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The Downside of the Digital Age

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Abstract

This commentary discusses how the digital revolution has advanced human society in undeniably profound ways. But not all the changes have been improvements. The collateral damage acknowledged as consequences of the Digital Age includes the emboldened threat of invasion of privacy, the development and proliferation of online deception, and the tragedies of cyberbullying and perpetual harassment, among others. And while sexting converts hormonal teenagers into self-pornographers, the world wide web's permanent memory banks rob young and old users of the chance to erase the scarlet letters of their digital pasts. As for human memory, it has eroded as its technological supplements have become its substitutes.

Keywords: digital revolution, cyberbullying, memory, dystopia, social media, smartphones, digital culture

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Introduction: The Two-Sided Legacy of Steve Jobs

In the days, hours and minutes following the death of Steve Jobs on October 5, 2011, scores of online articles marked the passing of Apple's co-founder and former CEO with effusive praise and ample laudatory references and remarks. Hailed as a visionary genius (Moses, 2011), a trailblazer (Greenburg, 2011), a "philosopher-king" (Foley, 2011), a "world-changer" (Anthony, 2011), "a modern-day Leonardo da Vinci" (Knickerbocker, 2011), and "kind of like this generation's John Lennon" (Parker, 2011), Jobs exited this world exceptionally admired for his extraordinary contributions and achievements.

U.S. President Barack Obama remarked that Jobs was "among the greatest of American innovators – brave enough to think differently, bold enough to believe he could change the world and talented enough to do it" (Effron, 2011). Bob Iger, president of the Walt Disney Company, described Jobs as "such an original, with a thoroughly creative, imaginative mind that defined an era" (Effron, 2011). And, in a one-sentence tribute, Howard Stringer, president and CEO of Sony Corp., said, "The digital age has lost its leading light, but Steve's innovations and creativity will inspire dreamers and thinkers for generations" ("Sony CEO Stringer," 2011).

With Jobs having passed away so recently, the following concept may be perceived as callous, perhaps even bordering

on sacrilege, but if Steve Jobs, the “mastermind behind Apple’s iPhone, iPad, iPod, iMac and iTunes” (Potter & Curry, 2011) is to be so unreservedly credited for so many of the advances of the digital age, should he not be assigned at least some blame for the problems that continue to emerge as a direct consequence of our increasingly hi-tech world?

Cyberbullying, Online Deception, and the End of Personal Privacy

“JAMIE [sic] IS STUPID, GAY, FAT ANND [sic] UGLY. HE MUST DIE!” spewed one of the messages posted anonymously on 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer’s profile page on Formspring, a social networking website. The Buffalo, N.Y. high school student had indicated on several social websites that he was struggling with his sexuality, and that he had become the target of bullies. “I always say how bullied I am, but no one listens,” he posted on his Facebook page in early September 2011. “What do I have to do so people will listen to me?” (James, 2011).

Another offensive post on Rodemeyer’s Formspring page read, “I wouldn’t care if you died. No one would. So just do it :) It would make everyone WAY more happier!” (James, 2011). Rodemeyer, described by his parents as “a smiley, happy boy who loved to play his cello” (James, 2011), committed suicide in mid-September 2011.

About four months earlier, Rodemeyer posted a YouTube video in support of the “It Gets Better” project, an online initiative intended to reassure troubled and potentially suicidal lesbian, gay and bisexual youth that, despite the taunting, bullying and physical abuse they face as teenagers, life improves after high school. “Love yourself and you’re set,” he told viewers after chronicling his torment in school. “I promise you, it will get better” (Tan, 2011).

In the case of 17-year-old Alexis Pilkington of West Islip, Long Island, N.Y., the mean-spirited posts persisted after her March 2010 suicide. A memorial site created on Facebook by

her friends quickly became littered with personal insults, sexually suggestive comments, even images of nooses and people with their heads blown off. Similar content appeared on Formspring (Kotz, 2010).

Numerous other stories are just as repulsively tragic. On October 17, 2006, three weeks shy of her 14th birthday, Megan Meier of Daddenne Prairie, Mo., hanged herself in her bedroom closet after she received messages on MySpace – supposedly from a 16-year-old boy named Josh Evans (Maag, 2007). Meier, who had a history of depression, became inconsolable when, after more than a month of cyber chatting (but never meeting or actually speaking) with Josh, she received this message from him on October 15: “I don’t like the way you treat your friends, and I don’t know if I want to be friends with you” (Maag, 2007). Meier also discovered that electronic bulletins were being posted about her, with such comments as “Megan Meier is a slut. Megan Meier is fat” (“Parents: Cyber Bullying,” 2007).

Six weeks after their daughter’s suicide, Tina and Ron Meier were informed by a neighbor that Megan had been the victim of a cruel hoax. The character of Josh Evans had been invented by another teen-aged girl (Brady, 2008), and she and the mother of another girl had used it to gain Megan’s trust and learn what she was saying about the woman’s daughter (“Parents: Cyber Bullying,” 2007). Megan Meier died never knowing the terrible truth about her fatal online relationship.

A different kind of deception was perpetrated by William Melchert-Dinkel, but with similar irreversible results. Posing as a depressed woman in her 20s, Melchert-Dinkel, a male nurse living in Minnesota, connected with 18-year-old Nadia Kajouji, a student at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, in 2008, and 32-year-old Mark Drybrough of Coventry, England, approximately three years earlier (Ambroz, 2010). Melchert-Dinkel allegedly used Yahoo and Google chats to instruct his two despondent contacts on how to tie and hang a noose. He also allegedly encouraged them to use a webcam so he could witness the suicides (“Minnesota nurse charged,”

2010). In a message to Kajouji, who drowned in March 2008 after throwing herself into Ottawa's Rideau River, Melchert-Dinkel, using the name "Cami," wrote, "if you wanted to do hanging we could have done it together on line so it would not have been so scary for you" (Williams, 2010).

Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old gay student at Rutgers University in New Jersey, jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge, which spans the Hudson River, on September 22, 2010 (Gendar, Sandoval & McShane, 2010). As reported in the *New York Daily News*, Clementi killed himself after his "dorm-room rendezvous [with another male] was surreptitiously streamed on the Web via his [roommate's] hidden camera" (Gendar, Sandoval & McShane, 2010).

Three nights before Clementi's death, his roommate Dharun Ravi, also 18, wrote on Twitter, "Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into Molly's room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay" (Gendar, Sandoval & McShane, 2010). The "Molly" Ravi refers to is 18-year-old Molly Wei, a fellow Rutgers student who resided on the same floor as Clementi and Ravi (Pilkington, 2010). Using Skype and Wei's computer, Ravi allegedly accessed the webcam on his own computer, which was located in the dorm room he shared with Clementi (Pilkington, 2010). It is claimed that Ravi broadcast the details of his voyeuristic escapade to the 150 followers of his Twitter feed. Two nights later, Ravi tweeted, "Anyone with iChat, I dare you to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12. Yes it's happening again" (Pilkington, 2010).

As Adam Hanft (2010), founder and CEO of Hanft Projects and an occasional writer for *The Daily Beast*, *The Huffington Post* and *Politics Daily*, sees it, social media killed Tyler Clementi. Hanft (2010) writes:

[Clementi's death is] a story of what happens when two ordinary, probably decent people get swept up in the notion that the world exists for our manipulation and

delectation – to be proliferated through whatever channels we have available – while we stay safely and remotely removed from harm. Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr, YouTube – they are all unmediated platforms for whatever runs into our brains, or whatever our brains run into [...] Today’s social media world prides itself on an ethic of sharing. It runs on amped-up immediacy that races ahead of our ability to reflect, judge and consider. We post, we comment, we exchange in what is increasingly a new kind of reflex behavior. In terms of brain biology, what happens is that our ability to calmly consider is pushed down by a deeper instinct. And the “automatic” part of our brain – which is the most ancient system – jumps ahead of the “reflective” part [...] Distance provides emotional safety. The same buffer that technology offered Clementi’s videographers is a criticism often leveled against the drone attacks on Pakistan. There’s no doubt that remote killing is easy and sanitized; you can be sure that if someone had to stand in the corner of the bedroom and film the sex scene, Tyler Clementi would be alive today. Instead a drone camera was installed and the video automated. Remote killing is what happened in Rutgers.

As reflected in the above stories and comments, social networking sites, webcams and e-mail have made bullying, intimidation, deception and emotional manipulation much easier and more tempting for the perpetrators because they now can be invasive and abusive with merely a few clicks and keystrokes, much more frequently, and seemingly from a place of comfort and seclusion. Their simple actions can now also cause greater, more lasting damage. As Gorman and McLean (2009) note:

While bullying is not new, the online environment can embolden persecutors (not coming face-to-face with their victim, feeling protected by anonymity), provide access to previously private activities (photographs taken on mobile phones in a school sports change room can quickly be uploaded to a website and distributed widely), and

exacerbate the effects of bullying (victims are unable to escape – cyberbullying knows no boundaries and transcends the schoolyard – and demeaning or humiliating information can be spread to a global audience in a short time). (p. 247)

Among the questions the author of this paper posed to his interview subjects was: “What do you believe is the most realistic, proactive protection against cyberbullying, given the widespread acceptance of chatrooms, video sharing, instant messaging, and so on?” Jim G. (note: all names of interview subjects for this paper have been changed), a 43-year-old gay man from Stoney Creek, Ontario, who estimates he spends 18 hours per week online, responded:

There has always been bullying, and, there will, sadly, always be bullying. People have just found new and more sophisticated ways of doing it [...] The Internet is based on hate, and it's easier for people to post things anonymously. We have created a place where anyone can now be a bully because even weak people can hide behind their computers now. We need to be able to find these haters and punish them. (“Jim G.,” personal communication, October 5, 2011)

The sentiments expressed by Jim G. complement those of Christopher Wolf, former chair of the International Network Against Cyber-Hate (INACH), who, in an address to INACH in November 2007, stated:

In the Internet era, it appears there are more people interested in spewing hate than in countering it. On the social networking sites and on YouTube, inflammatory, hate-filled content overwhelms the limited efforts to promote tolerance and to teach diversity. And, as we have seen, hate speech inspires violence. (Wolf, 2007)

Hanft's (2010) reference to an “amped-up immediacy that races ahead of our ability to reflect, judge and consider”

pertains to countless uses and abuses of today's digital technology. When immediacy meets impulsiveness, the consequences, as in the cases involving Tyler Clementi and Jamey Rodemeyer, can be deadly. In other cases, the results may be far less severe but life-altering in their own way.

Sex, Tech and Regrets

Consider the story of the three female high school students, aged 14 and 15, from Pennsylvania who were charged in 2008 with manufacturing, disseminating or possessing child pornography after they allegedly took nude or semi-nude photographs of themselves and shared the photos with male classmates via their cell phones. Two male students, aged 16 and 17, were also charged with possessing child pornography (Brunker, 2009). While some critics called this reaction extreme, the local police captain hoped the charges laid against the teenagers would send a strong message to other minors familiar with and/or interested in the practice of so-called "sexting" (Brunker, 2009).

"It's very dangerous," said Police Capt. George Seranko. "Once it's on a cell phone, that cell phone can be put on the Internet where everyone in the world can get access to that juvenile picture. You don't realize what you are doing until it's already done" (Brunker, 2009).

In late 2008, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and its research partners released a study called "Sex and Tech" that examined technology's role in the sex lives of teens and young adults. Of the teens aged 13 to 19 that had participated in the study, **19 percent** stated they had sent a sexually suggestive picture or video of themselves to someone via e-mail, cell phone or by another mode, and **31 percent** had received a nude or semi-nude picture from someone else (Lenhart, 2009).

A March 2009 study conducted by Cox Communications in partnership with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and Harris Interactive reported that **9 percent** of teens aged 13-18 had sent a sexually suggestive text message or e-mail with nude or nearly-nude photos, **3 percent** had forwarded one, and **17 percent** had received one (Lenhart, 2009).

Sexting can be a high-tech way to flirt with someone, or it can be a means to harass other people. Intentions aside, it's a practice that can quickly and easily complicate many lives. As Clark-Flory (2009) notes:

These digital offerings bring the potential for humiliation and blackmail if the photos or video get into the wrong hands – and, let's face it, they often do. Acting as your girlfriend's personal porno star is one thing; ending up a pedophile's favorite child pinup is quite another [...] [so] there's good reason to be concerned about teens being self-pornographers. (paras. 13-14)

Reimer (2009) echoes a point worth emphasizing:

The problem is that, unlike love letters that can be tossed in the fireplace when the relationship is over, nothing in cyberspace ever really gets deleted. A relationship goes south, and an aggrieved party can use those indiscreet photos and messages to hurt and humiliate. There are even websites just for the purpose of burning your ex." (paras. 13-14)

Permanent Records Open to a Global Public

Of course, not everyone needs to worry about X-rated photographs or racy videos following them into their future; for some people, the source of anxiety might be a candid photo from a frat-house party, a disparaging Facebook post about an overbearing boss, an online notation of an ill-considered political donation, or simply an irresponsible, perhaps alcohol-induced, blog entry or consumer comment that threatens to resurface at the most inopportune time.

Indeed, every moment we, someone we know, or someone we don't know posts online a photo, video, comment or other content that represents us and/or reflects back on us in some small or large way, it becomes yet another piece of our permanent digital record. And, as soon as that information gets online (if not before), we lose control of it, and it essentially belongs to the masses who then may be able to twist, turn or repackage it however and as often as they like. In an article in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "The Web Means the End of Forgetting," Rosen (2010) writes:

With Web sites like LOL Facebook Moments, which collects and shares embarrassing personal revelations from Facebook users, ill-advised photos and online chatter are coming back to haunt people months or years after the fact. Examples are proliferating daily: there was the 16-year-old British girl who was fired from her office job for complaining on Facebook, "I'm so totally bored!!"; there was the 66-year-old Canadian psychotherapist who tried to enter the United States but was turned away at the border – and barred permanently from visiting the country – after a border guard's Internet search found that the therapist had written an article in a philosophy journal describing his experiments 30 years ago with L.S.D. (para. 2)

In a recent survey by Microsoft, 75 percent of U.S. recruiters and human resources professionals reported that

their companies require them to conduct online research on their candidates, and many of them look to search engines, social networking sites, photo- and video-sharing sites, online gaming sites, and personal websites and blogs for their information (Rosen, 2010, para. 3).

Rosen (2010) goes on to write:

It's often said that we live in a permissive era, one with infinite second chances. But the truth is that for a great many people, the permanent memory banks of the Web increasingly means there are *no* second chances – no opportunities to escape a scarlet letter in your digital past. Now the worst thing you've done is often the first thing everyone knows about you. (para. 8)

Rosen's (2010) reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter* is apropos. Hawthorne's celebrated work follows Hester Prynne, a woman forced by her colonial New England village to wear the scarlet letter *A* to represent her sin of adultery. As Solove (2007) observes in his book "The Future of Reputation: Gossip, Rumor, and Privacy on the Internet," "the Internet is bringing back the scarlet letter in digital form – an indelible record of people's past deeds" (p. 11).

The author of this paper posed the following question to his interview subjects: "When you or your child(ren) engage in online activity, how conscious are you of the online content's indelibility as it's being posted or shared, and how comfortable are you with the prospect of the information casually posted or shared today re-emerging and influencing other people's judgements of you or your child(ren) in the future?"

Sharon D., a 43-year-old receptionist and crisis responder from Kitchener, Ontario, who estimates she spends about three hours per week using Facebook and e-mail non-professionally, offered the following as part of her answer:

My mother told me something I've never let go of. She said, "Never put anything in writing that you can't take back." I live by those words to this day. I shy away from posting relationship status [and other] personal information [like] what I ate for breakfast because it's my business and mine alone. ("Sharon D.," personal communication, October 7, 2011)

With her response, Jill P., a 40-something interior decorator and professional fundraiser, also residing in Kitchener, Ontario, kept her four children, ages 17 to 23, squarely in mind:

I constantly caution my children to be extremely careful [of] what they share [online], as prospective employers can always Google or Facebook them. I think it's difficult for teenagers to really see long-term impacts of their social networking, as most live in the moment and do not understand how the adult mind works and how adults hold people to different standards than their peers do. ("Jill P.," personal communication, October 6, 2011)

Jim G.'s answer suggests mixed feelings about his self-censorship:

I quite honestly think about everything I write on the Internet. I try to be myself, but [I] make sure I phrase things in ways not to make me look too bad or opinionated. I do not talk about particular stuff like where I work, religion, or intimate details of my relationship too often. I don't think too much about [my information] never being able to be erased, but [I] try not to ever put anything out there that people will judge too harshly [...] Early in my life I was afraid to speak my mind and [I] tried to make everyone happy. I need to speak more openly and honest now, and I would never go back to the days where I didn't speak at all. ("Jim G.," personal communication, October 5, 2011)

Imagine that you could never escape your past and that you could never be allowed to redefine yourself in the eyes of others. Imagine that you and other people, both strangers and friends, could witness various episodes and artifacts from your life pre-sobriety, pre-therapy, pre-personal epiphany or pre-normal adult maturation over and over again. That awkward fielding error that cost your high school ball team the regional championship. That embarrassing karaoke performance from a long-ago New Year's Eve. That regrettable Halloween costume. That immature act of vengeance against your ex. That mawkish love letter. That incriminating photo. That "between-friends" video clip. That off-the-cuff remark. That racial slur. That lie.

Thanks to the astounding archiving ability of the Internet, not all memories fade away as easily as they used to. As Mayer-Schonberger (2009) articulates it:

Memory impedes change. That is true for all memory. In analog times, however, memory remained expensive—and comprehensive, timely, and affordable access to it was largely elusive. We used external memory deliberately, not casually, and not all the time. Employed sparingly and judiciously, memory is a valuable treasure, it seasons our decision-making like a delicate spice. Digital remembering, on the other hand, today is so omnipresent, costless, and seemingly "valuable"—due to accessibility, durability, and comprehensiveness—that we are tempted to employ it constantly. Utilized in such indiscriminating fashion, digital memory not only dulls the judgment of the ones who remember but also denies those who are remembered the temporal space to evolve. (p. 126)

Mayer-Schonberger (2009) adds:

As humans we do not travel ignorantly through time. With our capacity to remember, we are able to compare, to learn, and to experience time as change. Equally important is our ability to forget, to unburden ourselves from the shackles of our past, and to live in the present. For

millennia, the relationship between remembering and forgetting remained clear. Remembering was hard and costly, and humans had to choose deliberately what to remember. The default was to forget. In the digital age, in what is perhaps the most fundamental change for humans since our humble beginnings, that balance of remembering and forgetting has become inverted. Committing information to digital memory has become the default, and forgetting the exception. (p. 196)

Draining Our Brains for Questionable Gains

It could be argued that the modern technology of our digital age is actually doing each of us a favor by archiving our lives and providing us such easy access to our past, for who needs to actively remember information when it's just a few mouse-clicks away? However, those of us who use technology such as the Internet on a frequent basis are each receiving that favor at a price, and the asset of ours that is dwindling is, ironically enough, our memory.

Carr (2010), author of "The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains," writes that:

The more we use the Web, the more we train our brain to be distracted—to process information very quickly and very efficiently but without sustained attention. That helps to explain why many of us find it hard to concentrate even when we're away from our computers. Our brains become adept at forgetting, inept at remembering. Our growing dependence on the Web's information stores may in fact be the product of a self-perpetuating, self-amplifying loop. As our use of the Web makes it harder for us to lock information into our biological memory, we're forced to rely more and more on the Net's capacious and easily searchable artificial memory, even if it makes us shallower thinkers. (p. 194)

To this point, among others, interview subjects for this paper were asked, "Based on your own experiences and/or

your observations of others, what is your opinion of the suggestion that people's increasing use of digital technology is adversely affecting their memory, deep or critical thinking skills, ability to concentrate and ignore distractions, and resistance to developing impulsive and/or addictive behaviors?"

Twenty-five-year-old Wendy C., a resident of Kitchener, Ontario, has no children and spends an estimated 20 hours per week participating in social media and other associated activities. She said that when she surfs the Internet, she does so mostly for news and celebrity gossip. In her response to the above question, she admitted relying on digital technology to help her remember certain responsibilities:

For example, if I am by a computer and I want to remind myself to pick something up, to do something later on during the day, or to pay my bills online, I will e-mail myself [...] I am not certain if I have a bad memory, or if the convenience of a computer or my phone is making me lazy and not wanting to remember certain things. ("Wendy C.," personal communication, October 8, 2011)

Brandy K., a 45-year-old painter and freelance fact-checker who lives in Paris, Ontario, estimated she spends between 25 and 30 hours per week on social media sites. Having recently ended a long-term lesbian relationship with "Fran," she soon after re-established contact with a former partner who now lives in Minnesota. Regarding any related issues with her memory, Brandy said:

Because of the short bursts of interaction with many people, without face-to-face time, I sometimes lose track of who I've told what to. For instance, through all the crap with Fran, I would have many friends texting, messaging me, etc., and I would update as succinctly as I could, but I would lose track of who I had updated what to. Skype is a little different, because when you have an actual conversation with someone, it's a natural back-and-forth,

[and] it's not like minutes or hours pass between responses, plus you get that face-time with the person [...] I also find when you know that you have things "on your phone," you know you have a record of it. So when I make plans with someone, I don't feel a strong need to commit the details to memory since I know I can just look back to my phone. In the old days, I would repeat the time a few times to myself and mark it down on my calendar as soon as I got home. ("Brandy K.," personal communication, October 9, 2011)

Brandy and Wendy (and so many others with similar dependence) might want to ponder these words from Carr (2010):

The Web provides a convenient and compelling supplement to personal memory, but when we start using the Web as a substitute for personal memory, bypassing the inner processes of consolidation, we risk emptying our minds of their riches. (p. 192)

Interestingly, as Brandy explained when she addressed the concept of digital technology exacerbating impulsive or addictive behavior, her relationship with "Fran" began on an online dating website, and several online dating sites also contributed to the relationship's eventual breakdown.

I think Fran already had an impulsive disorder, [and] the Internet absolutely ramped that up [...] I think her being on dating sites [during our relationship] was definitely an impulse issue. She needed that immediate gratification. She put ads on, and within hours she was fielding responses. The more ads she put up, the more attention she was getting. But I feel pretty strongly that the Internet doesn't cause these problems, but it certainly makes them evident and often brings out bad behavior in people. ("Brandy K.," personal communication, October 9, 2011)

As for digital technology adversely affecting a person's ability to concentrate and ignore distractions, research points to some distressing news there as well. As Carr (2010) summarizes:

Our use of the Internet involves many paradoxes, but the one that promises to have the greatest long-term influence over how we think is this one: the Net seizes our attention only to scatter it. We focus intensively on the medium itself, on the flickering screen, but we're distracted by the medium's rapid-fire delivery of competing messages and stimuli. Whenever and wherever we log on, the Net presents us with an incredibly seductive blur [...] The Net's cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively. Our brains turn into simple, signal-processing units, quickly shepherding information into consciousness and then back out again. (pp. 118-119)

Mona F., a 39-year-old resident of central Pennsylvania who describes herself as disabled, has a 10-year-old daughter with special needs. She believes wholeheartedly that digital technology can present formidable challenges to people with addictive and impulsive tendencies:

If someone has an addictive personality, the risks are that much greater because digital technology is no different for that individual than a slot machine, smoking, drinking, etc., due to the instant gratification factor [...] Moreover, I know from experience with my own child that digital technology can be very harmful for children who already have difficulty with impulsive behavior due to mental health diagnoses such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), Asperger's Disorder, and ODD (oppositional defiant disorder). The extreme movement on the digital screens over stimulate the brains of people with these diagnoses, contributing to difficulties like loss of sleep and an overall inability to slow down their brain

activity. (“Mona F.,” personal communication, October 10, 2011)

Compromising Our Abilities to Think Big, Get Close, Break Free, and Go Far

Other interview subjects commented almost nostalgically about the sacrifices they believe have been forced by the digital revolution, deep thinking and an appreciation of knowledge being among them. Consider the response from Edward J., a 45-year Canadian Forces chaplain with the rank of captain, currently stationed in Kabul, Afghanistan, to the following set of questions: “How do you think the digital age has influenced how people under 30 view themselves, their relationships, and their responsibilities to the future? What, if anything, has it done to their work ethic and personal productivity? How has your own use of digital technology shaped your sense of self, your work ethic and productivity?”

I have a sense that, due to the influence of the instant availability of material on the Web and the ubiquity of information, that knowledge – its value – has been downgraded. I can look up anything on Wikipedia and find out all about it in a couple of minutes. It’s a great resource. However, I didn’t have to work [much to get the information]; I didn’t have to troll through a library, read extensively, collate that information, and ruminate on it. I simply typed a query and received a response almost instantly. All knowledge is now data, and data is not held in as high esteem as knowledge. [Knowledge] is gained through labor – experience, thoughtfulness, reflection, interaction with others – [data] is simply obtained. This also speaks to the place of wisdom in society today. It was once said that having knowledge is not the same as having wisdom; wisdom is the application of knowledge and its intersection with life and experience. If anything, the digital age has exacerbated this. (“Edward J.,” personal communication, October 6, 2011)

Although Edward's response misses much of the thrust of the posed questions, it is nonetheless insightful and certainly relevant to the topic of this paper. But for an opinion from someone under 30, attention must turn back to Wendy, who shares part of Edward's view but goes on to comment on digital tools' impact on human relationships:

I think that some people may rely too much on technology and that will make them less motivated in their responsibilities to either themselves or to their future [...] People under 30 are [so] used to having things in an instant and information at their fingertips that they have forgotten about the conventional ways of researching information, i.e., the public library. I also think that because people under 30 have had so much exposure to the constant technological innovations they are forgetting about personal relationships. The digital age has, in some instances, diminished an intimate conversation between two people. Before the digital age, a conversation either over the phone or in person was the norm. Now, instant messaging and Facebook are used as the main communications tools for relationships. ("Wendy C.," personal communication, October 8, 2011)

A quick check of the dictionary points to a key distinction between personal communications and digital communications. The word "personal" pertains "to the self," while the word "digital" pertains "to the fingers." As Jill implied, when communication starts to favor the fingers so blatantly and discount the participation of the whole human body, it reduces what has the potential to be a complex, nuanced exchange to little more than a sharing of language.

Of young people who converse primarily via digital technology, Jill noted:

I think they are losing valuable communication skills—the whole concept of seeing what people *aren't* saying and interpreting gestures and facial expressions to understand the meaning of the words they are using. Eye contact and

being able to read people and develop an emotional intelligence could be lost on many of these teenagers. (“Jill P.,” personal communication, October 6, 2011)

Perhaps unconsciously alluding to cases like those of Megan Meier, Nadia Kajouji, and Mark Drybrough mentioned earlier, Mona drew a connection between digital relationships and the pretense of understanding, support and closeness from which some are borne:

I believe that it is very difficult to develop a personal relationship [dependent mostly on digital technology] because online conversation is much different than face-to-face communication due to the depth of emotion that is missing in online communication. For this reason, much of the emotion is assumed and interpreted by the “*Sitz im Leben*” (“setting in life”) of the reader. Moreover, I feel that one can be lured to have a false sense of security in the person on the other end of the communication, hence one or both individuals could find themselves in a dangerous situation leading to loss of money, family, and even life. (“Mona F.,” personal communication, October 10, 2011)

That false sense of security that Mona mentioned has turned countless people, particularly young people, into victims of online frauds and digital deceptions, and too often the perpetrators have eluded reasonable reprimand. Bauerlein (2008), author of “The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future,” argues that many of the under-30 digital tech users are allowing themselves to be duped each moment they immerse themselves in their favorite online activities:

The Web universe licenses young Americans to indulge their youth, and the ubiquitous rhetoric of personalization and empowerment—MySpace, YouTube, etc.—disguises the problem and implants false expectations well into adulthood. They don’t realize that success in popular

online youthworlds breeds incompetence in school and in the workplace. With no guidance from above, with content purveyors aiming to attract audiences, not educate them, young users think that communications come easy. With fewer filters on people's input and output, young users think that their opinions count and their talents suffice. They don't realize what it really takes to do well. (p. 158)

And Gabler (2011), in an opinion column in *The New York Times Sunday Review* entitled "The Elusive Big Idea," writes of participating witnesses to the digital age both young and old when he points to yet another depressing development:

We prefer knowing to thinking because knowing has more immediate value. It keeps us in the loop, keeps us connected to our friends and our cohort. Ideas are too airy, too impractical, too much work for too little reward. Few talk ideas. Everyone talks information, usually personal information. Where are you going? What are you doing? Whom are you seeing? These are today's big questions [...] We have become information narcissists, so uninterested in anything outside ourselves and our friendship circles or in any tidbit we cannot share with those friends that if a Marx or a Nietzsche were suddenly to appear, blasting his ideas, no one would pay the slightest attention [...] What the future portends is more and more information – Everests of it. There won't be anything we won't know. But there will be no one thinking about it.

If we are to believe what the above experts and authorities have so eloquently stated, we now exist in an age of information overload and trivial pursuits, inescapable pasts and constricted futures, sexting students and savvy seducers, nascent global narcissism and "(s)he who has the most Facebook friends wins," and reconfigured brain circuitry but mediocre minds.

We know how Eve's apple transformed Adam's world, and now we can understand better than ever the monumental

ways in which Steve Jobs' Apple has helped to transform ours.

The evidence stands as a warning to every active participant of the Digital Age to recognize the risks, threats and temptations before them and to respond to them responsibly, both for their own individual welfare and for that of the global society of which they are a remarkably influential and powerful part.

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