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Living Online Is a Societal Phase, Not a Dangerous Addiction

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Defending Digital Series, No. 11: The intensive use of technology is often a practical requirement. It's also much more like earlier enthusiasms for radio, movies, and television than addictions like drugs, alcohol, or tobacco; it should be governed as such.

The word addiction stems from the Latin word *addicere,* which in Roman law meant "to deliver or hand over formally a person or thing in accordance with a judicial decision." It was essentially the legal language of slavery. Over the centuries, usage evolved to encompass various types of "compulsion," "devotion," and the "giving over of oneself."[1] The connection between slavery and the giving over of oneself to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, or gambling is clear enough.



In recent years, usage has expanded much further, and people now routinely joke about being addicted to chocolate or *The Crown*. In other words, addiction is used to describe everything from severe dependencies that could ruin your life to harmless habits that you really enjoy. This unwieldy spectrum should serve as a warning that the seemingly potent phrase *technology addiction* has no fixed meaning, and thus can be applied to just about any type of frequent digital usage. This begs the question: Is living online more like eating sweets, being hooked on drugs, compulsive gambling, or something different altogether?[2]

TWO ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM

Critics of Big Tech argue that heavy use of technology is closely correlated with increases in depression, anxiety, obsession, isolation, fragility, narcissism, envy, misogyny, pornography, anger, shaming, bullying, self-harm, and violence, as well as decreases in fresh air, sleep, health, fitness, concentration, test scores, empathy, and real-world skills and experience. Whether we are raising the stereotypes of lonely boys in their parents' basement or anxious girls focused on their social status, there are many troubling cases. The terrible story of the 14-year-old British girl Molly Russel shows how children can be overwhelmed by certain types of targeted content.[3] As with alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and gambling, many people believe that online services need stricter regulation, and that it's no coincidence that the digital world refers to its customers as "users."

However, putting so much of the blame on online services ignores the way medications, lockdowns, masks, remote learning, shifting gender dynamics, troubled families, political polarization, economic strains, environmental fears, guns, and other pressures have added to the traditional sources of teenage angst. Besides, it's not like people have a lot of choice. The time we once spent with books, magazines, newspapers, maps, games, radios, stereos, televisions, cameras, pens and paper, as well as in schools, libraries, offices, meetings, cinemas, and stores is systematically migrating to the virtual world. It's not surprising that some children—and some adults—need more time than others to get used to having such unprecedented powers and distractions in the palm of their hand. Living online is now a challenging and unstoppable societal shift, but eventually a *new normal* will emerge.

AMELIORATING FACTORS

Given that there are valid points on both sides, the impact of intensive use of technology is somewhere in the middle of our spectrum. But wherever you place it right now, over time technology usage will look less and less like addiction. Consider these five factors:

1. Heavy technology use is the opposite of substance abuse in at least one important way. The technology downsides listed above are concentrated among the young, with the risks diminishing over time. In contrast, the damage from substance abuse tends to accumulate over the years as heavy smoking, drinking, or drug use inevitably take their toll. Long-term dependency is what we have historically meant by addiction; *temporary addiction* is almost an oxymoron.

2. The fact that technology dependence tends to decline as people enter their 20s, and certainly by their 30s, suggests that today's urge to be online closely resembles previous enthusiasms for radio, movies, television, and music, all of which had compelling appeal to teenagers that many adults found worrisome. And just as the thrill of those older media eventually levelled off, we already see some small drops in the use of social media among the young.[4]

3. Although many people enjoy drugs, drinking, and entertainment media, there is typically little value creation involved. In contrast, using technology effectively requires many useful skills—operating devices, navigating social media, editing videos, the coordination needed to excel at video games, the composition skills required to present oneself successfully, new means of collaborating, influencing, networking, and more. The demand for such skills will remain strong for many years. In contrast, there is little demand for people to smoke, drink, or watch TV. The many practical benefits of being online are unlike either end of our addiction spectrum, and this should prove to be a positive behavioral factor over time.

4. While the task of blocking harmful content is much more difficult for open online platforms than with traditional media, technology service providers know that they must do a better job of protecting children, and are working hard and cooperating with policymakers on this issue.

5. Looking ahead, it's easy to imagine a future where software agents, artificial intelligence, and/or new human/machine interfaces substantially reduce the time we all spend staring at screens.

NEGATIVE BIASES

The way we think and talk about technology also tends to push the conversation closer to the addiction metaphor than is generally warranted. Consider these three biases:

1. Reading the technology-addiction literature, one might think that dopamine and serotonin are dangerous narcotics. Yes, pleasure hormones are released when we receive likes on social media, just as they are with many recreational drugs, and this can create an almost irresistible urge to check for messages and updates. However, similar pleasures can also be triggered by meditation, exercise, eating, playing an instrument, advances in learning, winning at sports or games, sex, and countless other activities that are only rarely described as addictive, and are of little interest to policymakers. Given the time we spend online, occasional jolts of happiness are nothing to sneer at.

2. There is also a bias in language. "Binge watching" on Netflix, reading a book you can't put down, being passionate about one's field or work, shooting basketballs in the darkness, locking yourself in a room to master the guitar, or writing deep into the night are typically seen as fun, useful, or a sign of deep commitment. However, when people make the same time commitment to writing code, making TikTok videos, or competing in online games, the language is almost inevitably more negative, with individuals described as isolated, nerdy, obsessed, narcissistic, or even self-destructive. Back in the 2010s, it was trendy to say that it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert in a particular field or activity. Whether you believe this claim or not, sustained commitment and practice are needed in virtually every field, online activities included.[5]

3. Lastly, there are the familiar biases of age. How many baby boomers used to shake their heads at their children's—or colleagues'—enthusiasm for personal computers, mobile phones, texting, e-commerce, video games, videoconferencing or social media, only to become frequent users themselves? Similarly, older people have been complaining about the deficiencies of younger generations since ancient times, to little avail.[6] To cite just one counterexample, because of social media today's youth tend to be much more comfortable with public speaking and self-presentation than their parents, many of whom dreaded—and struggled in—such situations.

Taken together, these three biases continue to adversely shape the national debate.

DUELING "WASTELANDS"

The average American who watches television does so between three and four hours per day, more than any other activity except work and sleep, and far more than the average person spends playing video games.[7] To put this colossal accumulation of hours in perspective, consider this: If just 1 percent of the time Americans spend watching TV was focused on building out Wikipedia, the open-source encyclopedia's 6 million English language articles could easily have been produced in less than a year.[8] Apparently, adults, like teenagers, also choose to "waste" a lot of time, all while believing they don't have enough "free time."

Although watching a lot of television is correlated with isolation, depression, obesity, diabetes, over-medication, and other maladies, we rarely hear the phrase *TV addiction* anymore, even though if people have to miss favorite shows or sporting events, many suffer from anxieties

similar to those that people feel when they don't have their phones with them. As the amount of time spent watching TV has remained relatively stable over the years, it seems to be a habit that's very hard to kick. Yet hardly anyone cares; it's now just normal—not just on TV sets, but also on phones, tablets, and computers.

Thus, while it's easy to criticize some of what teenagers do online, we could do the same for adults. Much of the Internet and TV can seem like dueling wastelands. But adults see their viewing habits as understandable and largely benign lifestyle choices, even as they criticize those whose habits differ. Perceptions regarding what constitutes *free time*, how one *spends time*, and what amounts to *wasting time* remain very much in the mind of the beholder. It was ever thus.

The bottom line is that throughout America's post-World War II period, teenagers have struggled with many of the same issues as kids do today. The current pressures may well be greater than they have been in much of the past, partly due to digital technologies but mostly because of major changes in society overall. During this 75-year period, alcohol, drugs, and new media have often been irresistible outlets for teenage angst. Fortunately, online services are much more like the latter than the former two, while also having a great many practical benefits. As with television and motion pictures, service providers and policymakers should focus on age-appropriate content and accurate labeling—not the broader controls necessary for truly addictive and dangerous substances.

About This Series

ITIF's "Defending Digital" series examines popular criticisms, complaints, and policy indictments against the tech industry to assess their validity, correct factual errors, and debunk outright myths. Our goal in this series is not to defend tech reflexively or categorically, but to scrutinize widely echoed claims that are driving the most consequential debates in tech policy. Before enacting new laws and regulations, it's important to ask: Do these claims hold water?

About the Author

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ENDNOTES

1. All the quoted definitions are from the online version of the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*.
2. For example, the World Health Organization and other medical and psychiatric bodies refer to "gaming disorders," not gaming addiction. See, for example: World Health Organization, "Gaming disorder," FAQ, accessed October 28, 2022, https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/gaming-disorder.
3. Dan Milmo, "'The bleakest of worlds': how Molly Russell fell into a vortex of despair on social media," The Guardian, September 30, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/sep/30/how-molly-russell-fell-into-a-vortex-of-despair-on-social-media.
4. Data from Pew Research Center shows that the 18–29 age group is the only one to see a decrease in social media use since 2015. See: Michelle Faverio, "Share of those 65 and older who are tech users has grown in the past decade," Pew Research Center, January 13, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/01/13/share-of-those-65-and-older-who-are-tech-users-has-grown-in-the-past-decade/.
5. Phyllis Lane, *10,000 Hours: You Become What You Practice* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform), May 8, 2012, ISBN: 9781475033625.
6. As Horace succinctly put it circa 100 BCE: "Our sires' age was worse than our grandsires' We their sons are worse than they; so in our turn we shall give the world a progeny yet more corrupt."
7. Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey, Table A-1, "Time spent in detailed primary activities and percent of the civilian population engaging in each activity, averages per day by sex, 2021 annual averages," released June 23, 2022, https://www.bls.gov/tus/a1-2021.pdf.

   Limelight Networks, "The State of Online Gaming 2021," March 1, 2021, https://edg.io/resources/market-research/state-of-online-gaming-2021/.

   While some teenagers play video games for more than this, many adults watch more than three or four hours per day.
8. 250 million U.S. adults watching 3 hours of TV per day equals roughly 250 billion hours per year, 1 percent of which is 2.5 billion hours. Divided by 6 million Wikipedia articles, this equates to some 400 hours per article, which is almost certainly more than average.