

WEEK 8 | DIGITAL PATHOLOGY

When things are going wrong. . . you don't need practical solutions so much as you need philosophical commitments, firm convictions about the way things are—or at least about the way things ought to be.

—Craig M. Gay

We have spent the last two weeks looking at how digital media is designed to capture and keep our attention. The constant temptation of connection to people and information has led many to relocate more and more of their lives online. While we have already touched on some of the negative consequences of this digital age in which we live, it is now time to examine some of them in more depth.

DELAY

One of the most devastating consequences of the digital age is the psychological impact it is having on us, and especially on our teens. Over the past decade we have seen a massive increase in the rates of suicide and depression across the United States, and more and more researchers are beginning to link this phenomenon to the increasing ubiquity of smartphones in our society.

Jean Twenge, a psychologist at San Diego State University, has noted a distinctive behavioral shift amongst teens born between the years 1995 and 2012 (she calls this the “iGen” generation). Put simply, she has observed that today's teens spend more time alone—in their rooms and on their phones:¹

- Teens today are less likely to date.²
- Teens today are less likely to get their driver's license—a classic symbol of independence—when they turn sixteen. (1 in 4 teens today graduates high school without having earned their driver's license, reporting they are happy to have their parents act as chauffeur's longer.)
- Teens get together with their friends less frequently than in previous generations.
- Teens today are less likely to work or manage their own money, despite the increase in available jobs.

¹ Drawn from Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

² Twenge also notes that there has been a marked decrease in sexual activity among teens and, thus, the lowest teen birth rate recorded in 2016. We can recognize that this is a positive development. However, we also must recognize that the catalyst for this change—the digital addiction among teens—is itself a concerning trend.

Twenge summarizes, “The allure of independence, so powerful to previous generations, holds less sway over today’s teens, who are less likely to leave the house without their parents. The shift is stunning: 12th-graders in 2015 were going out less often than 8th-*eighth-graders* did as recently as 2009.”³

Whereas GenX “managed to stretch adolescence beyond all previous limits,” millennials and iGen have delayed its onset.⁴ By certain measurable markers, teens today are delaying growing up and entering adulthood, and researchers are hypothesizing that the amount of time teens spend online has a great deal to do with this:

Why are today’s teens waiting longer to take on both the responsibilities and the pleasures of adulthood? Shifts in the economy, and parenting, certainly play a role. In an information economy that rewards higher education more than early work history, parents may be inclined to encourage their kids to stay home and study rather than to get a part-time job. Teens, in turn, seem to be content with this homebody arrangement—not because they’re so studious, but because social life is loved on their phone. They don’t need to leave home to spend time with their friends.⁵

The amount of time teens spend doing schoolwork and engaging in extracurricular activities has also declined, with the result that teens today have more leisure time than previous generations. This leisure time, in turn, is being spent online. It has gotten to the point where smartphones are cutting into teens’ sleep: 57 percent more teens were sleep deprived in 2015 than in 1991. Again, the phenomenon began right around the time teens were beginning to get smartphones. Sleep deprivation, of course, is linked to a myriad of both physical and psychological issues that have been on the rise over the last decade.

DEPRESSION

One of the great ironies of this tendency among teens to live their social life online is it does not produce feelings of community and fellowship. Rather, “Our devices and applications, even those expressly intended to enhance sociability, appear to be leaving us lonelier and feeling more and more disconnected from one another.”⁶ Over the past decade we have seen a massive increase in the rates of suicide and depression across the United States, and more and more researchers are beginning to link this phenomenon to the increasing ubiquity of smartphones in our society. Despite our constant interconnectedness, many people feel lonelier than ever.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Craig M. Gay, *Modern Technology and the Human Future* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 47.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse has been funding the Monitoring the Future survey since 1975. Every year, 12-graders have been asked more than 1000 questions, including questions meant to measure their level of happiness and how much of their leisure time they spend on various activities. In recent years, as time spent in front of screens have increased, researchers have seen a corresponding increase in reports of unhappiness and depression. Simply put, “Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy.”⁷

A significant part of this unhappiness is the reported sense of isolation and loneliness associated with life lived online. Again, the irony cannot be missed: the increased connectivity of the internet has left people feeling *more*, not less, lonely. Following in the wake of loneliness is depression. Once again, the increased rates of depression appear directly linked to screen time. The same is true of suicide. “Teens who spend three hours a day or more on electronic devices are 35 percent more likely to have a risk factor for suicide, such as making a suicide plan.”⁸ Given the increased isolation teens experience along with increased rates of depression, 2011 was the first in 24 years in which the teen suicide rate exceeded the teen homicide rate.

Understanding *why* smartphones and social media are having this impact on teens is difficult to discern from a psychological perspective. Some researchers argue that move from a verbal to “nonverbal disabled context, where body language, facial expression, and even the smallest kinds of vocal reactions are rendered invisible” has led to the loss of critical social development necessary for teens to develop self-esteem.⁹ This has led to increased levels of anxiety in young people who lack confidence in social situations.

Another theory draws on the “imposter syndrome” in psychology, which describes the contrast between “who you appear to be and who you think you are.” The performative nature of social media where there is intense pressure to portray a certain lifestyle and identity online leads to a psychological schism in one’s own mind about who that person truly is.

Other researchers point to the mere fact that we are now *always* connected—we never get a break from our online relationships, being only a click, swipe, or tap away from interaction. This hyperconnected state can produce a great deal of stress and social anxiety.

From a spiritual vantage point, the issues are plain to see. We are social creatures, created for deep, intimate community with others. True community is lost online. Just as communication becomes more superficial and frivolous when we are not taking the time to talk to each other, so

⁷ Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

⁸ Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?”

⁹ Ekhmke, “How Social Media Affects Teenagers.”

does the fellowship the digital realm offers. To avoid the dangers of life online, we must realize that life is meant to be lived in the flesh, embodied, with other flesh-and-blood image-bearers.

Perhaps there is an even deeper issue. What is it that we are looking for in always being connected to each other. Perhaps the mistake is thinking that connection to another human being can provide the satisfaction that only fellowship with the Creator can provide. As Solomon writes, “apart from Him who can eat or have enjoyment?” (Ecclesiastes 2:25).

RAGE

Another alarming consequence of the digital age has been the increased polarization of our society. The technologies unique to this age have played no small part in this. Read Schuchardt has noted that the rise of social media has led to a sort of de-evolution of communication. All technology, Marshall McLuhan notes, serves as a “go-between,” a medium, between man and his environment, translating or “metamorphizing” our experience for us. This is true of all communication and communication technologies—they are a medium between us and others and provide a way for us to “metamorphize” our thoughts, opinions, and desires in a way that is communicable.

Throughout history, communication technology has evolved. It began with pictographs which, while a brilliant technological leap, were limited in their ability to communicate complex, abstract ideas. Eventually written languages were developed. Early languages were phonetic—there was virtually a one-to-one correspondence between the written and oral language, which limited to some degree how expansive the language could be. Over time languages have grown in complexity (i.e. the difference between Biblical Hebrew and Greek in their ability to communicate ideas) and enabled the communication of abstract ideas and logic.

Over the past decade we have seen this process reverse. Schuchardt note that we are “(a) moving away from full-length sentences and toward texting that is shorter, quicker, and easier; (b) enhancing our texting with more emojis; and (c) heading toward ever-greater complexity in the ‘content’ of our emoji’s.”¹⁰ He provides some examples:¹¹

- **Txtng is the new Hbrw**—no vowels are needed when you already know the context
- **Emojis are the new hieroglyphics**—The Israelites left Egypt and discovered their alphabet on the way to the Promised Land, most likely at Mt. Sinai. Today’s student wants to convey a rich amount of emotional context to her texting, so she deploys single-button emoticons or emojis to convey the feeling or context around her otherwise-cryptically minimalist letters.

¹⁰ Schuchardt, *Media, Journalism, and Communication*, 46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

As humorous as it seems, Schuchardt argues there is a significant consequence to this de-evolution in communication. He writes, “Taken together, this reveals a reversal of the human communication history timeline. In other words, we are regressing to a more primitive, less abstract, less rational, and more emotional mode, style, and means of communication. This has HUGE implications in all areas.”

Communication is becoming less rational, less nuanced, less concerned with facts and evidence, and more emotionally driven. In short, we don’t know how to talk to each other anymore, and poor communication has consequences.

Professors across the country are witnessing a loss of critical reasoning skills and the ability to carefully follow and evaluate an argument among their students. It’s really no surprise though, given that the average college graduate reads between zero and one book per year.¹² Reading books teaches us to follow a long and complex train of thought, taking into account the context and other pertinent factors. Through the medium of digital communication, however, we are being trained to only take in small bits of information devoid of context or nuance. In the attention economy, the more sensational a headline, the more likely it is to be absorbed. The net effect is that we are communicating more based on emotion and less based on rational thought or argumentation.

Not only are we communicating this way more and more, but recent research has shown that emotional and irrational communication is actually favored in digital media:

- A 2017 study by a group of researchers at NYU looked at half a million tweets, evaluating their reach based on word choice. They found that each moral or emotional word used in a tweet increased its virality by an average of 20 percent.¹³
- In another 2017 study, the Pew Research Center found that social media posts exhibiting “indignant disagreement” received nearly twice as much engagement as other types of content on Facebook.¹⁴
- A 2020 study found that “posts about the political out-group were shared or retweeted about twice as often as posts about the in-group,” meaning “out-group animosity” is particularly successful at generating engagement.¹⁵

¹² Lee Rainie and Andrew Perrin, “Slightly Fewer Americans Are Reading Print Books, New Survey Finds,” October 19, 2015, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/19/slightly-fewer-americans-are-reading-print-books-new-survey-finds/>.

¹³ William J. Brady, Julian A. Wills, John T. Tost, and Jay J. Van Bavel, “Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks,” *PNAS* 114 (28): 7313-18.

¹⁴ “Critical Posts Get More Likes, Comments, and Shares Than Other Posts,” Pew Research Center (February 2017), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/02/23/partisan-conflict-and-congressional-outreach/pdl-02-23-17_antipathy-new-00-02/

¹⁵ Steve Rathje, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander van der Linden, “Out-group Animosity Drives Engagement on Social Media,” *PNAS* 2021, Vol. 118 No. 26.

Clearly, these types of articles, stories, and dialogues capture our attention better than the alternatives. Since attention is the limiting factor in this economy, the financial incentive for big tech companies is to promote these types of stories, headlines, and dialogues. One research group notes that “social media may be creating perverse incentives for divisive content because this content is particularly likely to go ‘viral.’”

Not only is this the kind of communication we are receiving, but we far too often have adopted the values of the medium in our communication as well. One author writes, “Human beings evolved to gossip, preen, manipulate, and ostracize. We are easily lured into this new gladiatorial circus, even when we know that it makes us cruel and shallow.”¹⁶ This online discourse often takes place as what one group of authors label *moral grandstanding*:

Like a succession of orators speaking to a skeptical audience, each person strives to outdo previous speakers, leading to some common patterns. Grandstanders tend to “trump up moral charges, pile on in cases of public shaming, announce that anyone who disagrees with them is *obviously* wrong, or exaggerate emotional displays.” Nuance and truth are casualties in this competition to gain approval of the audience. Grandstanders scrutinize every word spoken by their opponents—and sometimes even their friends—for the potential to evoke public outrage. Context collapses. The speaker’s intent is ignored.¹⁷

Our founding father’s recognized that human beings had an inherent proclivity towards outrage and how quickly this rage and factionalism could spread at the expense of the common good. They believed, however, that the United States’ expansive size would limit factionalism by making it difficult to spread beyond a small geographic region. James Madison believed that factious leaders “may kindle a flame within their particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.”¹⁸ Madison and the other founders, however, probably could not have anticipated a technology like social media that would connect people over such great distances. Technology has made our world smaller and, as our founders feared, more susceptible to the conflagration of rage.

Jonathan Haidt, a sociologist studying the effects of social media on politics and culture, writes that these platforms are “almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves.”¹⁹ Simply functions—the “like” and “share” options on Facebook and the

¹⁶ Jonathan Haidt and Tobias Rose-Stockwell, “The Dark Psychology of Social Networks: Why It Feels Like Everything Is Going Haywire,” in *The Atlantic* (December 2019), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/>

¹⁷ Haidt and Rose-Stockwell, “The Dark Psychology of Social Networks.”

¹⁸ James Madison, “Federalist No. 10,” https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp

¹⁹ Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” in *The Atlantic* (May 2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>.

“retweet” button on Twitter—provide simple reward/punishment feedback loops that guide users as they prepare new tweets or posts. Rather than share their true preferences, these platforms push users to evaluate their posts based on how others will respond. The intensified viral dynamics of social media means “If you were skillful and lucky, you might create a post that would ‘go viral’ and make you ‘internet famous’ for a few days. If you blundered, you could find yourself buried in hateful comments. Your posts rode to fame or ignominy based on the clicks of thousands of strangers, and you in turn contributed thousands of clicks to the game.”²⁰

James Madison recognized and wrote about mankind’s natural proclivity toward “faction,” our tendency to divide ourselves into parties inflamed by “mutual animosity.” Human beings are “much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good.”²¹ He goes further, arguing that even “where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.”²² In other words, even frivolous things can divide us, especially in a context where emotion and outrage are valued over careful, thoughtful reasoning—just the sort of context social media has created. “Social media,” Haidt writes, “has both magnified and weaponized the frivolous.”²³

Media outlets, desperate to keep up with the almost infinite competition for where people get their information, have adapted to these new rules and values and have begun to mimic the emotional, hostile atmosphere characteristic of digital media. This has led to an erosion of trust in institutions that are vital to democracy and a liberal society.

It’s not that rage is a new phenomenon. The issue is digital media allows people to be enraged *all the time*. “When the majority of Americans began using social media regularly, around 2012, they hyper-connected themselves to one another in a way that massively increased their consumption of new information—entertainment such as cat videos and celebrity gossip, yes, but also daily or hourly political outrages and hot takes on current events. . . citizens are now more connected to one another, on platforms that have been designed to make outrage contagious.”²⁴ There is always someone to be angry at or something to be angry about, as algorithms curate the information flowing on our screen to feed us the stories most likely to engage our emotion and get us to click.

PRESCRIBING AN REMEDY

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ James Madison, “Federalist No. 10.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Haidt, “The Past 10 Years of American Life.”

²⁴ Haidt and Rose-Stockwell, “The Dark Psychology of Social Networks.”

The pathologies described above are often ignored or overlooked, yet they have become endemic in our society—there is really no demographic that has escaped the effects of digital media. While many psychologists and sociologists are growing increasingly concerned about these issues and trying to sound the alarm on them, few are able to offer what would appear to be a satisfying solution.

David Foster Wallace said, “in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”²⁵ Wallace, a secular author and atheist who—throughout the course of his career—showed an unusual interest in religion and its merits, pinpoints an significant theological reality: all human beings are natural worshippers. Part of bearing God’s image was the privilege of relating to God personally, a relationship that would be marked by creaturely worship of the Creator. If all of creation declares God’s glory (Psalm 19:1), mankind as the pinnacle of God’s creation ought to do so supremely. The most devastating pathology that afflicts mankind is the redirection of this worship away from the Creator to the things of creation (Romans 1:23): idolatry.

An idol is any person, object, or circumstance that we look to for ultimate significance, satisfaction, and security. One of the ways we can identify idols in our hearts is by looking at the person, thing, or circumstances that most rile our emotions, because emotions are the overflow of what is in our heart. You’ll notice that digital technologies seem to have deep emotional effects on people, producing loneliness, depression, anxiety, anger, despair. Why is this? While the technologies themselves may well be idols, I would argue that, often, what these technologies do is make our idols more accessible *all the time*. They allow us to bow before our idols more fervently and more frequently, feeding into a vicious cycle of misdirected worship.

If this is the disease behind the symptoms, what is the cure? Only the Creator Himself knows how to rescue His creation from its self-destructive idolatry. His prescription can be found in 2 Corinthians 3:18, where Paul writes, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Just a few verses later he will remind us that a Divine act is required for us to see the glory of Christ (4:6 “God. . . has shone in our hearts to give light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”). To break free from idolatry, we must look upon something better and more desirable. Only by fixing our eyes on Christ can we protect our hearts from being drawn to a lesser thing.

²⁵ David Foster Wallace in a commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005.