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An Experiment on the Impact of Technology

When I am sitting with my laptop working on a problem set, I will open a tab for Facebook at least once every thirty minutes. When I am sitting in a lecture, I will check my phone at least once every fifteen minutes. I spend an average of five hours per day listening to music. I probably spend more than seven hours a day on my computer. I pay for everything using a credit card. These statements might sound extreme, but they are probably more or less true for most MIT students. I did not realize the extent of my attachment to technology until I conducted an experiment in which I did not use technology for 24 hours. This included my cell phone, laptop, camera, credit card, watch, and MP3 device. I only allowed myself to use my ID card to get into my dorm building. I was not prepared for the liberation I felt, how much the experiment pushed me closer to my physical surroundings, and how it made me appreciate the inherent qualities of networking technology.

The most surprising aspect of the experiment was the sense of freedom I experienced while being disconnected from technology. I dreaded not texting or calling my family and best friend from home, but I did not expect to feel liberated by being unable to check social media. I did not know precisely what all of my friends were doing or where they were, but I could focus all of my attention on the individuals in front of me. In the first few hours of my experiment, I

got to know the new freshmen living on my floor better by interacting with them instead of being absorbed by the internet, the endless flow of problem sets, or friends that I was connected to through the network. It was enlightening to only be able to interact with those who were physically present. When I talked to others, I was no longer multitasking and talking to other people on my phone at the same time. I gave them my complete attention and I found these conversations much more memorable. I noticed more about the way people talked, their hand motions, and felt more engaged in their stories. At the same time, I became much more aware of how distracted others could be while using their cell phones during social situations. When I was sitting with my friends, someone would say something funny, and only half of the group would laugh because the others were too distracted by their phones and laptops. A few seconds later, the people that missed the joke would say, "Wait, what?" but the moment was over. They were less engaged and seemed indifferent. After the experiment, I made a conscious effort to avoid using my phone when talking to others because I realized how disheartening it could be for the other people in the conversation if one person was distracted.

While the experiment made me realize how technology could hinder human interaction, I also further appreciated its uses. For example, I was not able to meet up with my boyfriend for lunch because I had no idea where he was at the time. When I asked him about how my 24 experiment impacted him, he said, "I missed [being able to text and call] you even though it was just one day." I was not any further away from him physically, but in the time we spent apart, he felt my virtual absence. Technology has made it convenient for us to talk to each other regardless of physical distance. I had to warn my mom and friends from home that I would not be able to respond to them if they tried to contact me. If this experiment was longer, I could have sent them a letter and it would be possible to talk to them somehow, but the value of technology is in its

immediacy, and this was irreplaceable. As Rebecca Solnit says in "The Annihilation of Time and Space," "What distinguishes a technology world is that the terms of nature are obscured; one need not live quite in the present or the local." Ridding myself of the privilege to access the network was liberating because it placed me in the "present and the local," and I existed completely in the current, physical world for the first time in a long time.

When considering this experiment, I thought losing communication with others would be the most difficult aspect, but I struggled a lot more with not using the applications on my phone that have been so integrated into my life that I barely noticed them. Not being able to use the alarm function on my phone caused me the most trouble. I had my roommate wake me up in the morning, but we both fell back asleep and I was late to my 9am lab class. I took a nap before Ultimate Frisbee practice intending to wake up at 4pm when my roommate went to class. A friend that was also conducting her 24 hour experiment at the same time had asked me to wake her up for practice, but I did not wake up until 4:40pm when someone knocked on my door. Earlier in the day, I realized I needed groceries and contemplated using Instacart for grocery delivery before I remembered the experiment. I walked to Star Market near campus and forgot which street to turn left on. I usually would have used Google Maps, but instead, I wandered around for a few minutes before I recognized the street. These incidents, while small inconveniences, made me realize the magnitude of my dependence on technology. It was not the lack of technology, but the growing realization that I relied so heavily on it that unnerved me. If I were not so dependent on these features on my cell phone, I could have used an analog alarm clock or a printed map, but those objects are no longer commonly used because smart phones have replaced them. I did not need these functions, but I was accustomed to the convenience that

they provided. They have been so integrated into my life that I barely thought of these features as "technology."

As the first generation to grow up with internet and digital technology, my generation is known for our native fluency in technology. We are stereotyped as the generation that Tweets non-stop, takes too many selfies, Instagrams every meal, films entire concerts, and checks Facebook every other minute to see how many "likes" we got on our newest profile picture. While most Millennials are probably guilty of at least some of these actions, the impact technology has had on this generation reaches far beyond our daily habits. Technology may often serve as a distraction, but its usefulness was only highlighted by the experiment. Cell phones and computers are used for managing and planning time, learning through online education systems, discussion boards, accessing libraries, and connecting to millions of people through social media networks. Technology puts millions of resources at our fingertips and those who have thirst for knowledge can harness it as a significant source for education. Computing programs make it easier to solve tedious math problems without being limited by slower methods. Campaigns for social awareness can go "viral" on the internet and reach a global audience which was impossible before this age of technology. The internet, contrary to a popular saying, does not "make us dumber." Although my generation may have less directional sense and less patience than previous generations, technology has allowed us to be more aware of global politics and current events, and learn about our own interests online. Networking technology allows communities comprised of individuals from all over the world to be formed. It has made us all teachers, creators, students, and audience members. This is the inherent capability of the network that makes us so attached to it and giving it up for a day so difficult.

What started as a one day experiment has propelled me into constant analysis of technology and the role it plays in my life and the lives of people all over the world. It made me realize that being too absorbed in technology can be a severe distraction when interacting with those physically around me, but I also further appreciated its ability to bridge thousands of miles in a matter of seconds. Reflecting on the impact technology has made on my life, I realize I probably could not have gotten to where I am today solely given the education opportunities presented to me while I grew up. I learned through learning networks and personal exploration of internet resources. I became a photographer, a crafter, a musician, a cinematographer, a music enthusiast, and an engineer with the aid of the internet. Being aware of the distractions that the network can cause can be helpful in becoming too engaged in it; learning its features and appreciating its innate qualities can allow us to use it to its full potential.

Works Cited

Solnit, Rebecca. "The Annihilation of Time and Space." *New England Review* (2003): 5-19.

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