

When the Net Becomes A Web: A Multiple Case Study of Compulsive Internet Usage

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Abstract

The accelerating use of ICT is fundamentally impacting our existence, conduct and perception - both in our private and our public sphere. So much so that the virtual world offered by New Media has become the battleground between the deterministic and the reflexive schools of thought, throwing up questions to do both with the fluidity of its technology on the one hand and the psychology and sociology of its consumption on the other.

The present study focuses on four participants out of an initial baseline survey of 500 in order to profile the differences between internet users and abusers on the need gratification dimension; to study whether compulsive users display behaviour similar to that of substance abuse; and to determine whether it is the man or the machine that is the causative factor for addiction to occur.

It was found that heavy usage was not always associated with significant psychosocial impairment. But these two factors together with extremes in personality profiling did predict compulsive internet usage. Significant negative correlation was found between internet dependency and the sociability, self esteem, locus of control and social support levels of these participants. Shyness as a personality factor was the only variable exhibiting a positive correlation with compulsive internet use.

Keywords: Compulsive internet use, Technological determinism, Need gratification, Information communication technology

Introduction

In Being and Nothingness - A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology, Sartre (1943) (spoke of the uniquely conjoint dual character of human existence, "the equal dignity of being possessed by my being-for-others and by my being-for-myself". These aspects of human reality do not stand in the relation of "being" and "appearance", as if one represented essence and the other mere surface. They are both true, but only conjointly. It is the 'nothingness' that holds the potential for 'being'. For Sartre, man is a duality of different aspects and forces. As he puts it, man is "at once a *facticity* and a *transcendence*". If we want to deal with human reality in its entirety we have to treat it both "as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is." This does not mean that nothing can be said about human existence, only that it cannot be arrested at any point and still truly represent what somebody is.

What if we were to relate this to cyberspace – a world which is too at once "a *facticity* and a *transcendence*"? A world where the denizen can easily be defined as "being what it is not and not

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being what it is" (ibid: 65). A world where a human being can just as easily follow Descartes' philosophy of "I think, therefore I am" as he can Sartre's "I think, therefore I was" (ibid: 119).

In the disembodied world of the virtual community identity is not limited to the compelling definition provided by the body. In the physical world it is the body that provides a stabilizing anchor to the self, mutating over time and circumstance, but in the virtual world, it is information that triumphs over matter - information that spreads and diffuses, projecting as many electronic personas as one has the time and the energy to create, or more importantly, the need to create.

Theoretical Perspective

Looking at the question of 'need', the Uses and Gratifications approach, an axiomatic communications theory set forth by Katz et al, examines what people do with media, their underlying motives and consequences of that use. This theory recognizes that people differ along psychological dimensions, which in turn prompts them to choose different media to satisfy certain needs or desires and to react differently to the same media content; media, in turn, differ in the way they can satisfy certain needs and reward their use.

So, what are these needs and the nature of the gratification obtained therein?

Katz et al. (3) presented a five-fold classification of needs or the Process Model. This model says that social and psychological origins of needs lead to motivations which lead to the expectation of rewards which causes the individual to select sources which will give satisfaction. The needs are categorized as:

Cognitive needs related to strengthening information, knowledge and understanding of our environment; Affective needs related to strengthening aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience; Personal integrative needs related to strengthening credibility, confidence, stability and status on an individual level; Social integrative needs related to integrating/strengthening contact with family, friends and the world; and Escapist needs related to escape, tension-release and the desire for diversion.

We also need to look at a situation when a medium is used far beyond the demands of utility alone and enters the grey area of compulsivity. This is of particular importance in the study of a medium such as the Internet, where the user is an active component in the communication process. In fact cyber space can be considered as a psychological extension of the individual's intrapsychic world. Which brings us to the question of why do certain users become addicted to the Internet?

Dr. Kimberly S. Young [12], a clinical psychologist and professor at the University of Pittsburgh coined the term Pathological Internet Use in 1996 following extensive research on users reporting excessive time spent in accessing sites for pornography, gambling, gaming, chatting or to just search for information. The ACE Model developed by Young (3) explains how Accessibility, Control, and Excitement play a significant role in the development of Internet compulsions. According to

the model, Internet addiction develops due to three discriminate underlying rewards. The three variables include: (a) the accessibility of information, interactive areas, and pornographic images; (b) the personal control and perceived privacy of electronic interactions; and (c) internal feelings excitement leading to a mental "high" related to Internet usage.

In August 1997 serious efforts started being made to classify Internet addiction as an official health disorder recognized by the American Psychiatric Association. The first World Conference on Net Addiction held in Zurich on Sep 11, 2000 further legitimized this new disorder.

Mark Griffiths (7), a British psychologist, has identified technological addictions, which he refers to as "non-chemical (behavioral) addictions, which involve human-machine interactions". Griffiths (81) uses established features of addiction and applies them to the Internet in order to show the legitimacy of Internet addiction as a diagnosis. He identifies six features of addiction: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse.

Salience refers to the importance placed on an activity by an individual who may be addicted. For example, someone who is addicted to the Internet may consider the Internet to be the most important part of his or her life. Mood modification occurs when participating in an activity alters the mood of the individual. Someone who is addicted to the Internet may get a "high" or may find a way of escaping from their problems when using the Internet. Tolerance is the need to increase usage in order to receive the desired effect. Internet addicts may need to spend more and more time on-line to receive the desired effect. Withdrawal occurs when unpleasant feelings result from not participating in an activity. An Internet addict who is addicted to chat rooms may feel sad and depressed when not participating in a chat room discussion. Conflict can either be interpersonal or intrapersonal. An Internet addict may experience marital problems because he or she is spending too much time on-line. Relapse occurs when an addict returns to earlier pathological patterns after a period of healthy use. These terms can also be applied to other types of addiction, such as drug or alcohol addiction.

In her account of life in cyberspace, Turkle (11) rejects the term *addict* despite the fact that is how several of her informants describe themselves. The term *addict* emphasizes the external "the drug" while she prefers to focus on the relationship between people and machine and so chooses instead to employ *seduction*. Rather than searching for what is being done to us by the Internet, she explores the identity work we are trying to do with it. What is it about cyberspace, she asks, that fascinates and seduces us? Her driving hypothesis is that we are drawn to Internet simulations of community by their easy intimacy, the "illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship". Like Narcissus, we fall in love with the images of ourselves that we project onto the technology.

In a society where health is defined in terms of personal flexibility, Turkle (220) sees the simulations of cyberspace as "flexibility practicums" where we can see ourselves in many guises. We can approach our personal story in several ways and appreciate the "virtues of change over solidity". These flexibility

practicums will lead us to “greater freedom”, where we can achieve the virtuous state of “think[ing] of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible, and ever in progress”. Thinking about people as temporary configurations of information particles is not without danger. It “carries the serious risk of impoverishing our sense of the human”.

The culture of simulation may help us achieve a vision of a multiple but integrated identity whose flexibility, resilience, and capacity for joy comes from having access to our many selves. But if we have lost reality in the process, we shall have struck a poor bargain. (223)

A passage from Lawrence Kubie’s *Neurotic Distortion of the Creative Process* (4) dramatically focuses on the way personality determines the quality of any kind of feeling or activity:

There is not a single thing which a human being can do or feel, or think, whether it is eating or sleeping or drinking or fighting or killing or hating or loving or grieving or exulting or working or playing or painting or inventing, which cannot be either sick or well.... The measure of health is flexibility, the freedom to learn through experience, the freedom to change with changing internal and external circumstances . . . the freedom to respond appropriately to the stimulus of reward and punishment, and especially the freedom to cease when sated. (43)

If a person cannot cease after being sated, if he cannot be sated, he is addicted.

The Dependency Theory (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 11) (6) argues that the three components; media, audiences, and society as a whole, are inextricably linked to each other in a state of ‘system’ dependency. Dependency, is defined as “a relationship in which the satisfaction of needs or the attainment of goals by one party is contingent upon the resources of another party.” The theory also acknowledges that consequent mental and behavioral effects can occur as a result of the system.

As Littlejohn and Ross (28) (5) explain in their book *Theories of Human Communication*, “First you will become more dependent on media that meet a number of your needs than on media that provide just a few.” Since each person’s needs are different, what they depend on is clearly going to fluctuate. Therefore, if a person finds a medium that provides them with several functions that are central to their desires, they will be more inclined to continue to use that particular medium in the future. Again, the sheer versatility of the Internet, its interactivity, its anonymity, its direct involvement of the individual, its transpersonal character, its surrogacy of life, demands that it be studied as a parallel life space rather than merely as a medium.

An alternative approach, the Diathesis-Stress Model as proposed by Davis (191) (8), provides a more user-centered view of Internet addiction. Davis argues that the behavior and symptom-led models of Internet addiction tend to ignore the cognitive symptoms of Pathological Internet Usage (PIU) that might precede them. Taking a lead from cognitive explanations of depression that argue that cognitions (e.g. depressive schema, rumination, low self-esteem) lead to the symptoms of depression, Davis argues for a similar approach to be adopted for PIU. He suggests first that pathological Internet use be divided

into specific (i.e. cybersex or visiting porn sites) and generalized (i.e. wasting time on-line, taking part in on-line communities compulsively). He argues that specific PIU is likely to be due to a pre-existing psychopathology (e.g. gambling addiction), while generalized PIU is likely to follow experiences of social isolation. So for specific PIU, a psychopathology would most likely exist without the Internet, while for generalized PIU, the Internet is the trigger that leads from perhaps a minor psychopathology (e.g. loneliness) to pathological Internet use.

Certain people, due to a variety of factors, may be predisposed (diathesis) to developing an addiction to something, be it alcohol, heroin, gambling, sex, shopping, or on-line computer services. They could go through their entire lives never developing any kind of addiction. On the other hand, if the right stressor, or combination of stressors, affects the person at a critical time, the person may be more inclined to develop an addiction. If the person begins drinking alcohol even occasionally, but continues to increase consumption, he may develop a dependency on alcohol. The same premise holds for Internet addiction. If it is the right combination of time, person, and event, then addiction may take place. The idea is that it is not the activity or subject that is important. It is the person that is most crucial to the equation.

Research has revealed certain personality traits such as emotional sensitivity and reactivity, low self esteem, low self disclosure and non conformist characteristics as triggers of addiction whereby unmet real life psychological needs are gratified through online stimulation. Psychodynamic and personality views account for addiction through early childhood traumas, correlations with other certain personality traits or other disorders, and inherited psychological dispositions (Sue, 46). Other factors for addiction could be sociocultural and biomedical in nature.

Methodology

A baseline cross-sectional survey was conducted on users and non-users of the Internet in Chandigarh. Respondents self reported their demographics, psychographics, internet usage patterns and perceptions as also quantified the extent of their psychosocial impairment due to their usage.

All those who reported extremes in personality profiling along with severe psychosocial impairment due to their heavy Internet usage were taken up as case studies wherein a series of in-depth interviews were conducted to establish compulsive Internet usage. Further, the MPQ (Multiphasic Personality Questionnaire) was used as a common test instrument on all cases as also expert-recommended specific psychometric tests.

Case Discussion

For the four Case Studies taken up for this paper, crossing the cyber threshold served as a metaphor for a new identity and a new life - they became what they needed to be rather than what society and circumstances dictated that they should be. Yet, what we have here are also classic instances of a deeper psychopathology that is being fed rather than addressed.

Case I:

A 27-year old homemaker, currently contesting a divorce and using the Internet for upto 8 hours daily for sexual gratification primarily as a male and at other times as the third gender.

The subject is extremely sociable with high self esteem, self reliance and a complete lack of shyness. Her MPQ (Multiphasic Personality Questionnaire) scores reveal her to be a sensitor personality. This is substantiated by her scores on the Zuckerman Sensation Seeking scale where she reports high levels of thrill and adventure seeking, disinhibition, experience seeking and boredom susceptibility. Her scores on the Bem Sex Role Inventory reveal her to be gender schematic. She is sex reverse typed i.e. as per her physical gender she is a female but psychologically she has all the attributes of a male. She uses the Internet compulsively as its anonymity allows her to explore her psychological gender with impunity. She is also a hypersensitive narcissist reporting a low social support system.

The subject rates the Internet high on entertainment, diversion and identification giving it the maximum score of 10 on a 1 to 10 scale. This is corroborated by her responses to the 7-item subscales of cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative and escapist needs gratification through her use of the Internet. She exhibited Q4 scores as regards gratification of her affective needs and escapist needs (31 out of 35).

The no-holds barred options on the Internet provide instant gratification for the subject's hedonistic mindset and the limitless options take care of any tolerance levels. With hundreds of hormonal, chemical, emotional, physiological and biological processes all converging at once, it is the equivalent of a drug addict shooting up with a dozen different hard-core drugs all at once. Moreover, cyber sex provides her instant gratification without her having to emotionally invest in the relationship. It is like taking a shot without the effort of procurement or the fear of discovery. Moreover, she can also "stash" it for whenever the server is down by saving sites on her PC's hard drive.

The Internet here is an escape, a solace, but not a solution to a "bitter reality" which in this case is a marriage on the verge of being legally dissolved and a person yet to come to terms with her gender identity. Her husband being the only person to have stood up to her, the subject admitted to superimposing his face on the men who became her victims when she played the sexual predator online. The fact that her Internet usage has increased over time, the fact that she admits to drinking while she is online, the fact that she needs to increase the high and most importantly the fact that she has, on many occasions, tried to cut down on her usage, suggests a certain level of despair, shame and conflict.

Her scores on the depression and anxiety scale reflect that her Internet use has certainly not made her happy in any way. The fact that she has made half-hearted attempts at committing suicide - are all suggestive of the psychological fallout of her Internet usage patterns.

There were two other female respondents in the survey who were currently involved in divorce proceedings like the subject, but they were neither users of the Internet nor did they exhibit a similar psychographic or sociographic profile. Unlike the subject, both these respondents scored high on social support

and displayed average scores when it came to sociability, self esteem, shyness and locus of control. Also, unlike the subject, their media consumption was evenly distributed across all mediums with TV and radio claiming the maximum share.

Hence, technology alone cannot be said to be the determinant of her compulsive usage. At one level we have the subject using the medium of the Internet to reconcile the dichotomy between her physical and psychological gender but the Internet has not enabled the subject to bring her sexual conflict to closure, the ultimate union as signified in the concept of *Ardhanarishvara* because she herself is focusing on gratification rather than resolution through her Internet usage.

In Indian society, barring the upper crust, terms like bisexual, transsexual, cross-dressing, same-sex love still bear the stigma of ostracisation. It acquires its comfort zone only in the realm of the divine, specifically the concept of *Ardhanarishvara* or the eternal androgyne. It can be comprehended as representing harmony, resolution and balance in holistic union and from whom sprang all shrishti, creation. It describes the BOTH – half man plus half woman which equals double fertility; neither is reduced, both are enhanced – a representation of total satisfaction culminating in an entirety.

One does find an echo of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* here. More so when one addresses the existentialist connotations of the aspect of *ahamkara* (a-ham – I, ego) as embodied in human beings. The subject indulges her narcissist self online but at the same time alienates herself from all other relationships. Moreover, in continuing to indulge her two 'selves' she effectively negates one with the other thereby distancing herself from any normalisation.

Personality factors aside, the distancing perceived from social mores is just as much of a factor in her compulsive usage of the Internet as is the consequent psychosocial impairment.

Case II:

A 52-year old widow who uses the Internet for an average 8 hours daily with upto 5 hours spent in discussion groups for battered parents, another 2 in emailing and the remaining in sourcing medical information. The subject is highly unsociable and shy; suffers from low self esteem, self reliance and social support.

She rates the Internet high on diversion, integration and identification, "the Internet has become my reason for being" and exhibits all symptoms of substance abuse, namely salience, mood modification, conflict, withdrawal, relapse and tolerance with a summated score of 87 on the 20 to 100 index measuring psychosocial impairment due to Internet usage.

Her time online also serves as a mood elevator for the subject, "when I am guiding lost souls on the Internet or finding others like me, I feel I am not alone. This makes it easier for me to deal with the hours when I am not online. I spend more time online when I'm particularly depressed or feeling lonely. In fact, on my husband's death anniversary I stay online until I can't even see the monitor any more."

The subject admits that her life revolves around her Internet time but does not see it as harming anybody. "The only time I have to

be secretive about the time I spend on the Internet is when someone comes over, so I do not welcome guests. The Internet makes me feel powerful so why should I switch it off?"

"I eat when I am hungry and my computer table is right next to the bathroom. I don't even answer the doorbell when I'm online and I hate it when someone comes visiting and then does not leave quickly. There is an entire world of people waiting for me out there who need me more." Increasingly the subject finds herself spending more and more time online, "what else is there for me to do?"

But contradictions between the subject's account and those who know her give a different perspective to her Internet usage.

She was hospitalized twice earlier for paranoid schizophrenia and is a competent liar, hostile to any cross-questioning. This was also substantiated by the subject's MPQ scores revealing her to be a repressive personality. She is highly anxious, depressed, isolated and paranoid to the extent of being socially dysfunctional. She is suffering from major mental illness and is in need of psychiatric help.

The Internet offers her a limitless audience where she can project herself as both saviour and victim. It also enables her to move on when she is cross-questioned or overburdened. The subject came across as a dependant depressive on the DEQ scale. The Internet ensures that she would always have relationships in stock.

The subject's compulsive participation in online discussion groups is an exercise in compensatory escapism. It is cathartic in the short term but not therapeutic in the long term. Moreover, the obsessive manner in which the subject is using the Internet, her previous history of nervous breakdowns plus her current unhealthy psychographic profile, not to mention her erratic eating habits, puts her in the high risk category for a heart attack or a stroke.

The subject has a pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of others such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent; she reads hidden demeaning or threatening meanings into benign remarks or events; persistently bears grudges and is quick to react angrily or to counter-attack. She then moves further afield in search of people who do not know her.

Her behaviour is no different on the Internet. But unlike in real life here there is no end to the people she can meet and project herself to – in effect she will continue to be personally and socially dysfunctional.

There were 9 other respondents who are widows with a similar socio-economic background as the subject and live alone like her. Yet they did not reveal the same need gratification pattern nor the same level of impairment due to their Internet usage. Unlike the subject, they had all been working professionals and continued to exhibit a goal-directed approach to the Internet, which was just one of the mediums that they used. There were stark differences in the psychographic profile though. The other respondents were non-fatalistic, more sociable and had higher self-esteem and social support levels as compared to the subject. Surprisingly, even though the subject is exceedingly shy with a Q4 score of 60, she chats extensively on the net. On the other

hand, while the shyness levels of the other respondents falls between the first and the third quartile (23 to 47), they do not chat on the net at all.

Overall, psychographics seem to be the determining factor in the extent and nature of Internet usage and need gratification. The subject is using the Internet to attain a certain level of being. The psychopathology here may primarily be biomedical in origin, a chemical imbalance that can be corrected through medical intervention, but there is no denying the fact that the Internet, as a medium, has offered her a solution, if not a resolution. The world as she knew it, disintegrated with the death of her husband and with her daughters leaving home; the Internet offers her all the second chances she needs for integration, however 'unreal' they may be and these will last her a lifetime. Barring a nervous breakdown immediately after her husband's death, the subject has suffered no further episodes and this can only be attributed to the seminal position that the Internet occupies in her life now. She does not take any medication, she has no social support in her 'real' life, she lives alone and she manages. She does it because she has 'crossed over'. The subject took cognizance of her needs and gratified them. She may not be a productive member of society but neither is she a disruptive one. Her conversation may be illogical, her fears nonsensical, but not so to others like her on the Internet. In the ultimate analysis, would we call this a problem or a solution?

Case III:

A 15-year old male student who spends upto 4 hours everyday playing games online. He is highly unsociable and shy, suffering from extremely low self esteem and self reliance along with an extreme lack of social support.

He rates the Internet high as regards gratification of his affective, social integrative and escapist needs. His Internet use always increases when he is bored, lonely, depressed, happy, angry and vindictive. His predisposition towards the Internet also displays a Q4 score of 86 out of 100 i.e. he reports significant psychosocial impairment due to his Internet usage. Individually, he answers in the positive to all questions pertaining to symptoms that reflect substance abuse – salience, mood modification, withdrawal, relapse, conflict, tolerance and intrusion. He remains online for longer than he intends to and continuously fantasizes about it when he is not. His depression, nervousness and moodiness disappear once he is back online. He frequently tries to cut down on his Internet usage but fails even though his grades are suffering and he is losing sleep due to late-night log-ins. He is always secretive about what he does online and is constantly trying to hide the extent of his Internet usage especially as others are almost always complaining about it.

To the subject, the online gaming environment is a place where he can exorcise all his demons and it is also his sanctuary where he can get away from a domineering father, a clinging mother and tormenting classmates. His MPQ scores reveal him to be a repressor personality but on the Internet he can adopt multiple identities depending on his mood. He can help people, save them, extract revenge, kill them. If he is defeated, he can start all over again, "on the Internet no defeat is final", unlike when he is always at the losing end in skirmishes with class mates or arguments with his father.

On the Internet he has an even chance at gaining the upper hand and when he does not, he can always start over again – an option that he does not have in real life.

Other respondents who displayed Q4 scores in online gaming activity did not exhibit Q4 scores in internet perception or psychosocial impairment nor did they have maladaptive personality profiles. They had between Q1 and Q2 scores in need gratification through their internet usage. Also, unlike the subject, they did not limit their usage of the internet to online games alone.

Moreover, their gaming was constructional in nature. They focused more on the kinetic experience of playing and winning than on storyline or character unlike the introverted mode of playing displayed by the subject who used it as a catalyst or as a catharsis of his own feelings as he imagined himself into the game. Their online gaming activities, even though as extensive as the subject's in terms of duration did not translate into high need gratification scores viz. the internet.

The subject's Internet usage is problematic in that he is not being able to bring his gaming situation to its natural closure. He is living the game and the character and deferring his life and identity.

The subject is in a state of denial. Despite doing poorly in school and sleeping at his desk due to late night log-ins, he does not feel that his online activities are harming him in any way. Any conflict with his family because of his Internet use is because they are "techno dead" and in fact what he is doing is what his father wants – "I am extremely comfortable with technology now which is what my father wants. He also wants me to make friends. Now I have friends all over the world. Do you know there are about 3 lac of us in India itself, so who cares about those idiots in school. I've killed tonnes of them online. Out there I'm the most wanted and everyone wants to partner me because I am so good. I can go and stay with these people whenever I want. I can even start a global business when I grow up." But as of now, all these claims are in the realm of projection, which is also the only thing that dictates a gaming environment.

This is yet another instance of transcendence, of a search for fulfillment in the virtual world when denied it in the real one. At a certain level the transcendence is temporal, back to a time when stories told in childhood spoke of a hero and a villain, of a wise man who served as a guide and mentor and of a charlatan who served to deceive and mislead. The subject here transcends both time and space to seek this world, to be a part of it and to be in control. For him, it is a heroic quest, a quest not so much for game points as for identity. There is a hybridization here; he mutates as he takes on multiple identities, but should we consider the mutation to be akin to stagnation? Or regression? Is not the gaming environment also about lessons? That no defeat is final; that there is always a second chance; that control can be wrested; that goals are achievable? Is one's virtual self totally divorced from one's real self? Are the two always at conflict? Does not one cauterize the wounds inflicted on the other?

Case IV:

A 29-year old unemployed youth with a rigid and dogmatic mind set who separated from his wife because she no longer

subscribed to his ideologies. He uses the internet for upto 8 hours daily primarily for writing his blog and for participating in discussion groups while an hour is spent in emailing.

The subject is highly unsociable with an extreme lack of social support but does not display any shyness and has high levels of self esteem and self reliance.

He reports maximum gratification of his cognitive, personal integrative and social integrative needs through his internet usage. It also allows him to forget his immediate world which to him is populated with weak cowards who are not worth saving, "People do not know how to stand up for themselves, to fight for causes, nor do they know how to walk the distance. I started many discussion groups but only a few are still sustaining. That is why I concentrate equally on my blog now. Here, I have greater freedom in saying what I want and replying to the posts in the manner I want to or even replying at all. I enjoy the control here plus it enables me to archive everything for later when I may write a book on my viewpoints and why they are right."

The salience that the internet holds for the subject is evident from the fact that now he only forms relationships online. These continue to be important to him as long as there is a "meeting of minds"; if and when this ceases, he walks away. "There is no additional baggage in an online relationship unlike in a real time one which gets adulterated with too many other issues. The internet has liberated me. I don't use the phone because it forces me to speak. I don't hold down a full time job because I need freedom from the pressure of having to do something right away. Everybody wants a piece out of you. They want to touch. There is nothing of this sort on the internet. I choose to go online and I choose to switch off and yes, people reach out to me but its like a priest sitting in the confessional – I remain undefiled."

The subject uses the internet because "I can get straight to the point without indulging in any preliminary social niceties nor do I have to wait for an opportune moment. The minute a thought strikes me, on whatever topic, I can go online and find a listener or just use my blog. I find real time conversations wasteful and distasteful." The subject equates the internet with an instant gratifier and a mood elevator. "as I type, I feel my agitation draining away and an immense peace steals over me. Its like taking a painkiller. And there is nothing more arousing than have someone tell me that I have made them see the light."

The subject's MPQ scores reveal him to be a repressor personality i.e. both his thinking and his imagination is fragmented and rigidly compartmentalised. He is hard to get to know, over-sensitive, over-controlled, conventional, cautious, rigid and moody. He has a fixated ideology that is not in sync with reality. Therefore he turns to the internet where he finds others of his ilk. Just as in real life where he has cut himself off from those who do not subscribe to his views, similarly on the Internet, he subscribes to those discussion groups where he finds sounding boards. The fact that he has started concentrating more on his blog is also because here he can just 'speak' at a stretch without any interruptions.

More than a form of catharsis, the subject is using the internet as a buffer, as an exercise in self-preservation. The nature of the medium suits the subject's personality. Judging by his social support scores, he is incapable of reciprocity and the internet's

anonymity allows him that space, the avoidance of a final commitment. As he himself admits, he adopts multiple online identities, this again is something only possible on the internet. It enables him to mask his real identity in layers, thereby nurturing compliance, reverence, deference, endorsement and obeisance through the establishment of cliques and coteries. This he cannot do in real life given his distaste for close personal relationships. The internet allows him to convincingly intellectualize his feelings to compensate for his emotional frigidity.

There were six other respondents in the sample – four males and two females – who also had blogs and indulged in this activity for up to two hours daily which is half that of the subject. Barring one, none of the others exhibited a maladaptive personality profile – even those who reported significant impairment of their relationships and activities due to their Internet usage. They all had above average scores when it came to their level of socialization, self esteem, social support and a lack of shyness. Moreover, they used the Internet for diverse purposes without completely focusing on blogging alone like the subject. Also, unlike the subject, their media consumption was evenly distributed across all mediums with books, music and TV claiming the maximum share.

Conclusion

The Deterministic School of thought sees technology and mechanization as a change agent rather than as a tool of change. For instance, Davenport (230) (1) poses the question “Does mechanization affect human values, and if so, how? To what extent and under what conditions should we allow technology to shape our definition of ourselves as a civilization or as a species?”

Some authors, however, have begun to reject this deterministic view of a computer ideology imposed from above. They see a larger role for the users of technology – particularly technology that involves the creation of a mediated or virtual environment – in shaping that environment. This scenario is supported by Giddens’ (2) idea of a reflexive nature of social life, in which the structure of activity is created and recreated by the very activities constituting it. This image has particular applicability in the context of computer-mediated communication. We cannot study its effects upon the participants without at the same time studying the role of the participants in shaping and reshaping the context. Because the actors in this process are self-aware, theories developed and disseminated through the study of the medium can result in the use of that theory by the participants to further modify their communicative environment. As Giddens (23) says, “Reflections on social processes (theories, and observations about them) continually enter into, become disentangled with and re-enter the universe of events they describe.”

History is witness to the fact that the adoption of every new technology has given cause for both utopias and dystopias concerning the media and its effects but it is the latter that is always the cause for more concern. Even though it is something that cannot be eradicated altogether, it behoves being understood because therein lies the ability to control future direction.

In all the above cases it is the Reflexive School that dominates. The subjects used the Internet as per their needs, fully utilizing its distinctive features of anonymity, interactivity and control. But in all instances, the control had now shifted to the machine as their usage now far exceeded their initial need. They had allowed it to assume full surrogacy of their lives. The initial catharsis had now shifted to an abusive pattern with the Internet becoming the most important thing in their lives, bringing them into conflict with those around them. It had intruded into their lives to the extent that any attempt to withdraw from it resulted in withdrawal symptoms – depression, nervousness and irritability along with physical restlessness – and frequent relapses. Rather than being a solution, the Internet had now become part of the very same problem that had initially drawn them to it – namely, their maladaptive personality structure and social isolation.

The fact that many of the respondents surveyed in the study were heavy Internet users yet did not exhibit either any maladaptive personality or any psychosocial impairment while still others reported both with only moderate internet usage, reveals that technology alone cannot be blamed for turning the user into an abuser. Often, the psychopathology exists in the user prior to his taking up the use of any technology. This creates its own dependency over time, space and person.

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