Social media use and abuse is a widely acknowledged international phenomenon. We appear to be eating, living and sleeping social media, whilst ignoring the potential risk to millions in human development caused by our obsession with cyberspace. Facebook has been recently excoriated financially and reputationally for such sins as allowing or ignoring or simply not wanting to know about the nefarious political profiling antics in the US and UK carried out by the now defunct Cambridge Analytica.

In the interests of balance, we will not dwell on the recorded extreme effects of excessive use, such as nomophobia (fear of not having one’s mobile), but merely accept the everyday reality that we all use social media to a greater or lesser degree. The question therefore is not one of being right or wrong, but rather how much is enough?

Put that phone down

Fresh figures from a recent Nielsen report reveal that Americans spend an average of 2.5 hours on their mobiles every single day (17.5 hours per week). According to results from the OECD, Italian adolescents spend an average of 31 hours per week on the web. Not all of this is spent doing homework. They spend roughly 25 hours per week online outside school hours whereas the hours spent online in school are only 5.5 per week. This represents an increase since 2012 when they "only" spent 17.5 per week online.

In Spain, media articles report on how the mobile phone has become a weapon of massive distraction. This is down to the number of times the smartphone is checked and how this relentless multitasking activity negatively impacts on the cognitive attention processes.

On a national level, Irish mental health experts have been giving an alarming warning to parents about a growing “pornified normative and the constant hum of social media anxiety” evident amongst teenage girls. On the third level front, we as lecturers and tutors have noticed and recorded various changes in our undergraduate students for at least the last five years. At a recent ERASMUS gathering involving Humanities colleagues from various European countries, it was noted anecdotally that student performance is decreasing, whilst attention deficits are rising.

From informal chats with our students and amidst the usual requests for deadline extensions and reduced essay wordage, we too have noticed a definite increase in general student stress levels. Several of the main causes appear to stem from spending too much time online, resulting in major study time management issues. Being distracted by those Pavlovian cues known as "notifications" feeds into and confirms the FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) phenomenon. There is also the social media "rewards" promised at the end of and during study periods.
As a phenomenon, rewards from social media interactions and communications exist in and of itself. The problem with the rewards is their sheer unpredictability and serendipitous nature. Following their notifications or responding to their direct messages may take the students much longer than they had intended or realised. All of which has a direct impact upon their academic performance.

These perceived and anticipated rewards cause the brain to release dopamine. However, instead of dopamine giving us a pleasurable experience, recent research shows that dopamine causes us to join a dopamine seeking-reward loop. It's a bad self-perpetuating habit and often a genuine diagnosed addiction and in many, many cases, we get hooked. Several students (and colleagues and ourselves) have also confirmed the existence of nomophobia. How many times have we been "forced" to return home to reunite our nomophobic selves with our phone? It’s time for a little digital detox and assert our right to disconnect. We must all proactively take control back from our mobile.

Education is the key. We would say that, wouldn’t we? As educators, we have a certain (moral?) responsibility to make students aware of the harmful influence that social media may have on their performance when it is not used consciously and mindfully. Emerging technologies require emerging pedagogies which take into account these new realities and learning contexts.

These ubiquitous and intoxicating mobile devices have left us with a digital elephant in the room.

The frequency and total duration of social media usage by our students is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed, especially when it may have strong links with addiction and compulsive behaviours. Students need to acquire new types of learning strategies, developing for themselves a critical digital literacy to help manage and exploit effectively their current and future digital interactions. Such a literacy, we believe, is as important as the three RRRs.

The convergence and data synchronisation of these ubiquitous and intoxicating mobile devices have left us with a digital elephant in the room. When students have finally acquired this critical digital literacy, then it is their decision to decide how much is enough.

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