

Thumbs away

I sit down to eat with family and friends, hoping for a good conversation in a trusting environment. Along with plates and dishes, an inedible ingredient is added. Phones are added and fingers begin to swipe and thumbs begin to scroll and conversation ceases. The same scenario is repeated in restaurants and around family tables I hate it!

Some time ago, I picked up an interesting book by Mary Aiken called, “The Cyber Effect.” Mary is an international Cyberpsychologist who explores how human behaviour changes online. Her in-depth study deals with what happens when humans and technology collide; the internet addiction; cyber babies; gameaholics, cyber romance, cyber gambling; the deep Web among other things.

She says that the internet is a place where we can “make friends with people we’d otherwise never know-gain insights into other lives and situations. This is socially broadening and educational and also generates empathy and understanding. For individuals who are socially isolated –due to distance or personality issues-there’s now a place to reach out and find meaningful relationships. For young people who are lonely and are curious about their sexuality, the Internet offers a way to explore.”

The internet encourages anonymity, cyber socialization, on-line syndication, life of adventure, sexual exploration, and is designed to addict. The Internet always delivers breaking news, new surprises, personal messages, fast delivery, intermittent rewards as well as apps that push, notify and alert. And the average adult check his or her phone 200 times a day, an average of every 5 minutes.

“Connectivity” is the new normal. We use cell phones to read the news, connect with friends; shop, pay bills, share photographs. We are not just learning new devices, new interfaces, new apps; we are learning how to live in a totally new environment – cyberspace. People spend more time on Facebook than they do eating and drinking. The compulsive on-line shopper is rewarded for foraging and finding, hunting and gathering. Every moment is a Cyber Monday moment.

On-line gaming and gambling is big business and is often associated with a loss of the sense of time, basic desires, withdrawal, symptoms of anger, depression, social isolation, loss of control. Porn sites receive more visitors each month than Amazon, Netflix and Twitter combined. Sexually compulsive individuals are attracted to such sites because of anonymity. One can find a limitless supply of partners whether you are at home, at work or on the phone.

In the past, we used TV to be a glorified babysitter for a child. Now, we ask when to introduce a baby to a tablet and let its thumbs do the scrolling. Could it be that parents spend more time on Facetime than face time with their child? Could it be that we are rearing children to become less sociable; less likely to form deep and lasting relationships; finding contact with others problematic? Do children have to be kept busy all the time through the use of gadgets rather than using their innate ability to explore and be creative on their own?

One chapter explore the impact of cell phones, tablets and the Internet on babies and children. It challenges the modern perception that children need to be kept busy and occupied at all times. They can be allowed to be bored. No electronic device or app can replace talking, cuddling, laughing, playing silly games, holding hands or reading a book.

For teenagers, the internet is an adventure park where they can play, socialize, interact, learn, experiment, and take risks. The posting of selfies begs the question to “like me like this.” Who is this self that is portrayed on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, LinkedIn? Does it depend on the number of likes and hits? Is it constantly evolving both psychologically and digitally? Does it generate an oversized ego, a narcissistic view and a preoccupation with accomplishments?

Aiken says that “the Internet is not going away. We are moving to a place where we don’t have a choice but to engage – if you want to study, have a job, do research, be informed, access your healthcare benefits, or pay your bill. Technology has become as natural as the air we breathe, as necessary to twenty-first century survival as the water that replenishes our bodies. It has become part of our environment. Therefore the challenge could be an evolutionary one. Rather than talking about just addiction, we could discuss adaptation.”

She concludes her mammoth study of the Internet and its challenges by saying the battle we must now engage in is a battle between humanity and artificial intelligence. “It’s time to forget about our differences – gender, ethnicity, nationality and focus on the thing that unites us, our humanity.”