

Internet Addiction & the Central-Limit Theorem

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Do you ever think that your electronic communications devices are getting a little bit intrusive? At a performance of “God of Carnage”< <http://youtube.googleapis.com/v/HIInXwGU6Ww&> > presented by Lost Nation Theater,< <http://lostonationtheater.org/info/> > the local regional theatre in central Vermont (USA), one of the characters enrages everyone else at an evening meeting in a home by interrupting the serious discussions to answer his mobile phone. How many times have you interrupted a serious discussion at work or an intimate moment with your loved one(s) to answer a phone, tablet, notebook or tower computer’s imperious summons?

Internet addiction< <http://www.netaddiction.com/> > is a separate issue from what I think of as Internet-mediated attention deficit syndrome. A recent article by Tracy McVeigh< <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/tracymcveigh> > in the Guardian/Observer (which, ironically, I read using a Kindle program on a tablet computer) reported that “Internet addiction even worries Silicon Valley: Experts warn of the addictive power of technology”< <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/jul/29/internet-addiction-hooked-digital-technology> >. The journalist writes, “. . .attention is shifting from compulsive surfing to the effects of the all-pervasive demands that our phones, laptops, tablets and computers are making on us.”

Mike Elgan< <http://www.computerworld.com/s/author/9000162/Mike+Elgan> > discussed the distracting power of “a world of amusements . . . always just a click away” in a Computerworld article in March 2011< http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/9215078/Elgan_How_to_overcome_Internet_distraction_disorder >. He notes that spending time on distractions such as social-networking sites, online games, movie reviews and shopping can result in an *impression* of having done a lot of work; however, the key question is “What did I accomplish?” Alas, he writes, “For many, the honest answer is: ‘Not very much.’” Worse, “. . .as Internet distractions gobble up more of our time and attention, we feel like we’re working harder while our real work keeps piling up. So we force ourselves to work more and longer hours and bring more of our work home. The more we work, the more our minds rebel and gravitate to the amusements. It’s a self-reinforcing phenomenon that results in not really enjoying fun, and not getting our work done.”

Elgan suggests that one helpful approach to reduce distractions is the segregate work on specific devices and strictly observe the difference. Don’t play games or visit Facebook on your office computer; don’t read business e-mail on your mobile phone. Personally, I have used this approach for many years; for example, I do forward my phone to my mobile phone when I’m out of my home office – thus providing a single phone number for everyone – but I disconnect the autoforward at the end of the work day and turn off my phone when I go home.

The prevalence of instant communications has changed our conception of appropriate speed of communication. In my childhood (the 1950s) and youth (1960s), people routinely sent *correspondence on paper* via the mails; turnaround time could be a week for a simple written

communication. Naturally, we used telephones, but only Star Trek had portable communicators< <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNF51vBOQ0k> > resembling today's mobile phones. The first mobile-phone call was in 1973 – and the phone weighed a kilogram.< http://fc05.deviantart.net/fs45/f/2009/122/e/3/DynaTAC_8000X_versao_2_by_denuxo.jpg >

For many years, as a professor of statistics< <http://www.mekabay.com/courses/academic/norwich/qm213/index.htm> >, I've explained to students that the central-limit theorem< <http://www.khanacademy.org/math/statistics/v/central-limit-theorem> > has real-world applications. One form of the theorem is that, in the absence of additional information, any random event will most likely be average. Thus if we receive a phone call, we can expect that the call will be of average importance. The key is that if we consider what we're doing to be *more* important than average, *we should not answer the phone*. If what we're doing is *less* important than average, *answer the phone*. Now, the judgement of importance of the phone call can be improved by knowing who is calling or whether one has asked for a return call on a critical issue; the principle remains: don't interrupt your current activity unless you decide that the interruption has a higher importance to you than what you are doing.

I don't answer business calls after the day is over – I want to spend time with my wife, not continue interacting with business associates and students, no matter how nice they are. Recently I phoned a colleague on the West coast of the US and discovered that he was having lunch with fiancée, who lives in British Columbia. I told her to slap him upside the head for interrupting his lunch with her and told him *never* to put a phone call higher in priority than his time with his fiancée.

Should you have your e-mail client online while you are working? Once again, ask yourself whether what you are currently working on is more important or less important than average. If you are on a higher-priority task, don't look at your e-mail until later. And don't think that just because someone sends you an e-mail, you must respond immediately.

What if you know that some e-mails may in fact be high priority? You would like to see and respond to e-mails from a colleague who needs information urgently on a project or from your supervisor who may have priority-changing instructions for you. OK: use your e-mail client's functions for filing incoming e-mail according to sender, to subject, or even to specific keywords in the body of the message. File those in a folder called PRIORITY or IMPORTANT or URGENT and leave your e-mail client focused on that one, not on the general in-basket.

What about the "Important" flag available in many e-mail systems? It can be helpful, but only if everyone in your workgroup or circle agrees on guidelines for its use. For example, marking a message *important* may be justified if there is an urgent response required (and you will have to agree on what *urgent* means, too). However, if members of your group start applying the *important* flag to the most recent joke or for invitations to tennis games after work, the system will collapse into a mass of useless messages, all marked *important* – and you will be back to an undifferentiated mass of e-mail.

One final note: even if you notice a text message, instant message, e-mail message or voice-mail message, you do not have to respond immediately. Don't let the ease of communications become an imperious demand for response. Set your own priorities as you see fit and don't let other people's well-meaning interruptions deflect you from your purpose.

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