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*TECHNOLOGICAL TAKEOVER: A READING RESPONSE TO
CHAPTER 1 OF MICHAEL HARRIS' THE END OF ABSENCE*

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Technological Takeover: A Reading Response to Ch. 1 of Michael Harris' *The End of Absence*

Joshua Thompson-Persaud

I grew up among trees and leaves and books. There was little time for technology in my world of imagination. That was up until my late elementary school years when the Internet entered my life in full force, which is why I understand Michael Harris' reference to Before in chapter one of his book, *The End of Absence*. In reading his perspective, I realize that there are many instances where technology has taken the place of face-to-face physical interaction, but I question if it is to the extent that Harris has presented it. I also wonder what can be done to effect change on the growing trend of the concept of "continuous partial attention" (Harris, 10), having experienced this firsthand on a daily basis. By looking at these things, it is possible to see the effects that Harris' phrase: "the end of absence – the loss of lack" (Harris, 8) has on society at large.

The end of absence became most noticeably apparent to me in my first year of high school when, in my naïveté, I expected to be greeted by my peers with a sense of excitement and interest. What I got instead was a mouthful of clipped media references and an eyeful of hunched forms chatting away, not with each other, but across space and time, with their old elementary school pals. A question formed in my head: "Why would people ever talk to you when they could just as easily talk to their already established friends? Why take the risk?" Those around me were engaged by their cell phones, and since I did not have one yet, I was a whole world apart. Harris asserts that "the goal of human relations may extend beyond efficient transmissions" (Harris, 18), but the goal of human relation extends even further to artful transmissions. But artful transmissions were swept away by Facebook statuses that read "i need a new tattoo soon" or "sushi with the boyfriend #lovehim". Hourly updates on people's lives

hounded my experience of Facebook and I wondered what there would be left to talk about when I would meet these people in school the next day. I already knew about their jobs, their relationships with their mothers, and their intense dislike of complicated Starbucks orders. What more could there be? And when I did talk to these people, not more than a few words were exchanged before their heads became glued to their cell phone screens. Therefore, holding someone's attention for more than a minute became a necessary skill (Brym et al, 124-125).

These kids suffered from the condition described as continuous partial attention, where they are "partway through a dozen digital interactions, but none are complete" (Harris, 10). This state is not conducive to getting work done in high school; and, more importantly, it inhibits social interaction. From within this struggle for attention, high school kids have to learn how to juggle their virtual identities and their physical identities. The notion that my peers could be two different people online and offline hit me hard. I distinctly remember having 2 a.m. conversations over text message with one of the girls in my French course who would not even glance at me in class the next day. I was stunned and left wondering where I had gone wrong. But it was not the content of that 2 a.m. conversation, it was the keeping up of appearances that prevented her from talking to me. She had perfected the art of dramaturgy (Brym et al, 129); she acted 'cool and aloof' at school in order to stay consistent with the information on her Facebook profile. She hid her caring, thoughtful self behind the 160 'likes' on her profile picture and spent most of the class updating and maintaining her social connections on Facebook. She had no time for conversation because her attention was divided by the hundreds of notifications on her Facebook page, which, of course, she was obligated to check so she would not risk compromising her social status.

In an attempt to escape from the world of buzzing phones and Facebook drama, I mostly stuck to my books in high school. But Harris argues that books are a dying medium of communication since we do not want absence back in our lives. He says, “It’s hard to remember what we loved about absence; we never ask for our deprivation back” (Harris, 14), but I think that is untrue. Personally, I have sought out this absence in both books and nature which are the disconnected places of my world. And I am not alone in this. I know many people in my life who go camping on weekends in places where cell phones are useless as there is no reception. Unfortunately, this is becoming much less common as the whole world is being brought online at an alarmingly rapid rate, effectively ending absence.

But for all of his claims of the end of absence, Harris offers no solutions to this rising tide of technological prevalence. Harris presents the end of absence as a force that those who come from Before have to contend with and those who come from After do not even realize exists. Clearly, symptoms such as continuous partial attention as well as the active practice of dramaturgy suggest that there are negative aspects to the end of absence. Not to mention that in a world of interconnectedness, people who have few social connections are left feeling more alone than ever as social media “feeds their egos and their sense of self-worth” (Harris, 10). Without it, they are nothing. Given these negative effects, what can we do to reverse this process? The answer lies in awareness. Harris argues those from Before are “the only ones who will ever speak...both languages” (Harris, 16) because the prevalence of technology will “dissolve into the very atmosphere of our lives” (Harris, 16). But, as long as those from Before can accurately describe what life was like previously, then, just like good literature, the memory will be preserved and awareness can be spread from there. Armed with this knowledge, people

can decide for themselves whether to accept or reject this technological prevalence in their lives, much like their choice of roles (Brym et al, 118).

However, the end of absence is not a totally negative force that is systematically dismantling social interaction; there are also advantages to being connected. I have met people from Sweden, France, Australia, and other places in my experiences with the Internet, and this has lent me more of a global perspective when it comes to culture. Moreover, in the online world, I have the ability to pick and choose my friends. This has led to some amazing friendships and solid support systems as I interact with people who have views, opinions, and experiences that are similar to my own. The rise of technology, specifically the Internet, has brought people together, people that may have been alienated from their own societies and cultures. In particular, the social media site Tumblr, a diverse blogging medium, has provided many people, including me, with a safe space through which to vent their frustrations and express themselves freely. Given these positives, I cannot completely adopt the wholeheartedly cautious and decidedly negative viewpoint that Harris presents in regards to the end of absence.

By looking at chapter one of Michael Harris' *The End of Absence*, we can see that humans have made many concessions in this time of sweeping technological prevalence. I think it is important for everyone in society, especially those who have unlimited access to the Internet, to be aware of what the end of absence has personally cost us. In doing so, we can safeguard our social skills and our attention spans as well as make sure that nothing and no one has been left behind in our rush to stay connected. Of course, not all of the effects of technology are negative, like the freedom and support facilitated by some social media. Nevertheless, we must be wary of what we have, perhaps unconsciously, sacrificed to be a part of this brave new world of interconnectivity.

References

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