

Sample Argument Essay, Regents Task 2: Digital Media

According to a new study from the Kaiser Family Foundation, “The average young American now spends practically every waking minute — except for the time in school — using a smart phone, computer, television or other electronic device” (LeWin). But is living in a digital world helpful or harmful to people? While some argue that technology has brought people closer, allowed for the open exchange of ideas, and provided easy access to information, others believe that technology has hurt personal interactions, limited use of more quality educational material, and caused great distractions. Living in a digital world may make life convenient, but it has irrefutable negative effects on human beings.

Perhaps the most devastating effect of technology is the impact it has had on personal relationships. In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle “maintains that people who choose to devote large portions of their time to connecting online are more isolated than ever in their non-virtual lives, leading to emotional disconnection, mental fatigue and anxiety” (Price). In other words, although people believe they are forming deep connections online, they are truly not, as virtual lives are just that: *virtual*, not real. When the computer or phone is turned off, people find themselves just as alone as before. In addition, technology allows people to avoid real life. Turkle explains, “The most dramatic change is our ability to be ‘elsewhere’ at any point in time, to sidestep what is difficult, what is hard in a personal interaction and go to another place where it does not have to be dealt with” (Price). In real life, people must face conflict and talk about issues that bother them, whereas online, people can ignore the conversations in which they do not want to participate and “hide” from those they do not want to see. Furthermore, people are no longer as emotionally present in their real lives as they can escape at any time through digital media. “We are tempted to give precedence to people we are not with over people we are with,” says Turkle, citing the many instances in which people text, including while eating, driving, watching television, and supposedly spending time with friends. “We walk, we talk, we text, we drive, we set three alarms on our phone, then get up and do it again the next day. Our internal clocks are now set not by the sun, but by the digital ones and zeros of coded messages, guiding our day, keeping us on track, and busy,” says Mark C. Coleman. Technology, as Coleman sees it, is almost a habitual addiction in society. People are no longer motivated by nature or internal desire, but by the demanding digital world in which they live. This hardly leaves room for meaningful personal conversation or interaction.

Similarly, it might be suggested that learning through digital media lacks the quality of traditional book learning. Digital media tend to be short, succinct, and without nuance; books require more thought and analysis than an entry on Wikipedia. Ray Bradbury foresaw this change in his acclaimed science fiction novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. He feared that “information could become void of context and reasoning” as much of it has in the digital age (Coleman). Bradbury famously details the importance of books in society, portraying them as much more meaningful than the television “parlor” walls of the digitally-obsessed culture in which his characters live. “Do you know why books such as this are so important?” Faber asks Montag. “Because they have quality. And what does the word quality mean? To me it means texture. This book has pores. It has features. This book can go under the microscope. You’d find life under the glass, streaming past in infinite profusion” (Bradbury). Faber suggests that the quality of traditional media often surpasses that of quick-fix digital entertainment. Like a long conversation with an old friend, books provide a depth that neither a tweet nor a text can provide.

Living in a digital world also causes people to be more distracted than ever before. Like Montag whose mind is cluttered with the Denham's Dentifrice jingle, many people today are saturated with unimportant knowledge, and distracted by trying to do too many things at once: text a friend, while watching television, completing a homework assignment, and discussing the latest celebrity affair with family members. While people are often praised in modern society for "multi-tasking," studies show "what most of us know implicitly: if you do two things at once, both efforts suffer" (Sullivan and Thompson). The truth is that when one juggles too many things at once, rarely are they all done well. In one study by the University of California, Irvine, "the distraction of an interruption, combined with the brain drain of preparing for that interruption, made... test takers 20 percent dumber... enough to turn a B-minus student (80 percent) into a failure (62 percent)" (Sullivan and Thompson). This study shows that distraction causes a significant impact on one's performance, which could be detrimental to home or academic life. In fact, a 2005 study found that "heavy media use is associated with several negatives, including behavior problems and lower grades" (Lewin). And of course, no one can deny the dangers of texting while driving, in which distraction can be fatal. Obviously, distraction is good for no one.

It is clear that while convenient, living in a digital world has its costs. Though technology certainly "accelerates the sharing of ideas, freedoms of expression, and real-time decision making," it ultimately hurts personal relationships, limits true knowledge, and interferes with productivity (Coleman). Still, there is no stopping progress. Therefore, perhaps instead of eliminating technology, people should learn to set limits for themselves and their families in order to curb the negative effects of technology.