

# The psychosocial toll of our increasingly online lives

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Want to book plane tickets? Order a pizza for dinner? Check available university courses? Write a note to your Aunt Sally? Chances are you're going to need a smartphone (or laptop or desktop or smartwatch or

Amazon Echo personal assistant...) for that.

In an "always on" society—where we carry mini computers in our pockets at all times that are capable of solving nearly any problem or desire with a tap, pinch, or click—we can't seem to escape the ever-increasing role that computer technologies play in our lives.

But is this "new normal" quite so normal when it comes to your health?

In his new book, "[The Terminal Self: Everyday Life in Hypermodern Times](#)," UNLV sociology professor Simon Gottschalk examines the social and psychological toll of our increasingly online lives on work, education, family life, interactions, our sense of self, and more.

"In order to conduct [everyday life](#) in our society and accomplish most activities, we have to access a terminal. There is no choice," Gottschalk said.

"We have started to normalize a state of permanent urgency and most of the time it's not justified," he said. "From a sociological perspective, since the self emerges out of the interactions with others, the fact that an increasing number of interactions are occurring at the terminal may spell the end of the self as we know it."

According to Gottschalk, the constant intrusion of terminals, even with all of their conveniences, impacts our lives in several distinct ways:

## Health

Once upon a time, if someone was angry with you, they had to express those emotions face-to-face by way of yelling or gesturing, or by writing and sending a letter in the mail.

But in today's "always on" society, we're constantly being bombarded with negativity on email and social media.

The problem? Being on the receiving end of constant anger, stress, or other negativity triggers toxic neurochemical reactions in the body, Gottschalk says.

What's more, it's estimated that the average American worker spends 23 percent of the day just managing email. Gottschalk acknowledges that it makes sense for people in certain professions to remain on call outside of normal business hours, but not for most people—and the stress surrounding expectations to work around the clock can wear on you.

"Increasingly, offline and online behavior bleed into one another," Gottschalk says. "I don't think we've adjusted to that particular condition."

## **Relationships**

One of the conveniences of terminals is the ability to tap a screen and demand answers to almost anything—math equations, movie viewing options, the meaning of life—at a moment's notice.

However, Gottschalk warns that the instant gratification associated with eliciting a machine's response with every keystroke—sometimes giving us an answer before we even finish typing the question—can lead to us to unrealistically expect people to attend to our desires just as quickly in real life.

"It corrupts our interaction with people. We begin to feel entitled to have every one of our impulses gratified immediately," he said. "The fact that technology is available on demand doesn't mean that people are. No one can live like that."

## Empathy

Face-to-face interaction incorporates a number of non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and eye contact, but online you're reduced to one medium—language. "That really complicates communication," says Gottschalk.

Quoting the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Gottschalk says that only in face-to-face communication can we experience the full humanity of another person. Empathy tends to disappear at the terminal, where we find it easier to quickly humiliate, ignore, or disgrace someone else.

Take the historic medium of letter-writing, for example. Putting pen to paper usually involves taking time to reflect, making thoughts clear, and practicing "role playing" (examining thoughts from the reader's point of view) with the expectation that a letter may be kept in a box and treasured for years to come.

"Email communication degrades all that," Gottschalk said.

## Loneliness

Online shopping and texting mean never having to interact with other humans face to face. And even group activities, such as attending a concert but watching it through a tiny phone screen while recording, can be marred by technology.

"Our capacity to broadcast every passing thought, desire, or emotion to hundreds of scattered individuals is unique in human history and human psychology, Gottschalk said, "but research shows that at no point in our history have so many people reported being lonely."

One of the issues, Gottschalk says, is that the online environment allows for invisibility and anonymity, which lends itself to antisocial behavior. Another is that while the terminal enables us to communicate to whomever, whenever, from wherever, the communication it enables is so limited and limiting.

"That makes it very difficult to develop an authentic relationship with somebody else online" he added. "So we communicate more but we've never felt so lonely."

## Privacy

The internet was originally invented with the intent of exchanging information over long distances more quickly. However, Gottschalk believes it has escaped our control.

Years ago, booking plane tickets, locating oneself on a map, or buying music were anonymous activities that left no trace. Now, because we conduct these simple activities online, they inevitably leave traces that create a digital profile/shadow. As the saying goes, "on Google, you are what you click. On Facebook, you are what you like." Algorithms figure out with increasing precision what you are doing, where you are going, for how long, what you want, how to get your attention, what makes you sad, and how to trigger your pleasure or anger points.

Cookies, spyware, and hidden terms of service agreements can create a recipe for disaster when it comes to your data privacy.

Gottschalk recounted the controversy surrounding a [2012 experiment](#) in which Facebook showed nearly 700,000 randomly selected users sad or negative posts to test whether the users would in turn contaminate their networks with negative posts of their own. Facebook's hypothesis was verified, but the public was horrified to learn that they'd been subjected

to an experiment without their knowledge or consent.

"If we can't control this type of manipulation," he said, "we better stop the machines and look at what we're doing."

## **Loss of Skills**

Once upon a time, maps, calculators, cameras, and phones all had their own specific storage place in one's home and each required different skills or knowledge to operate them. Today, you carry all these devices as a single item in your pocket, allowing you to tap or pinch or click to perform widely different activities.

But would you recall or would your young children know at all what to do if you were lost on a dirt road without cell service and only a map to find your way home?

Gottschalk says there is evidence that dependence on terminals has caused previous skills to atrophy.

"The fewer skills we develop to accomplish everyday functions, the more we rely on the terminal. And the more we use the terminal, the less skilled we become. It's a vicious cycle," he says.

## **So Now What?**

From more countries taking [France and Germany's lead](#) to outlaw work-related emails on weekends to writing down our thoughts then sleeping on them before clicking 'send' on email or Twitter, Gottschalk suggests that we slow down and re-consider our sense of entitlement for constant and instant access to the terminals that increasingly colonize our life.

Even the sociologist himself keeps his cell phone on mute at work and doesn't read professional emails outside of business hours. He compares sending work emails over the weekend to him knocking on your door at 10 p.m. on a Saturday night because he wants your immediate attention. Such an action violates time and space boundaries; it implies that one can impose his or her sense of urgency on you whenever he or she feels like it. It betrays a certain lack of consideration for you, and signals that one's immediate needs trump your right to be left alone.

"We have to critically evaluate the purpose of this growing acceleration, this normalizing of constant and instant communication," says Gottschalk. "If there are no rational or desirable goals, we should ask ourselves why we accept those conditions and what we are losing in the process."

Provided by University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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