

Wired for distraction

Posted at 1:04 pm on November 21, 2010



"Students have always faced distractions and time-wasters. But computers and cellphones, and the constant stream of stimuli they offer, pose a profound new challenge to focusing and learning," writes the *New York Times*. "The risk, they say, is that developing brains can become more easily habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks—and less able to sustain attention."

As we recently reported in our October/November *Trumpet*, this non-stop multitasking is creating a generation that is increasingly unable to focus, study or think deeply.

"The worry is we're raising a generation of kids in front of screens whose brains are going to be wired differently," says Michael Rich, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School.

This new technologically infused environment is even rewriting school and societal norms. Says one school principal: "The technology has created on campuses a new set of social types—not the thespian and the jock but the texter and gamer, Facebook addict and YouTube potato."

According to the article, it is not unusual for students to spend hours every day on the computer, playing video games, or sending hundreds of text messages. In between classes, during lunch, on the way to and from school, students are constantly typing on their phones.

Students themselves are feeling the effects of over-stimulation and constant distraction, but are finding it hard to resist. Says one 14-year-old, "I'll be reading a book for homework and I'll get a text message and pause my reading and put down the book, pick up the phone to reply to the text message, and then 20 minutes later realize, *Oh, I forgot to do my homework*" (emphasis mine). Another student admits he "sometimes wishes that his parents would force him to quit playing and study, because he finds it hard to quit when given the choice." He continues,

I'm doing Facebook, YouTube, having a conversation or two with a friend, listening to music at the same time. I'm doing a million things at once, like a lot of people my age. ... Sometimes I'll say: I need to stop this and do my schoolwork, but I can't.

In a generation increasingly accustomed to instant gratification, a world of technology at their fingertips is an attraction more appealing than old-fashioned reading. The student continues,

[On YouTube], you can get a whole story in six minutes. A book takes so long. I prefer the immediate gratification. ... I can read a book, but then I'm up and checking Facebook. Facebook is amazing because it feels like you're doing something and you're not doing anything. It's the absence of doing something, but you feel gratified anyway.

The result? He admits: "My attention span is getting worse."

In an increasingly desperate attempt to recapture students' attention, more and more schools are turning to technology in an attempt to *entice* children into learning.

"It's in their DNA to look at screens," one teacher explains. "If I'm not using technology, I lose them completely."

"Scanning a book for a salient quote certainly has its place. So does skimming text to get the gist of the author's intent. Even occasional Web surfing might help one get a feel for current events," wrote columnist Stephen Flurry. "But none of this should be confused with *studying* the printed word."

In "The Perils of Screen Addiction," Brad Macdonald wrote,

[I]f our cultural infatuation and addiction to screens—and the fundamental impact this is having on our brains—really concerns you, you need to study our free book *The Incredible Human Potential*.

The more you study this book, the better you will see how screen addiction and its effect on our brains are actually damaging a masterpiece of God's creation: the human mind! •

The Perils of Screen Addiction (and How to Beat It) Do you stare at a screen for a huge portion of your day? Descend into panic when you misplace your cell phone? Feel compelled to check your e-mail or IM incessantly? [Read more »](#)