DIGITAL JUNKIES? – THE CONCEPT OF INTERNET ADDICTION AND SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Due to proceeding digitalisation, online communication and online entertainment play a significant role in the lives of many people, who spend great amounts of time online. Although excessive and pathological forms of online behaviour do exist, the impact of internet usage on mental health depends on many individual and social circumstances. A central issue within the scientific debate is the concept of Internet Addiction. However, there is neither a scientific consensus about proper diagnostic criteria, nor a consensus whether such a pathology exists at all. Nevertheless, popularised scientific literature and panic mongering media reports warn about Internet Addiction and its harmful consequences. This is an ethical problem: those unjustified claims stigmatise especially young people and pathologise their leisure activities – such as online gaming and online social networking. Parents, teachers and students are often misguided by the public debate. This article outlines problems of the concept of Internet Addiction and gives some suggestions of how to deal with it in philosophy-classes in schools.

1. Introduction

The internet plays a significant role in everyday life. A recent survey found that in 2016 14% of the German population used the internet for four hours or more per day for private purposes and 23% of the population used it for four hours or more for work or education purposes (DIVSI Internet-Milieus 2016). Considering the increasing relevance for work life and leisure activities, the impact of internet usage on mental health has been discussed controversially, both in the scientific community and in the public for many years. Although there is no scientific consensus about that topic, scientists agree that excessive and even pathological forms of internet usage do exist – especially in connection with online social networking and online gaming (cf. Quandt, Festl and Scharkow 2014). However, there is no general *internet effect*. The influence of internet usage on mental health depends on age, sex, and especially the online-user-group the person belongs to.

Nevertheless, popularised scientific literature that warns readers about internet usage is very popular. Some authors, for example, state that the use of digital media harms the intellectual capacities as well as social behaviour and leads to depression in the long run (cf. Carr 2011; Spitzer 2012; Spitzer 2015). Others alarm us with concerns that internet usage would produce narcissism, aggressive behaviour, emotional blunting, social isolation (cf. Aboujaoude 2011; Katzer 2016) or "digital Junkies" and emphasize the harmful consequences "for us and our children" (cf. te Wildt 2015). Although those simplifying diagnoses can be refuted in many cases (Appel and Schreiner 2014; Appel and Schreiner 2015), they have great impact on public opinion.

This is an ethical problem, since those contributors give unrealistic or even wrong advice. The well-known German psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer for example claims that children should grow up without digital media (cf. Spitzer 2015:350). Due to the proceeding digitalisation, this seems to be impossible for today and for the future. Thus, those suggestions rather stoke fears than provide orientation. That might be problematic for older cohorts, the so called "digital immigrants" like parents and teachers, who worry about the frequent internet usage of their children and pupils. But it is an even greater problem for young people, the so called "digital natives", who are often confronted with negative stereotypes or have to deal with stigmatisation because of their leisure activities like online gaming or online social networking.

It is often asserted within the scientific and public discussion that those online activities would produce new behavioural addictions – like Internet Gaming Disorder, Social Network Site Addiction or Cybersexual Addiction. This article will focus on the more general concept of Internet Addiction, which is sometimes understood as a separate pathology and sometimes as an umbrella term for other addictions. Two schools of thought have emerged within the scientific debate: On the one hand, authors who think that Internet addiction itself or different types of addictive online behaviour merit classification as new or emerging pathologies, which should be part of the official psychiatric nosology of the DSM ("Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders") and the ICD ("International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems").[1] And on the other hand, authors who avoid the term "addiction", and define certain individuals as having problematic or pathological Internet use in relation to specific online activities (cf. Yellowlees and Marks 2007).

Against this background, I want to show in a first step, how some scientists consider the concept of Internet Addiction as problematic and why it is important to deal with it in secondary schools. In a second step, I want to make some suggestions of how to integrate the topic into philosophy lessons, because the concept is not only problematic from an ethical point of view, it also raises classical philosophical questions about scientific knowledge, objectivity, and freedom of will.

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[1] The DSM is published by the *American Psychiatric Association* (APA) and offers standard criteria for the classification of mental disorders. The ICD provides the diagnostical classification by the *World Health Organization* (WHO).

2. The emergence of a new clinical disorder?

Research in Internet Addiction began with an anecdotal observation: In the 1990s, New York psychiatrist Ivan Goldberg identified groups of people abandoning family obligations in order to stare at a computer screen. He described the phenomenon of cyber addiction according to the DSM-4 criteria on substance dependency and sent it to his colleagues. Although Goldberg's statement was a spoof on the concept of behavioural addiction, the idea soon became a field of debate in academic research, popular cultural production, judicial institutions, and news media (cf. Cover 2004:111f.; Vukicevic and te Wildt 2011:109). In 1998 Kimberley Young released her guidebook *Caught in the Net: How to recognize the Signs of Internet Addiction – and a Winning Strategy of Recovery* (cf. Young 1998a), where she introduced the term "Internet Addiction Disorder". She also developed the "Internet Addiction Test" (cf. Young 1998a:45ff.) and the "Internet Addiction Diagnostic Questionnaire" (cf. Young 1998b), which provided the first diagnostical criteria, based on the DSM-4 criteria for pathological gambling and substance abuse (cf. Vukicevic and te Wildt 2011:110). This caused a considerable media flurry, but it also quickly revealed that according to her criteria nearly 80% of the respondents would be considered addicted (cf. Cover 2004:110; Widyanto and Griffiths 2007:147). Subsequently to Young's initial work, numerous scales and questionnaires on Internet Addiction and pathological internet usage were developed (cf. Bauernhofer et al. 2016; Schou Andreassen and Pallesen 2014; Kuss and Griffiths 2012). Although they all apply the criteria of pathological gambling and substance abuse to online activities, they differ in the cut-off-scores and in the selection and operationalisation of those criteria and are therefore oftentimes not comparable according to their findings. Another problem is that there is a lack of representative surveys. Depending on the particular context of the survey, prevalence reaches from 1% to 40% of addicted people (cf. Quandt, Festl, and Scharkow 2014:309; Bauernhofer et al. 2016:3). Notwithstanding these problems, which might be typical for empirical surveys, three main problems arise in applying a "rhetoric of drugs" (cf. Cover 2004:111) to the internet:

First of all, the concept of Internet Addiction ignores the multiplicity of online activities and the multiple structure of online communication and online entertainment via social networking websites, e-mail, chat, messenger, or online-games (cf. Cover 2004:115; Quandt, Festl, and Scharkow 2014:309f.). Therefore, it describes the internet as the *cause* of an addiction (cf. Cover 2004:113). But this is obviously untrue. Indeed, different theoretical models exist that explain pathological or addictive online behaviour, and most of them assume a vicious circle beginning with underlying pathologies or problems which produce certain emotional needs. This leads to an increase in certain internet activities which satisfy these needs in the short run but reinforce the underlying problems and pathologies in the long run – leading to an increase of certain emotional needs etc. (cf. Six 2007:363). While the internet is not addictive in itself, different forms of internet usage can sometimes become a medium to fuel other addictions (cf. Widyanto and Griffiths 2007) or be a coping strategy for other problems (cf. Kardefelt-Winther 2014). Therefore, it might be better to differentiate between various forms of pathological internet usage (cf. Quandt, Festl, and Scharkow 2014:307f.) – e.g. Internet Gaming Disorder or Social Networking Site Addiction.

Secondly, this leads to the problem of comorbidity. Many surveys found that excessive internet usage correlates with other pathologies, especially depression and anxiety disorders (cf. te Wildt and Vukicevic 2011:127f.). Some scientists argue that these comorbidities are similar to the comorbidities found in substance abuse – and this is often seen as an important argument to classify Internet Addiction as a psychiatric disorder in its own right. But comorbidity alone does not provide evidence of a separate psychopathology (cf. van Rooij and Prause 2014:208). Perhaps a model of compensatory internet usage is better to explain the problematic behaviour (cf. Kardefelt-Winther 2014), because the transfer of criteria which were developed for substance abuse and pathological gambling to online activities is highly problematic. And this leads to the third and most important problem of the concept of Internet Addiction: Does it even make sense to apply these criteria?

According to Mark Griffiths, all physical or behavioural addictions consist of a number of distinct common components: *salience* (the activity becomes the most important activity in the person's life and dominates their thinking and behaviour), *mood modification* (the substance or behaviour is used to produce a reliable and consistent mood state), *tolerance* (increasing amounts of the particular activity are required to achieve the former effects), *withdrawal symptoms* (unpleasant feeling states and/or physical effects occur when the particular activity is discontinued or suddenly reduced), *conflict* (conflicts between the addicts and those around them or intrapsychic conflicts, which are concerned with the particular activity), *relapse* (the tendency for repeated reversions to earlier patterns of the particular activity to recur and for even the most extreme patterns typical of the height of the addiction to be quickly restored after many years of abstinence or control; cf. Griffiths 2005a). These components are most commonly used in questionnaires and for scales of pathological internet usage (cf. Bauernhofer et al. 2016:4f.; van Rooij and Prause 2014:2f.). But applying these criteria to online behaviour leads to massive problems of interpretation – and in some cases, it does not make sense to apply them at all. Excessive internet usage, for instance, does not lead to *tolerance*, *withdrawal symptoms* or *relapse* in the same way as chemical drugs do. *Salience* seems to be a weak indicator, since many leisure activities can become the most important activities in a person's life. Furthermore, if online activity helps a person in coping effectively with negative effect, it is unclear why *mood modification* should automatically become a criterion for addiction. And as excessive internet usage is not *per se* harmful, the identification of *conflicts* depends much more on the social surrounding, than it does in the context of chemical drugs. This is not the place to discuss all of these criteria in detail (cf. e.g. van Rooij and Prause 2014; Griffiths et al. 2016; Kardefelt-Winther 2015), but some scientists are sceptical about transferring the criteria which were developed for substance abuse and pathological gambling to online activities.

Probably they are right. It is just a naïve failure not to recognize that criteria for problematic symptoms in relation to one activity (e.g. drug abuse) are not necessarily problematic in another context (e.g. online gaming, social networking via internet etc.; cf. Kardefelt-Winther et al. 2017:4). Furthermore, understanding excessive and sometimes harmful online-behaviour within the boundaries of the addiction model is also an ethical problem. On the one hand, putting too much faith in the comparison with substance abuse

might lead to misdiagnosis and ineffective prevention and treatment (cf. Kardefelt-Winther et al. 2017:4). On the other hand, the substance abuse framework considers preoccupations with online activities, like gaming, in a similar way to preoccupations related to chemical drugs, even though the former is an everyday activity and related to far fewer problematic consequences than the latter (cf. Kardefelt-Winther et al. 2017:3). Digital media and online communication play a significant role in everyday life, in particular for young people, thus the concept of Internet Addiction and its reception in the public discussion might lead to an unjustified pathologisation of common leisure activities and to a stigmatisation of youth culture. As the Australian media theorist Rob Cover puts it:

> There remains at play, then, a logic which suggests that frequent use of games and digital media is addictive *because* it is used by youth. This is part of […] cultural generationalism in the West that denounces the practices, behaviours, concerns, ideas and pastimes of youth and children while nostalgically venerating those of the recent past. (Cover 2004:118)

It is beyond doubt, that some people have great problems with excessive amounts of time spent online and that they need help – although recent surveys indicate, that there exist only very few of them (cf. Widyanto and Griffiths 2007; Quandt, Festl, and Scharkow 2014). However, the concept of Internet Addiction is unlikely to help them. The language of addiction rather sensationalises teens' engagement with technology and suggests that mere participation leads to pathology (cf. boyd 2014:78). It is often used in exaggerative way in public discussions in order to warn about the negative consequences of online activities and the harmful impact on mental health. While parents, teachers and students are sometimes alienated and misguided by the public debate, it is important to deal with this topic in schools. On that account, I want to suggest in the next part of this article how to integrate the topic into philosophy education.

3. Caught in the Net – Some suggestions for a philosophical reflection in schools

The concept of addiction poses many philosophical problems about self-control, freedom of will, desire, scientific objectivity, and moral responsibility. For this reason, the topic "Internet Addiction" fits perfectly into many teaching units of philosophy as a school subject – for example in the context of applied ethics/bioethics or philosophy of science. In teaching units about applied ethics or bioethics for example it may be useful to deal with the concept of addiction itself. There exist several philosophical approaches concerning this topic. A good starting point might be the "precising definition" of Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Hannah Pickard, which can be found in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry* (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong and Pickard 2013). Neil Levy outlines the problematic relation of addiction and autonomy (cf. Levy 2006) and Robert West and Jamie Brown provide a good overview of different theoretical perspectives on addiction (cf. West and Brown 2013). In teaching units about philosophy of science, it might be a good opportunity to investigate the above-mentioned problem of applying the criteria of substance abuse on online activities more closely (cf. van Rooij and Prause 2014). A critique of the current research approach

which focuses an addiction (cf. Billieux et al. 2015; Kardefelt-Winther et al. 2017) might be a good springboard for philosophical discussions about scientific truth and objectivity.

The following suggests a structure for a single philosophy lesson of about 90 minutes in senior classes, introducing the philosophical discussion about freedom of will and critically reflecting the concept of internet addiction. Therefore, it may be appropriate to use this lesson as a beginning for a new unit. It is also possible to use single parts of these suggestions to focus on other aspects of the problem (e.g. behavioural addictions in general, Internet Gaming Disorder etc.), or to combine them with other philosophical approaches.

3.1. Kimberley Young at TEDx Buffalo

As an introduction, it is recommended to show the first 12 minutes and 24 seconds of the talk "What you need to know about internet addiction" by Kimberley Young.[2] It was given at a local TEDx event in Buffalo in 2015 and is suitable for educational purposes. Kimberley Young points out concerns about internet usage very clearly. To make sure that students get the main ideas of her argument, they should be provided with at least one question, which they answer in brief notes (individual work) while listening to the speech. Here are some proposals for possible questions:

- Which forms of Internet Addiction does Kimberly Young describe?
- What are the negative aspects of Internet usage according to Young?
- What can you do, to improve your everyday management of technology?

Although it is likely that students are familiar with the concept of Internet Addiction, they probably want to discuss and reflect their own online-behaviour in class. Considering that, enough time should be scheduled. The talk might also raise some critical questions concerning Young's ideas about the negative impact of internet usage in general and the concept of Internet Addiction itself – obviously she starts talking about addiction and goes on talking about internet usage in everyday life. Also, some students might maintain that they know other people who are addicted to the internet. Nevertheless, it is recommended to postpone a critical debate and focus on the philosophical problem first: A widespread view of addiction among psychologists, philosophers, and laypeople is that an addict wishes to abstain an immediate desire toward temptation, but his will is not strong enough. In this sense, addiction is a loss of control about one's own behaviour or a loss or impairment of free will (cf. Foddy and Savulescu 2010:2). By discussing the TEDx talk of Kimberley Young, it is very likely that the students will start to philosophize or to raise philosophical questions, for example: "What is addiction?", "Is Internet Addiction comparable to a physical dependence?", "Has someone who is hooked on the internet a free will?" and so on. If students do not come up with their own questions, the teacher can provoke them with quotes from the talk. At the end of the discussion, a key question should be formulated, which guides the rest of the lesson, e.g. "Does Internet Addiction imply an impairment of the free will?"

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[2] See URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOSYmLER664

3.2. Harry Frankfurt on free will and the taxonomy of addiction

It is a good option to start the philosophical reflection of Internet Addiction with Harry Frankfurt's famous hierarchical account, in which he explains the concept of free will with the help of a taxonomy of addiction (cf. Frankfurt 1971). In his essay *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,* Frankfurt distinguishes between first-order desires and volitions, and second-order desires and volitions. Volitions are effective desires. First-order volitions and desires are simply volitions and desires to do or not to do one thing or another. Second-order volitions and desires are related to first-order volitions and desires. Hence the motivational structure of the self is essential for freedom of will:

> According to Frankfurt an agent's will is an effective first-order desire and claims that autonomy, or freedom of the will, requires both that the agent exercise control over her will and that she identify, at the level of her second-order volitions, with her will. Identification is the outcome of a process of reflection in which the agent distinguishes those desires that she endorses or regards as "her own" from those desires that she merely finds herself with and is either indifferent to or regards as external to herself. (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000:14)

The following proposal of a worksheet contains Frankfurt's main arguments and can be worked on in groups:

Worksheet 1: Harry Frankfurt's hierarchical account of the free will

In his essay *Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person* Philosopher Harry Frankfurt states that it is merely because of a person's volitions of the second order that the person is capable both of enjoying and of lacking freedom of will. He explains his position with the example of two addicts:

> One of the addicts hates his addiction and always struggles desperately, although to no avail, against its thrust. He tries everything that he thinks might enable him to overcome his desires for the drug. But these desires are too powerful for him to withstand, and invariably, in the end, they conquer him. He is an unwilling addict, helplessly violated by his own desires. The unwilling addict has conflicting first-order desires: he wants to take the drug, and he also wants to refrain from taking it. In addition to these first-order desires, however, he has a volition of the second order. He is not a neutral with regard to the conflict between his desire to take the drug and his desire to refrain from taking it. It is the latter desire, and not the former, that he wants to be effective and to provide the purpose that he will seek to realize in what he actually does. […] The unwilling addict identifies himself, however, through the formation of a second-order volition, with one rather than with the other of his conflicting first-order desires. He makes one of them more truly his own and, in doing so, he withdraws himself from the other. It is in virtue of this identification and withdrawal, accomplished through the formation of a second-order volition, that the unwilling addict may meaningfully make the analytically puzzling statements that the force moving him to take the drug is a force other than his own, and that it is not of his own free will but rather against his will that this force moves him to take it. […] Now freedom of action is (roughly, at least) the freedom to do what one wants to do. Analogously, then, the statement that a person enjoys freedom of the will means (also roughly) that he is free to want

what he wants to want. […] This means that, with regard to any of his first-order desires, [a person] is free either to make that desire his will or to make some other first-order desire his will instead. Whatever his will, then, the will of a person whose will is free could have been otherwise; he could have done otherwise than to constitute his will as he did. It is a vexed question just how 'he could have done otherwise' is to be understood in contexts such as this one. […] In illustration, consider [another] kind of addict. Suppose that his addiction has the same physiological basis and the same irresistible thrust […], but that he is altogether delighted with his condition. He is a willing addict, who would not have things any other way. If the grip of his addiction should somehow weaken, he would do weather he could to reinstate it; if his desire for the drug should begin to fade, he would take steps to renew its intensity. The willing addict's will is not free, for his desire to take the drug will be effective regardless of whether or not he wants this desire to constitute his will. But when he takes the drug, he takes it freely and of his own free will. I am inclined to understand his situation as involving the overdetermination of his first-order desire to take the drug. This desire is his effective desire because he is physiologically addicted. But it is his effective desire also because he wants it to be. His will is outside his control, but, by his second-order desire that his desire for the drug should be effective, he has made his will his own. Given that it is therefore not only because of his addiction that his desire for the drug is effective, he may be morally responsible for taking the drug.

(Frankfurt, Harry G. (1971): Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person, in: The Journal of Philosophy 68 (1), 12-20.)

Tasks:

1. Explain the difference between freedom of action and freedom of the will by using examples. Is Addiction an impairment of free action or an impairment of free will?

2. What is the difference between the "willing addict" and the "unwilling addict"? Why should these wills not be called "free" wills?

Within the philosophical debate a number of objections have been raised against Frankfurt's account (cf. Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000:14f.). Nevertheless, it is still one of the most important compatibilist positions and offers a promising perspective for controversial debates about addiction and self-control. It is important that students realise the difference between freedom of action and freedom of the will in this context, since both are sometimes mixed up within the debate about addiction (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong and Pickard 2013:856). In the last part of the lesson the students should return to the questions from the beginning, now reflecting the concept of Internet Addiction in a more structured way.

3.3. The Internet Addiction Questionnaire

This part of the lesson should begin with some general information about Internet Addiction and its pioneer researcher Kimberley Young, as outlined above. The teacher can give a short input on that topic but should ignore the critical aspects at that moment. It should rather be emphasized that Young developed the first diagnostic criteria recurring to the criteria for pathological gambling, which are again based on the criteria of substance abuse. The following proposal for a worksheet contains the *Internet Addiction Questionnaire* (cf. Young

1998b). Although it is twenty years old, it is still used as a template for representational surveys (cf. Durkee et al. 2012) and for numerous scales and questionnaires on Internet Addiction and pathological internet usage like Internet Gaming Disorder or Social Network Site Addiction (see above).

Worksheet 2: The Internet Addiction Questionnaire
Researcher Kimberley Young was the first to determine a set of criteria that would define addictive from normal Internet usage. By using Pathological Gambling as a model, she defined Internet Addiction as an impulse-control disorder that does not involve an intoxicant. To provide a screening instrument for classification, Young developed a brief eight-item questionnaire.

The Internet Addiction Questionnaire by Kimberley Young		
Question	**Yes**	**No**
1. Do you feel preoccupied with the Internet (think about previous online activity or anticipate next online session)?		
2. Do you feel the need to use the Internet with increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction?		
3. Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?		
4. Do you feel restless, moody, depressed, or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop Internet use?		
5. Do you stay online longer than originally intended?		
6. Have you jeopardized or risked the loss of significant relationship, job, educational, or career opportunity because of the Internet?		
7. Have you lied to family members, a therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Internet?		
8. Do you use the Internet as a way of escaping from problems or of relieving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)?		

Tasks:

1. Fill in the questionnaire. Do you think these criteria are suitable to diagnose an addiction? Why? Why not?

2. Is Harry Frankfurt's taxonomy of addiction (the "willing addict" and the "unwilling addict") transferable to online-activities?

In Kimberley Young's research, participants who answered "yes" to five or more of the criteria were classified as dependent Internet users. But since criteria one to five account for numerous behaviours that we would not necessarily classify as an addiction, the *Internet Addiction Questionnaire* was modified by Keith Beard and Eve Wolf (cf. Beard and Wolf 2001). According to them, items one to five and at least one of the items six to eight must be present, to diagnose an addiction. The teacher might let students fill in the test to discuss the results in class. Depending on context and special interest of the class, it is also possible to use scales or questionnaires about Internet Gaming Disorder or Social Networking Site Addiction. In the end, the class should discuss the suggested tasks. Alternatively, the teacher can just pick up the questions from the beginning of the lesson, like "Does Internet Addiction imply an impairment of the free will?" Thus, students get the opportunity to apply Frankfurt's theory to a relevant problem case.

There is no doubt that these items might indicate a problematic or even pathological behaviour, especially in regard to the modifications of Beard and Wolf. But a willing *addict* is hard to imagine without physical dependence. Negative consequences of online behaviour and conflicts with the social environment might just express personal preferences or coping strategies for other problems. Items three and five aim on the motivational conflicts described by Frankfurt (the "unwilling addict"). But in this case these conflicts might be part of normal decision processes, especially if the social environment has a negative attitude towards online activities, like gaming or online social networking. The teacher can prepare a critical debate on Youngs criteria with the help of the relevant scientific literature (cf. van Rooij and Prause 2014; Kardefelt-Winther 2015; Griffiths et al. 2016). In the end, it should become clear that Harry Frankfurt provides a plausible theory of the free will and hits the common understanding of addiction. But the taxonomy of addiction can hardly be applied to online activities. If time is left it may be worthwhile to finally discuss a quotation from technology scholar danah boyd, which aims on the above mentioned ethical implication of this debate:

> There is no doubt that some youth develop an unhealthy relationship with technology. […] However, the language of addiction sensationalizes teens' engagement with technology and suggests that mere participation leads to pathology. This language also suggests that technologies alone will determine social outcomes (boyd 2014:78)

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