hope that one can begin to see the error of their ways. If you, like me, are constantly longing for a more genuine, and even more connected social experience, you must begin to distance yourself from the grasp of technologies. You must compel yourself to take the effort, on your own behalf, to be receptive to the opportunities that exist and are happening every day around you. As Vroon (2009) stated, “Anyone who wants to do something for the world or just amount to a decent human being has to stay away from these technologies as much as he can” (p. 54).

Figure 2: Internet Use & Extraversion with Community Involvement & Loneliness

*Figure 2:* Graph (a) shows how increasing Internet use among extraverted users leads to more community involvement, but for introverted users more use leads to decreasing community involvement. Graph (b) indicates that increased Internet use among introverts leads to increased loneliness while extraverts experience slightly decreasing levels of loneliness as their Internet use increases. Source: “Internet Paradox Revisited” by Kraut, R., Kiesler, S., Boneva, B., Cummings, J., Helgeson, V., & Crawford, A., 2002, *Journal of Social Issues*, *58*(1), p. 61.

In today’s world, technology is sometimes a necessity. It is not entirely valid to expect the people of a first-world Superpower country to completely detach themselves from technologies. But as I’ve alluded to, it is all about how and when a person uses technologies that either makes them helpful or hurtful. With technologies now evolving into “all-in-one” solutions to peoples’ wants and needs, there is increasing exposure to the *distraction factor* that technologies often create for users. People need to learn how to distinguish the difference between wants and needs, and by doing so this will allow the users of technologies to more efficiently determine when and where the necessity aspect of technology fits into their lives. If we can learn to apply technologies in meaningful and helpful capacities, we can gain so much from there. If we do the opposite, technologies can take us away from the world around us and create a sense of loneliness and isolation.

When technologies begin to include so many aspects as is the case with all-in-one devices, the line begins to become blurred between efficiency and time-wasting. There are quite frankly just too many opportunities for humans to distract themselves when there are endless possibilities right at their fingertips. It is exactly this that is causing the deterioration of social society. We need to face the reality of what modern-day has brought us, and be mindful of the how these changes can, and are, impacting social habits and skills. Technologies are not going anywhere. They are only evolving and becoming more integrated into all aspects of our daily lives. In order for society to continue along with these advancements and salvage any hope of remaining *genuinely* socially-connected, we need to adhere to the principles of self-awareness and self-control. The ease of becoming distracted and detached is constantly present, but we need to remember a time in our history when going out to the movies or a drive-in theater were the preferred methods of entertainment, and not iPods with noise cancelling headphones (Cutchen, 2009, p. 10).

We as a society need to have the capacity to demand more from ourselves. More self-control needs to be exercised in order to use and apply technologies for purposes of efficiency and production rather than allowing ourselves to become detached and isolated due to the opportunities for distraction introduced by many technologies. I propose that true self-realization of technology intrusion and dependence can make users more selective about how to balance and manage their lives. Awareness is the first step to any type of change, and if people care to preserve and maintain a high level of social skillsets and interactions they would do well to make a proactive effort to change their newly formed, modern-day habits. This would lead to a much healthier and more meaningful life, as well as much stronger and more tight-knit societies.

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