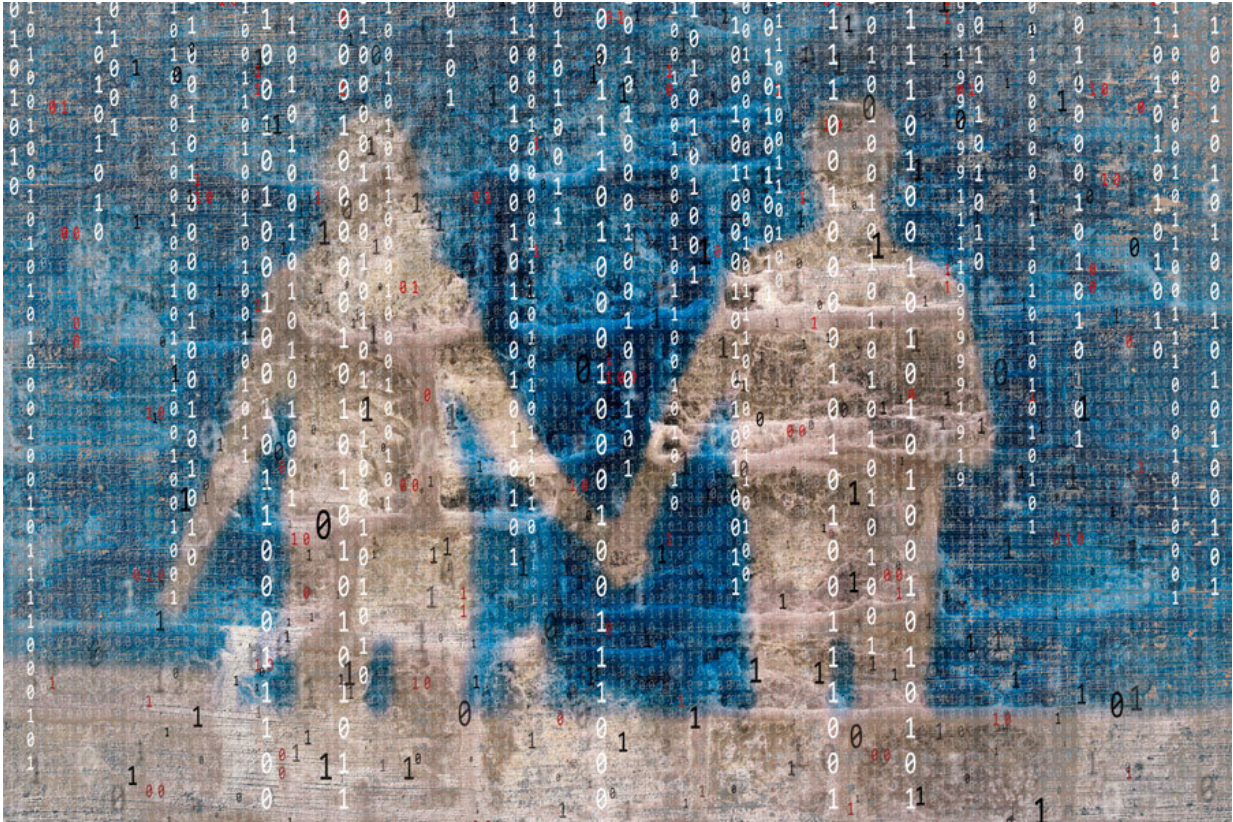# Social media, social problems

September 6 2018, by Ann Manser



UD Prof. Scott Caplan began studying internet usage after earning his doctorate in 2000 and has written a new book on the subject, The Changing Face of Problematic Internet Use, published in June by Peter Lang International Academic Publishers. Credit: University of Delaware

Scott Caplan is a big fan of face time.

That's not FaceTime, the video calling app, but actual <u>face time</u>, the in-person social interaction in which people talk directly with one another the way they have for thousands of years.

"The iPhone was introduced in 2007, and that's when things really started changing because people could be online through their mobile device all the time," said Caplan, an associate professor of communication at the University of Delaware, who conducts research on problematic internet use. "I'm certainly not saying that technology is bad, but technology can be used in ways that magnify a lot of social problems."

Caplan said he became interested in the connection between internet use and well-being by reading early research on the subject that began in the late 1990s. He was especially intrigued by reports that people who said their internet use had negative effects on their lives also said they particularly used interpersonal features such as chat rooms and instant messaging.

He began studying the issue after earning his doctorate in 2000 and has written a new book on the subject, *The Changing Face of Problematic Internet Use*, published in June by Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.

One finding that Caplan wanted to explore was why people who were lonely, depressed and socially anxious were more likely to have problems with their internet use. His question: Did overuse of the internet lead to these problems, or was it a symptom of them?

"People's social skills do predict their problems with these devices," he said. "They use technology to compensate for other interpersonal communication problems."

Although some observers have called various types of problematic internet use addictions—the World Health Organization recently defined a new type of addiction called "gaming disorder"—Caplan said he thinks that's the wrong approach.

"Throughout my research, I've tried to view problematic internet use, not as a disease but as a condition related to people's interpersonal skills," he said. "I do have a chapter in my book on addiction, but there's a bigger picture."

Problems that result from the way the internet and mobile devices are used can include difficulties in relationships of all types, Caplan said. More extreme examples occur when people are victimized by such online behavior as cyberbullying or cyberstalking.

But even in everyday life, Caplan said, the use of smartphones and other mobile devices that allow people to be online wherever they are has created new and different problems with interpersonal communication.

For example, he said, it wasn't long ago that professors would walk into a classroom, announce the start of class and wait for the chatting to die down. Today, he's noticed that most classrooms are silent even before the instructor arrives: Students are on their phones, not interacting with their classmates.

"They're very connected to people, but not to the people they're physically with," Caplan said. "They not really with each other; they're with someone else, the person on their phone."

He noted that some experts believe this reliance, especially on texting, will inhibit teenagers' conversational skills over time.

Another example of new types of problematic internet use can be termed

"distracted parenting." Caplan cites studies in which observers note the large number of parents accompanying their children to a playground who spend the time on their phones rather than interacting with the youngsters.

Children need face time and social interaction with their parents in order to develop in a healthy way, he said. They also need to learn interpersonal skills that they will use throughout life in making friends.

People naturally like to do things that are fun, and video games are no exception, Caplan said. And people in an earlier generation worried that television would distract people from more useful pursuits.

"But the problems we have with technology and our social problems have changed," Caplan said. "One thing that's different is that with 'old tech' like TV, you can watch together and you can talk about what you're watching.

"With new tech, your phone takes you into your own world. If everybody is on his phone, everybody is in his own silo."

## More about Caplan and his new book

Caplan earned bachelor's and master's degrees from UD and a doctorate in interpersonal communication from Purdue University.

He joined the UD faculty in 1999 and has received the University's Excellence in Teaching Award.

He is a member of the editorial board for *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Research* and the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*.

*The Changing Face of Problematic Internet Use: An Interpersonal Approach* provides a "first of its kind" overview of previous research, including details of where many of those studies were incorrect, reviewer and clinical psychologist John M. Grohol wrote.

"Every field in psychology needs a book like this at least once a decade to help all researchers working in the field understand where we've come from, where we're at today and where we should be in the future," Grohol wrote in the psychology network Psych Central.com.

Provided by University of Delaware

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