

## Healthy Mind in the Information Society

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to understand how technological advancements in information, particularly unprecedented social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp, has been controlling and badly affecting human life with or without our conscious knowledge. It is also observed that as a result of facing uninterrupted flow of information we have become too engaged in sorting out the information. In the process we drain ourselves of our vital energy and are left with fatigue, feelings of lack of control and frustration. It has also been suggested that actively and freely trying out different options lead to creativity but due to lack of free time the ability to exercise creativity is being compromised. By adopting some principles of organization like following time schedule and dividing long term goal into short term ones gives more satisfaction than only having a sole long-term goal. Other techniques like flow experience and mindfulness meditation technique can be helpful in controlling distractions of the mind.

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The day is far when we will be guided and also manipulated by technology. Robots and driverless cars have already started their jobs with unmatched efficiency in comparison to humans. While this technology is useful in saving us time and reducing errors especially in diagnosis of diseases and surgeries it can have harmful effect on employment of human beings. Thirty years ago, travel agents made our airline and rail reservations, salesclerks helped us find us what we were looking for in stores, and professional typists or secretaries helped busy people with their correspondence. Now we do most of those things ourselves. The information age has off-loaded a great deal of the work previously done by people we could call information specialists onto all of the rest of us. We are doing the jobs of ten different people while still trying to keep up with our lives, our children, our hobbies, and our favorite TV shows. We are all faced with unprecedented amount of information to remember, and small objects to keep track of. In this age of iPods and thumb drives, when your smartphone can record videos, brows 200 million websites, and tell you how many calories are in that strawberry ice-cream, most of us still try to keep track of things using the systems that were put in place in a precomputerized era. The past generation has seen an explosion of choices facing consumers. In 1976, the average supermarket stocked 9,000 unique products; today that number has gone up to 40,000, yet the average person gets 80% - 85% of their needs in only 150 different supermarket items. That means we need to ignore 39,850 items in the store.

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Neuroscientists have discovered that unproductivity and loss of drive can result from decision overload. Our brains don't automatically prioritize decisions if faced with too many things at a time, leading to neural fatigue, leaving no energy for the important decisions. According to Daniel Levitin, a neuroscientist at McGill University, Canada, recent research shows that people who were asked to make a series of meaningless decisions- for example, whether to write with a ballpoint pen or felt-tip pen- showed poorer impulse control and lack of judgment about subsequent decisions. Today we are faced with unprecedented amount of information than ever before in human history. As *New York Times* writer Dennis Overbye observes, this information consists "more and more information about our lives- where we shop and what we buy- the economy, the genomes of innumerable organisms we can't even name yet, galaxies of stars that are yet to be counted" Such information moves faster and faster through bigger and bigger computers down to everybody's fingertips, which are holding devices with more processing power than the Apollo mission control." Scientists of information have counted all this: compared to 1986 Americans galloped five times more information each day. This is equivalent to 175 newspapers (Alleyne, 2011). Every day each of us uses 34 gigabytes or 100,000 words. 21,274 television stations of the world produce 85,000 hours of original programming each day where we spend an average 5 hours of television each day. It still excludes YouTube, which uploads 6000 hours of audio-video each hour. In addition to that Computer gaming consumes more bytes than all other media put together, including the Internet, TV, Books, DVDs and magazines. We have created 300 exabytes (300,000,000,000,000,000,000 pieces) of human-made information. Every one of us has the amount of information equal to half a million books stored on our computers.

### *Freedom in technological world*

Our brain has the ability to process the information we receive but at a cost: we can have difficulty choosing important information from the unimportant one. This process makes us fatigued. Neurons in our brains have living cells with a metabolism; their food, oxygen and glucose, is necessary for them to work for us and when they work too hard- in processing the information we receive- we experience tiredness. Every new post on Facebook, every text message on WhatsApp you get from a friend is contending for resources in your brain with important things like whether to admit your child in school A or school B, where to find a better job, of how to convince your wife about next investment option. Many of us are increasingly finding it difficult to manage all this flood of information. According to Levitin (2014), part of the reason of this problem is that our brains evolved to help us deal with life during hunter-gatherer phase of our evolution. During that time, it was unlikely to come across more than around thousand people in a person's lifetime. But today in the modern cities you will come across these many people in just half an hour. Our attentional filter has limited capacity to effectively process inflow of information. We can at most process 120 bits of information per second. To simplify it, we cannot have conversation with more than two people at a time. But when too much information is coming to us, it is difficult to fully understand any one source and we may respond half prepared to the sources. It may also give rise to multitasking, a function that is very unique to us humans. Other animals are not seen as involving themselves in any kind of multitasking. Many people feel proud to complete many tasks at the same time and consider it to be their strength. But research has shown that multitasking increases the production of stress hormone cortisol in our brain as well as the fight or flight hormone adrenaline which can lead to mental fog or scrambled thinking (Levitin, 2014). It also leads to dopamine-addiction feedback loop, effectively rewarding the brain for losing focus and for frequently finding new sources of stimulation. As if this is not enough, our prefrontal cortex has a novelty bias that means it can easily get distracted by new information. Ironically, the same

area that we employ for staying on task gets distracted easily by new information. The result is losing focus and staying on the task at hand. The ultimate result is we end up with many little empty rewards that come with completing many sugarcoated tasks at the cost of loss of big reward that can come with sustained attention and focus for long duration (Levitin, 2014). Wilson (2010) found that being in a situation where you are trying to focus on a task and an email is sitting in your inbox can reduce your IQ by 10 points.

In order to deal effectively with overload of information, we cannot control the inflow of information but we can strive to manage it by adopting several ways that I have mentioned below.

### ***Creativity and critical thinking:***

Creativity requires thinking in novel ways. According to Levitin (2014) creativity involves the skillful integration of time- stopping daydreaming mode of the mind where it is quite relaxed and imagining and the time monitoring central executive mode which works to focus on a particular activity at a time. In all this process the relaxation phase is very crucial which modern technology can deprive you of. Technology provides us with set algorithm to solve any problem that can become counterintuitive for creativity. As discussed, earlier technology has been engaging us human beings in using computers in unprecedented large amount; making us increasingly less free to think freely and openly about an issue at hand. Those who develop technology may be able to use the faculty of their creativity for the development of new programmes but once the program is made available lay men are left with fixed uses; with no choice to solve problems in their own way. Critical thinking is necessary to think about an issue with many ways before coming to a sound conclusion. But increasing use of technology provide easy and fast answers at the expense of sufficiently thought-out options before coming to a satisfactory conclusion. The important thing here is not the answer but the process of reaching the answer that is important.

### ***Organization***

Uncontrolled use of technology can lead to chaos of orderly behavior. As discussed earlier, technology has supreme power to disrupt our attention for long. It is said that well organized mind can beat highly intelligent mind because with organization you can achieve things when you need them the most. In the age of information overload, it becomes difficult to carry out plans for long. Distractions are pervading nearly all of your actions. With the help of some techniques, we can hope to stay focused and motivated to achieve desired tasks.

### ***Categorization***

With categorization we can separate useful knowledge from distracting knowledge which otherwise becomes difficult to manage. Modern age information flow is incessant and it is difficult to keep track of it. Hence, the moment it appears to you can decide whether to go further and take cognizance of it or just discard it as unimportant. One technique that can be useful here is *shifting the burden of organizing from our brains to the external world*. Many people are loners when it comes to organizing their daily activities. They try to manage everything on their own but in doing so they exhaust themselves. Well organised people are skilled in assigning unimportant tasks to their subordinates. It can save them quality time that they can use for more important and meaningful work. Many people like to make a *To Do* list for their daily tasks but most of people just like to keep things in their head thinking that they won't forget any of it. But in addition to forgetting most of the things they are also left with less energy to use for other more important things. Cognitive neuroscientists have

discovered that our brain has limited energy to utilize in a day. If we spend it on unnecessary things, we will be left with lack of energy to deal with other important things.

### **Procrastination**

Procrastination can be seen as a failure of self-regulation, Planning, impulse control or a combination of all three (Levitin, 2014). According to Peers Steel who is an organizational psychologist, there are two causal factors that lead to procrastination- low tolerance for frustration and unwillingness to forgo reputation when the person has low confidence in the completion of the task at hand. While some goals are easy to attain, others are quite difficult. It is the tasks that require more efforts and long time to complete where procrastination usually takes place. Many successful individuals try to take out some time and engage themselves in some hobbies like music, gardening, or exercise that bring immediate reward. According to Roy Baumeister (\*\*\*\*), those individuals who are addicted to alcohol and other drugs are less able to plan for future hence are less able to delay gratification. Technology is addictive just as much as any mood-altering drug. Mobile phone addiction and internet addiction is becoming new area of research and treatment for researchers. Technology, particularly social media and internet is feeding you with instant gratification and reward with no any provision for later more important rewards. The more you use it the more you are likely to seek immediate gratification. Hence the one who long for greater and long-lasting happiness and success in life better try for activities that are difficult, challenging and having delayed reward.

### ***Flow experience and information overload***

Flow experience is a state of mind where an individual experiences total engagement with the activity of his liking (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). In this state individual forgets the consciousness of time; time vanishes for him or her. The person experiences supreme joy while being engaged in the activity. During flow one does her or his best, in fact, more than what one can expect of him or her. To experience flow the individual should be expert in the chosen activity. Novices are unlikely to experience flow because since they have to attend to more than one aspect of the activity their attention gets distracted which is counter productive to experiencing flow. During flow state, attention is focused on a limited perceptual field and that field. In this state, action and awareness merge. In order to experience flow, your mind should be able to focus on the task at hand. Unfortunately, by using too much technology and its varied information, our mind gets easily distracted. In order to make flow possible there should be very less or no disturbance from outside world. In order to excel in a chosen field, the individual should be able to experience flow as much as possible. In his acclaimed book *flow*, Csikszentmihalyi (2013) has given stories of many super achievers in varied fields of activity to emphasize the importance of flow in happiness and productivity.

### ***Mindfulness:***

Mindfulness has been found to be useful in many psychiatric disorders (Chandramani, 1998) in addition to help us be safe from excessive thinking and excessive worry. Mindfulness is a meditation technique originated from South Asia and believed to be practiced and professed by the Buddha. It is a relatively simple technique of initially focusing your attention on your breath as a way of bringing your attention to the present. Later on, in the training the person is able to stay in the present moment without any deliberate attempt. By living in the present and having been freed from worldly desires the person can devote his attention to the task at hand and can attain high levels of achievement in his chosen field while experiencing joy at the same time. In the technological era man is more likely to fall prey to advertising aimed

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to make him uncompromisingly materialistic. Materialism and mindfulness are antithetical to each other. Materialism's aim is to produce a culture of consumerism where everyone is trying to get richer without any end. Ironically, goods and products of everyday use as well as luxury items get updated and replaced every now and then creating craving for newer items. The Buddha once remarked that "desire is like wildfire that keeps increasing if it keeps consuming the forest". The technological man should be wary of the trap of technology induced materialism.

### CONCLUSION

In the present paper an attempt is made to understand the nature of how modern technology induced information is affecting our mental health. The researcher has used descriptive method to understand the nature of the phenomena. The researcher has tried to show that technology, instead of making us free from our work, has made us ultra busy at the cost of our physical and mental health. The researcher has shown how explosion of information is affecting us by giving examples of how rapidly information is generated and being thrown to us. The researcher has suggested some ways to deal with the challenges of technology like organizing our time and place, externalizing the burden of information, flow experience, engagement in creativity and mindfulness.

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### Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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