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Fall 2013 Third Prize Essay

LIVING CONNECTED TO ONESELF, OTHERS, AND ONE'S CELLPHONE—YES, MAGGIE JACKSON, IT IS POSSIBLE

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My textbook and my phone sat side by side, staring me in the face. I had a choice to make, the same choice I must make every day: What are you going to do? Will you give in? I flipped my phone over as I usually did during my allotted study time, another victory. In fact, I thought, I didn't need it at all today. Today, my phone would tell time and nothing else, just like an overlarge wrist watch. I was practically a pioneer, I mused, smiling to myself. An hour later, I closed my book with an enthusiastic *flap* and woke up my phone to check the time. Five new messages lit up my screen: one from my mother checking up on me, a hilarious .gif from my sister, and three messages in a group chat of high school friends at different colleges. I couldn't in good conscience ignore them, right? Before I could convince myself otherwise, I was reading through my messages and snickering at an old inside joke. Surprisingly, I wasn't disappointed in myself. My experiment had failed, but I realized there was no point in denying myself technology, of reverting and rejecting modernity. I could still engage in deep, personal thought and be greeted afterward by the comfort of my family and friends. Yes, they were miles away and all I had of them were pixels on a screen, but those were still their words, their thoughts, instantly. That is special.

And I am not sorry. One need not be a technological apologist. There is room for technology in life—as long as one finds balance and uses it appropriately. In her novel, *Distracted*, Maggie Jackson argues that society has lost said balance, that “in modern society, we've always floated in and out of each other's lives... We are ghosts moving in and out of each other's consciousness, often silently but sometimes with a shriek and a howl”(58). In other words, she believes technology destroys one's ability to create a sense of self and strong bonds. Her depiction of people as “ghosts” implies they are barely present in their relationships with others. And while there is some truth to her view, it is polarized. Technology is not the soul sucking device she paints it to be: it may *change* one's relationships with others, but it does not *define* them. True, technology challenges one to use social networking wisely and yes, some people do not pass that test. However, Jackson takes this idea too far. “Distracted” is overwrought with appeal to pathos and logical fallacies. Her blatant condemnation of technology and its role in modern life makes what could have been a solid argument offensive and reactionary.

Jackson's overreaction to the digital age is understandable in some sense. Her nostalgic appeal to pathos clouds her societal view: the world she knew has changed and will not change back. Ergo, it must be wrong. While she claims to be attacking merely society's attention deficit, her novel is a broader attack on modernity. Since many aspects of technology are central to modern life, this makes sense. For instance, she detests “our infatuation with nomadic life” and claims “places link us to history, literature, the murky depths of the human soul, and to others” (108-14). However, Jackson's infatuation with nostalgia inhibits her from being realistic. Because of society's “on-the-go” attitude, Jackson fears we have lost the feeling of connectedness a family meal provides. When shown a pre-packaged baked good, Jackson asks, “How much of my USDA daily recommended allowance of memories is in one serving?” (103). However, modern life does not always allow for family meals. To Jackson, rooting oneself is essential

to establishing a sense of self and maintaining relationships with others. Yet, this type of provincial lifestyle (while it is picturesque and evokes an emotional response) is simply not possible for everyone. It has no place for college age students living away from home, like myself, as well as for commuters and urban dwellers. It is this new, “nomadic” lifestyle that makes technology absolutely necessary. Not only is her idyllic world impossible, her diction is also highly emotionally charged, which makes it difficult to take her seriously. “The murky depths of the human soul”? Really?

Clearly from her view on sense of place, Jackson believes physical contact is necessary to maintain relationships. But when the tangible is unachievable, technology works. It may not be ideal, (as she is keen to point out) but communication through technology *does* have value. The examples Jackson presents in her novel, however, give the reader the impression that web-based networking is purely superficial. She portrays it as a way to create loose social ties instead of true bonds. As her evidence, Jackson cites a power-hungry teenage boy, Miguel De Los Santos, whose pastimes include breeding social insecurity by frequently changing his Top8 friends on MySpace depending on his mood (58-9). One should not be convinced that De Los Santos’s behavior is the norm, as Jackson is employing the Straw Man fallacy to build her argument. Of course, anyone can see that De Los Santos misuses technology, but it is unfair and biased to suggest all teens use networking this way. In fact, MySpace has lost prevalence in today’s society. According to the *New York Times* reports, “by 2011 many of its users had abandoned it, the founding team had departed and its owner, News Corporation, sold it for just \$35 million.” Ergo, it is clear Jackson’s example is quite outdated and does not fairly represent social norms.

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Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are much more relevant examples, however. Granted, some teenagers may be overly concerned with the number of likes and followers they have, but that is not the sole purpose of social networking. Each networking platform has its own unique value. For the artistically inclined, Instagram offers young photographers an opportunity to share their work with the world. For college age students, Facebook bridges any distance, allowing one to check up on family and friends instantly. Social media is not purely focused on socializing, either. For instance, sites such as Linkdin provide an easy way to build business contacts and further one’s career. To write off social connectivity as just “a numbers game,” for social climbers does not give credit to the possibilities technology offers (59). There will always be people like De Los Santos, but, if used correctly, social networking can connect us in ways never possible before.

Jackson would argue the opposite: that technology allows us to disconnect from others in ways the past never allowed. She believes the majority would prefer the easy way out, because, “with the virtual at hand, we needn’t suffer the discomfort of looking one another in the eye and fumbling for the right words” (52). Yet, she is not giving credit to those who use technology to preserve ties with others instead of taking the easy way out. Not everyone engages in “virtual romances” like Willie, a 14 year old boy whose girlfriend he has never met but only spoken to over of the phone (53). By including this anecdote, Jackson implies this is the new norm for teenage relationships, which is an overgeneralization. Again,

Jackson provides an example that does not accurately portray societal norms. Sure, there are children and even adults who engage in online relationships, but they are outliers.

Conveniently, those who use technology to help foster true long distance relationships—face-to-face encounters and all—are not accounted for. Jackson only focuses on the negative. She suggests that because of our numerous yet loose social ties with others, “a quarter of Americans report having no close confidantes” (59). Yet, because of technology, this could not be further from the truth for me. As a college student whose friends are scattered throughout the country, I do not know how my relationships would survive without texting and FaceTime. Some days, when homesickness and isolation creep in, I am immensely thankful for technology. One quick text later and I can chat face-to-face with my best friends and it is just like old times, despite the distance. Although I am still physically alone, it certainly does not feel like it. While Jackson is right to point out the allure of misusing technology, one must keep in mind that technology need not be and should not be a crutch. It can, however, be a tool to connect us, as long as we find balance between digital and real life.

Herein lays the reason behind Jackson’s emotional appeals and fallacy: she fears loss of control. She fears that technology, already a significant part of life, will *become* life. Thus, she uses shocking examples possible along with emotional appeal to “scare us straight” so to speak. In her novel, she warns, “when we embrace the machine not as a tool but as part of us, we begin to lose the inner will and other means to connect with one another. We risk living in solitary glass cages, enchanted by shadows on the wall” (100). Losing the will to connect with others is a frightening prospect and valid concern. However, Jackson’s alarm is a bit preemptive. As mere children in this new technological era, we have been given unlimited power and freedom; of course we have to learn to wield it. It may take time for us to learn to implement technology appropriately in our daily lives, but we need not fear technology as a sinister force like Jackson suggests.

Painting technology as something out to get us, as something that only corrupts and “distracts” from the way life should be does not give enough credit to it as a useful tool in our lives. Jackson is right: technology can disconnect us. The new technological era could be the end of socialization as we know it. Will it be? Probably not. As Jackson herself points out, “George Kelly described how people shift and amend their ‘constructs,’ or frameworks for understanding: faced with new information, they either grapple with its implications, or turn away, clinging rigidly to old, unchanging readings of the world” (173). It is clear which train of thought Jackson chose. She does not understand that as addicting as technology can be, it is not all powerful. We still hold ownership of ourselves. We can still put our phones down and sometimes, it is okay if we choose not to.

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