

Society

The Over-Mediated World

According to a media expert, technology creates its own value systems.

The average American spends more time using media—an iPod, computer, radio, television, etc.—than in any other wakeful activity, almost nine hours a day. Ubiquitous news, e-mail, and entertainment are facts of modern life and, not surprisingly, most of us feel that convenient and consistent access

to the digital world is a good thing.

But what if our new “connected age” is actually pushing us further apart, making us not more informed, but less so? This is the concern of Michael Bugeja, director of the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University and author of *Interpersonal*

Divide: The Search for Community in the Technological Age (Oxford, 2005).

“Family time at the dinner table used to be sacrosanct. Nutritionists and psychologists will tell you that having dinner together uninterrupted is a good thing. We moved from that to ‘quality time,’ where both parents were working. Now we’ve gone from family time to quality time to media time, or defining activities around media. We spend time together by using media in proximity to one another, in the same house or in the same car, but the media itself is often separate,” says Bugeja. By way of example, he points to the common sight of parents driving and talking on their cell phones while their kids sit in the backseat and watch a DVD.

“The more we use technology, the less time we have to nurture our primary relationships,” says Bugeja. “The reason is simple: Communications systems alter value systems. We’re spending more time communicating via social networks, ignoring those in our immediate environment. Meanwhile, television viewing devours leisure time. Of course we’re lonely most of the day. We’re searching for meaningful relationships in front of screens and monitors.”

The amount of time we spend immersed in the media environment affects the way we behave and interact outside of that space. Students who have wireless capability on their laptops feel more entitled to log onto Facebook, MySpace, or other social networking Web sites during lectures. The intern who has a video game loaded onto his cell phone is most likely to be the one playing Tetris under the table during an important meeting. The harried professional who logs 30 hours a week on his Blackberry is more inclined to take a call in the middle of a concert, during dinner, or at some other inappropriate time. Media, in its very availability, invites abuse, according to Bugeja. When such techno-abuses become commonplace they cease to be taboo, a phenomenon Bugeja refers to as “digital displacement.”

He describes digital displacement as what happens when the demands of the real-world conflict with those

Media Consumption by Type and Time

Percentage of People Who Used Media in a Given Day

Media	Percentage
Broadcast television (excluding VCR and DVD)	91.0%
Radio	83.0
All Reading (including books, newspapers, magazines)	78.0
Cell phones	42.6
E-mail, chat, Internet use	63.4
Video	27.7
DVD	12.0
Video Games	8.0
MP3	6.0

Amount of Time People Spent Using Media Per Day (Average)

Media	Mean time per user in minutes
TV	350
Internet	123
Radio	155
Reading (includes books, magazines, newspapers)	86
Music	124
Games	154

Source: The Middletown Media Studies, Spring 2004. Web site www.idmaa.org.

of the virtual, resulting in too many people paying too much attention to gadgets and ignoring reality, such as drivers interfacing with navigation computers instead looking out for pedestrians. "Driving is already a risky activity. You have approximately a one in 100 chance of getting into a serious accident during your adult lifetime to age 70. Yet we now feel it's appropriate to use our cell phones every time we're driving."

While cell phones and the Internet can empower the pursuit of information, they can also further what ethicist Christine Rosen has called "egocasting," or "the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one's personal taste."

Bugeja is particularly concerned about what the trend means for students and teachers. In an article for *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, he writes, "Information technology in

the classroom was supposed to bridge digital divides and enhance student research. Increasingly, however, our networks are being used to entertain members of the 'the Facebook Generation,' who text-message during class, talk on their cell phones during labs, and listen to iPods rather than guest speakers in the wireless lecture hall. Facebook is not the soul source for those woes. However, it is a Janus-faced symbol of the online habits of students and the traditional objectives of higher education, one of which is to inspire critical thinking in learners rather than multitasking. The situation will only get worse as freshmen enter our institutions weaned on high-school versions of Facebook and equipped with gaming devices, cell phones, iPods, and other portable technologies."

While Bugeja doesn't imagine the situation will change quickly or eas-

ily, he does acknowledge that a solution exists. "The key is to nurture interpersonal intelligence," he says. "That's the ability to know when, where, and for what purpose technology is appropriate or inappropriate. I have been advocating that institutions such as high schools, but especially in higher education, focus on that topic for their incoming students and deprogram them from the agenda of media-marketers. . . . I don't believe this is a problem of the emerging generation. I think this is a problem of the profiteers of new media. I believe the solution is, as it's always been in this country, education and information." —Patrick Tucker

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