Perspective 1: Technology Makes our Communities Stronger

There is something deeply symbolic about the opening ceremonies of t he Olympic Games, with athletes from all nations coming together to share and celebrate being part of one world. In one time, in one place, the world seems smaller, friendlier, and more together. It's a unique moment, not to be repeated until the next time the world assembles to come together to watch. Not anymore.

The Olympics are still important, but our society's ability to envision the world has changed through rapidly changing technology. We can all come together immediately, live, in words or pictures, thanks to the power of cell phones, computers, televisions, and cameras. The way we socialize, learn, play, and communicate are constantly improving because of advancing technology.

Rapidly changing technology is giving today's students enormous educational opportunities. Elementary students can not only study about the geography or cultures of people living across the planet, they can video-chat with a classroom of students across the globe in real-time. Middle school students and high school students use online discussion boards, textbooks, and class websites to post homework, download assignments, and interact with their teachers. This technology can also give new opportunities to today's students that no previous generations of students had, because now PREK-12 students can enroll in online courses, often at their local school, and take classes that would be impossible to offer in many small communities. Whether it's a foreign language, obscure science, interesting elective, or advanced course that would not run in a small school-environment, 1.75 million PREK-12 students took online courses last year, and that number is expected to rapidly increase to 10.5 million by 2014. This also helps students transition to college, where now 1 in 5 college students take courses online.

But being familiar with social networking, cell phones, video games, and all other forms of emerging technologies have other self-reported impacts. Students today are more equipped to handle the quickly-evolving technological world and they report being more open to diversity. We socialize differently because of modern technology. While it is difficult to find reliable statistics on the success of online dating, many Americans successfully find partners directly or indirectly through online communication, whether it's through a social network or through an online dating service. The social benefits of technology are almost never-ending. One can find potential friends with similar interests, post to existing friends their plans and feelings on topics, view the schedules of their other friends, and read about the trials and tribulations of the social lives of everyone they know—by glancing at a screen or two of a computer or cell phone. The days of making numerous phone calls or opening and sending dozens (or hundreds) of emails are now over. More importantly, by bringing together so many people, it is hard to imagine that anyone can feel alone. Everyone can find a group to belong to online, one that will share his or her beliefs and listen to his or her thoughts. People who previously felt lonely or isolated from their community can now be a part of a community online that will welcome them and celebrate their thoughts or ideas.

In additional to the educational value, communities are being served through enhanced ability for people to see events in their community to better comprehend their world. In January 2009, when a US Airways passenger plane made a "miracle" emergency landing in the Hudson River, people began tweeting about the plane crashing four minutes after it occurred, and a rescue-ferry worker snapped a picture of the plane in the water almost 15 minutes before a national news broadcast aired with the plane-emergency landing story. This followed a December 2008 Continental incident in Denver where a jet slid off a runway and burst into flames and a man tweeted about the experience immediately, which instantly created fame for both the man—and Twitter, and hailed Twitter as a breaking-news mechanism where eyewitnesses to events report their information to the world to become, in essence, a part of a community of reporters.

The trend of relying on ordinary people and their emerging technology has shaped modern journalism. Whether it's local broadcast channels or community newspapers, the rise of "citizen journalism" allows and encourages ordinary community members to use modern technology—emails, digital photography, cell phone snapshots, text messages—to report breaking news events and share their findings with the newspapers, online newspapers, or broadcast channels. In this way, ordinary citizens can share their photos or text messages of breaking news, or their thoughts about events going on in the news with the public as a whole. Technology serves the greater good and helps make the community stronger and more connected.

Perspective 2: Technology Threatens the Community

Henry David Thoreau once complained that he almost never got any mail worth opening and there was little value in looking at a newspaper. It is almost humorous to contemplate what he'd think of a world of emails, social networking, and cell phones. But one does not have to be a transcendentalist to see that although there are some individual benefits of emerging technology, our reliance on these technologies is harming our communities.

There is no doubt that technology has created a nation of multi-taskers, but is this trait beneficial? Although some businesses encourage young workers to stay happy, in a poor economy, more and more companies are banning (and blocking) employees from accessing social networking because they believe employee productivity is declining when their workers are spending hours of the day in chatrooms, updating their social status, or doing anything other than the work they are supposedly performing. The popular culture image of Homer Simpson eating a donut while working at a power plant can be replaced in modern America by employees updating their Facebook status, tweeting about the monotony of their jobs, and checking their online dating accounts for a potential Friday night date, all while purportedly working. During the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, CBSSportline, which broadcasts the games online free to millions of viewers a year, even created a "boss" button that would quickly hide the basketball game in case an employer walked into the room while an employee was supposedly doing work. While all of this may seem innocent, it could be costing American corporations tens of millions of dollars a year in work. While individuals may be benefitting, distracted workers could be financially harming corporations and the business community.

But technology can be causing actual physical harm, as well. In May of 2009, a Boston MBTA trolley-car rear-ended another trolley and injured 49 people when the driver ignored a red light because he was texting his girl-friend. It was a rare case of public-transportation drivers being accused of texting while driving, with innocent citizens on their way home from work being injured because of a cell-phone-obsessed driver. More states continue to pass legislation regulating or banning texting while driving or using cell-phones while driving, but in many cases drivers ignore these laws. It is nearly impossible to drive an hour in America without seeing several drivers talking on cell phones or texting while driving. About one in four accidents is believed to be caused by a person on a cell phone, and one in five drivers admits to texting while driving, which in some studies is shown to be equally as dangerous as driving while intoxicated. New technology has allowed more drivers to become distracted and put all drivers on the road at risk.

And yet the biggest benefit of emerging technology and social networking is thought to be the educational and communication benefits. But for all the amazing potential, the reality is that technology can impede classroom performance and negate intended benefits. New studies show students spend more than seven hours a day using technology—and this doesn't include time spent using text messages, which studies show adds an extra hour or two to the busy life of a student today. Students who are frequently emerged in a multi-tasking world at home are at risk of developing shorter attention spans and some studies suggest they are suffering from an inability to actually listen to fellow students. They are so used to immediately acting—typing, interacting, or performing some task that they cannot interact successfully in social situations where technology isn't involved. This lack of socialization is not simply a danger for students.

Psychologists and sociologists warn that people who spend too much time on computers—especially in alternate worlds in video games or on social network chatrooms—run the risk of secluding themselves from hours or typical human interaction. They perceive that they prefer to interact with their associates online. Although some interaction with people with common interests is certainly important, this can in actuality be isolating. By not spending time socializing with actual members of their local community, people run the risk of never learning proper socialization cues and never truly being able to engage in proper behavior in situations where technology isn't present or appropriate.

We are surrounded by technology, everywhere we look: iPhones, iPads, Kindles, cell phones, headphones... Is too much technology a positive thing? Can too much technology be harmful? Technology, originally designed to make our lives easier and more efficient, has created complications and big bills for many people. And for all the benefits that technology can have on both individuals and society in general, are there additional drawbacks? Do today's rapidly changing technologies help or hurt our communities?

Whether it's the latest social networking site or simply a video game system that has customers waiting in line outside an electronic store at midnight in order to guarantee access to the product at the first possible minute, young Americans often pride themselves with having the latest technology and the most hip communication devices. In fact, game systems often become outdated within a few years; phones are typically upgraded almost yearly, and computer software often requires product updates even immediately after installing. The following Perspectives offer two different opinions on the effects of these numerous evolving technologies.

In the first Perspective, technology is defended and celebrated as a conduit through which both individuals and communities can become stronger. The author highlights how technology can help individuals and communities through education, socialization, and greater awareness in the news and the community. In the second Perspective, technology is attacked and shown to be a catalyst for harmful traits that could adversely impact the community. Whether technology simply takes away time from other more meaningful tasks or physically harms an individual or isolates an individual, technology can be dangerous to both individuals and the community around them.

Conclusion:

Nearly everyone in America uses modern technology on a daily basis, and even in uncertain economic times it remains clear that most people will refuse to settle for anything but the newest products available when it comes to cell phones, video game systems, or product software. Emerging technology use is especially seen among the young, but some forms of technology are common across the American landscape. The use of technology, though, is still debated when the question of potential benefits is raised.

In Perspective 1, the idea of rapidly changing technology was embraced and shown to be a positive force in communities today. Not only do these technologies grant students enormous educational opportunities, they provide a significant and valuable social sense of belonging and an important news tool in an emerging multi-media world.

In Perspective 2, the role of technology's benefit on communities is called into question, with the author noting the financial hours lost (from employees) and educational time wasted (from students at home) when workers and students spend too much time distracted by their social networking sites and not enough time on their workplace or homework. Additionally, serious societal safety issues like texting while driving or lack of socialization can occur because of patterns of mis-use of emerging technology.