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Courtney Parece

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In Technology We Trust

COURTNEY PARECE

Courtney Parece is a freshman at Bridgewater State College majoring in Psychology. This piece was written for her Writing I class, with support and guidance from her professor Patricia Portanova.

As I step out of Psychology, I quickly snatch my cell phone from my back pocket. While I have been in class for an hour, there is a great possibility that I could have missed a call or received a text message, and it is vitally important that I check to make sure neither of the two have occurred. While walking down three flights of stairs, I text my boyfriend back to tell him that I love him too and that I will see him later. By this point in the year I have mastered texting and walking. It was not easy, but I like challenges. When I reach the bottom of the stairs I search frantically for my tiny black headphones that no doubt have gotten tangled in my notebook in the side pocket of my bag. I step into the Moakley technology building and finally manage to untangle them, plug them into my cell phone, and listen to the catchy tunes of Andrew McMahon. His poetic stanzas of teenage angst and hopeless romanticisms manage to bring me to another world while I make the journey to the Commuter Cafeteria. I order my number one (white, scrambled, and bacon) and wait in line, now being entertained by none other than the band Paramore. After I pay for my food, I find my usual spot, sit down, plug in my computer and log on to Facebook. I see that Brianna has sent me a free gift and Ben has poked me for the umpteenth time, all this I'm doing while listening to my music and reviewing for a test in my last class of the day. When the clock reaches ten of eleven, I pack up my Dell and head to English. There we discuss the impact of technology, and I turn a little red when I realize what it has done to me in just the past hour.

Most people, especially college students, can relate to my story. We have grown up in a world of technology and as a result many of our lives center around it. What people once did manually, we would never even consider unless it was a last resort. People used to go next door to talk to their neighbors about something they were worried about, or ask their spouses for insight when they could not find the answers in themselves. Today, we can call people on our cell phones to chat, we look to Google for the answers to everything whether it is what is causing a sore throat to what Britney wore, or didn't wear, this week. Now, if you have nothing to do there is no reason to get up and move, just plug in the Xbox controller and play basketball with LeBron James.

People across the world no longer value human interaction as we once did, when technology was not everywhere. We have come to depend on machines to do what we could do very easily on our own. These innovations have caused

us to become lazy, but to say that is all they have done is a vast understatement. They have changed us as people in countless ways and for the most part these changes have not proved to be positive ones. While people everywhere are considering technology something that they can't live without because it enables them to feel connected and up to speed with the world around them, they are not considering the possibility that it is really just pulling us farther away from reality, into a world where we are isolated and unable to deal with actuality.

Electronics provide people with fun that is comparatively mediocre to the actual fun they could have if they threw their devices away. Unfortunately, they can't see that because they would rather have to press a few buttons, turn a few mechanisms, and plug something in than actually really get physically involved. People are becoming farther apart from each other and closer to their machines, and not because they need to, but because they want to.

As much as I love being immersed in my technology, the world truly opens up when I don't use my mp3 player or get sucked into my computer, but it also makes me feel like I am missing something that I really need. Control is one of those overwhelming emotions that can be seen as positive or negative, but in this case it is classified as the latter. With all of the electronic devices at our disposal it is completely possible to get caught up in their ability to keep you updated on everything. However, too much control is not good, simply because it is not realistic. In the real world you are not in control of a great deal of things, and when you can check work anywhere on your Blackberry, keep track of friends or enemies on Facebook and MySpace, stay updated with news on your cell phone, and catch the newest trends on your video iPod, you become under the illusion that you have nearly complete control of the world around you (Williams 2). We have grown to depend on these machines to keep our fears of not being in control at bay and that does not seem healthy.

When we use our technological machines we are not only quenching our thirst for control, but we are also unknowingly isolating ourselves. Each day as I walk from one campus building to another with my headphones on I am sending the message to others that I am in my own space, and I am not about to enter theirs. Sometimes it is good to be in your own space but, too often, we forget that there are other people out there, opportunities and important interactions that are necessary to develop one's character (Williams, 1). On the days that I forget my mp3 cell phone, I notice so many things that I take for granted on the other days: animals, sounds, conversations around me. Sometimes I even get involved in conversations myself, even if it is just small talk. The problem is when I put the headphones back on all of those opportunities, conversations, and realizations disappear.

Armstrong Williams, a writer for the *New York Amsterdam News* summed it up perfectly, "When you plug into your iPod in a public place, you are basically telling everyone else that you don't want to interact with them...you want to be isolated and left alone" (Williams, 1). Williams shows the effect that occurs when we use our electronic devices in public. When someone is in a coffee shop and sits next to a customer with their headphones on, they will almost always feel less prompted to talk engage you in a discussion because when the headphones are on, the conversation is off (Williams 1).

I recently read an article written this summer in *Newsweek* about a family who went on a road trip titled, "The Family Road Trip: Strangers in a Minivan." The author, Lisa Segelman expressed how disappointed she was with the road trip because it lacked all of the human interaction and togetherness that she used to experience when her family used to go when she was younger. She knew that the trips wouldn't be exactly the same, but she thought they would be reminiscent. She pictured her kids marveling at the scenery as they drove by, playing license plate games, and singing along to the radio together as a family (Segelman 1). But it was nothing like that; her kids were either listening to their mp3 players or watching a DVD on the portable player, leaving her feeling like she was all alone as she sat in the front seat driving. Even when she tried to strike up fun conversations with the kids, they were too busy with their electronics to notice (Segelman 2). My favorite part was when she talked about how the global positioning systems were the only people talking. Imagine that, a car with a real family inside and the only voices being heard were from "Kelly" and "Robert" the voices inside the machine! At the end of the trip her daughter got tangled in her seat belt and her mom took comfort in the fact that none of the electronic devices that filled the car were able to help her, only a simple pair of scissors (Segelman 2).

The "iSolation effect", as Bruce Weinstein, a writer from *Business Week Online* calls it, is not just limited to music players. We use electronic devices for countless other things that require our constant attention, and, thus, we are only focusing on that one thing. When we text, read business e-mails on our Blackberry, check online to see when our favorite band is touring in the area, or are having a conversation on our cell phone as Weinstein says, "We miss the chance...to make new friendships, renew old ones, or simply say hello to a new stranger" (Weinstein 2). It is something that one can see simply by observing the foot traffic between campuses each day. The kids who talk to each other are most often the ones that don't have an electronic device in sight. If those people can live without their devices for a while it seems unnecessary for others to be attached to theirs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (Weinstein 2).

The isolation that has resulted from everything electronic clearly holds the potential to destroy our social relationships. People no longer look outside of their own room or the walls of their house to interact with others. For instance, my sister goes upstairs to her bedroom, shuts her door, and sits in her bed with her laptop on her lap, and the TV right next to her on her nightstand, along with her cell phone. She stays up there for hours and only comes out for food, bathroom breaks, and when she's got something on her mind that Jeeves can't answer. Her family, the people around her, rarely get to talk to her. I can honestly say I have no idea who her friends are, what she watches on TV, or what her current goals are, unless of course I go on her MySpace or Facebook page. It's a sad truth to have to accept, but we are more focused on the virtual world than the actual one we are living in.

In chat rooms you can meet people from Britain, Australia and China. You can even hold business meetings with people from seven different countries, without any one of them being in the room (Freidman 2). Through IM, text messaging, and emailing you can communicate with your cousin in Texas, or your Uncle in Ireland, all while disregarding the person beside you (Klempner 1). The irony is that we are so excited that we can tear down the boundaries of geography that we forget how we lived before those boundaries existed. Now, a time when we looked to the person next to us to chat may seem dated, but it enabled people to build genuine relationships (Freidman 4).

The technology revolution has not only caused human interaction to falter, and placed false empowerment in people, it has also caused a threat to our physical health. Companies are selling these devices requiring our attention, often attention that we can't provide solely because we have other things to accomplish, so we learn to do both. Multi-tasking with electronics is negative from many vantage points; one very dangerous aspect is its effect on us physically. Multi-tasking activities are not always as harmless as most of the people who actually do them think. Driving while on a cell phone is not just a minor thing; *The New England Journal of Medicine* published a study which found that, "Drivers who use a cell phone are four times more likely to be involved in an accident than are drivers who do not" (Weinstein 2). That means that every time you talk on your cell phone while cruising down the highway you are putting yourself, as well as others, in serious danger.

In addition, cell phones aren't the only things that are capable of hurting or potentially killing you. You can add to the list, mp3 players, handheld computers, handheld movie-players, and any other handheld electronic device. When you are on these devices you are forgetting about the cars, trucks, bikes, etc., that you encounter while walking, making it easy for someone to hit you. This year in New York alone, there were two deaths reported

after pedestrians, distracted by their mp3, players were hit by cars (Weinstein 2). New York Senator, Carl Kruger, worried that the death toll would increase from all of the electronics used by the people of New York who walk its streets each day, tried to ban the use of these devices while crossing the streets in New York City and Buffalo (Weinstein 2). I remember seeing the story on the news and thinking "How stupid!", but, honestly something has to be done when the grasp of technology is killing us, literally. The only problem seems to be that not many people actually see our current technology as unnecessary. They think that their iPod, their laptop, and their cell phone are things that they simply can't live without, because they have grown to depend on them.

E.M. Forster wrote a story in 1909, called *The Machine Stops*. In Forster's science fiction work he described people who had allowed technology to take over their lives. They inhabit the land beneath the world's surface, each person by themselves, and their only real means of communication was through a plate, which we can compare to our modern day webcam. The plates deprived them of real human interaction, and prohibited them from their own independent thought. Because they could not really think to themselves none of them, except for the main character, Kuno, realized that the Machine was slowly taking over their lives. Also, they were no longer in control, even though the machine made it seem like they were. They had buttons to do everything for them so they never had to even move. In the end the machine failed and everyone died because they didn't know what to do, they had depended on the machine for so long they were lost without it. (Forster)

This story is eerily familiar to what is happening in our world right now, especially since it was written nearly a century ago. But Forster's story is more than just a fantastical work of literature; it is a prediction, as well as a warning. The people of the Machine world were slowly immersed in all of these new technologies, which they saw as interesting and harmless, just as we see ours. No one could see what was really going on because they were so distracted by the excitement of all of the new innovations. They thought that the machine was just there to help them, but in the end it hurt them because it failed. Thankfully, we have not reached the point that the people of the Machine world did, but that is not to say we won't. With so many of Forster's predictions having already proven themselves, it would not be fair to deny the chances of his last one coming true.

Technology is now not only venturing into new lands, but potentially dangerous ones. It has come to the point where even the people who are creating devices from it are so blinded by their innovativeness, that they can't predict what might result from them. However, it is not difficult to see what has happened to us up to this point, and that picture is not a pretty one, but that doesn't mean we can't make it one. The world of technology needs to slow down and reposition its focus. We need to get away from the cool mechanisms that we don't really need, and move toward productive goals, not towards an even better iProduct. If we do not do something now, it is frighteningly possible that we could soon see demise similar to the poor souls in Forster's dreadful story.

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