

The Tuscaloosa News

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THE PORT RAIL

*Put down
that phone,
at least for a
little while,*



Larry Clayton

Did you know, or realize, that high school students spend about nine hours a day on digital media?

I didn't spend nine hours a day on anything when I was in high school. Or in college for that matter, not even obsessing about being in college with a coed population after seven years in an all-boys prep school deprived of the normal interaction between the sexes.

This obsession with digital media has resulted in adverse mental, emotional, and physical health consequences. When

on campus, I cannot help but observe and hear that just about everyone is glued to their cell phone, walking like zombies here and there. Their conversations can be totally inane.

"Hi, just got out of class."

Just got out of class?
I'm thinking.

"Well, am off to cross the street. Wazup?"

Who cares?

Even guys driving their 18-wheelers are on their cell phones, and when they weave into your lane as they look up a phone number you better move over.

Digital addiction is dangerous, not only for teenagers and college students, but for the rest of us trying to navigate the storms and shoals of life.

What's going on here? The French appear to be ahead of us. Starting in September 2018, French Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer has declared a total ban of mobile phone usage in primary and secondary schools. Blanquer said it's a matter of "public health."

Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, has established the first Center for Digital Wellness -- it's Wi-Fi free! -- in the land.

Its founder, Sylvia Hart Frejd, the author of "The Digital Invasion," summed up the reasoning behind this pioneering effort to deal with a national addiction.

"I like what technology is doing for us, but I don't like what it is doing to us."

The major implications of digital technology addiction were explored recently right here at the University of Alabama by Dr. Alan Blum, a professor at the College of Community Health Sciences, and Tomasz Gruchala, a Catherine J. Randall Research Scholar in the Honors College. Their findings, along with those of Frejd and others studying the addiction, are troubling. After recounting all the good things that come of digital media, like instant access to information, GPS, online viewing of film, art, opera, etc. (our undergraduates are really into opera these days while having a brewsky on the Strip...) the adverse effects were described. Ugly. These are general categories:

- Decline in school performance
- Diminished attentiveness
- Physical and mental health problems
- Incivility
- Less satisfying relationships

On a more detailed level, an increase in narcissism among college students and a decrease in empathy, a higher risk for

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depression, anxiety, and stress, and, ironically, as Frejd describes it, "even in a hyper-connected generation, studies still show we are lonelier than ever before."

Everybody is texting, connected, multitasking, and yet the end is loneliness and isolation, unable to deal in real-life situations. A recent article in the Wall Street Journal said true achievers were not multitaskers, but those

who could block off the trash and focus on one or two elements at a time.

Let's invite Frejd to UA for a conference and take some real steps to deal with this. Like any good student of a phenomenon, she has some suggestions for "digital wellness":

1. IT'S NOT "I TWEET, THEREFORE I AM," but think twice before you post, tweet, text, or upload it.

2. WATCH YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS, because they are permanent.

3. UNPLUG. Take a digital "fast" once a week or once a month

4. INVEST IN RELATIONSHIPS. Real people trump virtual ones

5. ESTABLISH DIGITAL BOUNDARIES. Limit when you use digital devices and how much time you spend on them (like, "I should be practicing my piano lesson rather than sitting in front of this computer typing.")

6. FIND THINGS YOU ENJOY DOING IN REAL LIFE and do them.

7. GET OUTSIDE. Take walks, feel the sun, and breathe fresh air.

8. POWER DOWN AND GET SOME SLEEP. Your brain can't thrive without it.

9. CULTIVATE YOUR "GODSPACE" DAILY. Take time to be still and know that He is God.

10. BE A GOOD STEWARD. Use technology for God's glory.

I like the above, some of which I do better than others. I am glued to my computer far too long for my mental and physical health. I told my wife that I need to get that Harley like No. 6 recommends above. Now is the time!

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