**Don’t Touch That Dial! A history of media technology scares, from the printing press to Facebook**

A respected Swiss scientist, Conrad Gessner, might have been the first to raise the alarm about the effects of information overload. In a landmark book, he described how the modern world overwhelmed people with data and that this overabundance was both ‘confusing and harmful’ to the mind. The media now echo his concerns with reports on the unprecedented risks of living in an ‘always on’ digital environment. It’s worth noting that Gessner, for his part, never once used email and was completelyignorant about computers. That’s not because he was a technophobe, but because he died in 1565. His warnings referred to the seemingly unmanageable flood of information unleashed by the printing press.

Worries about information overload are as old as information itself, with each generation reimagining the dangerous impacts of technology on mind and brain. From a historical perspective, what strikes home is not the evolution of these social concerns, but their similarity from one century to the next, to the point where they arrive anew with little having changed except the label.

These concerns stretch back to the birth of literacy itself. In parallel with modern concerns about children’s overuse of technology, Socrates famously warned against writing because it would ‘create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories’. He also advised that children can’t distinguish fantasy from reality, so parents should

only allow them to hear wholesome allegories and not ‘improper’ tales, lest their development go astray. The Socratic warning has been repeated many times since: The older generation warns against a new technology and bemoans that society is abandoning the ‘wholesome’ media it grew up with, seemingly unaware that this same technology was considered to be harmful when first introduced...

When radio arrived, we discovered yet another scourge of the young: The wireless was accused of distracting children from reading and diminishing performance in school, both of which were now considered to be appropriate and wholesome. In 1936, the music magazine the Gramophone reported that children had ‘developed the habit of dividing attention between the humdrum preparation of their school assignments and the compelling excitement of the loudspeaker’ and described how the radio programs were disturbing the balance of their excitable minds.

in 1938 "The War of the Worlds" is an episode of the American radio drama anthology series The Mercury Theatre on the Air. It was performed as a Halloween episode of the series on Sunday, October 30, 1938, and aired over theColumbia Broadcasting System radio network. Directed and narrated by actor and future filmmaker Orson Welles, the episode was an adaptation of H. G. Wells' novel The War of the Worlds (1898). It became famous for allegedly causing mass panic

The television caused widespread concern as well: Media historian Ellen  War ella has noted how ‘opponents voiced concerns about how television might hurt radio, conversation, reading, and the patterns of family living and result in the further vulgarisation of American culture’.

By the end of the twentieth century, personal computers had entered our homes, the internet was a global phenomenon, and almost identical worries were widely broadcast through chilling headlines: CNN reported that ‘Email “hurts IQ more than pot”,’ The Telegraph that ‘Twitter and Facebook could harm moral values’ and the ‘Facebook and Myspace generation “cannot form relationships”,’ and the Daily Mail ran a piece on ‘How using Facebook could raise your risk of cancer’. Not a single shred of evidence underlies these stories, but they make headlines across the world because they echo our recurrent fears about new technology .

There is, in fact, a host of research that directly tackles these issues. To date, studies suggest there is no consistent evidence that the internet causes mental problems. If anything, the data show that people who use social networking sites actually tend to have better offline social lives, while those who play computer games are better than non-gamers at absorbing and reacting to information with no loss of accuracy or increased impulsiveness. In contrast, the accumulation of many years of evidence suggests that heavy television viewing does appear to have a negative effect on our health and our ability to concentrate. We almost never hear about these sorts of studies anymore because television is old hat, technology scares need to be novel, and evidence that something is safe just doesn’t make the grade in the shock-horror media agenda.

The writer Douglas Adams observed how technology that existed when we were born seems normal, anything that is developed before we turn 35 is exciting, and whatever comes after that is treated with suspicion. This is not to say all media technologies are harmless, and there is an important debate to be had about how new developments affect our bodies and minds. But history has shown that we rarely consider these effects in anything except the most superficial terms because our suspicions get the better of us. In retrospect, the debates about whether schooling dulls the brain or whether newspapers damage the fabric of society seem peculiar, but our children will undoubtedly feel the same about the technology scares we entertain now. It won’t be long until they start the cycle anew.

Vaughan Bell, Slate Magazine, 15 February 2010. Vaughan Bell is a clinical and research psychologist.

 1  Identify five past or present concerns about media technology mentioned in the ‘Don’tTouch That Dial!’ article.

2  What is ‘moral panic’? Do you believe that people’s moral concerns about the effect of media technology are justified or over-exaggerated? explain your answer.

3  choose five recent news stories from the technology sections of national, state or local print or web-based newspapers and briefly summarise the technology focus and any issues that arise from the technology being highlighted in the articles.