

## INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC AGENDA

### ***Students Addicted to Social Media***

It's official: the use of digital technology is addictive, or so concludes a 2010 study by the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of Maryland. After two hundred University of Maryland students willingly gave up their digital devices for twenty-four hours, journalism professor Susan D. Moeller found them virtually traumatized by the experience. Indeed, as one student wrote, "Texting and IM-ing my friends gives me a constant feeling of comfort. . . . [W]hen I did not have those two luxuries, I felt quite alone and secluded from my life. Although I go to a school with thousands of students, the fact that I was not able to communicate with anyone via technology was almost unbearable." Maybe iPhones should come with a warning from the Surgeon General?

American college students today are addicted to media, describing their feelings when they have to abstain from using media in literally the same terms associated with drug and alcohol addictions: *In withdrawal, Frantically craving, Very anxious, Extremely antsy, Miserable, Jittery, Crazy.*

A new study out today from the International Center for Media & the Public Agenda (ICMPA) at the University of Maryland concludes that most college students are not just unwilling, but functionally unable to be without their media links to the world. "I clearly am addicted and the dependency is sickening," said one student in the study. "I feel like most people these days are in a similar situation, for between having a BlackBerry, a laptop, a television, and an iPod, people have become unable to shed their media skin."

The new ICMPA study, "24 Hours: Unplugged," asked 200 students at the College Park campus to give up all media for 24 hours. After their 24 hours of abstinence, the students were then asked to blog on private class Web sites about their experiences: to report their successes and admit to any failures. The 200 students wrote more than 110,000 words: in aggregate, about the same number of words as a 400-page novel.

### **Without Digital Ties, Students Feel Unconnected Even to Those Who Are Close By**

"We were surprised by how many students admitted that they were 'incredibly addicted' to media," noted the project director Susan D. Moeller, a journalism professor at the University of Maryland and the director of the

International Center for Media and the Public Agenda which conducted the study. “But we noticed that what they wrote at length about was how they hated losing their personal connections. Going without media meant, in their world, going without their friends and family.”

“The students did complain about how boring it was to go anywhere and do anything without being plugged into music on their MP3 players,” said Moeller. “And many commented that it was almost impossible to avoid the TVs on in the background at all times in their friends’ rooms. But what they spoke about in the strongest terms was how their lack of access to text messaging, phone calling, instant messaging, e-mail, and Facebook, meant that they couldn’t connect with friends who lived close by, much less those far away.”

“Texting and IM-ing my friends gives me a constant feeling of comfort,” wrote one student. “When I did not have those two luxuries, I felt quite alone and secluded from my life. Although I go to a school with thousands of students, the fact that I was not able to communicate with anyone via technology was almost unbearable.”

The student responses to the assignment showed not just that 18–21-year-old college students are constantly texting and on Facebook—with calling and e-mail distant seconds as ways of staying in touch, especially with friends—but that students’ lives are wired together in such ways that opting out of that communication pattern would be tantamount to renouncing a social life.

### **News: Accessed via Connections with Friends & Family**

Very few students in the study reported that they regularly watched news on television or read a local or national newspaper (although a few said they regularly read *The Diamondback*, the University of Maryland student newspaper). They also didn’t mention checking mainstream media news sites or listening to radio news while commuting in their cars. Yet student after student demonstrated knowledge of specific news stories. How did they get the information? In a disaggregated way, and not typically from the news outlet that broke or committed resources to a story: “To be entirely honest I am glad I failed the assignment,” wrote one student, “because if I hadn’t opened my computer when I did I would not have known about the violent earthquake in Chile from an informal blog post on Tumblr.”

“Students expressed tremendous anxiety about being cut-off from information,” observed Ph.D. student Raymond McCaffrey, a former writer and editor at *The Washington Post*, and a current researcher on the study. “One student said he realized that he suddenly ‘had less information than everyone else, whether it be news, class information, scores, or what happened on *Family Guy*.’”

“They care about what is going on among their friends and families and even in the world at large,” said McCaffrey. “But most of all they care about

being cut off from that instantaneous flow of information that comes from all sides and does not seem tied to any single device or application or news outlet.”

That’s the real takeaway of this study for journalists: Students showed no significant loyalty to a news program, news personality or even news platform. Students have only a casual relationship to the originators of news, and in fact rarely distinguished between news and more general information.

While many in the journalism profession are committing significant resources to deliver content across media platforms—print, broadcast, online, mobile—the young adults in this study appeared to be generally oblivious to branded news and information. For most of the students reporting in the study, information of all kinds comes in an undifferentiated wave to them via social media. If a bit of information rises to a level of interest, the student will pursue it—but often by following the story via “unconventional” outlets, such as through text messages, their e-mail accounts, Facebook, and Twitter.

Students said that only the most specific or significant news events—for example, a medal event at the Olympics—merited their tuning in to a mainstream outlet. Even news events that students cared about were often accessed via their personal interactions. To learn about the Maryland vs. Virginia Tech basketball game, for example, one student told of “listening to someone narrate the game from a conversation they were having on their own phone” (although he would have preferred watching it on TV) and another student told of calling her father to learn more about the earthquake in Chile.

## Study Background

The University of Maryland is a large state university campus, and the class, *JOUR 175: Media Literacy*, that undertook this 24-hour media-free assignment, is a “core course” for the entire student body—which means it enrolls undergraduate students across majors. It is, in short, a class of 200 students, characterized by a diversity of age, race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. According to the assignment, students had to go media-free for a full day (or had to try to go media-free), but they were allowed to pick which 24 hours in a nine-day period, from February 24–March 4. By coincidence that period saw several major news events, including the earthquake in Chile on February 27, and the close of the Vancouver Olympics on February 28.

According to separately obtained demographic data on the student class, <sup>15</sup> 75.6 percent of the students in JOUR 175 self-identify as Caucasian/White, 9.4 percent as Black, 6.3 percent as Asian, 1.6 percent as Latino, 3.1 percent as Mixed Race, and 3.9 percent as Other. Students who self-reported themselves as non-American said they were from China, South Korea, Sri Lanka, and Ethiopia. Women outnumbered men, 55.9 percent to 44.1 percent.

44.1 percent of the class reported that their parents or guardians earned over \$100,000 or more; 28.3 percent reported that their parents or guardians earned between \$75–\$100,000; 22 percent reported coming from a household with an income between \$50–75,000; and 5.5 percent reported that their families' income was between \$25–50,000.

40.9 percent of the students who responded to the demographic survey reported that they were first-year students, 40.9 percent reported that they were sophomores, 11 percent reported that they were juniors, and 7.1 percent reported that they were seniors or beyond. Most students reported their ages as between 18–21; the average class age was 19.5.

When asked about what types of media devices they own, 43.3 percent of the students reported that they had a “smart phone” (e.g., a BlackBerry or an iPhone), and 56.7 percent said they did not.

Prof. Susan Moeller led the study research team, and the six teaching assistants for the course acted as researchers/authors, conducting a qualitative content analysis of the student responses. Those six TAs, all PhD students in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism, were: Ms. EunRyung Chong, Mr. Sergei Golitsinski, Ms. Jing Guo, Mr. Raymond McCaffrey, Mr. Andrew Nynka, and Ms. Jessica Roberts.<sup>1</sup>

### READING THE TEXT

1. What are the symptoms of addiction to social media, according to the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda study conducted at the University of Maryland?
2. What can journalists learn from this study?
3. What is the primary reason for the use of digital media for the students in this study?
4. In your own words, how can people's reliance on social media be considered an “addiction”?

### READING THE SIGNS

1. Write a journal entry in which you reflect upon your own use of text messaging, online social media, and other forms of electronic media. Why do you use such media? Would you consider yourself “addicted”? If you do not use them, or do so rarely, why is that your preference?
2. Conduct a similar experiment in your class, having everyone give up their use of all digital media for 24 hours. Then use your course Web site to blog about your experiences (or discuss them in class). To what extent does your experiment replicate the results of the University of Maryland study? If your results differ, how do you account for that difference?

<sup>1</sup>The study is available online at <http://www.withoutmedia.wordpress.com>.