

Disconnected

LYNDA SMITH

Lynda Smith wrote the following essay for her second-semester college English course. Originally, she used the *Arguing Crisis* chapter of this book (see Chapter 10) to reveal a critical part of everyday life that people normally take for granted or ignore entirely. In the argument, she uses a wide range of rhetorical strategies.

A jogger runs down the Leelanau Trail talking on a cell phone. A student text-messages while in class. High-speed. Real-time. BlackBerry, Razr, and Firefly. Like it or not, technologically advanced communication devices have taken over our lives. Rapidly reaching epidemic proportions, we have come to accept and rely on them as if our very lives depended on it. But have we slowed down long enough to ask ourselves, is “faster” giving us more time? Are more ways to connect making us more connected? Have we compromised our values for mass produced values?

I admit it! I am a technophobe. Or in technospeak, a P.O.N.A. (acronym for *person of no account*). Yes, I have exercised my right to choose what communication devices I will allow in my world. But, it's hard. Every day, I am bombarded with catchy commercials, communication catalogs, and people who are trying to convince me all of this techno stuff is inevitable, a sign of the times, the way of the world. That “faster” will give me more time and being hyper-connected will fulfill my needs for connecting with

friends and loved ones. While I do own a cell phone (it's in my car somewhere) and a computer, I resent the fact that the outside world attempts to persuade me to compromise my values for mass-produced values. I treasure the choice to talk to whom I choose when I choose, time to enjoy a lazy walk in the woods where the only sound is nature, real-time, face-to-face conversations with close friends over a nice dinner and a bottle of wine. Call me old-fashioned, but I'm not convinced all this technology is giving us more time or making us more connected.

Communication technology has been around for a long time. “In point of fact, humans have been creating ways to transmit, store and manipulate information and messages for centuries—if not millennia” (Thurlo et al. 37). Inventions such as the printing press, telegraph, and telephone were exciting, important innovations that for the first time allowed us to “reach out and touch” family and friends in ways that were previously not available. But, with the rapid advancement of present-day technologies, it has become an obsession to be connected with the latest devices.

Advertising for these communication devices is big business. Appealing to our desires for connectedness and more leisure time, communication conglomerates spend billions of dollars on advertising campaigns. Their ads are bigger and more prevalent than ever before. Every day we hear about new inventions that make it easier to stay connected. We are bombarded with catchy commercials and sophisticated ads for

Lynda Smith, “Disconnected.” Reprinted with the permission of the author.

high-speed Internet, long-distance calling plans, and cell phones. Infectious phrases such as "Can you hear me now?" saturate our subconscious, silently reinforcing our need for connection. High-speed Internet surfing caters to the rampant desire for instant gratification while quietly leading us to believe faster will give us more time. Visual images lure us in using color, strategically placed props, and text to appeal to our emotions. The omnipresent repetition of these persuasive messages is seducing us into a state of intellectual numbness, making us immune to logical thinking so we will buy their products. In the United States, there are now 194,479,364 cell phone users and 203,824,428 Internet users (United States, Central Intelligence Agency). We can't go anywhere these days without seeing a cell phone attached to someone's ear or pocket. Ask anyone on the street and he or she will tell you they have a cell phone "just in case" someone needs to contact them, or they are "handy to have" because they can do so many things. According to a report by the United States Department of Transportation, cell phone subscriptions rose from 340,213 in 1985 to a whopping 117,000,000 in 2001 (155). These numbers clearly indicate that this subliminal invasion has taken hold.

- 5 But are technologically advanced communication devices inevitable, or are we allowing huge corporations to lead us blindly from being real-time human beings to virtual puppets?

Human beings are social by nature. We desire heartfelt connections with our families and friends. This desire is exactly what

communication conglomerates use in their advertising campaigns to convince us that we need cell phones. This is how it works. First, they fill their ads with lots of pictures. Photos of smiling people talking on cell phones and pictures of the endless variety of wireless devices we can fill our lives with. Next, they bombard us with catchy phrases and text, phrases like "spread the word" and text such as "be connected" and "let's talk." In other words, they use a need to create a need.

Take my friend Randy, for example. When I first met him, his cell phone was his constant companion. He felt that he needed to be available for his family and friends any time day or night. And he was. Barely a minute went by that he was not talking on his phone. After a while, he started to realize the constant connection was taking up more and more of his time and the amount of stress in his life was increasing. What had initially started out as an innocent need to connect had turned into a self-perpetuating cycle. The more time he spent talking on the phone, the less connected he felt to his family and friends. That in turn triggered the need to feel connected, and the cycle would repeat. He came to realize that the phone was preventing him from spending quality face-to-face time with loved ones as well as himself. He has since learned to use his phone in moderation.

Being connected is easier than ever before, but it has allowed us to become "hyper-connected." The time we spend keeping "in touch" is on the rise. Cell phone customers used 1.5 trillion MOU's (minutes of use) in 2005, up 36% from 1.1 trillion in 2004 ("Wireless"). This obsession with our

cell phones has become a type of cultural addiction. The *Encyclopedia of Psychology* describes an addiction as an "overpowering desire or need for an . . . action or interaction . . . that produces a psychophysical 'high.' This desire or need is repetitive, impulsive, and compulsive in nature" (Hatterer 16). Our obsession with cell phones is not unlike other addictions that consume our lives—addictions such as working too much, buying too much useless stuff, or even taking drugs.

And the more an addiction takes over, the more our true needs are not being met. While many would insist that talking on their cell phones is synonymous to face-to-face communication, the fact remains that talking on a cell phone can't replace real-time human connection with its eye-to-eye contact, physical touches, and emotional responses.

- 10 In this fast-paced society of compacted time restraints, we long for more leisure time. At the same time, we are consumed with the desire for instant gratification. We want immediate access to people, information, and services any time, day or night. We believe that somehow if we do everything faster, we will have more free time. Our lives have become a world filled with services to help us move through life with increased speed. We have drive-thrus for food, banking, even laundry so we don't have to leave our cars. We have u-scan checkouts at grocery stores so we don't have to wait in line. And now, different speeds at which we can choose to move through life. There is high speed, turbo speed, and new elite speeds where you can, without leaving your home, hit speeds up to 6.0 Mbps (AT&T). This

desire for speed is just one more way that big communication companies can use to draw us in. They appeal to our desire for more time by supplying us with increasingly faster services.

Even though we can connect with the world at faster rates, our whole sense of time gets warped. We get mesmerized by the speed and actually end up with less time. It becomes a self-perpetuating cycle. The faster we go, the more time spent, the less time we have, the greater our needs, the more we crave, and the faster we want to go. AT&T's new slogan promises, "Your world delivered." But is all that speed really giving us the time and connections we desire? Mark Slouka's example in his book *War of the Worlds* says it well:

As everyone knows, unreality increases with speed. Walking across a landscape at six miles an hour, we experience the particular reality of place: its smells, sounds, colors, textures, and so on. Driving at seventy miles an hour, the experience is very different. The car isolates us, distances us; the world beyond the windshield—whether desert mesa or rolling farmland—seems vaguely unreal. At supersonic speeds, the divorce is complete. A landscape at 30,000 feet is an abstraction, as unlike real life as a painting. (3)

In other words, the further we move away from our basic needs, the more separated from our lives we become.

Technologically advanced communication devices are the guiding force leading us into our own virtual worlds. For example,

look at the recent advancements in cell phones. Besides talking on them, we can e-mail, text-message, watch TV, play games, and take pictures. The Samsung Company is now working on developing a cell phone that can "feel, think, evolve, and reproduce" (Maney). That's scary. We already use computers for information, entertainment, companionship, and even love. "Our home computers . . . will soon come with a face capable of responding to our expressions, understanding our gestures, even reading our lips. Its eyes will follow us around the room. We'll be able to talk with it, argue with it, flirt with it. . . . Will it have emotions? You bet" (Slouka 8). That's even scarier!

The acceptance of these technological advances into our lives has propelled us toward a virtual society. What does this mean?

A culture once based exclusively on physical contact is in the process of being transformed into one where goods and services are accessible without the need for face-to-face contact with other people. Technology has enabled this transformation toward virtual societies. Technology is the glue that makes virtual societies plausible, but technology alone does not guarantee the viability of the virtual society, for the technical power must be used intelligently and deliberately by an informed population. (qtd. in Agres et al.)

virtual societies one might believe that I am totally against computers and cell phones. Although I am a self-proclaimed technophobe, I do recognize there are benefits to having both. Having a computer has enabled me to write this paper, and it allows me to keep in contact with friends and family who live far away. And while I have never had to use a cell phone for an emergency, I do believe it is an important reason to have one. More than 224,000 9-1-1 calls are placed each day and many lives have been saved ("Wireless"). But I am still not convinced that all this technology stuff has given me more time or has made me feel more connected. Mark Burch says it best:

To the degree that we cultivate the capacity to enter deeply into the experience of the moment, we also cultivate the experience of joy, plenitude, and well-being in our lives. This requires few things, but the capacity to know and enjoy them with profound intensity. It is a process, finally, of cultivating oneself and one's relationships with others. . . . Mainstream society consists of the exact opposite—ever-briefer and more superficial encounters with ever-larger quantities of goods, services, and people. There is no pleasure or contact, only the giddy adrenaline-fueled whirl of changing experience without substance, touch without intimacy, information without meaning, company without community. (qtd. in Pierce 305)

- 15 With all this talk about cell phone addiction, high-speed Internet surfing, and Computers and cell phones can benefit our lives, but spending too much time

with them can lure us away from real-time experiences, face-to-face interactions, and isolate us from our surroundings. We need to ask ourselves: Are we going to accept these devices as inevitable, a sign of the times, the way of the world? Are we so busy connecting with the outer world that we have forgotten what it feels like to connect with our inner worlds? Have we moved away from our most basic needs? "Within the universe created by Isaac Asimov [a science fiction writer], people slipped unconsciously into a virtual society. The pendulum swung from a physical to a virtual society without any examination or recognition of the changes . . ." (Agres et al.). What will your choice be?

Works Cited

- Agres, Carole, et al. "Transformation to Virtual Societies: Forces and Issues." *Information Society*, vol. 14, no. 2, Mar. 1998, pp. 71-82, doi: 10.1080/019722498128881.
- AT&T. *Why Just Surf When You Can Fly?* 2006.
- Grmoljez, Aimee. "Wireless Industry: Growing and Competitive." Energy and Telecommunications Interim Committee, Helena, 1 May 2008. Presentation.
- Hatterer, L. J. "Addictive Process." *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, edited by Raymond J. Corsini, J. Wiley & Sons, 1994.
- Maney, Kevin. "Top Popped on What Cell Phone Technology Can Do for Us." *USA Today*, 1 Mar. 2006.
- Pierce, Linda Breen. *Choosing Simplicity*. Gallagher Press, 2000.
- Slouka, Mark. *War of the Worlds*. Basic Books, 1995.
- Thurlo, Crispin, et al. *Computer Mediated Communication: Social Interaction and the Net*. Sage Publications, 2004.
- United States, Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook*, 2006.
- United States, Dept. of Transportation, Research and Innovative Technology Administration, Bureau of Transportation Statistics. "Cell Phone Service Subscriptions: 1985-July 2001." *Transportation Statistics Annual Report*, 2001.
- "Wireless Quick Facts." CTIA, Apr. 2006, files.ctia.org/pdf/Wireless_Quick_Facts_April_06.pdf.