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The Victorians had the same concerns about technology as we do*

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We live, we are so often told, in an information age. It is an era obsessed with space, time and speed, in which social media inculcates virtual lives that run parallel to our 'real' lives and in which communications technologies collapse distances around the globe. Many of us struggle with the bombardment of information we receive and experience anxiety as a result of new media, which we feel threaten our relationships and 'usual' modes of human interaction.

Though the technologies may change, these fears actually have a very long history: more than a century ago our forebears had the same concerns. Literary, medical and cultural responses¹ in the Victorian age to the perceived problems of stress and overwork anticipate many of the preoccupations of our own era to an extent that is perhaps surprising.

This parallel is well illustrated by the following 1906 cartoon from *Punch*, a satirical British weekly magazine:



Worrying trends, 1906. Reproduced with kind permission of Punch Ltd., www.punch.co.uk

The caption reads: 'These two figures are not communicating with one another. The lady receives an amatory message, and the gentleman some racing results.' The development of the 'wireless telegraph' is portrayed as an overwhelmingly isolating technology.

Replace these strange contraptions with smartphones, and we are reminded of numerous contemporary complaints regarding the stunted social and emotional development of young people, who no longer hang out in person, but in virtual environments, often at great physical distance. Different technology, same statement. And it's underpinned by the same anxiety that 'real' human interaction is increasingly under threat from technological innovations that we have, consciously or unconsciously,

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assimilated into daily life. By using such devices, so the popular paranoia would have it, we are somehow damaging ourselves.

Cacophony of voices

The 19th century witnessed the rapid expansion of the printing industry. New techniques and mass publishing formats gave rise to a far more pervasive periodical press, reaching a wider readership than ever before. Many celebrated the possibility of instant news and greater communication. But concerns were raised about the overwhelmed middle-class reader who, it was thought, lacked the discernment to judge the new mass of information critically, and so read everything in a superficial, erratic manner.

The philosopher and essayist Thomas Carlyle, for example, lamented the new lack of direct contact with society and nature caused by the intervention of machinery in every aspect of life. Print publications were fast becoming the principal medium of public debate and influence, and they were shaping and, in Carlyle's view,² distorting human learning and communications.



John Orlando Parry, 'A London Street Scene', 1835. © Alfred Dunhill Collection (Wikimedia Commons)

The philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill heartily agreed, expressing his fears in an essay entitled 'Civilisation'.³ He thought that the cacophony of voices supposedly overwhelming the general public was creating:

A state of society where any voice, not pitched in an exaggerated key, is lost in the hubbub. Success in so crowded a field depends not upon what a person is, but upon what he seems: mere marketable qualities become the object instead of substantial ones, and a man's capital and labour are expended less in doing anything than in persuading other people that he has done it. Our own age has seen this evil brought to its consummation.

Individual authors and writers were becoming disempowered, lost in a glutted marketplace of ideas, opinions, adverts and quacks.

Old complaints

The parallels with the concerns of our own society are striking. Arguments along not at all dissimilar lines have been advanced against contemporary means of acquiring information, such as Twitter,⁴ Facebook,⁵ and our constant access to the internet⁶ in general.

In his 2008 article, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?', journalist Nicolas Carr speculated that 'we may well be in the midst of a sea change in the way we read and think'.⁷ Reading online, he posits, discourages long and thoughtful immersion in texts in favour of a form of skipping, scanning and digressing via hyperlinks that will ultimately diminish our capacity for concentration and contemplation.

Writers, too, have shared Carr's anxieties. Philip Roth⁸ and Will Self,⁹ for example, have both prophesied these trends as contributing to the death of the novel, arguing that people are increasingly unused to and ill-equipped to engage with its characteristically long, linear form.

Of course, all old technologies were once new. People were at one point genuinely concerned about things we take for granted as perfectly harmless now. In the later decades of the 19th century it was thought that the telephone would induce deafness and that sulphurous vapours were asphyxiating passengers on the London Underground. These then-new advancements were replacing older still technologies that had themselves occasioned similar anxieties on their introduction. Plato, as his oral culture began to transition to a literary one, was gravely worried that writing itself would erode the memory.

While we cannot draw too strict a line of comparison between 19th-century attitudes to such technologies as the telegraph, train, telephone, and newspaper and our own responses as a culture to the advent of the internet and the mobile phone, there are parallels that almost argue against the Luddite position.¹⁰ As dramatically as technology changes, we, at least in the way we regard it, remain surprisingly unchanged

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