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 now 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 users to others far away, both for personal and business uses, by allowing processes to be vastly sped up. 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 is needed, right when it is needed. 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 instant and always available 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 the emergency devices Vroon (2009) proclaimed they were marketed to the public as, people use them as entertainment devices. When they are being used for communication purposes, it is often done in a non-engaging manner, often times through text messaging. The fact that this technology is always on and always available 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. As Vroon (2009) believed, people now have so many other platforms to take up their time that the idea of conversation is being killed.

As Cutchen (2009) stated, 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. 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 and social skill-building are quickly dwindling due to these types of choices.

Figure 1: Proposed Student ICT-Use Cycle

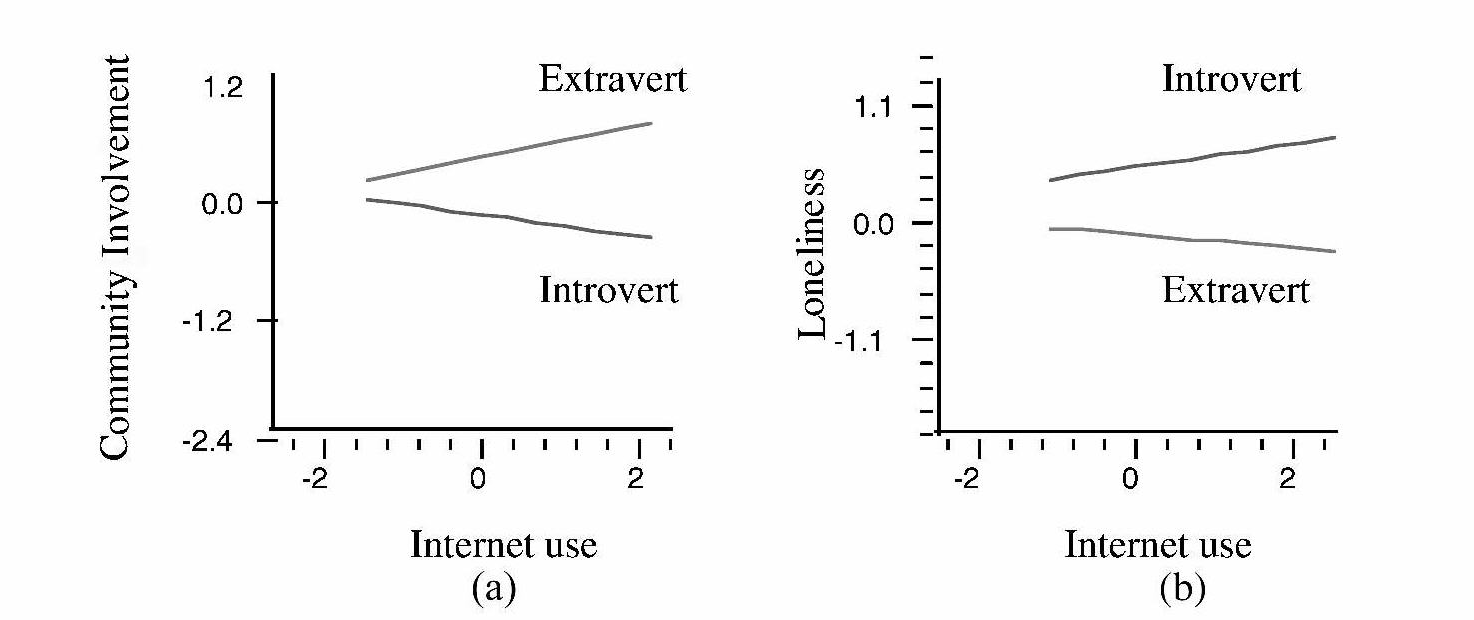


*Figure 1:* ICT-use cycle demonstrates how communication via information and communication technologies impacts tests subjects’ (college students in this case) capabilities, causing an increase in their perceived levels of stress. They then seek social support through communication via ICT use. Source: “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 that they prefer methods of communication via information and communication technologies (ICT), although 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. When this occurs, users then turn to more ICT to seek support, and the cycle repeats itself. Massimini and Peterson (2009) determined that their subjects’ 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 directly contributing to them becoming 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 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 classes are conducted and how information is taught and learned. The incorporation of these types of 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). This frequent use of technologies by still-developing children and adolescents is a trend that Cenameri (2013) noted needs to be monitored carefully from a young age in order to help prevent and minimize the risks of addiction and social isolation. By guiding today’s generation toward learning how to grow and develop with these technologies as a common part of their lives, hopefully we can begin to shape a new age in which all users of technologies recognize and focus on the great potential provided by them.

While it has been acknowledged that technologies do have the potential to be powerful and helpful tools, Vroon (2009) felt that human nature ultimately causes technologies to “inspire the use we make of them” (p. 53). It is simply how we choose to use technologies that determines their effectiveness or can instead shape unhealthy habits. In a study conducted by Kraut et al. (2002) it was found that the capacity in which technologies (specifically the Internet and computers) are used is largely related to the personality type of the user. They reported that users who were more outgoing and extraverted seemed to reflect this personality type in their tech-usage by using the Internet to interact with and increase their overall level of community involvement. Introverted users seemed to show signs of the opposite and generally became more detached and isolated from their communities as they used technologies.

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 et al., 2002, *Journal of Social Issues*, *58*(1), p. 61.

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, and 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 while still feeling as though I have the capacity to stay connected to what is happening in the outside world.

The only true way for people to change this dependence on and preference for technologies is by becoming self-aware. Through my own admittance and the ideas contained in this text, I simply hope that technology users can begin to see how having such a reliance on technologies can create detachment from reality. If you, like me, are constantly longing for a more genuine and even more truly connected social experience, you must begin to distance yourself from the grasp of technologies. Anyone who cares to be a member of a functioning, productive society must compel themselves to take the effort to be receptive to the opportunities that exist and are happening around them every single day. 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).

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. By doing so, this will allow all 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 them. If we do the opposite, and continue to misuse them, technologies can pry 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 how these changes 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 newly formed, modern-day habits that are influenced by technologies. 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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