

Social Media Addiction and the Loss of Self

Time to Detox and Hear the Birdsong!

PROFESSOR M L O'ROURKE



Prof O'Rourke on his graduation day

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Introduction

The online world of our lives is so intimately bound up in our daily lives that it can be hard to distinguish where the internet ends and the real world begins. Online life is simply layered on top of offline life. As a patient at an internet-addiction clinic in Beijing put it, "it's not a real disease. It's a social phenomenon" (Adam Alter, 2017, p64). We all understand the joys of our always-wired world — the connections, the validations, the laughs, the information. But we are only beginning to come to terms with the costs. "For the subtle snare of this new technology is that it lulls us into the belief that there are no downsides" (Alter, p64). We have a problem, then, of definition: either the world is in the grip of a silent and dangerous epidemic or the parameters of normality, and of how we understand consciousness in general, are shifting ineluctably and forever. An addiction expert told a London conference recently that "giving your child a phone is akin to giving them a gram of cocaine" (Cristin Leach, 2017, p15). A recent World Health Organisation study showed that Irish children are "shunning" sport and outdoor activity in

favour of their smartphones and spend "an average of 5.5 hours online every day; that five-year olds had unsupervised internet access; and children as young as two were online. Irish children are watching less TV, more YouTube" (Leach, p15). Newspaper headlines warn of the "era of lost innocence in the young and that we are losing the battle to protect our teens from a mob mentality that now infests the online world" (O'Regan, 2018, p23). Kathy Sheridan in *The Irish Times* (June 20th 2018, p12) exhorts us to put away the smartphone and start taking our lives back! The world wide web is a place without mercy. In the whirlwind of this super-tech age, there is no knowing the eventual destination of words and views expressed. O'Regan reminds us: "The battle to keep the despoiling effects of electronic exchange and online activity away from those not yet mature enough to make informed judgements is being lost. But parents who are themselves addicted to social media in all its many guises-and the sometimes fantasy world which is part of the web-may themselves be part of a problem devoid of easy solution" (O'Regan, 2018, p23).

Kathy Sheridan suggests that we could take a tip from the anti-smoking campaign. She considers: "Take a good look at our own senseless, often obnoxious behaviour; create more and bigger smartphone-free zones; brand phones as rather pathetic props for those who won't or can't be bothered to engage with real-life people and events; start to wean ourselves down to a few touches a day" (Sheridan, 2018, p12).

In late 2010, Steve Jobs of the Apple Corporation told a New York Times journalist that his children had never used the iPad. "We limit how much technology our kids use in the home" (Alter, p2). Evan Williams, a founder of Blogger, Twitter, and Medium, bought hundreds of books for his two young sons but refused to give them an iPad (Alter, p2). Walter Isaacson, who ate dinner with the Jobs family while researching his biography of Steve Jobs, noted: "no one ever pulled out an iPad or computer. The kids did not seem addicted at all to devices. It seemed as if the people producing tech products were following the cardinal rule of drug dealing: never get high on your own supply!" (Alter, p2). Greg Hochmuth, one of Instagram's founding engineers, realised he was building an engine for addiction when he stated: "There's always another hashtag to click on. Then it takes on its own life, like an organism, and people can become obsessive" (Alter, p3). Instagram, like so many other social media platforms, is bottomless. Facebook has an endless feed as it gives everyone the equivalent of their own blog and their own audience. More and more people got access to a smartphone. Twitter emerged as a

form of instant blogging of micro-thoughts. Then the apps descended, like the rain, to inundate what was left of our free time. Netflix became part of this virtual living never-stopping and moving automatically on to the next episode in a series. Tinder now encourages users to keep swiping in search of a better option. Users benefit of course from these apps and websites but they also struggle to use them in moderation as they become immersed each day in the stream of internet consciousness, jumping from site to site, tweet to tweet, breaking news story and catching up with multiple memes. "The problem isn't that people lack willpower; it's that there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have" (Alter, p3).

The Modern Cultural Ethos is Addictive

Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. We are very vulnerable indeed. We are often lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Sherry Turkle considers that "our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We'd rather text than talk" (Turkle, 2011, p1). The age of behavioural addiction is still young, but early signs point to a crisis. Addictions are damaging because they crowd out other essential pursuits, from work and play to social connectedness and social interaction. The good news is that our relationships with behavioural addiction aren't fixed. There's much we can

do to restore the balance that existed before the age of smartphones, emails, social networking, and on-demand viewing. The key is to understand why behavioural addictions are so rampant, how they capitalize on human psychology, and how to defeat the addictions that hurt us, and the ones that help us. "Factors that predict excessive use include an increased tendency to experience negative emotions, being unable to cope well with everyday problems, a need for self-promotion, loneliness, and fear of missing out" (McCarthy- Jones, Trinity Today (2018,p19).

Surely, it is time for a detox where we can gain a footing in our minds once we realise that we spend more and more hours each day, alone and silent, attached to a laptop in a constant cacophonous crowd of words and images, sounds and ideas, emotions and tirades in what might best be described as a wind-tunnel of deafening and deadening noise. Andrew Sullivan in *The Sunday Times Magazine* (November 27th, 2016, p25), best sums up this modern day predicament:

So much of it was irresistible, as I fully understood. So much of the technology was irreversible, as I also knew. But I'd begun to fear that this new way of living was actually becoming a way of not-living. By the last few months, I realised I had been engaging-like most addicts-in a form of denial. I'd long treated my online life as a supplement to my real life, an add-on, as it were. Yes, I spent many hours communicating with others as a disembodied voice, but my real life and body were still here. But then I began to realise,

as my health and happiness deteriorated, that this was not a both-and-situation. It was either-or. Every hour I spent online was not spent in the physical world. Every minute I was engrossed in a virtual interaction I was not involved in a human encounter. Every second absorbed in some trivia was a second less for any form of reflection, or calm or spirituality.

The Internet Generation, Adolescent Aggression and Electronic Communication

The internet is rapidly becoming an integral part of modern daily life, changing the nature of interpersonal relationships. Children born in the mid-to-late 1980's and 1990's have been labelled the "internet generation", the first generation to grow up in a world where the internet has always been present (Herring, 2008,p71). The existence of the internet is all that these adolescents have ever known and is simply part of their lives. Social networking websites and instant messaging are increasingly popular ways for young people to communicate. The internet has been shown to facilitate adolescents' identity formation, providing opportunities for self-definition and self-reflection. Unfortunately, the many benefits cannot be fully appreciated when the online environment becomes aggressive. Cyberbullying can best be understood as the "by-product of the union of adolescent aggression and electronic communication" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008, p131). Perhaps, the biggest obstacle for parents and educators in devising effective cyberbullying policies is the lack of adequate understand-

ing of the new technologies and the role that the internet now plays in young people's lives (Conway, 2009, p95). For parents and teachers alike, computers are functional tools to be used for practical or business purposes, while adolescents often view this technology as a lifeline to their peer group.

Sue Leonard writes that "children adore networking sites. Calls to ban them are as much an over-reaction as calls to ban pen and paper to stop vicious notes. We can't stop children from socialising this way. But we can make sure that they don't expose themselves to danger" (Leonard, 2008, p68). Anne Conway holds a similar view that social networking sites can be a positive force in young people's lives. "It was found that socialising with other young people online offers adolescents opportunities for self-learning; can help adolescents become more self-aware, boost self-confidence, learn about themselves and how they are perceived by their peers; and provide opportunities to develop personal interests or hobbies" (Conway, 2009, p96). Unquestionably, there is a need for a greater degree of openness, dialogue, and discussion on all aspects of social media, including cyberbullying allied with a high degree of creativity in devising ways to mitigate and regulate these impulses. In China, internet addiction was declared a clinical disorder in 2008. The broader category of "behavioural addiction" was added to the list of diagnoses in the American Psychiatric Association's Bible: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in 2013.

In April 2018, a primary school in

Co Kerry brought in the country's first smartphone ban in school and at home. Blennerville National School began an eleven week pilot programme with their sixth class pupils, banning smartphones and social media apps outside of school hours, with the full support of parents. This courageous step was taken after shocking content was found to be circulating in messaging groups that included eleven and twelve year olds with older teenagers. In the Blennerville Project, it was noticed by parents within days that children's school performance and moods improved. Now the policy is being rolled out across the entire school from September 2018. School Principal, Terry Sullivan, stated: "It's been a roaring success for us, after having this eleven week trial. Youngsters began showing a renewed interest in family time, outside activities, sports and communal games" (Irish Daily Mail, June 21st, 2018, p8).

Time to Detox— Some Possible Solutions

So, let us consider some possible solutions to kick-start healthy life-long digital habits! There are books to read; games and many sports to be played; landscapes to be walked; friends to be with; life to be fully lived; daily silences; the recreation of a digital Sabbath each week-just one day in which we live for 24 hours without checking our phones. And imagine if restaurants had a rule where smartphones must be surrendered upon entering, or coffee shops that marketed their non-wi-fi safe space? Or, more practical: more meals where we agree to put our gadgets in a box while we talk to one another? Or lunch, where the first person to use their phone pays

the whole bill? There are other burgeoning signs of a more human correction with yoga practitioners increasing from 20 million in 2012 to 40 million by 2016. Mindfulness, at the same time, has become a corporate catchword for many and a new form of sanity for others. Self-confidence, emotional resilience, social skills, and creative thinking are certainly the key ingredients or traits to combat this new online and offline life immersion.

The other thing that could happen at the level of individual users is that people stop using Facebook because it makes them unhappy. Researchers reported in a paper from the American Journal of Epidemiology that the more people use Facebook, the more unhappy they are. In addition, they found that the positive effect of real-world interactions, which enhance wellbeing, was accurately paralleled by the negative associations of Facebook use (Lanchester, 2017,p27). However, there seems to be little hope of a major impact on the most recent monthly figure of 2 billion active users of Facebook! “No human enterprise, no new technology or utility or service, has ever been adopted so widely so quickly. The speed of uptake far exceeds that of the internet itself, let alone ancient technologies such as television, cinema or radio” (Lanchester, 2017, p27). Facebook’s mission used to be “making the world more open and connected”. It now says “that the new mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (Lanchester, p20). Flaubert was sceptical about trains because he thought that “ the railway would merely permit more people to move about, meet and be stupid

together” (Lanchester, p20). You don’t have to be as misanthropic as Flaubert to wonder if something similar isn’t true about connecting people on Facebook for social media exploits weaknesses in human psychology. Sigmund Freud considered the power of communities both to shape and to subvert us. Social validation feedback loops change our attitudes and behaviours. Social networking sites grab us because they involve self-relevant information and bear on our social status and reputation. Indeed, the greater your need to belong and be popular, the more irresistible is the site’s siren song.

Conclusion

“I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul”-Invictus.

So what is the solution? We can’t abandon technology, nor should we. Some technological advances fuel behavioural addiction, but they are also miraculous and life enriching. And with careful engineering, they don’t need to be addictive. It surely must be possible to create a product or experience that is indispensable but not addictive. Adam Alter considers that our attitudes to addictive experiences are largely cultural, and “if our culture makes space for work-free, game-free, screen-free downtime, we and our children will find it easier to resist the lure of behavioural addiction” (Alter, p320). In its place, we’ll communicate with one another directly, rather than through devices, and the glow of these social bonds will leave us richer and happier than the glow of screens ever could (Alter, p321). Even in places where digital saturation is greatest, there are people-especially the young —

who are asking the hard questions about costs, about checks and balances, about returning to what is most sustaining about direct human connectedness. Andrew Sullivan considers:

‘If an alien had visited Ireland, Britain or America just five years ago, then returned today, wouldn’t this be its immediate observation? That this species has developed an extraordinary new habit — and, everywhere you look, lives are constantly in its thrall? Just look around you — at the people crouched over their phones as they walk the streets, or drive their cars or play with their children... Visit an airport and see the sea of craned necks and dead eyes. We have gone from looking up and around to constantly looking down’ (Sullivan, p25).

In reflecting on the diverse positions adopted by various researchers in this work, this writer advocates a more proactive approach to the management of social media. A 2017 survey of parents by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation found deep concern about technology’s impact on children’s social and psychological development. “Some parents have even decided to send their children to screen-free schools. Many are limiting or even banning screen-time in the home. Some make it a condition of childminding that the minder does not scroll on the job (Sheridan, 2018, p12). Kathy Sheridan’s summations are worthy of note when she writes: “Silicon Valley parents are ahead of us because they have front-row seats on their industry’s frantic mission to build increasingly addictive products. Some compare it to Big Tobacco

marketing, the old trick of hooking customers while young and keeping them for life” (Sheridan, 2018, p12). Interestingly, Jaron Lanier, the founding father of Silicon Valley, has recently published: *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* — it should be prescribed reading for all Leaving Certificate students! Lanier is convinced that social media is toxic and making us sadder, angrier, and more isolated. “The concept of random reinforcement addiction fed not by reward but by never knowing whether or when the reward will come is well known” (Lanier, 2018, p92).

The last words we leave with the journalist, Andrew Sullivan, who battles daily to gradually create a space that lets life breathe again and find a silence that was previously regarded as integral to the health and mental wellness of the human imagination. He argues:

The smartphone revolution of the past decade can be seen in some ways simply as the final twist, in which those few remaining redoubts of quiet—the tiny cracks of inactivity in our lives — are being filled with more stimuli and noise. And yet our need for quiet has never fully gone away, because our practical achievements, however spectacular, never quite fulfil us (Sullivan, 2016, p 29-30).

Did not John McGahern remind us that “the best of life is lived quietly where nothing happens but our calm journey through the day where change is imperceptible and the precious life is everything?” Wordsworth said it all when he wrote: “The music in my heart I bore, long after it was heard no more”.

Glenfarne/Kilty Rises from the Ashes

Gleann Fearna/Coilte Clohair

‘The lowest ebb is the turn of the tide.’ Never has a quote being so apt to describe the amazing rise from the ashes as in the story of Glenfarne/Kiltyclogher GAA club.



Twelve months ago, the club was almost set to fold as they were unable to field a team of 15 players to compete in the Intermediate Championship. Consecutive heavy defeats took its toll on everyone, as did the relegation to Junior ranks. With a small population and so limited a pick of players, it was almost impossible to conceive how they would overcome this obstacle.

But resilience and pride has always been at the heart of this club and, for once, they also had a bit of luck on their side. At the start of 2018, a number of players returned from abroad with former Leitrim star, Fergal Clancy, also transferring back from a Dublin club. Under the guidance of club stalwarts Joe Keane, Michael McGuire and Dermot O'Rourke, others were coaxed back. From barely getting 15 players, they now miraculously had a panel of 27.

Every week, they slogged it out at training and the results of their hard work started to show. When they reached the final of the Junior A Championship against their nearest neighbours Glencar/Manorhamilton, few naturally gave them a chance. While it was a second string side for Manor, they have a massive pool of talented players to pick from. Everyone expected Glenfarne/Kiltyclogher

to compete well, just not to win.

It was a titanic battle between the two sides with the boys in black and white proving to have that extra edge, confidence, and motivation to finally lift the Dick Ellis Cup. The team rose to the occasion, determined to bring back silverware to the area for the first time in 27 years.

The celebration that followed was more than just about winning that final. It was about showing how hard work, commitment, and determination can prove fruitful in the end. It was about showing the underage players and future stars that there is always hope and reward, no matter what the obstacles and opposition to be faced. It was about celebrating the hard work of past players and supporters who have carried the club during the good and bad times. It was about two parishes celebrating a joy that has been robbed off them for years, both on and off the field. It was a tribute to our beloved past players and supporters who we remember each time we take to the field.

From the lowest ebb, Glenfarne/Kiltyclogher have achieved so much. May there be many more days like it again.

Glenfarne/Kilty Abú!