iPads, iPods and Technology-Enabled Isolation: If We're So Connected, Why are We so Alone?

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***Abstract*- In the past twenty-five years, we have witnessed and absorbed incredible technological advances into our lives. The new technologies in many ways have been liberating and empowering – in our age, we have become accustomed to and dependent upon the immediacy of electronic delivery. However, these technological innovations have not come without a cost. As we have become more connected and aware of our online selves, we have become less available and less connected to our offline worlds. We are in danger of not merely transforming our humanity, but forever losing what makes us human. We are more connected than ever before in history, we are more medicated than at any point in history, and we are more isolated from one another than ever before. It is important to consider and reflect upon technology's contribution to these issues and decide whether or not the benefits brought on by the innovations are truly worth the societal, communal, familial and individual costs. We must decide if it is worth reframing our lives with a consideration of balance between what is digital and what is real.**

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The media constantly reminds us that we are the most interconnected society in the history of the world. Everyone is wired – or wirelessly - plugged into the Web, and into knowledge. From iPhones, Androids, iPads, iPods, and laptops, we are always online; we are Tweeting, checking email, texting our friends, updating our Facebook status, and producing or uploading content to sites including Flickr, Pinterest and Instagram. When we are done with those tasks, many of us will remain online and work from home on our laptop or drive in to work, where most of our daily ritual is accomplished while we are bathed in the glow of our high-definition LCD screens. We cannot escape our digital chains. Today, news travels at the speed of light. When we watch traditional broadcast news, we are encouraged to visit the network's website for more information regarding the story. Even more to the point, as Levinson observes, "the readers have become writers and viewers have become producers" (1, Levinson). Not only are we empowered by the technology – the hardware and software – to create and consume content produced by hundreds of millions of non-professionals, we have also become acclimated to the immediacy of electronic delivery. Due to this new technology, we are no longer beholden to the broadcast media gatekeepers – we are no longer obligated to the traditional paradigm of 'television by appointment'; due to Tivo, Hulu, Netflix and other online technologies, we can watch what we want when we want. As we have become

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more connected and aware of our online selves, we have become less available and less connected to our offline worlds – our true friends, our families, perhaps even our primal selves that makes each of us unique. We must not forget our humanity. It is vital that we step back, unplug ourselves from our devices and pause to consider what has been lost in the fool's bargain we have made with our new technological bosses.

Sociologists have reported that increased Internet use has profoundly negative psychological and behavioral ramifications and implications. Dimaggio et al (2001) reported that higher levels of Internet use were "associated with declines in communication with family members, declines in social circles, and increased loneliness and depression." Conversely, other studies suggest that the time people spend online may actually be beneficial in terms of increased social capital especially as it transfers into an offline context, but such views depend on how the researcher views what is defined as positive or negative – there are no definitive measurables. Dimaggio observes that users who spend a large amount of time online "reported declines in socializing, media use, shopping, and other activities" (316). In many modern contexts, technology-enabled isolation is even more troublesome. As Slade observes, "intimacy with machines is increasingly replacing mutual human intimacy" (15). As a result, we have become ever more connected to (and dependent on) our digital, web-enabled devices, and have become less trustful of those around us.

The connection to our digital devices, and the inevitable dependence on the technological innovations afforded by easy access to information, has far-reaching implications for society. As Chandler observed, "technological progress has without doubt brought a multitude of benefits, and will likely bring many more. However it is also clear that the costs of that progress can include not just physical harm but also psychological discomfort, as manifested in the recurring malaise about our powerlessness vis-à-vis the development and uptake of technologies" (Chandler, 262).

In addition to issues of trust, current research in the neurosciences has shown disturbing results that suggest that people, especially digital natives, "should learn to moderate interactions with media" as they "appear to possess less ability to demonstrate empathy, recognize social cues, focus for extended periods of time on one task, or follow a linear thought without interruption" (Herman, 37). Montessori understood the important connections humans ought to forge between one another as she pointed out "the individual rarely lives a life entirely apart from others; rather, he is meant to associate with many others" (Montessori, 55).

Clearly, we haven't yet fully assimilated the online world with the offline world – the concepts and the conflicts are too new. We have sacrificed one for the other, and the technological determinists would argue that the inevitable march of technology has created a situation where it was impossible for this situation to **not** have occurred. Wahhab offers a possible solution – a possible merging of the online world with the online world in a scene that can only be construed as overly utopian and idealistic: "we need to create a library of the future; a place that embraces the digital age but manages that process. Alongside a mass of digital screens should be a community café, possibly a social enterprise hub, maybe even a job centre" (Wahhab, 23). In less than two decades, we have at once become more connected and more isolated and this dichotomy, this move away from the natural self and to the digital self, is continuing to pick up speed.

Gordon E. Moore, who in 1965 was the Director of Research and Development at the semiconductor division of Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation, observed the speed at which the number of transistors could be fitted into an integrated circuit was doubling every year. Furthermore, he

predicted that this trend would continue. Moore's prediction proved so accurate that it became known as Moore's Law, which still has relevance over 45 years after its release. Moore's law reinforces the basic tenets of technological determinism; the relentless, increasing speed of computing devices' effect on society at large cannot be denied. As Ceruzzi observes, "we should step back from a social constructionist view of technology and consider that, in at least one instance, raw technological determinism is at work. Only then can we begin to make intelligent observations about the details of this process" (593). Moore's Law can facilitate the abdication of our communal and societal obligations as we 'digitize' our life and move ever closer towards a solitary online existence. Vanderburg warns us about the acceptance of and reliance on fast, easy access to the transformative effects of digital technology and computers when he says "human life has become digitized, since the process of industrialization transformed human life and society to make the computer and information revolution both possible and necessary. It has also misdirected our sense of responsibility for technology" (Vanderburg, 331). At this point, we are very nearly on the verge of being subsumed and engulfed by the very technology we created. "The digital network that constitutes our network society is an immensely powerful meta-technology, one in which parts cannot be analysed in separation from the whole – it is a logic that is oriented towards commodification and colonization…that allows for no real choice or real freedom of technological expression" (Hassan, 368).

When we consider how we interact with our digital media libraries, the isolation due to technology that is commonly articulated by the technological determinists is clearly evident. This idea is not new. In 1984, four years after the Sony Walkman was introduced in the United States, Shuhei Hosokawa observed the alienating effects of the new technology via personal interactions with the Sony Walkman – i.e., how people used the device. Dubbed the "Walkman Effect", Hosokawa observed that "people once lived happily in harmonious contact with nature, but with industrialization and urbanization, especially in recent decades, they lose that healthy relationship with the environment, become alienated and turn into David Riesman's 'lonely crowd', suffering from incommunicability" (Hosokawa, 165). As consumers became more and more plugged into to their Walkmans in the 1980s, they at once became less and less accessible in formerly social situations. The Walkman became a part of the person's body. "Through the Walkman, then, the body is opened; it is put into the process of the aestheticisation, the theatricalisation of the urban – but in secret" (Hosokawa, 177). Walkmans, and by extension, the iPods of today, allow us to take music wherever and whenever we go. We are listening to our own music on our own time, and just as we are no longer dependent on broadcast network television gatekeepers, we are no longer beholden to the gatekeepers of radio. We have struck out on our own yet again, in a spectacularly singular manner. With the Walkman and the iPod, there is no connection to the society around us. "It is rather anonymous, impersonal, pre-individual and nomadic. A consciousness is nothing without some synthesis of unification, but there is no such synthesis for the consciousness without the form of the "I" or the point of view of the self" (Hosokawa, 169).

Today, the iPod has continued to facilitate this retreat from public space. When we see someone wearing the ubiquitous white Apple earbuds, we understand the individual's implicit message – "stay out of my personal space." As Richmond observed, on a subway, people listening to iPods never rejoin the public space, even as they are exiting the car. "They retained their separation. When they reached the top of the stairs and regained cell-phone coverage, they (and many others) speed-dialed and retreated further still" (Richmond, 2).

So-called "converged devices" – iPhones, Android devices, iPads and the like

– refine and strengthen technology-enabled social isolation. The devices, which are clearly intended to have a short lifespan (witness the relentless Apple upgrade path – iPhone 3, iPhone 4, iPhone 4S, iPhone 5, etc.), are portals with which consumers form deep attachments. "It would seem that the scale of presence…has further carved the need for a focus on the 'empty' spaces of everyday life. Those in-between spaces are not in fact empty spaces – they are actually populated by the mobile devices that people carry with them (Beer, 366). "Even deep in the subway, without a cell phone signal, there is more than enough to keep you entertained, productive and removed" (Richmond, 3). Beer and Richmond do not see the technology providing for increased social discourse and unity. Richmond observes that "with this personal technology, we occupy an efficient, comfortable and entertaining private bubble. We are also more and more mentally removed, and our attendance in physical surroundings becomes more solitary, less shared" (Richmond, 4). Other technology that builds on and intensifies the techo-social separation wrought by personal listening devices can be found with "noise-cancelling" headphones popularized and marketed primarily to business travelers by Bose Electronics. "To the extent that the use of noise cancellation becomes the norm in the spaces of transit, the cultural value of circulation will suppress the cultural value of embodied copresence; in addition, whatever opportunities these spaces offer for intercultural interaction will be minimized" (Hagood, 587).

In our society today, consumers are strongly urged to integrate the latest technology into their lives. Steve Jobs was famously quoted as saying that Apple was in the business of creating products that consumers didn't know they needed until they saw it. Surely, the rampant success of the iPod, iPhone and iPad has made Apple into a wildly successful tech behemoth, but the technology does not provide a panacea for societal problems. As Davidson observes, "an iPad or Kindle does not magically improve education" (Davidson, 1). From the era of the Walkman to the era of the smartphone, devices that were supposed to bring us together have pushed us further apart. Only time will tell if the isolation and subsequent and resultant communicative shortcomings will somehow mediate and improve – in spite of the technology and its relentless push to shape our lives – no matter what the societal cost.

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