

Introduction

Addiction: It Got Your Attention

Popular cultural pundits, theorists and journalists posit the overuse of the Internet as problematic, addictive or disruptive. In our daily lives, we hear stories claiming that online use interferes with relationships and that it is not healthy to spend 'excessive' time in front of computer screens. People joke about suffering from withdrawal if they cannot check their emails. Some parents worry especially about their children's use of computers and wonder whether it is to the detriment of other life experiences normally associated with childhood. Is it possible that people, some young and some not so young, are addicted to computers and Internet use?

On 19 September 2007, I watched an Australian current affairs breakfast show called *Today*. They discussed virtual worlds and focused on a particular virtual online world popular with children below the age of 12. In featuring Disney's™ 'Club Penguin', one of the first questions about the game was 'Is it safe?'. The answer was yes, but the question seemed to be based on a premise supposing that a virtual world of play would justify caution. The discussion then focused on the amount of usage deemed to be OK for playing 'Club Penguin'. What happened next seemed to be a typical link associating high usage with consequent addiction. In asking 'what about addiction?', the question was positioned to be 'natural' and 'normal' to ask of a person who had limited authority to comment on the issue. However, the digital media 'expert' (brought in as a regular guest on the show) stated that limiting children to three hours a week was suitable or preferable. What a simplistic answer to a complex issue! It is unlikely that any child will be disadvantaged and have 'bad things' happen to them because they play 'Club Penguin' for more than three hours a week. Having a blanket answer for parents to act on suggests not only that parents lack intelligence and require specific directives, but that all players of 'Club Penguin' should have the same limit on their leisure. Should we say that children should only play in the playground for three hours a week? Longer than that, they are bound to be addicted! Should we say that children should not watch television for more than an hour a day because they are likely to become addicted? Labelling someone as 'addicted to the Internet' negates their ability to comprehend and critique their own practice. Children and youth are capable of monitoring this. These ridiculous, surface solutions to preferred types of leisure are not aberrant in their 'safe' form.

The media sells things by drawing our attention to addiction because any type of addiction is a concern. Popular discourse found in the media tends to

revert to essentialising everyone and everything. Bob Pease (2000, 26) explained essentialism as:

A belief in fixed properties that allegedly define the nature of things, leading to the idea that women and men can be identified on the basis of eternal, transhistorical, immutable essences ... for example women being more peace loving and closer to nature than men.

Examples of essentialism are common within the media. Those who are selling their books to *save* or *rescue* people from Internet addiction are capitalizing on the popular discourse that suggests Internet addiction is rampant and becoming an extremely widespread disorder. The sensationalized and essentialized headlines claiming that poor little Johnny or Sally may be addicted because he or she plays ‘Club Penguin’ for more than three hours a week are causing people to worry about things that may not be worth worrying about.

This chapter introduces the topics to be covered in this book and focuses on the idea that ‘addiction’ is a contestable, misconstrued term. The term ‘dependence’ will be challenged and contested, as will the idea of what constitutes ‘too much time’ on the computer.

The Notion of Dependence

Are we dependent on technology? Is dependence a form of addiction? If addiction is determined by degrees of dependency, we can argue that we are addicted to our bathroom, we are addicted to television and we are addicted to using a kettle to boil our water. It is not that we cannot live without these things; it is that these new technologies have been impressed upon our lives and that most of us choose to use these technologies to make our everyday lives easier. People refer to certain web browsing or surfing the World Wide Web as wasting time, but could we not argue that working through a book of Sudoku puzzles or crosswords is also wasting time? Advocates of these puzzles would probably deny this allegation and claim that by getting one’s brain to think through puzzles or crosswords, one is developing cerebral activity whilst engaging in a leisurely activity that helps one to relax and fill in time. To counteract this, I claim that engaging in website activity helps one to relax and fill in time. If that is ‘time-wasting’, then that is OK. However, when one reads and views websites – whether it be BBC news, or Facebook or finding out the latest results of a sports tournament – one is learning at the same time one is engaging in leisure. I will continue to argue this throughout this book.

If one is *always* online, there is a common misunderstanding that they may be addicted. The amount of time spent by young people using media and multitasking with various forms of media does raise the question of the healthiness of such

praxis. Tapscott (1998, 116) raised the issue of addiction and stated, 'If you ask children online if they are addicted, they will invariably say yes. On the other hand, they don't seem too concerned about it because they don't believe that it's harmful to them'. He also added that it is hard to argue that this activity is harmful, unlike dependency on drugs or nicotine. If one plays a lot of tennis and is *always* at the tennis club, if one is *always* watching television or if one is *always* reading a book, why are those people not also considered to be addicted? The reason for this is the common occurrence that happens when a new technology is introduced and becomes 'mainstreamed'. People are not sure about the acceptability of the practice and about its possible side effects. This is a natural and commendable suspicion. What I would like to point out is that the possible side effects of people's involvement in online activity and even in having a home personal computer have not occurred. The side effects predicted with the advent of the radio did not occur. The side effects associated with the advent of the television did not occur (see Chapter 2). Of course, one should admit that there will always be those people who are loath to do anything other than sit on their couch and watch television. But are they addicted? No, probably not, it is just that their preferred leisure is readily available right there on the couch. But what about their need for a healthy lifestyle? This is an important question, but there are many people who are neither couch potatoes nor have a healthy lifestyle. The need to eat healthily and in a balanced way, coupled with the need for everyday exercise is a challenge that many of us struggle with.¹ One of the problems I seriously address in this book is that the notion of *addiction* is readily and too easily thrown about in popular discourse. The media is full of it, and to assert that addiction is present is a simplistic and incorrect answer in regard to prolonged engagement with many technologies and activities.

Consider the example of gamers who regularly and constantly engage in playing video or computer games. Those of us who do not play these sorts of games find it difficult to understand the appeal for these people who constantly play electronic games. Many of us would look down on these gamers who seem not only preoccupied or obsessed but perhaps also *addicted* to playing these games. However, as a counter-argument, in the gaming world, gamers must not only dedicate mountains of time to learning how to play the game effectively, but they relish the challenge of each narrative and the prospect of further mastery (Johnson, N.F. 2007a). For other gamers, they view their fellow successful, top-ranking peers with respect as they value their enterprise, focus, determination and skill that has constituted their success (for example, an international top ranking, high power within a category). I will return to this argument in Chapter 9 where I focus on how the values of one *field* may not apply to another.

1 Another issue we need to consider are the people who are addicted to exercise, which is explored in Chapter 2.

The following excerpt from an online article gives insight to my argument:

Surfing the net has become an obsession for many Americans with the majority of US adults feeling they cannot go for a week without going online and one in three giving up friends and sex for the Web. A survey asked 1,011 American adults how long they would feel OK without going on the Web, to which 15 per cent said just a day or less, 21 per cent said a couple of days and another 19 per cent said a few days. Only a fifth of those who took part in an online survey conducted by advertising agency JWT between Sept 7 and 11 said they could go for a week.

‘People told us how anxious, isolated and bored they felt when they are forced off line,’ said Ann Mack, director of trend spotting at JWT, which conducted the survey to see how technology was changing people’s behaviour.

‘They felt disconnected from the world, from their friends and family,’ she told Reuters.

The poll found the use of cell phones and the Internet were becoming more and more an essential part of life with 48 per cent of respondents agreeing they felt something important was missing without Internet access. More than a quarter of respondents – or 28 per cent – admitted spending less time socializing face-to-face with peers because of the amount of time they spend online. It also found that 20 per cent said they spend less time having sex because they are online. (Reuters 2007)

For those of us that identify with the idea that they are missing out if they do not go online once a week, this does not mean that we are addicted. However, it does suggest that we, as twenty-first century participants, are dependent on technologies because they make our lives easier and we prefer to use them rather than not.

The Notion of Addiction

On 28 October 2007, a Sun-Herald (Sydney) article referred to Facebook as ‘Stalkbook’ and ‘Crackbook’ (Dasey 2007). Not only did the article state the claim that Facebook ‘enables people to monitor and track what you are doing without you being aware of it’, but also claimed that people ‘find it addictive and spend endless hours trawling the site’. Does this reporter really know what addiction is? Does he have the knowledge to state what addiction is? As will be shown in Chapter 7, some young people use the word ‘addict’ or ‘addiction’ as a glib and acceptable response to their everyday practice. Some examples from my own friends on Facebook who are not teenagers include comments such as:

- ‘Facebook can be pretty addictive!’
- Sam is ‘wondering whether the addictive nature of Facebook makes it a banned substance??’ (status update)
- Jenny is ‘spending waaayyyy too much time on Facebook’ (status update).

The phrase ‘I’m addicted’ merely conveys that one is enthusiastic about it and perhaps just really likes having this ‘thing’ or ‘environment’ in their life. In fact, the phrase ‘I’m addicted’ is a misnomer; they are not addicted as addiction causes serious detriments to happen if one does not ‘kick’ the addiction. We need to encourage people to carefully use these phrases and think about what it actually means to be addicted, and whether high usage and high dependence constitutes addiction or not.

Chapter 1 discusses the nature of addiction, whether one can consider a lot of Internet use to be addiction, and critiques the notion of Internet addiction itself. There is much discussion as to whether Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) (Young 1998) is actually a legitimate disorder, or whether it is an indication of other problems (Yellowlees and Marks 2007). Competing discourses include those who argue for specific behavioural therapy techniques to be used to treat Internet addiction as a pathological disorder (Young 2007), alongside those that claim further research needs to be conducted before the establishment of a disorder (Huisman, van den Eijnden and Garretsen 2001). Some say the Internet is an environment; therefore it cannot invoke addiction, and that addiction can only be attributed to substances. Chapter 1 will discuss the established criteria for diagnosing disorders such as impulse control disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and substance abuse, and contrast this with popular discourse that inadequately falls back on the phrase ‘Internet addiction’ to identify practice. Demonstration of the serious disorders surrounding gambling and pornography will highlight the inconclusive reasoning of IAD. Glasser’s (1976) notion of ‘positive addiction’ will be elucidated, as well as the view that for some addicts, the Internet is the place where they conduct their previously chosen addictive behaviour (Griffiths 1999; Widyanto and Griffiths 2006). The phrase ‘Pathological Internet Use’ will be introduced as a preferable alternative to the phrase ‘Internet addiction’. The notion of temporary obsession will be discussed and offered as an alternative to the knee-jerk label of addiction. As one influencer on the claims about Internet addiction is ‘too much time on the computer’, it is important to address this presumption. After viewing this chapter, readers are likely to concede that this area is indeed complex, and that addiction is a serious matter.

In Chapter 2, I identify and discuss some criticisms of high usage, and the possible side effects. Many of the criticisms were made in the late 1990s and it is fair to say that these possibilities are not actualities. This chapter probes potential problems as a result of ‘too much’ computer use. It discusses the issues surrounding

setting limits on young children and youth in regards to their computer usage. It puts forth the sceptics' views of the dangers of technology, those that prefer 'virtual lives' to biological lives and just what does constitute 'overuse'.

Chapter 3 discusses concerns about the state of childhood as it once was, and whether children are missing out on the 'good old days' through the dominance of technology in western society. In featuring the development of technology throughout history, I show how the digital age is a societal development occurring in similar ways to the move from the agricultural age to the industrial age and to the print age. Through demonstrating that throughout history society has been suspicious of new developments and the effects of technology on everyday life, the chapter claims it is inevitable that society is now suspicious of people who spend many hours of their leisure time using the Internet.

As this book builds on and develops Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice including the concepts of *habitus*, *field*, *capital*, *doxa*, *misrecognition* and *hysteresis*, Chapter 4 gives the reader a brief, yet important overview of the French social theorist's writings focusing on the fundamental concepts of *habitus*, *field* and *capital*.

Chapters 5–9 focus on understanding the practice of leisure and its blur with learning, evident in this digital age. It argues that the phrase 'Internet addiction' actually constitutes Bourdieu's (2000) notion of *misrecognition* for those who are not avid users of digital technologies.

Chapter 5 presents the recent qualitative study I completed involving eight teenagers in New Zealand. These teenagers demonstrated their expertise in their use of a personal home computer and the Internet. The study focused on how the teenagers became technological experts and explored the types of practice and leisure common in the lives of contemporary youth. This chapter discusses the perceived and actual differences in perspective and approach between those who have always had computers and digital technologies in their lives (*digital insiders*), those who have not (*digital newcomers*), and those who are indifferent to digital technologies (*digital outsiders*).

In my study, I found that for some young people, online engagement may help to develop technological expertise. Home computer use is a site of learning, leisure and an important social networking tool. The everyday practice that *digital insiders* engage in will be described, including how they learn while engaged in the leisurely use of digital technologies. Chapter 6 delineates the *field* of home computer use for leisure.

Highlighting the popular discourse found in the lives of some teenaged technological experts, Chapter 7 argues for recognizing that the notion of

addiction is readily and too easily thrown about in the public consumption of media. This chapter gives real-life examples of this discourse based on recent research. It also identifies the *habitus* in the *field*, the *doxic* practices in the field, and discusses whether addiction is really the case according to Bourdieu and his notion of *hysteresis*. Through introducing the idea that addiction is misrecognized, the book's argument suggests that some forms of leisure are also misrecognized. To (mis)recognize something is to (not) 'acknowledge the existence, validity, or legality of' someone or something (Macintosh Dictionary Widget 2008).

There are significant influences on cultural, social and economic *capital* in the lives of young people today. One of the many privileges that *digital insiders* have is Internet access, along with personal computer ownership. Chapter 8 draws attention to the views surrounding privilege in this digital age, and highlights how these new forms of privilege may not only boost both formal and informal learning opportunities, but perhaps induce important self-efficacy in this digital age.

Many young people seem to have a limited connection with their schooling and associated experiences. The students know they should succeed in school, yet school seems to be situated in former fields associated with a print culture, or print-based literacy, which is at direct odds with the digital culture in which they are positioned and the digital literacy that they are developing. Chapter 9 claims that their daily engagement with digital technologies constitutes a practice of leisure, closely aligned with learning and the possible development of expertise. I highlight some of the moral panics and digital myths surrounding the *misrecognition* of the practice of leisure.

To enforce the critical stance of this book, the conclusion gathers the arguments surrounding Internet addiction evident in the conflicting discourses found in health, psychology, popular culture and media studies. The sociocultural critique of this book is enforced through challenging the prominent discourses surrounding Internet addiction that are simplistic and thoughtless. Through highlighting the complexities in the competing discourses surrounding Internet addiction, and elucidating the notion of temporary obsession, I claim that, through the media, the public are receiving a simplistic and unsatisfactory version of what Internet addiction really is, or whether it exists at all. I will conclude that certain activities that may temporarily include an obsession with the Internet can actually be a positive practice (Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham 2007).