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The Challenge to Disconnect:
Response to Chapter One of *The End of Absence*, by Michael Harris

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In chapter one of *The End of Absence*, titled “This Kills That”, Michael Harris gives an introduction to his view on the problems of technology use in our society. He states that we have trouble seeking absence from technology. This chapter invited me to think about the extent to which technology affects and is part of my daily life. It inspired me to think critically about the positive and negative impacts of digital technology on society, specifically on digital natives such as myself. I think digital technology is a remarkable tool that allows people to accomplish tasks never before possible and communicate with ease, regardless of distance. However, I believe, as does Harris, that digital communication technology must remain only a part of our life, as opposed to our lives revolving around it.

Like most teenagers in university, I use technology on a daily basis. As Michael Harris points out, we are the generation that has lived our entire lives in the active presence of the internet. Perhaps electronic means of communication were not as relevant to us when we were very young; however, in our teenage and emerging adult years, they are more relevant than ever. I have a phone in my pocket most of the day and am, without a doubt, constantly “connected”. The first chapter of the book, “This Kills That”, inspired me to observe the connectedness of myself and those around me. The sheer number of people on various forms of electronic devices at any given time is incredible. This fact made me question Harris’ point about “two realities”. He states that “young and old, we’re all straddling two realities” (Harris 24). The ubiquity of technology use among my generation in North America suggests to me that *it is* a part of our reality, not a separate one. It is not only a part of our reality, but other generations as well, as technology today penetrates almost everything one could possibly think of. I like how Michael Harris includes personal anecdotes and examples from his own life to demonstrate how he too is subject to this

constant bombardment of messages and notifications from the web, even in the workplace. To me, this situation seems to be one of the main issues requiring attention to ensure technology augments our lives as opposed to overtakes them.

We need to distinguish between irrelevant pings and notifications and those that are actually important, with the latter being attended to only when the situation or task at hand allows for it. As Harris explains, "If we maintain cognizance of the difference between online life and offline life, we can choose to enjoy both worlds and move between them when we wish" (17). While this statement assumes that electronic communications are a separate entity or "world", I agree that we need to know which times are appropriate for engaging in online communications. We need to balance how much of our reality is occupied by digital interaction. According to Harris, this is "no Sisyphean effort" (17), and he recalls how he progressively checked his email less and less throughout his research. The issue I see with myself and many others around me is a false sense of urgency with every incoming notification, especially those coming from phones. While some notifications, such as a text or call from someone of importance, must be attended to promptly, others such as a Snapchat or Facebook post do not require immediate attention. A very interesting point of the chapter was when Harris mentioned a quote by Dr. Small, a professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at UCLA, who states that "[people] tend to thrive on the perpetual connectivity. It feeds their egos and sense of self-worth, and it becomes irresistible" (10). This idea is a thought-provoking psychological perspective on the reasons behind the constant checking of our phones. Harris points out that he does indeed feel more important with all these notifications raining down upon him. He reflects

on this topic stating that “I must be very, very important” (10). This way of thinking may very well be the unconscious thought process in the minds of us teenagers.

While reading the chapter, it became more evident to me that if I worked to eliminate unnecessary interactions with devices such as my phone throughout the day, I could become more efficient and effective at various everyday tasks. A notable and relatable example for many university students is the classroom setting. It is tempting to reach into your pocket to check out what your phone just buzzed about. After checking your phone for some time, perhaps it has been five minutes or so, you try to tune back in to the lecture, with the perpetual need for phone checking satisfied (for now). At this point, it becomes harder to understand what the professor is saying, as you just missed the preceding five minutes of lecturing. So, you check your phone again, and the cycle repeats itself. After all, you can just go home and read the textbook again, right?

To avoid this vicious cycle, I found a few realizations rather useful. First, the notifications you are receiving will not disappear if you do not act upon them immediately. They will be right there on your phone even after class is over. Second, the people from whom truly important messages could be received most likely know that you could be in class, meaning what you receive is likely unimportant. Third, I found it very useful to disable phone vibration in class as well. This eliminates the constant reminder in your pocket that just screams “check me please, I’m here!” Realistically, life will not be affected if you check your phone after class as opposed to during it. These realizations helped me even in settings outside the classroom, where my attention needed to be focused on a certain task. I found it extremely surprising how much work I could get done just by leaving my communications alone for merely an hour. Not only that, but the quality of my online

communications with people improved afterwards, because I was not distracted by my work.

Overall, I was quite pleased with the first chapter in *The End of Absence*. While it is a great introduction to the book, I also think it is an interesting read on its own. It inspired me to take on the challenge of leaving my phone alone periodically throughout the day. These times included activities such as hanging out with friends, doing homework, exercising or sitting in class. I realized that the value to be extracted from these simple everyday experiences is much greater if I am undistracted by my online communications. While Harris draws a divide between the online life and everyday life, I believe technology is a part of everyday life, especially for us teenagers. However, as I found with myself, there is value in seeking periodic “absence”. Life becomes more productive, and many experiences simply become more genuine. To me, it is not about eliminating technology from my life, but rather to know the time and place for my online interaction, not letting it get in the way of enjoying and focusing on other activities. I believe that if people my age took the time to implement such an approach, they would become more productive and would actually end up having more free time. Michael Harris makes his point about technology use in an inviting, relatable, and non-accusatory way, and I agree with his overall message about the value of “absence”.

References

Harris, M. (2014). This Kills That. *In The End of Absence: Reclaiming what we've lost in a world of constant connection*. HarperCollins.