

iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us
Larry D. Ph.D. Rosen

Electronic entertainment and technology are dangerous friends. Rosen tells us how to protect ourselves

We clever humans are better and better at manipulating our environment. At the same time, we are better and better at manipulating each other and letting ourselves be manipulated.

Technology has invaded every aspect of our lives, and now that it is portable, it follows us everywhere. Rosen says there is a technology jacket available that can carry 22 different portable devices, with custom pockets for iPod earbuds and other quirky features.

He opens with illustrations about how psychologically dependent we are on our technology. Our cell phones sit on the table at dinner, and on our nightstands as we sleep. We interrupt conversations with real people all the time to tap away at our portable devices to see what's going on.

Rosen goes into a long riff on the narcissistic personality disorder. He is a psychologist, and reads from the standard psychological textbooks and uses the updated Freudian categorizations that are within the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. He does not, however, adhere religiously to the DSM and proposes his own category, which he calls according to his title iDisorder. It would not be a clinical condition, affecting a continuum of normal to narcissistic people. It can, however, be debilitating. The purpose of this book is to tell us how to minimize the harmful effects of all this technology in our lives without forgoing the benefits. He recognizes, in other words, that one cannot fully live a modern life without the technology.

He has chosen Facebook for special attention. It caters to narcissists. He asks you to consider the care with which you prepare and post photographs, how frequently you post, how often your posts use pronouns in the first person.

He remarks on the reasons why it is easier to get into online catfights behind the anonymity of the computer screen than in person, and the deleterious nature of the fights that ensue. This is nothing new; it is an update of the flame wars as they were known when blogging got started, of what they call "dissing" down in the 'hood, and what we used to call cut-low wars in high school back in the 1950s. Narcissists are both more prone to go on the attack and to feel wounded by online attacks or counterattacks. One has only to follow the comments on any Amazon book review to watch this phenomenon in action.

Rosen provides, very conveniently, a neurotic personality inventory (NPI) so you can determine whether you yourself or somebody you know appears over the top as far as narcissism goes. He offers some useful, common sense advice about how to back off if you find yourself trapped in constant cyber battles with people who emerge to taunt you. Or worse, you feel you are tempted taunt them. Cool

down, wait a while, count the use of the pronoun I, and recognize that it is a human being on the other end of the conversation.

Though most of his focus is on Facebook, he remarks that Twitter is absolutely the most egocentric medium, 140 characters of almost invariably self-centered mediocrity.

Emotional contagion is a new term to me, one which makes a lot of sense. We are social animals, and we respond to other people's expressed emotions. This is healthy when we cry in movies or at the end of a romance novel when the guy gets the girl. It is unhealthy when people are overexposed to rap or heavy metal music, movies or video games in which there is a lot of violence and other depressing material. Rosen cites many studies that show a high correlation between measurable depression and involvement in all sorts of electronic activity, including video games and music, but also Facebook.

We all let ourselves be more affected by the negative than the positive. In other words, the single cruel remark by somebody we don't even know about a photo we post on Facebook outweighs the good many positive comments from friends and likes. Considering how the anonymity of the Internet emboldens people to be cruel, being active on Facebook we really set ourselves up to be cut down. Perversely, the people who are most likely to feel the pain are those who are most likely to have been drawn to Facebook in the first place. These are people who do not have enough going on in their flesh and blood lives to give them the positive human feedback that they want.

Rosen includes a short mental-health questionnaire – nine questions – to measure whether or not you are depressed, and he has a lot of good advice what to do about it.

Rosen takes on one of the fond myths of our age. Authors such as James McGee find some benefit in video games. They make certain facets of our brain work better. Earl Hunt, writing in "Human Intelligence," says that such activity may increase measured intelligence. Rosen doesn't contradict him, but he does cite several studies that show correlations between video game usage and depression and poor physical health. The time a kid devotes to video games, which is often prodigious, is not available for learning, exercise, or normal socializing.

He also tackles the myth that your kids love to tell you, that they can multitask without any problem. You know instinctively it is a lie, and he comes up with the science and the statistics. As Daniel Kahneman describes in "Thinking Fast and Slow" the brain is only able to chew on one intellectually demanding task any time. What looks like multi-tasking is really only task switching, and there is a lot of inefficiency in going back and forth. It involves disengaging and re-engaging. Some activities such as video gaming and reading are inherently difficult to multitask. Other true background activities such as eating and listening to music are easier, but still cost a bit. The bottom line is that people are much better when they attempt to one thing well than many things in a disordered jumble.

Rosen offers a theory I had not read elsewhere that ADHD, which has grown so rapidly over the past few decades, is largely a self-induced condition. Our technology forces us to behave as if we had ADHD, and

lo and behold, the condition may be induced in people who are driven to behave frenetically because of their technology. The human animal evolves slowly. Genetic evolution takes place between human generations, and that that, at an extremely measured pace. Our electronics, conversely, have generation lengths measured in years and even months. There is absolutely no way we can be biologically equipped for the changes we are subjecting ourselves to. When it comes to ADHD, the lesson would be, simply back off and be content to be the animals which nature had us evolve to be. The good news is the plasticity of our brains. We can adapt; it is a question of choosing optimal adaptations.

Rosen relates technology to other problems which have become much more widespread over the last few decades:

- Internet induced hypochondria, in which people immerse themselves in Internet content and convince themselves that they are suffering from every illness described. This is certainly fed by prescription drug advertising on television.
- Social disorders and failure to successfully enter society. People who have a difficult time interacting with others now have a place to escape – the Internet – where they did not have to deal face to face with other people. They can do much of their school work there, and they can make a living online. Rosen doesn't say so, but this goes hand-in-hand with the diminution of traditional socializing mechanisms. Schools no longer teach social dancing, support glee clubs, encourage debate clubs, or do so many of the traditional activities that allowed young people to interact in a structured environment. Parents no longer provide the models of courtesy and politeness that they did 50 years ago. It is not surprising that the millennial generation is not as well socialized as their parents or grandparents.
- Voyeurism, sexting and pornography. I had not heard about the second before – that's what they call Anthony Wiener's crime. It fits in a pattern. These distractions keep children from developing into full functioning adults, or allow adults to retreat into a not very healthy and private world.
- Narcissism. Rosen cites studies confirming a significant increase in narcissism among young people, and a corresponding lack of empathy. These are, of course, correlated with the massive exposure that children get to all sorts of body beautiful propaganda, and their removal via electronic media from the immediacy of face-to-face interaction and the concomitant immediate and personal feedback that should rebuff antisocial behavior. Children can affect antisocial without overly grave consequences, and they learned to do so. The most obvious case in point is swearing. Kids swear with impunity over Facebook, and now to their parents' faces. It is a tide that parents, for lack of unity and lack of certainty in themselves, have been powerless to stop.
- Body fetishism, including anorexia, bulimia, screwy diets, radical exercise programs, surgery and all sorts of nonsense to correct illusory or minimal flaws. The media has so captured our minds that we do not have the confidence to confront the world as who we are, but rather we allow ourselves to be manipulated into changing our very essence. That which we do not change, we often grossly misrepresent over the Internet, as if our cyberpersonality were the real thing and the flesh and blood merely the author of a puppet theater.

-

Rosen refers several times to his previous book, "Me, MySpace and I: Parenting the Net Generation." I hope it goes into the most essential argument. The very survival of any society depends on its ability to reproduce itself. Biologically, this means having kids. Culturally, it means inculcating in those children the same culture that their parents had. I might add, the culture that made their parents' ancestors successful enough that that generation might be born. We are failing mightily on both counts. People are not having children. We are so self obsessed that we do not commit ourselves to loving relationships. If we do happen to get into a relationship, as often as not children are an accidental afterthought. When we do have children, we as often as not give their moral instruction over to uncaring government schools. Although we stuff their young brains full of sex education, nobody prepares our children for marriage and parenthood. And certainly nobody feels that our culture is something to be passed on. Its defining aspects, a belief in Christianity and in America's uniqueness, are in such widespread disrepute that it takes a brave person to say a word in their defense, especially in a public school or university. But if not those, what elements of culture do most of us have to pass on? In practice we have none, and all of the pernicious things which Rosen so well documents have rushed in to fill the void.