MINDS ON

How much time do you spend in a given day…?
- Playing video games
- Texting
- Surfing the Internet
- Navigating social media sites like Facebook and Instagram
- Watching television – either on your actual TV or on your computer, tablet or smartphone

How much time do you spend in a given day…?
- Speaking with your family and friends
- Going for a quiet walk
- Sitting alone and just thinking about life

Follow up

The Minds On exercise asked you for your best guesses. Over the next few days, actually time yourself while you participate in these activities. You don’t have to be precise — you just want a general idea of how much of your waking life you spend interacting with technology versus the time you spend interacting with people or being alone with your thoughts.

SETTING THE STAGE

The digital natives are restless

In 2001, Marc Prensky coined the phrase “digital natives” to describe the generation of children who grew up immersed in technologies like television, video games and computers. Now with the emergence of smartphones, the natives are even more preoccupied with their gadgets than ever. Indeed, the digital natives seem to be perpetually restless.

Technology transforming us

And how does this affect the world we live in? Today’s teens and young adults - the true digital natives - have no problem finding their way around the Internet and can re-work their smartphones to do things that leave their parents — the so-called digital immigrants — awestruck and bewildered. At this point it is not unfair to say that the marvels of modern technology have altered the way we see the world, the way we interact with each other, and the way we act in certain circumstances.

The dark side

Which brings us to the dark side of the wired world. While things like video games, television, smartphones and social media have their merit, they have unwittingly brought out the worst in us. Health care professionals are raising the alarm around obesity and poor health in general because the sedentary life of the video gamer, TV couch potato, and online computer geek is keeping people from active, physical activity. Culture critics worry that social media is creating a society that is more concerned with online “likes” than real life friendships. And educators are noting a sharp rise in cheating —
with as many as 80 per cent of high school students admitting to some form of academic dishonesty — as a sign that our obsession with technology is creating a generation of students who know more about cheating than they do about the content they are supposed to be studying. These developments constitute a significant social and moral shift in the world we live in.

**The end of empathy?**

Overall, psychologists are concerned that all these technological gadgets are making us less inclined to feel empathy (the ability to feel what others feel). The two dimensional images of modern technology facilitate a sense of separation from what we are viewing. This causes us to consume the content of technology as outsiders who feel little or no emotional attachment to what we are viewing — whether we are watching a show, playing a video game, or taking part in a video chat. We are also tacitly encouraged to disregard the moral consequences of what we are perceiving. First-person shooter games, viral videos of accidents and embarrassing moments, and cyber-bullying are examples of this. By stripping the feeling out of part of our lives, many psychologists worry that we will become desensitized to violence and less compassionate in the face of acts of atrocity.

**To Consider**

1. What is the difference between a digital native and a digital immigrant?
2. How has modern technology transformed the world we live in?
3. What do psychologists fear most about recent trends that see people more and more preoccupied with technology?
4. What does the use of pronouns such as “we” and “us” do to the tone of the Setting the Stage article?
VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-viewing

When Yalda Uhls and Patricia Greenfield completed their research into the varying themes of television programs broadcast between 1967 and 2007, they came to a disquieting conclusion: fame had become the number one value espoused in TV shows, replacing the ideal of community (a value that dropped right out of the top ten by 2007). What does this tell you about the nature of television programming from 2007 to today? Can you think of any shows that emphasize fame as a goal? Can you think of any shows that emphasize building a sense of community?

While viewing

A. Technology and our brains

1. Why is Michael Tremblay concerned about his son, Joey?

2. What are some of the problems that educators are noticing with kids who don’t get the opportunity to play with one another?

3. What does Mike Tremblay plan on doing to help teach his son how to socialize?

4. What is the number one priority for kids today according to researcher Yalda Uhls? What used to be the number one priority?

5. How do today’s young people measure their success on social media?
6. How does Yalda Uhls explain the change in values between previous generations and the ones being raised on social media?

7. What values are communicated in shows like American Idol?

8. Which behaviours “shut off” when people become too preoccupied with technology like smartphones and tablets?

9. Which part of the brain needs to be activated if kids hope to develop meaningful relationships with others and gain a deeper knowledge of themselves? Which social skill is key to this process?

10. How is living online re-wiring people’s brains? How are people changing when it comes to relating to others?

B. Technology and cheating

1. How does the student in the documentary go about helping others cheat on their essays? How lucrative is his cheating business?

2. According to teaching assistant Kate Erhardt, how prevalent is cheating at her university? How do people cheat?

3. How many students admit to cheating at university? What percentage of them actually get caught and receive a punishment?
4. Why do some students think that cheaters are really just cheating themselves? Do you agree with this perspective?

5. According to the University of Windsor, which students are most likely to cheat? Why do they choose to cheat?

6. Why are international students three times as likely to be accused of cheating as domestic students?

7. Why does reporter Catherine Harrop refer to today’s students as “the cut and paste generation”?

8. What is meant by the expression “plagiarism by misunderstanding”?

9. a) Out of the 5,322 students caught cheating at the 30 universities contacted by CBC, what was the most common form of cheating? How did most of them get caught?

Post-viewing

The prevalence of cheating signifies a transformation of the moral landscape in North American education. In 1963, 39 per cent of students admitted to cheating on tests and assignments. In 1993, that number rose to 64 per cent. Today, experts believe the number may be as high as 80 per cent. What do you think needs to be done to put an end to people’s desire to cheat in order to get ahead?
CHEATING

Minds on
Read the following examples. Do you think the actions of the people involved constitutes cheating?

• A student taking a mandatory course (it’s a graduation requirement but has no bearing on their future career) decides to buy an essay from a paper mill and submit it as their own.
• In an effort to finish a history project on time, a student decides to copy and paste a section of a Wikipedia page to get to the necessary word count. The shortcut would give the student time to focus on their math homework — a course that they are currently struggling in.
• A student texts some of the questions that appear on a biology test to a friend who will be writing the same test later in the day.
• While their teacher is distracted, a student uses their smartphone to take several pictures of the exam to share with their friends.
• A group of students share homework answers on Facebook.

Sharing vs. Cheating

Students call it sharing. Teachers call it cheating.

There’s no doubt that the battle between the digital natives (the students) and the digital immigrants (the teachers) has exposed a glaring difference of opinion when it comes to the idea of cheating. Students view many forms of cheating as a reflection of the cutthroat competition to get higher grades and gain acceptance into top schools. For the most part, a little cutting and pasting allows today’s student to expedite matters because the burdensome workload assigned by teachers is simply too much to endure. Teachers say, “Suck it up. We had to do the work. Now it’s your turn. And if we catch you cheating, we are going to punish you.” These competing perspectives represent the lines of demarcation between the students who choose to cheat and the teachers who choose to catch them in the act.

How the kids are cheating

1. Copy and paste – When students copy content from the Internet and paste it into their assignments, presenting the work as their own.

2. Calculator notes – Using a graphing calculators notes function to type in and save formulas and definitions to be accessed during a test or exam.

3. Sharing work – When students share homework answers via social media, text test questions and/or answers to each other during or after a test or exam, or photograph tests and exams, sending the images to their friends through their smartphone.

4. Buying papers – When students buy essays from paper mills or private writers.

5. Stretching – When students increase the font size of their work to meet the page requirement called for in an assignment. In cases where the teacher has specified font type and size, some students will increase the size of punctuation to stretch the physical size of the document they are producing.

6. Padding the bibliography – When students copy and paste bibliographies and footnotes from other sources. Many students turn to the works cited of certain Wikipedia pages for this kind of cheating.
How teachers catch the cheaters

- Run part or all of a student’s assignment through anti-plagiarism software like TurnItIn.
- Make sure students erase their calculator notes prior to a test or exam.
- Enforce a strict “no smartphone” rule during tests and exams.
- Some teachers use software that shuffles the order of test questions to beat the cheaters.
- Carefully review bibliographies, looking for bogus citations.
- Sometimes students will brag about their cheating exploits on Facebook. Teachers find out about the cheating either on their own or from classmates who find the students bragging to be distasteful or irritating.

Educators have discovered two sure-fire ways to defeat the need to cheat:

1. **Personalize assignments** – It’s hard to cheat when you are talking about your own experience.

2. **Create questions that require critical, creative and analytical thinking** – Asking students to think on the spot is better than asking for regurgitation of memorized facts.

To consider

1. More than 60 per cent of high school and university students admit to some form of cheating during their academic careers. Many students say they cheat to get better grades and to avoid failure. Why do you think students choose to cheat to get ahead? What are the short-term consequences of cheating? What are the long-term consequences of cheating?

2. Which of the examples of cheating listed above do you consider to be “no big deal”? Which ones do you think need to be taken very seriously?

3. Let’s say someone manages to cheat their way through high school and university. They hire people to write their essays, they buy information from other students to help them get ahead on tests, and they poach answers from other students through online study groups. In the end, they are granted a degree. How will the degree serve the student? How far ahead are they as a result of their cheating? How effective will they be at the career or profession that their degree helped them to get?
AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH

In 1985, Neil Postman released his seminal work *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Almost 30 years later his social commentary seems to pack the same punch as it did on the day it came out.

Postman’s thesis is this: at some point in modern history, society has shifted from the reading/literary bias of the printing press to the visual/image bias of the television. This has caused a seismic shift away from the rational thought promoted by reading toward sedentary thoughtlessness. In short, this is happening because television viewing requires very little thinking while reading requires quite a bit of thinking. In other words, society — despite the rapid development of powerful technologies — is becoming less capable of rational thought and much more capable of passive video consumption. Why? Because today’s technology is doing a lot of the thinking for us.

To illustrate this point, Postman framed his argument by comparing two novels: George Orwell’s *1984* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Orwell’s book outlines the emergence of a totalitarian dystopia where people live in constant fear as the government (known as Big Brother) monitors and dictates people’s every move. Huxley’s novel focuses on the emergence of a society where people embrace technology (as well as a pleasure drug called soma) and are lulled into subservience by a governing power that sells people on the illusion of perpetual happiness. Postman believes Huxley’s *Brave New World* reflects the attitude of people in the age of television (keep in mind that Postman’s book precedes the widespread use of computers, the internet, and smartphones).

Postman synthesizes his concerns when he writes:

“What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one… As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In 1984, Orwell added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we desire will ruin us.”

— Postman, vii-viii

According to Postman, the age of print provided people with the opportunity to digest information and reflect before responding. In the television age, information is presented in a flash with no opportunity for thoughtful consideration. Information in the age of print came gradually; information in the age of television (and computers, Internet, and smartphones) comes in an ongoing series of short, explosive bursts. Postman might argue that the modern world has become preoccupied with consuming information at the expense of
thoughtfulness and the human need to find meaning in the world we live in. He writes, “It is not necessary to conceal anything from a public insensible to contradiction and narcotized by technological diversions” (Postman, 111). In other words, a society fixated on its gadgets is easily lulled into passive acceptance and stupefaction.

**Stupefaction** refers to the state of being stupefied. To be stupefied is to have been rendered incapable of thinking and feeling.


**Follow up**

In a 250- to 500-word reflection paper, answer the following question:

Is our preoccupation with technology evidence that we are metaphorically amusing ourselves to death?