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Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha

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[Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha Ph.D.](#)

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# Tuning In and Tuning Out Technology

Connectivity both increases and decreases social isolation.

Posted Dec 01, 2014

It's the end of the semester. For teachers like me this moment is a busy and [stressful](#) time of the year filled with grading, end of semester meetings and looming deadlines. Even so, this is also a moment filled the anticipation-- of a winter break. During busy times like now I am [grateful](#) for the technological innovations that ease my professional burdens. Despite my appreciation for the conveniences of technology, I approach my computer gingerly and eye it suspiciously as it sits commandingly in the corner of my workspace. The usual floods of email from students take up more and more of my screen space—and more and more of my time. At semester's end, there are frantic note from students replete with excuses and requests of every sort.

As I approach my office, my stomach twinges as I walk into my office wondering about how much time I'll need to devote to reading and answering these emails. At those moments I long for first years of my teaching [career](#) long before countless electronic requests from administrators to complete yet another form in an endless series of forms, or demands for new training to incorporate yet another change in administrative procedure. In those proto-technological days, I had time to drink a glass of tea, read the newspaper, and perhaps chat with a colleague. These were relaxing and preparatory rituals that helped me face my daily responsibly with greater focus, enthusiasm, and energy.

Like many Americans my day does not end when I arrive home. After dinner and evening activities, I often check my computer for last minute items that require [attention](#). I might also send a quick greetings to family and friends via text, email, or Facebook. My dependence on technology to do my job and connect with family and friends is part of much larger trend in contemporary society..

Like all innovations in human history, recent technological advances are designed to decrease the burdens of work, and to increase leisure time. The benefits of technological advances certainly outweigh its drawbacks. It is almost impossible to cope with the demands of modern life without the use of technology, even for those of us over 50, who experienced life before social computerization. Twenty years ago only 2% of Americans 65 years and older used the Internet. By the year 2000 this number increased to approximately 15%, and by 2004 it had jumped to 22% (Fox, 2004). Currently 35% of Americans age 55 or older owns a computer, and 70% of them have Internet access in their homes (Gatto & Tak, 2008).

There are 665 million online support groups, which is more than twice the population of the United States. More than 751 million mobile phone users access Facebook every month,. Indeed, 21% of the world's Internet population uses Twitter every month. These figures are amazing. In fact Twitter's fastest growing age demographic is 55 to 64 year olds. About 74% of American households now have Internet access census.gov.

Beyond the demands of work, adults are making use of the Internet for many other reasons--interpersonal connections, information, entertainment, paying bills, online banking and shopping, and making travel arrangements (Jones & Fox, 2009). Many people, especially older adults (68 %) rely on the Internet for health information. As one ages, technological competence is linked to

personal autonomy, empowerment, control, and overall well-being. In his E-Quality Theory of Aging, Douglas McConatha (2012) proposes that ongoing access to the resources available through the World Wide Web can substantially improve the quality of the aging experience for older adults. In particular, being able to acquire and disseminate knowledge and exert social influence online can help elders maintain desired social status, stimulate physical and cognitive functioning, and continue to feel a sense of social integration. Seniors who acquired computer and Internet skills report higher social connectivity and social support. Scholars have found that there is a link between the use of the Internet for communication with family and friends and a reduction in loneliness.

Connectivity, however, can also increase [social isolation](#). Increased dependence on technology can increase stress, and makes it more difficult to separate work from personal life. The ever-changing nature of technology requires continuous updating, which can exact a personal and financial toll [news.usc.edu](#). The pervasiveness of technology can prevent “mindful” living. It can make it difficult to focus on the moment. Technological devices can serve as easy distractions, a bandage for feelings of loneliness. The increasing amounts of time people spend on technology means that less time and energy is spent on other activities. Meaningful life is connected to the social contexts of our circumstances. Indeed, computer connections are often free of social context. Recent studies indicate that constant access to computers, tablets, and cell phones do not allow for much needed down time. A large percentage of people say that various technological devices make it difficult to focus on the activity at hand. Like me, almost 40 percent of people check emails after working hours or while on vacation [nytimes.com/technology](#).

Most people say that technology does not effect time with family, but in one study one in seven married people stated that the use of technological devices took time away from their spouses. 1 in 10 of the respondents said that the use of technology took time away from their children. Other studies have found that late night technology use inhibits much needed sleep. It appears that the artificial light from TV's and computer screens affects melatonin production and throws off our sleep patterns preventing needed rest and renewal [huffingtonpost.com/david-volpi](#).

Clearly the picture is complex. A large percentages of Americans do indeed benefit from the use of technology. The Internet can serve as a valuable tool for people of all ages. It can empower to be better informed about our health

and enable us to connect with family, friends. It can help us do our more efficiently. But these benefits have costs. Technology can not only produce feelings of well-being, but it can also hinder them.