

Digital Detoxification: Humanity on the Precipice

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Abstract --We are more globally connected than ever before, but life in the digital age is far from ideal. Excessive use of digital devices has its obverse side. The key to staying sane in our hyper-connected world is adopting healthy and sustainable habits the way we use technology so that you are in control of it (rather than the other way around).

Smart-phones, laptops and tablets, combined with the increasing wireless Internet accessibility, enable technology users to constantly be connected to the digital world. Our ability to stay balanced in this time of exponential technological growth, and create healthy relationships with our digital devices, will determine the future of humanity.

Violence-centric Gaming platforms are creating addictions similar to drugs, making people insensitive to finer features of life -- leading to emergence of empathy-starved citizens. Lately, the 2016 US presidential election and Brexit referendum are examples of dubious role that digital social media played in adversely impacting the outcome of elections.

Keywords: Hyper-connected world, Digital age, Smart phones, Digital addiction, Data deluge, Healthy relationships, Digital dependency

LAST YEAR, Vishnu Viswanath, a software engineer at Cisco, San Jose California alongwith wife fell into a 800 feet deep gorge in Yosemite National Park in US while taking a selfie on their smart phone. A video on WhatsApp depicted a 5-year Keralite girl, losing her mental balance, being an Internet addict. Many youngsters, walking on rail tracks near Delhi have been crushed by incoming trains as they did not hear engine's whistles -- absorbed as they were in listening to their choice music on smart phones.

These examples show that brain gets diverted -- losing focus with excessive exposure to electronic gadgets. We're spending more time than ever on our digital devices—and with the flood of incoming texts, emails, calls, and push notifications, it's rare if our screens stay dark for more than a moment.

This vicious cycle is taking a toll on our health, mental well-being, and relationships. Surveys and studies have reported an association between electronic gadgets and depression, anxiety, and decreased marital satisfaction, to name a few.

Perpetual influx of new technologies in our lives and the

information that we consume on a daily basis (also known as 'the data deluge') is making it increasingly difficult for us to "switch off" from the devices in our hands.

Back in 2016, it was reported that one in eight traffic accidents were due to smartphone use. In UK's Ofcom's latest report on 'digital dependency', it was found that the average Briton checks the phone every 12 minutes and spends nearly three and a half hours a day looking at a mobile device. As smartphone addiction increases, we are probably likely to see the number of traffic accidents increase.

II. COMPULSIVE NEED

Developing a compulsive need to use your digital devices, to the extent where it interferes with your life and stops you from doing things you need to do, is the hallmark of an *addiction*. There are three different types of digital addiction which include phone addiction, internet addiction and social media addiction.

Phone addiction is a dependence syndrome and a clinical addiction where users are affected by smart-phone overuse which impacts their daily lives in a negative way.

Internet addiction is defined as an impulse control disorder, also known as pathological internet use, where some may find it difficult to differentiate between the virtual world and reality. Sufferers tend to spend excessive amounts of time online, not only eating up time but also causing a higher risk of overspending by getting involved in online gambling and gaming.

If you spend far too much time on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat to the point where you document each and every aspect of your life on any/all of the platform, you could be a *social media addict*.

It is reported that an average American spends more than half of the waking life staring at a screen. The negative psychological, social and cultural impact is real. There's no denying that we're more plugged in than ever before. Sure, this level of connectedness has benefits—it's simple to stay in touch with friends and family; you can express yourself on social media; multitasking is easier—but there are also some pretty serious drawbacks. Staring at our devices may be pleasurable in the

moment, but “pleasurable behaviors are addictive”.

III. FORMAL DEFINITION

Oxford Dictionary’s definition of Digital Detoxification is: “A period of time during which a person refrains from using electronic devices such as smartphones or computers, regarded as an opportunity to reduce stress or focus on social interaction in the physical world”.

Despite the advantages of technology, it seems we are now aware of the negative impact it can have on our lives - take for instance social media and its ability to distract and consume us - that we are increasingly being told how we need to escape it and give ourselves time away so we can disconnect. *Call it a digital detox or an escape from the online world, scientists say our brains benefit from down time.*

Digital detox is the time period when an individual refrains from using any digital or electronic device. These devices generally include portable handheld devices such as smartphones and tablets as well as computers, laptops and even televisions. There are plenty of places that specialize in providing these kinds of technology-free retreats.

A digital detox is primarily done to avoid being addicted or obsessed with digital devices and mentally relaxed by taking some time to enjoy the physical or real world. This enables maintaining a healthy balance between normal life and the time a person spends using such electronic devices.

III. MULTITASKING

The connecting devices’ multitasking character has a serious impact on the learning ability. Multitasking implies operating on a surface level, which only involves the short-time memory. Using multiple connecting devices as learning platforms is therefore not beneficial. A reduction of information choices enables the brain to focus more on the quality of the information rather than the hastiness of it.

Many of us have lost the reason why we even post our activities online in the first place, and a lot of the time it comes down to that notion of seeking validation through the reactions - be it likes or comments - that we receive as a result. It’s something that has been written about extensively, and seen broadly in the millennial and generation Z crowds. For those whose happiness relies on the number of likes they receive on social media; life can quickly feel pointless unless it’s constantly being documented and live-blogged to the virtual world.

The World Travel Market Global Trends Report even listed digital detox as one of the next big trends to hit the hospitality industry in the coming year. Whether you’re just a person feeling a little lost in the data deluge, or perhaps it’s something as

extreme as feeling like you’ve lost who you are through the overuse of social media - like with any detox - a complete break from digital life is the best way to cut the habit.

Five days is also a good amount of time to do a digital detox for, as you won’t feel excluded from your normal life far too long, but it’s also long enough for you to hit that all important ‘reset button’, giving you a break from the everyday stresses and constant flow of data and information we receive; helping us to reassess what really matters in life. But any trip can potentially be a digital detox: Just switch off your phone, leave your laptop and tablet behind and go experience the physical world at its finest.

IV. MENTAL HEALTH

There are the potential physical effects of being “always on,” from neck pain (and wrinkles) to elevated blood pressure. Potentially a consequence *and* a cause of this is the fact that there is an ever-growing body of evidence that suggests a link between social media usage and poor mental health. Using devices whilst driving is likely to cause major issues when it comes to road safety.

There are a number of other potential dangers of technology addiction, often related to excess screen time. For example, artificial blue light emitting from screens increases alertness and suppresses the hormone melatonin, which negatively impacts sleep. Apparently 47% of UK adults miss out on sleep due to internet usage. And a US survey found that more than 73% of young adults suffer from symptoms of digital eye strain from screen overuse. As well as this, some research has found a link between internet addiction and changes to the brain involving emotional processing and decision making.

Whereas poor mental health may be a well-publicised side effect of technology addiction, it is certainly not the only issue – and one that may be slightly surprising is that social media overuse can potentially make us more susceptible to burglaries.

A recent study of 2,000 social media users found that 22% share information online that they are on holiday and away from home, while a further 33% said that they had posted a holiday picture whilst away. One in 20 even revealed exactly how long they are away for. This might seem innocent enough, but when privacy settings haven’t been checked, and social media accounts are left public – problems can arise. Even a former burglar recommended not freely posting schedules online. So burglary is a somewhat surprising danger of social media overuse and addiction, but one that could have serious consequences.

V. THE WAY FORWARD

But giving up all your screen time? It’s just not practical. Thankfully, experts agree that you don’t have to break up with

your phone completely—you just have to relax your death grip on it. ‘If you’re allowing yourself to get interrupted five times in a half an hour, you’re never actually focused in that time’.

Designate tech-free hours: Many of us feel “naked” when we’re without our devices, but taking breaks from technology can do wonders for our well-being. “Start by designating a certain time each day that’s tech-free—like while you’re eating lunch.

Make your bedroom a no-tech zone: Most people use their phone for an alarm clock. But when you reach for your phone to switch it off, it’s easy to start scrolling through Twitter. In fact, it’s best if you can leave your phone outside the bedroom at night and invest in an alarm clock. Screens’ blue light tricks our brains into thinking it’s daytime, which makes it harder to drift off.

Rediscover paper: You might have noticed that reading a book feels more satisfying than reading a tablet. Not only do books offer fewer distractions, but research suggests that when we read on paper, our minds process abstract information more effectively. Additionally, consider getting your news from a newspaper.

Limit yourself to one screen at a time: When we’re attempting to work and we start scrolling through Instagram, our brains go a little haywire. “Multitasking is really bad for us,” psychologists say. “If you are focusing on a task and you get distracted—like, oh, I’ll just click over to this other window or I’ll just look at this text message—it takes several minutes to recalibrate our brains back to the original task.” Make a habit of only looking at one screen at a time to improve concentration—and, in some cases, enjoyment.

Download the right apps: Plenty of us feel addicted to our phones—and for good reason. Checking our devices activates the reward circuitry in the brain, triggering the body to release a hit of the “pleasure hormone” dopamine, which is exactly what happens when we gamble. While there’s no doubt technology has made our lives easier in many ways, research suggests that our addiction to it is real. Every new notification or text triggers the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that drives us to seek rewards, so you keep coming back for more. A new study suggests that our *brains’ reliance on smartphones may be taking a toll on our thought processes* for problem solving, memory recall, and learning.

Staring copiously at a screen, our bodies pay a price. To combat digital eye strain, which can cause dryness, blurred vision, and headaches, follow the 20-20-20 rule. For every 20 minutes you look at a screen, look up and at an object 20 feet in the distance for 20 seconds. Also, don’t forget to blink!

To fix «text neck,» skip the bent neck and hold your phone higher so you can look at it straight on. And avoid «smart-phone thumb»—that perma-bent texting position can cause inflammation, irritation, and pain—by taking regular breaks from your phone and mix up the way you type, using different fingers.

To cut back on your digital dependency, turn off your phone’s push notifications for social media apps, including Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, news sites, dating apps—anything that sends an alert when someone contacts you or likes a post. Starting with one or two, set a specific time of day to check each and a time limit for how long you’ll spend on the site, such as 20 minutes. This way you’re not going offline entirely but rather choosing when to access your social media sites and networks. This puts you back in the driver’s seat.

Since not being connected 24/7 has practically become a cultural taboo, many people’s biggest fear about doing a digital detox is that others won’t be able to reach them. If you’re ready to take the leap to a whole day or weekend of unplugging, put in place ‘digital safety nets’. Tell family, friends, and colleagues that you’ll be going off line—and use technology to do so. At least one week in advance, send emails, texts, and tweets, and set up an out-of-office away message. You can also write on your social media profiles that you’ll be unreachable for that period of time.

To ease your mind, consider leaving your phone with a trusted family member or friend who will know how to reach you if something truly urgent comes up. Then keep in mind: What’s *really* an emergency? Ask yourself, ‘What’s the worst that could happen while I’m offline? Most likely whatever may happen during your unplugged period won’t be life-threatening or even all that important.

Technology addiction can come in many forms; from over-reliance on smartphones, to not being able prise yourself away from video games. There are many potential dangers of tech over use and technology addiction, some more surprising than others. Technology addiction is causing growing concern in mental health circles, with suggestions of links to anxiety and depression. Arguably the worst culprit is social media addiction, with young people particularly vulnerable.

Since the launch of MySpace in 2003 followed by Facebook a year later, the total user base of social media has grown exponentially. In 2017, there were 2.46 billion social media users worldwide. Social media is now a central part of many people’s everyday lives, whether that’s catching up with friends on Facebook, or keeping an eye on celebrity lifestyles on Instagram. The effect that social media addiction might be having on mental health is no longer a secret, with more and more press, public figures, and health bodies coming out and voicing their concerns.

VI. ADVISING OUR CHILDREN

Truly, humanity is on a precipitous edge today! Fed up with your family spending all their time on screens? Wondering what happened to *meaningful conversation* over dinner and having *fun* together? Most parents think their kids spend too much time on their phone at home. Let's be honest, we can't avoid our kids using screens. And we shouldn't! University of Oxford research suggests that moderate screen time can actually enhance the well-being of teenagers. Especially, their creativity, communication skills and development. So, instead, think of screen time like junk food. Too much junk food is a bad idea. Junk food now and again? A treat we all enjoy. This is how we see digital detox – taking steps to find a healthy balance with our digital devices and encouraging temporary breaks from screens to ensure we're not 'binging'. Want to learn how to help your family switch off? Screens have the ability to act like pacifiers on young children and probing the subject of screen time with older kids and teens is tricky, but here's why we need to start talking about digital detox:

- Late night screen usage can keep us feeling alert and suppress the release of the sleepy hormone melatonin. Sufficient sleep is not just important for tackling the next day at school, a lack of sleep in children has been linked to an increased risk of obesity.
- Screen overuse can negatively impact school work and leave less desire to take part in other more creative extra curricular activities and hobbies.
- Spending too much time on social media has been linked to mental health issues in young people. Apps like Instagram have created a culture of comparison. This can leave users feeling inadequate and anxious in terms of their looks and lifestyle.
- Create phone-free spaces – the dinner table: for good conversation and bedrooms: for good sleep.

VII. MEDITATION

During last week of June last year, Newspapers reported that 12 young football players and their coach were trapped in a narrow Thailand cave, where surging water sealed escape. Their coach, a young Buddhist monk, as part of his training routine had extensively engaged the kids in the practice of 'extended periods of meditation' to instill winning-attitude and enhance performance in the field.

In absence of water, food, light and outside help, he exhorted the youngsters to meditate. After 12 days, when rescuers located them, they were all in meditation, like polar bears hibernating in winters.

Likewise, meditation holds the promise of conquering our insatiable urge to rush to gadgets, thus helping in restoring our balance and detoxifying our mind, without spending a Rupee.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Smart-phones, laptops and tablets, combined with the increasing wireless Internet accessibility, enable technology users to constantly be connected to the digital world. Our ability to stay balanced in this time of exponential technological growth, and create healthy relationships with our digital devices, will determine the future of humanity.

Parents complain about their children's screen use while children are increasingly unhappy about their parents' smart-phone habits. Is it time we all looked at what our relationship with technology is doing to family life? Overall, the potential dangers of overuse of technology are well documented. They cover a range of issues – from mental health, to increasing the chance of burglaries. By being more aware of your own technology use, we can ensure that any risks of dangers are limited.

In developed countries, it is now a common practice that operators offer formal Digital Detoxification tours at exotic Retreats. Here, we can plan daily visits to gardens and a holy place to rediscover joys of life. Or, to restore blissful balance in our lives, pranayams, mudras and meditation can be performed.



Dr Ranjit Singh, FIETE (b. 17 Aug 1948) obtained B.Tech, M.Tech. and Ph.D degrees from Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur in 1969, 1971 and 1975 respectively specializing in the area of Electronic circuits and devices. Has abiding passion for research and innovative approach to teaching. Guided BTech, MTech and PhD scholars.

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From September 2008 to February 2015, he taught at Ajay Kumar Garg Engineering College where, he was a Professor in the EC department. Thereafter appointed as Head of the ECE and EI departments, IEC Engineering College, Greater Noida from April 2015 – May 2016, where he supervised setting up of e-Yantra lab.

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- Big Data: Challenges and opportunities (Feb 2017)
- Smart Cities (April 2017)
- Lure of ISM Band (July 2017)
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