

Is social media making you anti-social?

May 28 2009, By Wailin Wong

The turning point came around November for Jessi Odenbach.

"I noticed I was online more and more often," said the 26-year-old Chicagoan. "I'd go home and immediately turn on my laptop. I finally took the plunge and got the [iPhone](#), and I can't get away from it now. ... I'll wake up in the morning and before I even get out of bed, I'm checking my [e-mail](#) and my Twitter stream on my phone."

It probably doesn't help that Odenbach started this month as the [social media](#) manager for a local camera equipment company. But she is aware of how tethered she has become to technology, and has tried to set boundaries.

Every Tuesday, for example, she plays euchre with her girlfriends.

"I make sure to put the phone down and interact with them because it's the only time during the week where we get to see each other," Odenbach said.

The strong pull of technology that can interfere with social engagement is a common experience in a culture accustomed to easy Internet access, a 24-hour news cycle and instant communication.

Even critics who recognize the benefits of social media warn against rapid and unchecked adoption of technology that has the potential to erode intimacy and further fragment attention spans. Many Web denizens are aware of the Internet's addictive quality and the anxiety that

can accompany a foray into social media, such as worrying that even a temporary distraction from the screen will mean missing crucial updates and in-jokes. As a result, some consumers are partially unplugging or seeking other ways to integrate technology into life.

Yet the dark side exists. One extreme example of what counselor Hilarie Cash calls "uncritical" involvement with technology is a college dropout who spent six years playing video games and surfing the Web.

When he decided to return to school, he had to re-learn focus through Sudoku puzzles and teaching himself Japanese, said Cash, who worked with him. Cash, of Redmond, Wash., is an Internet and video-game-addict counselor.

Cash said her client realized that his self-discipline was like a muscle that had atrophied. "(He said) 'I have to build it back before I can possibly be successful again,'" she recalled.

David Levy, a professor at the Information School at the University of Washington, believes the social media phenomenon is part of a cultural swing that started with the industrial revolution.

"Really nothing has slowed us down," said Levy. "In other words, we've been witnessing a 200-year acceleration."

A computer scientist by training, Levy has studied how the Arts and Crafts movement of the 19th century emerged as a reaction against the potentially dehumanizing effects of industrialization.

Levy, who also has a degree in calligraphy and bookbinding, argues that modern society needs to restore a balance between the contemplative and technology-driven, goal-oriented sides of life.

Then there are those who believe technology can help or hinder work and even artistic pursuits, depending on how it's used.

Take Brian Mazzaferri, the lead singer of I Fight Dragons, a Chicago band that blends video-game music and sounds with pop rock. When publicizing his music online, Mazzaferri felt guilty he wasn't spending enough time writing and practicing. His early promotional efforts involved adding friends on MySpace, which he found ineffective because it didn't lead to communication with fans.

"There's so many things you can do online that make you feel you're doing something, when in reality you're doing nothing," Mazzaferri said.

He now works with Natiiv Arts & Media, a local firm that provides social media training for artists. He started talking with fans and fellow musicians on Twitter and discovered that he could share ideas directly with them, receive feedback and enhance his music.

"A lot of people, especially in our culture, tend to view artists as rarefied," Mazzaferri said. "You go off and have a meditative, creative state and shut yourself off from the world. I really like the idea of viewing it the other way -- that artists have to go to work like everyone else."

But for others, the boundaries between work and play have blurred to become non-existent.

"My personal life and business life have become one, and I don't know if that's a good or bad thing," said Michael Brito, a social media strategist at Intel. He estimates he's online 18 hours a day, either behind a computer or on his iPhone.

"At this point, it's not detrimental to any of my real relationships," said

Brito, referring to family and friends that he sees offline. "If it ever did, I'd have to sit back and re-evaluate my behavior."

Still, Brito limits his children's computer time and has enrolled them in swim and dance lessons. "They don't have to be behind a computer 20 hours a day," he said. "We really want them to be more balanced."

Not everyone feels like they can push back against the inertia of a technology-driven consumer culture.

Levy said he has informally surveyed more than 200 undergraduate students across the country and more than 80 percent of them say they spend too much time online. Younger people "are actually reflecting on this and they are concerned about it," Levy said. "They also feel like there is no way to deal with it."

It is possible to scale back. Ken Salkover, a 39-year-old Skokie, Ill., resident, joined Facebook and started a personal blog about a year ago. He also signed up for Twitter around the holidays.

Now Salkover rarely updates his blog, limits Facebook usage to 15 minutes a day and switched to a new e-mail account to cut off unwanted messages. The digital diet stemmed from a realization that it was too easy to "spend almost all my free time on the computer, either social networking or switching to the television network Web sites."

"I'm doing better than I was once was," Salkover said. "At some point, you realize how valuable your time is."

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