Digital Sabbath: Distraction addiction to the Internet, social media, and our digital devices

This article [first appeared in the New Sunday Times newspaper (Feb 16, 2014)](#). Here is my full, unedited article.

Recently from Jan. 25 to Feb. 3, 2014, I underwent a self-imposed [Digital Sabbath](#). For ten days, I stayed offline. I was curious to see how unplugging from the Internet, social media, and my mobile digital devices would affect me.

Digital Sabbath: Taking a break from the ubiquitous and demanding Internet, social media, and our digital devices (photo from liahalsall.com).

In the [World Unplugged](#) study in 2010, 1,000 university students from ten countries were asked to stay offline for 24 hours. For some of these students, staying offline became unbearable. They reported a motley of withdrawal symptoms which included anxiety, depression, confusion, and loneliness. Some

even reported [phantom cellphone vibrations](#) where they mistakenly thought that their phones were vibrating. The withdrawal symptoms were so bad that more than half the study's participants failed to complete the study.

Deep entanglement with our devices: Unplugging even for a single day can become a stressful experience (photo from brightlightsearch.blogspot.com).

Studies such as from World Unplugged underscore how deeply and intricately information technology has become entangled with our daily lives.

That we are so entangled with technology is nothing new or revolutionary, writes [Alex Soojung-Kim Pang](#) in his book ["The Distraction Addiction"](#). Throughout history, humans have been inseparable from technology. Technology innovations have helped shape and define us humans. Our relationship with computers, however, is unique, different from what we have with other technologies. We tend to become deeply attached to our computers, treating them as extensions of our minds. As computers become increasingly responsive, interactive, adaptive, and in some cases, more social, their capacity to affect us would increase – and our attachment and reliance on them would further deepen.
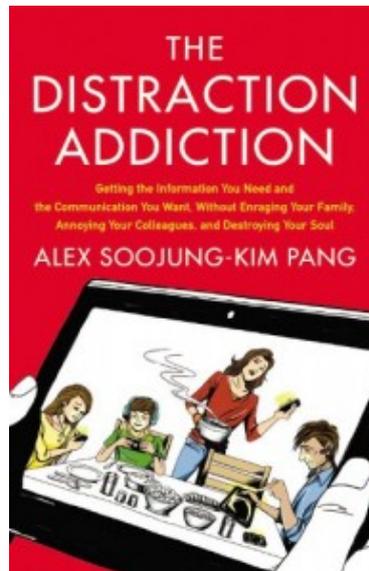
"The Distraction Addiction" by Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

But the problem with information technology, according to Soojung-Kim Pang, is it is poorly designed and thoughtlessly used. Computers today are faster, but are we writing and reading faster or remembering more today? Or has our workload increased instead?

Technology innovations ironically do not always reduce our workload, as first observed by English economist [William Stanley Jevons](#) in 1865 and then by historian [Ruth Schwatz Cowan](#) from the University of Pennsylvania in 1983. Innovations such as the Internet and mobile digital devices, for instance, have increased the amount of alerts and messages that are sent and received and that must be acted upon. So, while these technologies have made our work easier, faster, and more efficient, they have also increased our workload and created additional work — precisely because our work have been improved. Thanks to these technologies, the standard by which our work should now be accomplished has also been raised. For instance, we are now expected to be accessible at all times.

With increased workload and work demands, our stress levels would increase in tandem. In 2008, writer [Linda Stone](#) observed that whenever people (including herself) checked their emails, people would unconsciously hold their breath. Stone called this condition ["email apnea",](#) and this condition is caused by anxiety when people read their emails, dreading news about deadlines, problems,

concerns, or whatever fires that need to be put out. A [2012 study by Mark and his colleagues](#) further found that employees who frequently checked their emails and who received more emails experienced higher stress than those who checked their emails less and who received less emails.

The Internet, social media, and mobile digital devices have changed the way and speed we communicate with one another. [Catherine Steiner-Adair](#), in her book [“The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age”](#), reveals that while such technologies help us connect to more people than ever, these technologies also paradoxically disconnect us from them. When it comes to relationships, such technologies favor quantity over quality, breadth over depth, and superficiality over intimacy. Increased used of digital devices have caused us to spend more time on these devices and less time relating on a more meaningful way with our family and friends.
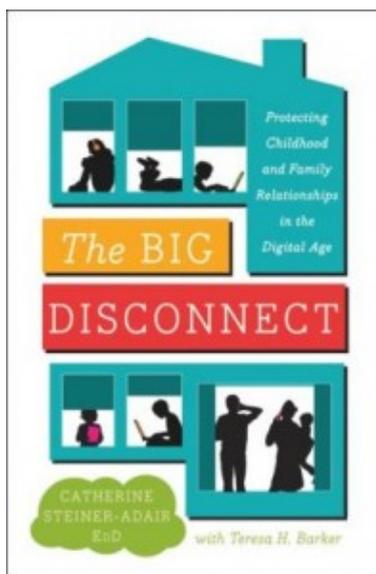
“The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age” by Catherine Steiner-Adair

Information technology paradox: Connected to others but yet disconnected from them (including those beside you) (photo from techland.time.com).

Because of information technology, we have become more distracted, impulsive, and impatient. Our attention span has declined, and we multitask more. And our reading comprehension has also declined. As pointed out by Nicholas Carr in his book "The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains", frequent reading off a computer screen encourages shallow reading where we "scan" sentences: reading quickly but superficially and without reflecting deeply on what have been read.

Our children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the Internet and digital media because our brains take an astonishingly long time to mature. Our prefrontal cortex, for instance, takes 25 years to fully develop. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive and cognitive functions that include functions for regulating behavior, distinguishing between right and wrong, and self-control. That the prefrontal cortex is responsible also for self-control is consequential for two reasons. Firstly, numerous studies have revealed that information technologies cause lower self control in children, and secondly, children's self-control is found to be the greatest predictor of their adulthood success. Research by Walter Mischel in the late 1960s and recently by Terrie Moffitt and his team in 2011 have consistently shown that the more children can delay their gratification (that is, have greater self-control), the more likely these children would be healthy, wealthy, and more intelligent in their adulthood lives.

The landmark study, so-called the "Marshmallow Test", by Stanford University's Walter Mischel showed that children who can delay their gratification (i.e., have greater self control) would likely be successful later in their adulthood lives. Self control is the greatest predictor of a child's success later in life (photo from www.dailyfinance.com).

Consequently, Steiner-Adair urges parents to be more careful in allowing their children access to information technologies. But instead of limiting their children's exposure, some parents mistakenly increase it by using computers and other mobile devices as surrogates to educate their children. Digital devices like iPads do help in learning, but they are merely tools and cannot replace the role of direct and personal engagement from parents. In [2010, Rebekah Richert and her colleagues at the University of California](#) showed that children appeared not to have learned any new words after watching educational DVDs on vocabulary for six weeks. Instead, children who were directly taught by their parents and without DVD support learned far more.

How children learn best: Information

Information technology has no doubt brought us many benefits. But we need to understand that information technology brings both the good and the bad.

Soojung-Kim Pang encourages "contemplative computing" practice – a blend between science and philosophy – to understand how information technology affects us and how we can create a healthy and more balanced relationship with it. Contemplative computing includes determining our online habits and using social media more mindfully. Even the use of so-called Zenware software such as Freedom and WriteRoom can improve our work productivity by helping to remove distractions that would cause us to multitask.

Soojung-Kim Pang further recommends the regular use of restorative spaces or activities, where we can go or what we can do to think and reflect in peace, and the regular practice of Digital Sabbath where we go completely offline. All these are to help us maintain focus, become less distracted, and have a sense of being away and at the same time a sense of being connected to our life ideals or philosophies, without the interference from information technology.

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang takes a break too from the

online cacophony and distraction (photo from nationaldayofunplugging.com).

Meditating helps too. Far from just some quaint activity done by Buddhist monks, a series of scientific studies particularly by [Richard Davidson and Antoine Lutz from University of Wisconsin-Madison](#) have shown that people who meditate often are less distracted, have longer attention span, and have greater memory. And increasingly more people are meditating too, as revealed by [Kate Pickert](#) in her article ["The Art of Mindfulness"](#) in the Time magazine (Feb. 3, 2014). She writes about the [MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction)](#) classes. Since its inception in 1979, MBSR has more than 1,000 class instructors in over 30 countries. MBSR teaches people mindfulness techniques that include meditation to cope with the online cacophony and to calm their busy minds.

Meditating has been scientifically shown to improve concentration, attention span, and memory (photo from www.theepochtimes.com).

Time article "The Art of Mindfulness" by Kate Pickert (Feb 3, 2014) discusses about the importance of taking a break from digital media. Meditation can be helpful.

Steiner-Adair concludes her book by reminding parents to develop a family philosophy about how information technology would be used, so its usage reflects and supports the family values. The incontrovertible truth, Steiner-Adair maintains, is children need their parents' time and their direct and personal engagement.

At the end, I came out from my Digital Sabbath more mindful. I have become more self-controlled in using the Internet while I am at work. I have terminated my cable TV because my family and I seldom watch TV anyway. I have downgraded my [BlackBerry](#) plan to a simpler broadband plan, and my BlackBerry has been set so it no longer gives an audible or vibration alert when new emails or messages come in. I would again wear a wristwatch after nearly twenty years lest I be tricked into checking my emails if I were to use my smartphone to tell time. I will check my emails and messages when I need to and not because my BlackBerry tells me to.

During the ten days of my Digital Sabbath, I had received over a hundred emails of which more than two-thirds were either spams or scams and the rest were

legitimate emails – but none of them needed my immediate response. I had missed nothing.
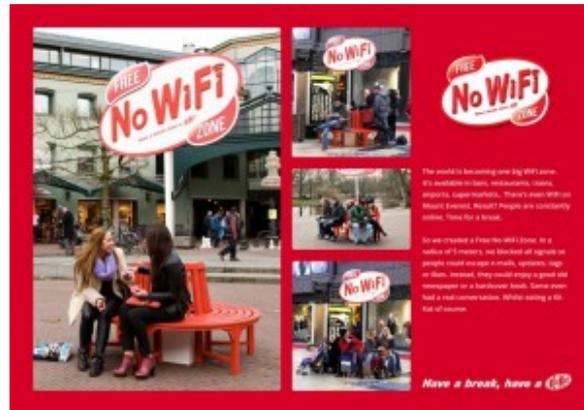
It would be nice to see this instead: No WiFi zone for people to take a break and connect to others in a more meaningful manner (photo from adsoftheworld.com).