



June 6, 2010

# An Ugly Toll of Technology: Impatience and Forgetfulness

By **TARA PARKER-POPE**

Are your [Facebook](#) friends more interesting than those you have in real life?

Has high-speed Internet made you impatient with slow-speed children?

Do you sometimes think about reaching for the fast-forward button, only to realize that life does not come with a remote control?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, exposure to technology may be slowly reshaping your personality. Some experts believe excessive use of the Internet, cellphones and other technologies can cause us to become more impatient, impulsive, forgetful and even more narcissistic.

“More and more, life is resembling the chat room,” says Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, director of the Impulse Control Disorders Clinic at Stanford. “We’re paying a price in terms of our cognitive life because of this virtual lifestyle.”

We do spend a lot of time with our devices, and some studies have suggested that excessive dependence on cellphones and the Internet is akin to an addiction. Web sites like [NetAddiction.com](http://NetAddiction.com) offer self-assessment tests to determine if technology has become a drug. Among the questions used to identify those at risk: Do you neglect housework to spend more time online? Are you frequently checking your e-mail? Do you often lose sleep because you log in late at night? If you answered “often” or “always,” technology may be taking a toll on you.

In a study to be published in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, researchers from the University of Melbourne in Australia subjected 173 college students to tests measuring risk for problematic Internet and gambling behaviors. About 5 percent of the students showed signs of gambling problems, but 10 percent of the students posted scores high enough to put them in the at-risk category for Internet “addiction.”

Technology use was clearly interfering with the students’ daily lives, but it may be going too far to call it an addiction, says Nicki Dowling, a clinical psychologist who led the study. Ms. Dowling prefers to call it “Internet dependence.”

Typically, the concern about our dependence on technology is that it detracts from our time with family and friends in the real world. But psychologists have become intrigued by a more subtle and insidious effect of our online interactions. It may be that the immediacy of the Internet, the efficiency of the [iPhone](#) and the anonymity of the chat room change the core of who we are, issues that Dr. Aboujaoude explores in a book, “Virtually You: The Internet and the Fracturing of the

Self,” to be released next year.

Dr. Aboujaoude also asks whether the vast storage available in e-mail and on the Internet is preventing many of us from letting go, causing us to retain many old and unnecessary memories at the expense of making new ones. Everything is saved these days, he notes, from the meaningless e-mail sent after a work lunch to the angry online exchange with a spouse.

“If you can’t forget because all this stuff is staring at you, what does that do to your ability to lay down new memories and remember things that you should be remembering?” Dr. Aboujaoude said. “When you have 500 pictures from your vacation in your Flickr account, as opposed to five pictures that are really meaningful, does that change your ability to recall the moments that you really want to recall?”

There is also no easy way to conquer a dependence on technology. Nicholas Carr, author of the new book “The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,” says that social and family responsibilities, work and other pressures influence our use of technology. “The deeper a technology is woven into the patterns of everyday life, the less choice we have about whether and how we use that technology,” Mr. Carr wrote in a recent blog post on the topic.

Some experts suggest simply trying to curtail the amount of time you spend online. Set limits for how often you check e-mail or force yourself to leave your cellphone at home occasionally.

The problem is similar to an eating disorder, says Dr. Kimberly Young, a professor at St. Bonaventure University in New York who has led research on the addictive nature of online technology. Technology, like food, is an essential part of daily life, and those suffering from disordered online behavior cannot give it up entirely and instead have to learn moderation and controlled use. She suggests therapy to determine the underlying issues that set off a person’s need to use the Internet “as a way of escape.”

The International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the [University of Maryland](#) asked 200 students to refrain from using electronic media for a day. The reports from students after the study suggest that giving up technology cold turkey not only makes life logistically difficult, but also changes our ability to connect with others.

“Texting and I.M.’ing my friends gives me a constant feeling of comfort,” wrote one student. “When I did not have those two luxuries, I felt quite alone and secluded from my life. Although I go to a school with thousands of students, the fact that I was not able to communicate with anyone via technology was almost unbearable.”