Personal Computer Use in Our Time: An Addiction?
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

Last week ago as I write this, I had a window seat on a five-hour flight from Philadelphia to the West Coast. Seated next me in the middle seat was a fit, dark-haired, polite appearing young man of about twenty-two--fashiony clothes and glasses, jeweled stud in his ear, carefully outlined three-day growth of facial stubble, clean and neatly filed fingernails. He looked to be a charter member of this generation's college cohort, a senior perhaps. In his left hand was a mobile phone. On his lap was a laptop computer. I've thought about him every day since.

Why? Because shoulder-to-shoulder next to me, non-stop, every second, for the entire five hours, this young guy fidgeted and fooled with that mobile phone and glanced at the laptop. OK, not absolutely every second—he went to the bathroom once and ordered two sugary soft drinks. But with those exceptions, he never looked left or right or ceased for a moment from his tasks at hand. He read and tapped out text messages and fiddled with what looked to be Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts and glanced at one movie and a then a second he had playing on the laptop. I emphasize it was constant--I mean *constant*—twitching and abrupt movements, surfing his mobile phone, tapping out messages, catching a brief look at the movie and now and again, with a wave of his hand and wrist, skimming back to a previous scene to catch something he had missed while he was occupied with the mobile phone. Is the word multi-tasking?

There was nothing the least bit extended or continuous about any of this: quick, this-and-that, back-and-forth between the mobile phone and the movie and back-to-pick-up-what-I missed with the movie. I didn't catch the titles of the two movies, but both were comedies of the sort Adam Sandler makes, or Vince Vaughan, or Owen Wilson, or Seth Rogen, people like that, protagonists approaching-middle-age dressed and behaving far younger than they are--probably not up for any awards, if you know what I mean. The only pictures I caught sight of on the mobile phone were several of this young man himself, headshots in I'm-cool poses on his Instagram.

A couple of hours of sitting cramped up against this, what to call it, controlled-frantic, or controlled-hyper, behavior—where other than in an airplane are we ever so close to a stranger?—it came to me: this young guy is out of control. This is addictive behavior. He's an addict. This feverish tech activity could just as well be heroin or cocaine. Really. Five hours. Non-stop. Every second. That mobility phone never was out of his left hand for five straight hours. Of course I can't vouch for what happened during his one trip to the bathroom, but I know he took the phone with him, and it was in his left hand when he left his seat and in his left hand when he came back and sat down and immediately got back to his business. Yes indeed, what's going on here is in the realm of addiction, I thought to myself. Seriously. Something is really off about this.

The next day, on the West Coast, I checked out computer addiction on Wikipedia. It started out defining computer addiction as "the excessive or compulsive use of the computer which persists despite serious negative consequences for personal, social or occupational function." It referred to an article by psychiatrist Jerold Block in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* in which he described what he termed an Internet addiction as "a compulsive-impulsive spectrum disorder that involves online and/or offline computer usage and consists of at least three subtypes: excessive gaming, sexual preoccupations, and e-mail/text messaging."[1] Block noted that the current edition of the Diagostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) currently counts computer addiction as an unofficial disorder.

I have not done a systematic review of the research and literature, or any formal scholarship, in this area. However, I have drawn tentative conclusions about some aspects of this topic from my experience with university students as a professor of education. While I don't know for certain since I never spoke to the young man I sat next to on the plane, he seemed typical of the students I work with these days. I don't know about two areas Block refers to, excessive gaming and sexual pre-occupations, but in my work in the university I do see what looks to me to be pre-occupations with text messaging--not e-mailing; I don't know that the young people I work with bother to check their e-mail. The big things I pick up, though, and they aren't categories Block emphasizes in his writing, are a pre-occupation with social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, texting)

and, though it is less fervent, an affinity for the mainstream popular entertainment currently being pitched at young people. My seatmate seemed to epitomize these phenomena).

As for this activity having "serious negative consequences for personal, social, or occupational functioning, " I certainly wouldn't put the behaviors I observe in a category with free-basing. Being on Facebook from the time you get up in the morning on a Saturday until you go to bed—I'm thinking of one of my students who told me that's what she does—won't result in living under a bridge. But with that extreme taken off the table, I speculate that, yes, serious negative consequences can, and do, result from the all-but-obsessive, digital-related, media-related, behavior commonly displayed by my students at the university.

Along this line, I produced a writing last year—its a few sources below this one on this site--called "An Educator's 10 Concerns About Social Media." I still have those same concerns a year later. What's new this year is that I'm wondering how much the activity I see falls into the realm of addiction—or obsessive/compulsive behavior, or conditioned response, or neurotic; anyway, more than simply a personal choice that I might find unwise or problematic. Especially after my five-hour plane flight to Seattle, I'm starting to think of my students as not just caught up with social media but hooked to it.

For the details of what I think social media in particular are costing young people—and others as well, but my focus is on young people—refer to "An Educator's 10 Concerns About Social Media." I'll briefly list the ten concerns here and, in places, apply them to my seatmate on the flight. I realize making any assertions about this young man is very speculative. I never spoke to him; he never as much as glanced in my direction. But nevertheless, if my speculations are kept in proper perspective, I believe they can be useful in giving direction to at least potentially productive analyses and actions. Whether or not what I offer here is of any worth, I'm dead certain that personal computer use is a crucially important area to investigate. In fact, I can think of no more important personal/social/cultural issue than this one.

In "An Educator's 10 Concerns About Social media, I suggested that being caught up in sitting in front of screens and punching keys contributes to ten problems (this list isn't in order of significance):

1. *It has an opportunity cost.* The price you pay for doing anything is everything else you could otherwise be doing. If you are reading and tapping out texts and glancing at a lightweight, innocuous movies you aren't reading Dostoyevski, having an in-depth conversation, crafting a serious letter (texts tend to be two off-the-top sentences), or communing with nature, and the list goes on, use your imagination.

2. *You aren't in the room.* In a very real way, this young man wasn't on that airplane. Rather, he existed in virtual reality; he was a citizen of Cyberspace. Which is not to say that, absolutely, he should have been on that plane, fully present in that place and time, that chatting with me would have gotten him anywhere; I'm just saying that in a very real way he wasn't there on that plane. I'll go further and contend that these young people with their mobile phones in their hands and back pockets and purses are never really, truly, anywhere, at the dinner table, in the classroom, at the ballgame, anywhere. They are always, every waking minute, partially, if not predominately, somewhere else, and that that has consequences for them (and for the rest of us as well), including negative ones.

3. *The world centers on you and what you think.* It basically comes down to checking out what somebody texted you or the picture they sent—or what's in the news, or the prominent movie currently, anything--just enough for it to bring things back to yourself and what you have to express, your take on something. The outside world is a prompt to talk about yourself.

4. *Easy does it.* While this young man on the plane was certainly active for these five hours, it was all virtually effortless. He didn't have to work up a sweat or stretch himself to surf his messages and tap out replies, look pictures of himself, or glance at benign, unchallenging movies. If that pattern, that standard, of engagement is a big part of your life, it stands to reason that it will spread over to other things you are doing, such as your schoolwork and occupational commitments and person-to-person relationships, and they'll be dealt with in an easy does it way too.

5. "Nowism."   The social media are all about this time, now. Yesterday's gone, what's on for today, that's the ticket. But now is not the only time that matters. To live *your* life and not simply *a* life, you need to have a reasonable understanding of the very best that has been accomplished in the past, and then, with a clear sense of who you are what you want to be like and what you want the world to be like in the future, go from there to make something that truly matters happen. You don't get that done tapping out your immediate impressions in an informal exchange and watching Adam Sandler movies.

6. *Affinity for the popular culture.* I don't think it was a coincidence that the movies the seatmate had on his laptop were of the sort that play in Cineplex Nine at the mall. Go with what's now, immediately available, interesting, easy—"Hunger Games 4," "Iron Man 5," good enough.

7. *Puts you in show business.*   At the heart of Facebook, texting, and Instagramming is exhibiting yourself to the world, looking good, entertaining others, holding their attention, making them feel good about you, winning fans, as it were, who come back for more. You become Jimmy Fallon.

8. *Imprecise word.* No need to press for exactness or go into depth about anything, accurately and completely depict the reality inside of you or outside of you. Two sentences off the top will do. No long, carefully crafted letters in our time. Tap, tap, tap, no need for grammar or punctuation, quick, get it out—in fact, the shorter, more off-handed, the better.

9. *Groupthink.* With social media you have a public persona, an identity embedded in the collective; you are always visible, always subject to approval and disapproval and rejection. That prompts a desire to fit in with the whole, to be acceptable by its standards, and to avoid disapproval and condemnation, or even indifference. Truth becomes social truth--what the group decides is so—rather than objective truth or individual truth, and the same holds true for values and morality and tastes and preferences. Without realizing it, you are becoming more and more a conformist, just like the others in your particular virtual tribe.   You think the way they

think; they think the way you think—what other way is there? all of you have come to believe.

10. *Perpetuates Immaturity.* Social media emphasizes being young, new, not there yet. Why grow up?

What is particularly tough, and intriguing, with this addiction—or compulsion, or obsession, or conditioned response, or ingrained habit, whatever to call it—is that the addicts, call them that, the young people I deal with in the university, and I'm guessing, the young person I sat next to on the plane, is that they don't see what they are doing as a problem for them. If they were strung out on cocaine, say, or washed their hands thirty times as day, they would at least know they have an issue to deal with. In the education and media courses I teach, I've brought up how I think social media in particular gets in the way of personal development and maturation and that it pushes academic study in the direction of disinterest in the life of the mind and minimally jumping through hoops the course syllabus puts in front you and getting back as quickly as you can to the real action, working on your Facebook page.

I've assigned "An Educator's 10 Concerns About Social Media" in courses. Invariably, student responses have been to lecture me on the virtues of social media, how it allows them to express themselves and establish and maintain contact with others, and how it has supported revolutionary uprisings in foreign countries, although they don't know the details. They tell me I'm missing out by not participating in this activity. As far as I can tell, they have no comprehension of my concerns, the ten in the article or any others, nor any desire to hear about them. They seem to be saying, in their polite but vaguely disdainful way, you don't get it, butt out of our lives. I'm no sage, maybe they are right. All I know for sure is that their responses set my stomach to churning.

So what is to be done about any of this? My answer, it's very much an individual matter: each of us needs to do the best things we can think of that we have a reasonable chance of accomplishing given our capabilities and circumstances. A shorter way of saying it: we each do what we do. I feel compelled to try to make sense of certain aspects or the world and write that down and make it public, so I do that. And you do whatever you feel pressed to do about any of this,

which I understand may be nothing, because attending to this issue simply isn't on your to-do list in life.

Something that brings this topic into play for me is I'm a parent of a nine-year-old daughter--let's call her Dee--who lives with her mother on the West Coast of the US. I live on the East Coast and see Dee every two or three months or so and we write back and forth (I'm hearing impaired and can't use a phone or hear on Skype). The plane flight I'm writing about here was to see Dee for five days. There is no bigger concern for me than what Dee will be doing in the years ahead with computer technology generally and social media in particular.

One of Dee's and my rituals when I'm around her is to read together for fifteen minutes or so together before she goes to sleep at night, Dee with her book and me with mine. "Let me get my Kindle, I'll be right in there." I shouted the first night of this last visit, "there" referring to Dee's bedroom. "How about if you hold off on the Kindle this visit," Dee's mother—Margaret for this writing --said to me *soto voce*. "I'm trying to keep Dee's involvement with technology down. Grab a book and read that with her while she reads her book." I did what Margaret suggested, and for the rest of the visit stayed away from my Kindle, as well as surfing ESPN.com and New York Post online, which, I'm sorry to report, I'm prone to do to kill time and get mildly zonked out and depressed in the process.

As the days of the visit went along, it struck me how little a part of Dee's life technology is. She has a laptop and iPad and access to a big screen TV, but in those five days her involvement with communication technology was one DVD—a Jim Carrey movie she wanted to watch, "Mr. Popper's Penguin," which I watched with her and it turned out to be quite evolved by the standards of today's popular movies, and she and I went to a 3-D kids' movie at the theater, "Rio 2," again her choice, which I really can't comment on because I slept through a lot of it, jet lag perhaps, although in my waking moments I noticed a few other adults in the audience who seemed to be nodding off. But that was it: no hanging out with the TV, no video games, no texting her little friends, none of that. And from reports I get from Margaret, that's the pattern. And really encouraging to me, from what I'm hearing from Margaret and from Dee herself, a lot of what Dee is taking in, and this is with Margaret's arranging and encouraging, is classy fare. Examples that come to

mind are a couple of truly fine films, subtitled in English, by the great Chinese director, Zhang Yimou, "Not One Less" and "The Road Home." (Dee gets many of her movies on DVD from Netflix).

Something else I've noted this last visit, and it's been true all along, is how little junk food is part of Dee's life. No pitches from her for McDonald's or pizza, no candy bars, no looking for desserts at the meals we ate at home. She barely touched or passed up entirely desserts that came with meals in restaurants, and she didn't order any desserts.

I bring this up because I put junk food in the same category with media involvement: both of them are, well, junk, unhealthy, base activities and harmful to a child's development and growth. And both are pitched as all but inevitable in a child's life. Of course, so it goes, children are going to plead to stop at McDonald's (we pass a McDonald's on the main road leading to most places we go). Of course they are going to want to watch TV endlessly and curl up for hours with their iPads and mobile phones. The word to parents is there is nothing you can do about any of this, it's going to happen, it's bigger than you are, so cool out and go with the program; and even more, support the program, encourage it, get on board with it, integrate this into your life.

I've noticed that prominent among those getting this "it's bound to happen" point across are those with a financial interest in parents thinking and acting this way: the makers of the laptops and mobile phones, the producers of the summer blockbuster movies and lightweight dramas and comedies, the video game manufacturers, the take-out food restaurant chains, and so on. There's a movement currently afoot to get computer coding in place as part of the school curriculum. Prominent among its proponents is Bill Gates, who these years presents himself as the expert on all things human and life coach to the world. Gates, when you think about it, is not the most disinterested and impartial of advocates. If you can get your thing, computers or whatever it is, into school programs, it helps legitimize it and embed it in the way people think about and conduct their lives, and that helps sales and stock prices.

While Margaret has gotten the word along with everyone else that eating Chicken McNuggets out of a cardboard box and spending hour upon hour staring at screens and tapping keys is a given in the lives of children, she isn't buying it. She's countermanding it. And she's winning. And frankly that surprises me. If you'd asked me

two or three years ago, I would have supposed that, for sure, Dee would now be eating dinner with big a puffy fat, calorie, and sodium packed Burger King Whopper in a paper wrapper in one hand and a mobile phone in another tilted to the side antsy to surf the sites and hit the keys. But that is not the case.

How is Margaret getting it done with both computers and food? She is doing five things in particular that I think add up to operating principles with general applicability: they will work in other areas, say, promoting academic achievement or being good at golf (Dee really likes golf).

1. *She has taken the time to figure out what's going on and why, and what the results of it are.* Margaret has an articulate understanding of these areas; that is to say, she can put words to this reality that precisely explain it. She has mediated the stimulus-response chain: rather than responding thoughtlessly, automatically, to cues from the outside—think this, do this—she has interjected a conceptual understanding into the process and is guided by that rather than the external cues or prompts. While I don't think knowledge in itself sets us free, it is a necessary condition to personal autonomy and self-determination.

2. From this critical understanding, call it that, *she has set out clear goals for Dee.* She knows what she wants for Dee, both now and in the years ahead. She can picture in her mind what it will be like for Dee, and how she herself will feel, when those goals are realized. Another way to say it, Margaret is *purposeful*, she knows what she wants to get done and why.

3. *She intends to accomplish those goals.* An intention is more than a preference or hope or desire. It is the all-out commitment to make something happen. And it is more than just something in one's head. It is a posture, a bearing, a stance in the world; it pervades one's being; in a very literal, physical, existential, sense, it is who one is. Margaret doesn't just *have* these goals; she *is* these goals. Even if they don't realize it, human beings are capable of making a total, organic, felt shift—move from one way of being to another-- and letting their actions flow from this new experience of being alive. Margaret has become, on her own volition, intentional.

4. *She looks for ways to get this done, and she finds them.* She has confidence that if you are truly intentional, if you actively seek them out, and are vigilant to what the world shows you, you will find ways to accomplish your ends. And if you happen to mistake a bad technique or strategy for a good one and things don't work out, you just try something else. You keep doing that, you don't quit, and you eventually get it done. And even if somehow you don't—no one is omnipotent—spending your time going after things that really matter to you was still the best you could have done with your time.

5. *She makes it something we do.* Dee isn't alone with this. She's part of something larger, which gives her direction and resolve and strength: what we as family—her mother and me and Dee herself, all of us—are about. Dee's part of a team, as it were. We show the way to one another, we encourage and support one another. Margaret in particular--she's closest to Dee day-to-day--does more than *point the way* to Dee. She *is the way*. She exemplifies, models, what she advocates by controlling technology use and eating well herself. With food, Margaret sees nutritious food preparation and consumption as integral to a life well lived: a graceful, dignified, self-expressive, caring, and physically and psychologically healthy activity. Margaret and Dee shop for organic food together and buy fresh fruits and vegetables together and cook together. This past weekend was Mother's Day, and Margaret forwarded me a photo of breakfast in bed Dee had prepared for her—so loving, so complete, so healthy, so graceful and evolved. Dee was proud of what she had done, and pride is a motivator to keep doing whatever contributed to the pride. And the same kind of thing with computer use and contact with the media generally. They aren't things to be banned entirely, but they are things to keep in their proper place. That's what we do (so hold off on the Kindle).

And we don't just *not* do things; we *do* do things, good and uplifting things. Margaret and Dee go to the lakefront together and ski together and work in the garden together and read together and pick out good DVDs on Netflix and watch them together. Those are the kinds of things we do; that is our statement to the world, and to ourselves, of what our lives represent.

With regard to the focus of this writing, I'd like to think that Dee's computer use is going in a direction where it won't, up the line, become an addiction, or anyway out of control and excessive. To me that matters greatly, because, the main point here, it appears to me that a whole lot of young people these days are more than just interested in computers, they are captives to them, addicted to them. Perhaps looking at what's going on from this perspective-- along with others, we don't have to come at things from just one angle—will prove helpful to those who want to understand and take charge of their lives in this area and not just be moved along by what circumstances dictate.

Notes

1. Jarold Block, "Issues for DSM-V: Internet Addiction," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 165, No. 3, March, 2008.