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Little Red Herrings — Have We Reached the Proverbial Tipping Point?

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According to **Malcom Gladwell** who made the tipping phrase famous, the tipping point is that sudden threshold, that critical mass or boiling point, when a series of small changes causes a much larger change to occur. He made mention of a number of sociological ones, but the phrase today has been used, overused, and abused to have become almost meaningless.

Still, we need to rescue it, especially on the particular point of this column: our online future. All of a sudden, a spate of material has come before us about the uselessness of social media and online behavior. This is not necessarily new, of course, but the now resounding chorus of voices is singing a very different tune about most online life. Not even a decade ago, that chorus sounded most like **Handel's Messiah**: we had entered the Promised Land! Today, however, it is sounding more and more like **Mozart's Requiem** by calling on everyone to give up hope all who enter there.

This "disenchantment," as it was called in a recent *Inside Higher Ed* piece (<https://bit.ly/2MHGIR2>), is mainly at social media, **Facebook** and **Twitter** to be sure, but it also extends to much of what is happening online. We cannot escape fake news, no matter how hard we try, and one of the best and most able vehicles of that is our online access. Consider the recent and now bogus claim that we cast 500 million straws away every day. It turns out that the claim cited by **NBC**, **CBS**, **MSNBC** and even the old grey lady herself was made up by a nine-year-old. To arrive at that number, every man, woman, and child in the U.S. would have to drink at least one straw-equipped drink every day.

Much of the ongoing recent disgruntlement began in the winter of the last presidential election when nearly everyone's odds-on favorite lost in a colossal upset. **Facebook** became the poster child for all that was wrong, accused of spreading misinformation, hacks, hate and so on. **Twitter** did not come off well, either, and for a lot of the same reasons. Moreover, while dishing out dubious information, both of those social media are content to censor whenever they please, or rather when the message does not please their chosen ideology.

But if political sour grapes blew up social media, the upset was only just beginning. **Anya Kamenetz** brought forward her *The Art of Screen Time: How Your Family Can Balance Digital Media and Real Life* (Public Affairs, 2018). **Kamenetz** is not a Luddite by any stretch of the

imagination, but she strictly limits her family (i.e., children's) usage of online time, and suggests everyone else do likewise. Almost immediately thereafter came **Naomi Riley's Be the Parent, Please: Stop Banning Seesaws and Start Banning Snapchat: Strategies for Solving Real Parenting Problems** (Templeton Press, 2018). Why this is important is that **Kamenetz** leans left while **Riley** leans right; two very different people hold differing ideologies with very different presuppositions, look at the same problem, and come to the same conclusions: there is not much to commend going online, and there's much to discredit it.

Yet these are moms, right, and we can dismiss them, can't we? After all, we're adults, and besides, there's a lot of evidence out there about technology and learning. If only. **PISA**, the Programme for international Student Assessment, is given to 15-year olds in 38 countries. In the most recent test, 15-year olds who used computers less for homework scored the highest in reading and math. What's more, even when a computer might be needed to do work on a random basis, those who eschewed it the most, scored the highest. Meanwhile, our own students, according to *Trends in Adolescence Media Use, 1976-2016*, are spending much more time online and much less time reading. Those same kids also score unpromisingly on reading and math tests. Research has always shown that the human mind works especially well when it is habituated in its thinking, that is, it can predict based on what it has already learned. But new research on the growing minds of young children shows us that the point-and-click technique is short-circuiting this predictive ability altogether. The answer must be a click, not something that can be reasoned to. If all that is not enough, online gaming, for all its putative fun, has a serious downside: a Russian teen allegedly decapitated himself with a chainsaw after losing an online video game (<https://bit.ly/2p2Q9wu>).

Even sex appears now to be ruined. Online sex education may well be the worst form of it, even worse than none at all. **Chesterton** once had a rather hilarious illustration about what sociologists 100 years from his time would think of men when they excavated men's restroom walls. OMG! What will they say 100 years from now when they see what we have allowed online about sex? If nothing else, we're raising a generation of young boys who, as men, will have a less than promising view of how to treat women.

Then, there are all the technology moguls: **Gates**, **Musk**,

Sandberg, **Cook**, **Zuckerberg**, and so on, who limit, pretty severely, their online time as much as they can. What is it that they know that we do not, or know, but choose to ignore? Even **Wikipedia's** inventor, **Sanger**, regretted his involvement to the point of leaving **Wikipedia** and beginning a new enterprise that involved experts. Meanwhile, **Sir Berners-Lee** regrets his involvement in the World Wide Web, at least insofar as it has evolved into a chattering class of nincompoops.

If we sum this up, we are spending too much time online, all of us. Most of what is online, cats and all the rest, while funny and possibly entertaining, is of questionable long term value. What we thought would be revolutionary in education appears to be, if not stultifying, then certainly stymying to growing minds. The web has apparently ruined sex, opened a gaping portal into our elections for any miscreants who want to cause mischief, and created a lido-mirage for wasting enormous amounts of time. It is, if not already, ruining reading. And it isn't exactly an elixir for memory, or reading, or so we are told by many, **Nicholas Carr**, **Sven Birkerts**, **Evgeny Morozov**, and yours truly. So, why is it that we keep hoping against hope? And why, why, do librarians continue to push these technologies at every turn? Don't we understand that if they really are compromising the reading abilities of rising generations, they will eventually make libraries obsolete?

Yes, yes, I know. Not all online activity is bad. Some really wonderful things are going on, not the least of which is allowing people who could not get together otherwise to do so online. And they are doing some very positive things. But we have to ask ourselves this: is the game worth the candle? I mean, if a toothpaste promised and delivered 100% whiter teeth, eliminated flossing and trips to the dentist, would you still use it if a significant side effect was the that it also slowly dissolved your tongue?

Hope, however stupid, springs eternal. Only the other day an article came across my desk about some universities offering incoming freshmen a sure roommate: Alexa. The idea is to have preloaded all the questions a student might have about what is going on at the university: games, programs, the location of certain buildings and perhaps even the library's hours.

Alas, apparently we can't even count on people to look things up unless they can do it on the Internet. And if you think that is a boon to libraries you don't know the difference between boon and boondoggle. 🐼