

Does the Internet Really Make Everyone Crazy?

A closer look at the data shows that media claims about the Web making us mad might be justified in newsstand sales, but not by science

By [Maia Szalavitz](#)

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Drugs are a frequent focus of societal anxiety attacks, but this week, *Newsweek* tries to foment a classic panic against a more universal foe: the Internet.

Headlined online “Is the Web Driving Us Mad?” the [article](#) begins with the story of Jason Russell, the filmmaker behind the “Kony2012” video about the African cult-leader and warlord Joseph Kony. After the video went viral and suddenly brought Russell international fame, he wound up naked and ranting on a San Diego street corner. To make the case that the Internet caused Russell’s psychotic break, the *Newsweek* article rapidly generalizes from rare, extreme experiences like Russell’s and wends through a selective reading of the research to argue, in the words of one quoted source, that the Net, “encourages — and even promotes — insanity.”

The first good, peer-reviewed research is emerging, and the picture is much gloomier than Web utopians have allowed. The current incarnation of the Internet—portable, social, accelerated, and all-pervasive—may be making us not just dumber or lonelier but more depressed and anxious, prone to obsessive-compulsive and attention-deficit disorders, even outright psychotic. Our digitized minds can scan like those of drug addicts, and normal people are breaking down in sad and seemingly new ways.

The problem is, this conclusion is the exact opposite of what the research data actually show.

Dokoupil makes much of brain scan studies suggesting that Internet use “rewires” the brain in ways that look similar to changes seen in drug addiction. The reality is that *any* enjoyable activity leads to changes in the brain’s pleasure regions if a person engages in it frequently enough. Indeed, any activity we perform repeatedly will lead to brain changes: that’s known as learning. Riding a bicycle and playing the violin also rewire the brain, but we don’t choose to refer to these changes as “damage.”

As yet, there is no brain scan that can clearly determine whether certain brain changes signify addiction or simple, harmless enjoyment. Nor can brain scans predict, in the case of addiction, who will be able to regain control over their behavior and who will not.

Dokoupil cites a [study](#) that scanned 24 people, some experienced Web users and some who were less proficient. He says that the regular users had “fundamentally altered prefrontal cortexes,” but he fails to mention that the research only explored people’s Google use — comparing Google aficionados to newbies. He writes further that just five hours of time spent online (using Google) “rewired” the brains of the new users. This, of course, tells us nothing about addiction: we don’t know if the experienced Google searchers were even having trouble controlling their Internet use,

or whether, based on one small study, a tiny bit of experience learning how to search the Web can “rewire” the brain dramatically. If so, then everyone’s addicted — or no one is, and the brain changes are meaningless.

Dokoupil acknowledges that the research linking Web and smartphone use to psychiatric problems cannot show clear cause and effect, but he brushes off this lack of evidence with quotes from experts who conduct this research and use it to confirm their own clinical observations — in other words, anecdotes, which are an even sketchier source of data.

In truth, the research linking Internet use to addiction, depression or other behavioral and psychiatric problems simply cannot determine whether being online causes these ills or whether people who are already prone to such problems tend to go online more. In fact, there’s better [evidence](#) (not mentioned in the article) that the Internet can be used to treat anxiety and depression than there is suggesting it causes these problems. Randomized controlled trials of online therapy for depression have found it to be as effective as traditional therapy — and only randomized controlled trials, not the observational data cited by *Newsweek*, can scientifically demonstrate cause and effect.

Dokoupil also approvingly cites an expert who has become a target of widespread ridicule in the science blogosphere for her extreme claims about Internet-related brain damage. Baroness Susan Greenfield, a pharmacology professor at Oxford, told Dokoupil that the Internet problem “is an issue as important as climate change.”

Greenfield has never published a study on Internet use. The logic behind her claims is often befuddling: for example, this is how she attempted to explain why she believes the Internet has something to do with the recent rise in autism, in a 2011 [interview](#) with the *Guardian*: “I point to the increase in autism and I point to Internet use. That’s all.” Obviously, that is not scientific reasoning.

The *Newsweek* feature also highlights stories from China, Taiwan and Korea, where Internet addiction has been accepted as a genuine psychiatric problem and treatment centers have been set up to deal with it. Those facts, however, don’t necessarily mean that Internet addiction exists, let alone that it is widespread. Simply naming a disease and treating it doesn’t make it real, no more than the existence of witch hunts proves the existence of witches. In fact, the new edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, psychiatry’s diagnostic manual, which will be published next year, rejected Internet addiction as a bona fide disorder.”

The truth is, we really don’t know much about how our online lives are affecting us. It’s quite possible that Internet use has the deleterious effects critics suggest — certainly some people do have difficulty controlling the amount of time they spend online. But is it the addictive effect of the Internet that keeps us checking our work emails on vacation or during evenings and weekends — or is it the fact that we fear we may lose our jobs if we don’t?

The Internet might indeed be a cause of our societal worries, but not necessarily because we’re addicted to it. And creating a moral panic based on flimsy evidence isn’t going to help, no matter what the real cause of our problems.

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