Knowledge Shock Part V: Cyber-Technology and Popular Culture

Information sharing has exploded across the globe. Social media sites offer 24-7 access to news and views in a wide variety of formats. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat are but a few of the available networks. We have entered an exciting new age for the exchange of ideas and opinions. Yet extensive reliance on such sources can have disquieting consequences.

We recently received a request for training from a major financial planning firm that now needs to supply counseling to the increasing number of baby boomers on retirement pay-out options. This firm was recruiting finance-major graduates from prominent universities in the eastern United States to provide this counseling. What they discovered was troubling. These millennial hires were well versed in financial theories and formulas, and were adept at using instant messaging, texting, and social media. They, however, did not consider talking to a client on the phone or having a face-to-face counseling session to be important communication options. As they seldom did this in their own lives, they lacked facility in engaging others in conversation. This financial planning firm was seeking assistance in establishing a training program that would provide these new hires with practice in conversing and directly negotiating with clients. A college degree does not guarantee essential job or learning skills.

This is not an isolated example. Recent surveys indicate that businesses find millennials deficient in a number of important skills areas and fault their work ethic. In addition to lacking interpersonal skills, many don't write very well, have short attention spans, can't read rapidly and comprehend longer written texts, or readily do the math required for a job. Why are so many young Americans poorly prepared for the 21-century labor market?

While computer technology has led to tremendous advances in science, medicine, and technology, the increasing dominance of many online sites and applications in people's lives and in popular culture are decidedly disturbing.

Many of my friends have recounted with dismay watching a group of teens or young adults flopped on couches silently messaging each other on their cell phones. They also spend long stretches of time on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or other social media sites, tuning out the real world around them. Apple's latest data show users compulsively checking their phones about 80 times each day. A 2015 Common Sense Media study found that over 50 percent of teenagers spend 4 hours a day on various types of media and one quarter spend more than 8 hours. In a 2016 survey by this group half the teenagers reported feeling they were addicted to mobile devices. Such addiction is not confined solely to this age group. Studies have linked extensive smartphone or internet usage to a variety of personal issues: decreased concentration spans, reduced problem-solving abilities, depression and even an increase in teenage suicide rates.

Why should a child, teen, or adult value learning-how-to-learn when the internet provides instant answers? A study found that when people know a piece of information is available on the

internet, they may lose their ability to recall it. Creativity requires calling up information from memory and combining it with new facts or ideas to construct inventive solutions. Learning is not simply a matter of finding a fact on Google. The effortlessness of finding information on the internet may make acquiring knowledge seem easy, when in fact it requires the same persistence and effort as mastering a musical instrument or becoming proficient at a sport.

Critical components of our human nature: intuition, creativity, social skills, innovation, improvisation etc., can be diminished, erased, or never developed by the overuse of cyber-technology. American popular culture is eroding the desire to learn. This is a real crisis.

Another significant problem is the role of the internet in spreading misinformation. There are no editors checking facts on the internet. Anyone can post spurious data or news on it. Too many Americans are unaware of the importance of checking the authoritativeness of internet sites. Many in fact are spreading misinformation through social networks. The use of stolen or false identities on such sites is further compounding this problem.

Various malign aspects of cyber-technologies are eliciting a variety of calls for reform. Advertisers are threatening to cancel their accounts and there is increasing pressure for government regulation of social media sites due to offensive content. Concerns about the effects of internet use on learning and cognitive development as well as addition to video gaming and the ready access to pornography are prompting crusades for increased parental oversight of children's online activities. Wait Until 8th is a movement to help parents counter peer pressure to give their child a smartphone before they reach 13 or 14 years of age. The Truth About Tech is an initiative begun by former employees of Facebook and Google that seeks to pressure these companies to make their sites less additive to children. But in the end isn't it up to each of us to assess whether the time and attention we give to smartphone use and social media is reaching the level of addiction?

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