

Living in an offline world

ENTANGLED:

Increasing reliance on computers affects humans

FROM Jan 25 to Feb 3, I underwent a self-imposed digital sabbatical. For 10 days, I stayed offline. I was curious to see how unplugging from the Internet, social media, and my mobile digital devices would affect me.

In the World Unplugged study in 2010, 1,000 university students from 10 countries were asked to stay offline for 24 hours. For some of these students, staying offline became unbearable. They reported withdrawal symptoms which included anxiety, depression, confusion, and loneliness. Some even reported phantom cellphone vibrations, where they mistakenly thought that their phones were vibrating. The withdrawal symptoms were so bad that more than half the participants failed to complete the study.

All this underscores how deeply and intricately information technology has become entangled with our daily lives.

That we are so entangled with technology is nothing new or revolutionary, writes Alex Soojung-Kim Pang in his book *The Distraction Addiction*. Throughout history, humans have been inseparable from technology. Technology innovations have helped shape and define us. Our relationship with computers, however, is unique. We tend to become deeply attached to our computers, treating them as extensions of our minds. As computers become increasingly responsive, interactive, adaptive, and in some cases, more social, their capacity to affect us would increase — and our attachment and

We tend to become deeply attached to our computers, treating them as extensions of our minds.

Christopher Teh Boon Sung is a senior lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia



reliance on them would further deepen.

But the problem with information technology, according to Soojung-Kim Pang, is it is poorly designed and thoughtlessly used. Computers today are faster, but are we writing and reading faster or remembering more today? Or has our workload increased instead?

Technology innovations ironically do not always reduce our workload. So, while these technologies have made our work easier, faster, and more efficient, they have also increased our workload and created additional work — precisely because our work has improved. Thanks to these technologies, the standards by which our work should now be accomplished have also been raised. For instance, we are now expected to be accessible at all times.

With increased workload and work demands, our stress levels would increase in tandem. In 2008, writer Linda Stone observed that whenever people (including her-



A 2010 study found that those who stayed offline experienced **anxiety, depression, confusion and loneliness**. AFP pic

self) checked their emails, people would unconsciously hold their breath. Stone called this condition “email apnea”, and this condition is caused by anxiety when people read their emails, dreading news about deadlines, problems, or concerns. A 2012 study found that employees who frequently checked their emails and who received more emails experienced higher stress than those who checked their emails less and who received fewer emails.

The Internet, social media, and mobile digital devices have changed the way and speed we communicate with one another. Catherine Steiner-Adeir, in her book *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*, reveals that while such technologies help us connect to more people than ever, these technologies also paradoxically disconnect us from them.

Because of information technology, we have become more distracted, impulsive and impatient. Our attention span has declined and we multitask more. And our reading

comprehension has also declined.

Our children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the Internet and digital media because our brains take an astonishingly long time to mature. Our prefrontal cortex, for instance, takes 25 years to fully develop. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive and cognitive functions that include functions for regulating behaviour, distinguishing between right and wrong and self-control. That the prefrontal cortex is responsible also for self-control is consequential for two reasons. Firstly, numerous studies have revealed that information technologies cause lower self control in children, and secondly, children's self-control is found to be the greatest predictor of their adulthood success.

Consequently, Steiner-Adeir urges parents to be more careful in allowing their children access to information technologies. But instead of limiting their children's exposure, some parents mistakenly increase it by using computers and other mobile devices as surrogates to educate their children.

Information technology has no doubt brought us many benefits. But we need to understand that information technology brings both the good and the bad.

Soojung-Kim Pang encourages “contemplative computing” practice — a blend between science of philosophy — to understand how information technology affects us and how we can create a healthy and more balanced relationship with it. Contemplative computing includes determining our online habits and using social media more mindfully.

Meditating helps, too. Far from just some quaint activity done by Buddhist monks, a series of scientific studies particularly by Richard Davidson and Antoine Lutz from University of Wisconsin-Madison have shown that people who meditate often are less distracted, have longer attention span and have greater memory.

At the end, I came out from my digital sabbath more mindful. I have become more self-controlled in using the Internet while I am at work. I have terminated my cable TV because my family and I seldom watch TV anyway. I have downgraded my BlackBerry plan to a simpler broadband plan, and my BlackBerry has been set so it no longer gives an audible or vibration alert when new emails or messages come in. I would again wear a wristwatch after nearly 20 years lest I be tricked into checking my emails if I were to use my smartphone to tell time. I will check my emails and messages when I need to and not because my BlackBerry tells me.

During the 10 days of going offline, I had received over a hundred emails of which more than two-thirds were either spam or scams and the rest were legitimate emails — but none of them needed my immediate response. I had missed nothing.