

Analysis of Addiction: Technological Media Pervasion in Academia

**Background**

Thus far in CMS.100, our analytical papers have focused on examining media through various academic frameworks for understanding. This paper, however, shifts our study away from the media itself and instead explores the relationship people have with media, media devices, and media culture, by taking a step away from pre-synthesized information and going straight to primary sources. The basis of this analysis relies upon a series of interviews conducted by the students in the class to inform the discussion, affording us a chance to view information directly and without authorial biases. In this way, we are allowed to come to our own conclusions and see raw and peoples’ raw and unfiltered perspective on how media affects their everyday lives. In this paper, my specific analysis examines peoples’ interaction and relationship with their media devices by studying their responses to questions two and three from Mia’s section, respectively. In so doing, I approach the subject of how media has invaded everyday life, as well as answer the question of “how does media addiction manifest itself, has our addiction to media changed our lives, and does this addiction vary based on demographic lines among students (in particular academic field of study)?”

On a personal level, as someone who relies heavily on media devices, I have always found this topic fascinating as a point of comparison and a means of stepping outside myself and reflecting on my own use of media and media devices. To this end, I will use Gitlin’s *Supersaturation*, Carey’s *Technology and Ideology*, and Gitelman’s *Media, Materiality, and the Measure of the Digital*, to understand our how our addiction came about and presently manifests itself, as well as sources external to our class reading specifically to analyze the use of media in
academia and on a per-major basis. Using these resources, I find that this addiction to media and media technology changes interpersonal relationships, the way we entertain ourselves, the way we conduct business, and the way we perceive media. With respect to the prevalence of media technology, there is not significant variance among academic majors.

Why Examine Addiction?

This sort of "media diet" analysis has been a hot topic of late, pervading the news media and at the subject of much psychiatric as well as academic debate. Though “addictions to technology have not been officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association as a certified addiction…research on the subject is increasing” said Hilarie Cash, a co-founder of an Internet addiction-recovery program.  

1 It is not only the Internet that people are addicted to, however. BlackBerry mobile devices are referred to as “CrackBerries” for good reason, and, while not an officially recognized term, mention the “iPod generation” and people will immediately know the demographic about whom you are speaking.2 People are becoming more defined by their media and how they use it, creating a vicious cycle of propagating addiction and addiction feeding into our newfound identities – identities revolving as much around how we interact with media devices as our personalities.

Why are we Addicted?

Todd Gitlin analyzes the origin of this cycle (and hence our media addiction) in “Supersaturation,” a chapter in Media Unlimited. Gitlin posits that we live in a world where media is pervasive and impossible to escape, where media is a torrent, a supernatural force, and

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is utterly inescapable.\textsuperscript{3} Some of this, he correctly notes, is that media has become affordable well beyond the point at which it becomes an impulse buy. Part of this is due to demand, part of this to improving technology, but regardless of the reasoning, this has led to media penetrating every aspect of our home lives – 65\% of children 8-18 now have a TV in their bedroom and 75\% a CD player, not to mention the number of children with computers. \textsuperscript{4} These numbers (already out of date) are bound to increase, and those children will be dependent on constant access to media for life. Even these statistics, though, are an underestimate of the abundance of media we now experience on a daily basis. These figures are self reported and do not measure exposure to media; rather, they only measure the media an individual chooses to acknowledge. \textsuperscript{5} This change in accessibility of media, as well as the culture created by it (“did you watch Scrubs last night?”) means that, aside from the exorbitant amount of media we consume (7 hours a day for an average household in 1999), the majority of this consumption is simply “because it’s there” and we will watch “whatever’s on.” \textsuperscript{6} This shift in attitude related to media, as well as the preponderance of such devices, has changed the way that current college students have developed, making them rely more heavily on media to get through a day. The pervasion of these devices no doubt also readied the iPod generation to handle their new technology with aplomb, ensuring it became an integral part of their lives without a second thought to how reliant they were sure to become – or already were. Today, they typical student might have the TV on in the background while doing homework or listen to music on an iPod on the walk to class, or even just use text messages to keep in touch. No matter what, though, media technology is an integral part of student life.

\textit{Evolution Drives Integration}

\textsuperscript{4} Gitlin. Media Unlimited. 16, 30.
\textsuperscript{5} Gitlin. Media Unlimited. 19.
\textsuperscript{6} Gitlin. Media Unlimited. 16.
James Carey analyzes the emergence of the telegraph and its effect on our lives, in particular our interpersonal relationships and the paradigm shift that the separation between transportation and communication brought about. 7 First and foremost, as with most new technology (and media technology in particular), the most profound impact was on commerce and government. Carey notes that the telegraph, or, more accurately, the rapid sharing of information, was “a producer good before a consumer good.” 8 It had a profound effect on our social and monetary economies, making relationships less personal, changing moral codes, and spurring everything from arbitrage to time synchronization. 9 It even led to much of the technology we take for granted today. For example, Twitter is effectively a derivative of the telegraph, which “made prose lean and unadorned and led to a journalism without the luxury of detail and analysis.” 10 Facebook, too, had the telegraph as precursor, as it created “a thoroughly encephalated social nervous system in which signaling was divorced from musculature.” 11 While communication used to involve moving pieces, we now have it in the palm of our hand, affording us easy access to information, entertainment, and other people. The degree to which technology has evolved means that it has become an integral part of everyday life, and we have become addicted to the information accessibility new media affords.

Media Setting Precedent – “It’s everywhere.”

Media has become not only integral to our daily lives, but it has shaped laws and set precedent. MP3’s, for example, spurred the clarification of copyright law. Interestingly, Lisa Gitelman notes, media evolves and we do not notice – piano rolls seem to do the same thing as MP3s, but the truth of the matter is that our interaction is transparent despite the fact that the

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8 Carey. Communication as Culture. 216.
9 Carey. Communication as Culture. 207-209.
10 Carey. Communication as Culture. 211.
11 Carey. Communication as Culture. 211.
distribution changes everything. Our assumptions of habits break down through the democratization of media, which, while we once were anxious about, we have since come to accept. Media is so integral to our culture that every aspect of our lives has been touched by it.

**The Interviews**

These analyses identify how media initially changed culture and has since pervaded it. Using them as context for studying the data collected by my peers allows one to see firsthand how people interact with their devices in reality (how media alters their life), and how they imagine their ideal interaction taking place (what media means to them). Question three addresses the former fairly directly, and question two the latter. To best understand the data presented, I initially planned to break my analysis up along the demographic lines where we have the most differentiated data points: academic major. Unfortunately, there are no freely available, credible studies relating media consumption to the academic interests of students, and other documents instead focus on demographic borders with more striation (various age groups), which are not well represented enough in our data to determine statistically significant trends.

Instead of attempting to relate our data to the myriad academic studies available on age and media use, I will instead explore how students generally understand and relate to media and focus only a minor part of my studies on breaking up my analysis along the demographic boundaries where we have the most differentiated data points: academic major. I will examine the responses of business and economics majors, electrical engineering and computer science majors, and mechanical engineering majors, as these were the only groups in the survey with a statistically significant number of responses.

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13 Gitelman. Memory Bytes. 207.
This context provides us with a basic understanding of media addiction and how it might best be defined. We are addicted to media when it becomes transparent, a background to our daily lives. Addiction means we rely on media as a primary means of communicating outside our physical environment. Addiction means we use media as a crutch and don’t notice it. Given this framework, I will begin by first examining business and economics students, attempting to find common themes among their definitions of “media” to best determine their attitude toward it and its utility, as well as to answer the question of how big a part of their life do they perceive it to be.

**Business Students**

In the transcribed interviews, there were six business and economic students posed with the question of defining media, how they use it, and how big a part of their life it is. We examined a typical day and their ideal day and from this can determine, to some extent, their addiction level. Compiling their definitions of media, the general consensus was that media was a tool used for influence, communication, and a way of passing information and data. Only one student mentioned entertainment directly in their description, saying “media is an extra service that people use for their entertainment, for their luxury and as a resource.” More typically, the definition was along the lines of “a communication tool. The means in which information can be transmitted from a source to many different people in a common mode,” indicating that most of the business students understand media to be a means to an end rather than an integral part of everyday, non-work related life. Perhaps in this vein, everyone indicated that they used Facebook on a regular basis to keep in touch with friends and acquaintances – networking gone webified. Many others use additional social networks (MySpace or Twitter, for example, which I found surprising as all of the sites aside from LinkedIn lack a professional feel), displaying a
dependence on the Internet and mobile devices to keep them in touch with their peers. Twenty years ago, this would have been impossible, but now it appears to be almost a prerequisite for being a business student. Curiously, five of the six students surveyed watch reality TV regularly – far higher than the other student groups interviewed. While we are unable to determine how actively the students pay attention, this indicates that the business students are generally unaware of how much media they consume (as only one student defined media as a form of entertainment, yet they all watch television shows regularly). This obliviousness indicates a high level of addiction, especially since it indicates that most of the students were likely underreporting their use of media on a daily basis. Not one interviewee mentioned a smart phone for email, which I found startling. It is unclear whether this is due to the sample group, or if they did not realize their dependence on the device (many business students I know are addicted to their mobile devices for BBM’ing and similar tasks).

Asking the business students about their typical day and how media plays a role, everyone seemed to be addicted. Their first reaction to discovering a media device being broken is to “run” and find a replacement, as they feel a sense of urgency in maintaining connectivity. This is partly due to the fact that business requires constant connectivity, as noted by one student saying he regularly used technology to “react in real time to situations regarding my application sales.” Only one business student reacted calmly to the theoretical situation – others seemed to be upset that we could even ask such a “horrific” question. These dramatic reactions contrast starkly with their claims that an ideal day would feature a minimum of media – perhaps indicating a lack of awareness of just how much media they use every day, and their obliviousness to their media addiction.

_Electrical Engineers_
Electrical engineering and computer science students were posed with the same questions. The general consensus was that media is a form of communication and a means of conveying information, or “any published content meant to be watched, listened to, or played.” These students never mentioned influence, indicating slightly different motivation for utilizing media than the business students. In this vein, among the eight respondents in this group, all of them indicated that they regularly use Facebook. One student mentioned using Twitter despite the fact that he indicated social networking is “silly.” Networking is still important and seemingly addictive in this group. Television, on the other hand, plays a lesser role – only three of the 8 respondents watched reality TV regularly.

As with the business students, the electrical engineers rely heavily on their media devices to get through the day and freely admit this fact. One student answered, “if it [my laptop] broke I guess I wouldn’t know what to do with my day.” Another noted, “my computer is my media portal to the world.” These students rely more on their devices for media than for communication, as the business students do, though in both cases there is a sense of urgency when it comes to restoring access to their media devices in the event of a disaster. The electrical engineering and computer science students, while still addicted to media, are more aware of their reliance. When asked about their ideal days, most responded with a desire to spend several hours online, playing games, or watching TV. One student responded he would use “much internets. Several hours of internets,” while another responded, “5 hours of media- split between news media, sports, and games. Internet and FIFA.” Unlike the business students, the EECS students are aware of their media consumption, and to some degree, their addiction.

Mechanical Engineers
The last group surveyed, the mechanical engineers, answered identical questions. The mechanical engineers defined media as a means of communication and sharing information, and as with EECS, one student out of the eight mentioned its use as a form of entertainment (though another touched on this notion when mentioning that media is “any sort of sensory object”). As with the other students, they used Facebook daily, checking it “5 times a day with notifications on my Blackberry.” Television again plays a minimal role, with most students choosing instead to spend their time using iPods, Blackberry’s, and laptops. As with the other students, a broken device would be a nightmare, and one student went so far as to say he would “cry [himself] to sleep. There would be a mourning period but [he] would be able to cope.” Another said, “without [my laptop], I feel like a caveman living in the Jetsons' world.”

As with the EECS students, the mechanical engineers were more aware of their addiction to media, saying their ideal days would involve lots of web browsing and television viewing. One went so far as to say, “My ideal day would be nonstop consumption of media. I would be playing video games, reading magazines, watching TV, YouTube, reading the internet and books all day if I did not have to work…” – despite the fact he did not mention entertainment in his definition of media.

So, what did we Find?

From these interviews, we can get a fairly good picture of what students are typically like and how they interact with and perceive their interactions with media in all forms. Most students surveyed mentioned that media is used primarily as communication and sharing information, and every single student used Facebook regularly to keep in touch with the “outside world.” Every group appears to be similarly addicted, though the engineers were more aware of their addiction than the business students, or at least more willing to admit their dependence. Perhaps that is...
because the media of this generation “seem[s] inevitable and thus transparent” – we do not
realize just how much we truly rely on it. 14 The “participants who interact with each other
according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” are unaware of their
dependence on technology. 15

Do other studies agree?

The results from our survey align with several recent studies. One study regarding a pilot
program to provide every student at a university with a laptop noted that 25% of students chat
with friends in class, and 62% reply to emails in class. 51% are “addicted” to Facebook, and 60%
own iPods – not to mention smart phones or other MP3 players. 16 In similar studies, 31% of 18
to 24-year-olds were found to check Facebook more than 20 times per day, and 60% of these
students have a Twitter account.17 One student reported that he plays videogames “three to four
hours a day and believes it affects his study habits.” The same study notes, “almost one in five
college students meet the criteria for addiction to technology.” 18 Changes in mode of
communication illustrate this point clearly. 63% of communication involving typical college
students comes in the form of text messages, and only 7% is face to face. 19 Students check email
on average 5.5 times per day – and that is only going to increase in the future. 20 Aside from
Facebook, Twitter, and texting, students make a habit of collecting media. Even in 1985, people

14 Gitelman. Memory Bytes. 199.
17 Rittenhouse. “Addiction In Student Life.”
18 Rittenhouse. “Addiction In Student Life.”
20 Massimini. “Information and Communication Technology.”
would “buy more records than they can listen to. They stockpile what they want to find the time to hear.”

*What exactly does major dictate, then?*

So, does academic major play a role in media consumption for? One study found that although major influences the amount of computer use, the individual student – and the time typically spent studying – is the largest factor in determining the amount of media consumed. Comparing students to professors in the same field, we find a relationship between the students’ assertions about media use and the professors’ response rate to emails. Science and engineering professors use computers more than business students, which I found rather startling – many scientists seem to loathe computers, while smart phones are the business staple. Even more surprising is the bias that engineering and business students appear to have compared with other “soft sciences” students, though none of the interviews we completed directly address this issue, other than to say 85% of soft sciences students regularly use the internet and 91% of science and engineering students use the internet, and for longer durations. The number of students with access is also surprisingly low – overall, 72% of students use the internet, and only 87% have access.

*Wrap-Up*

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24 Lazinger. “Internet Use Among College Students.”
It is clear that as a society, we are addicted to media consumption. These new devices are artifacts embodying social and material relationships, working for and working on people, creating new social constructs and means of interaction. Much of this is because these devices do not call attention to themselves and are transparent, making it easier to fall into the trap of becoming gadget-dependent.  

While we have demonstrated that students are addicted to technology and that it has pervaded every aspect of life regardless of their field of study, I would have expected the business students to embrace the media torrent more fully. Media has to do with economic expansion – it is communication, but also an opportunity for growth and opulence. The best indication that students today are addicted to media is that most communication is no longer a personal construct. Our social networks are more global than ever, but less intimate at the same time, and the trend is only going to create more separation between reality and virtual reality. While the future of personal relationships may look bleak, at least we’ll always have our iPads.

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CMS.100 Fall 2010 Interviews


