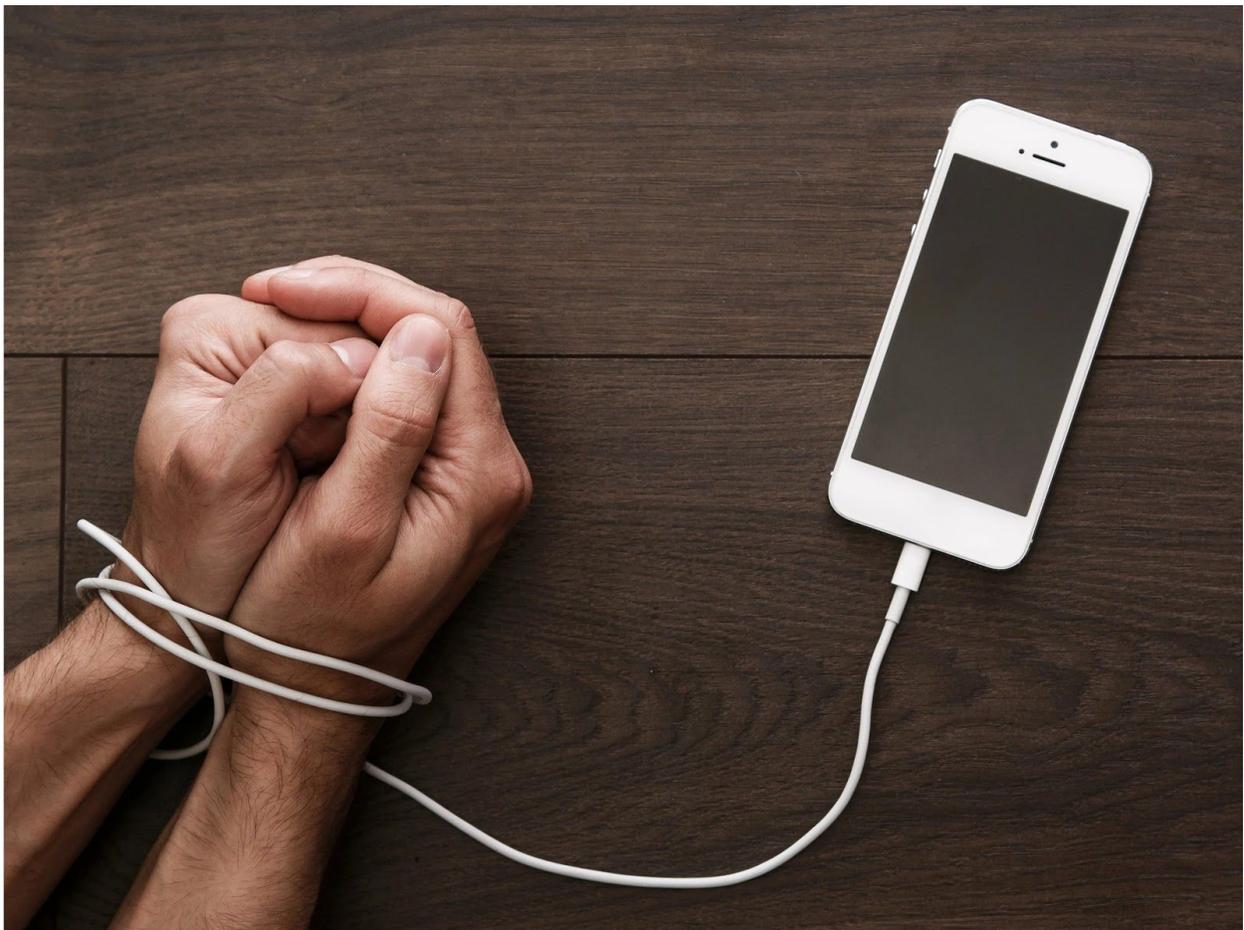


# A Glance into the Future of Addictive Technology

Technology has become increasingly addictive over the last few decades, and science fiction provides many possibilities for the continuation of this trend.



How many times per day do you check your phone? For some, it may be too many to count. I would guess that your phone is within arms-reach right now; perhaps you're even reading this article on a smartphone. Much of our society revolves around

technology, and humans have become increasingly reliant on computers and smartphones. This development raises an important question. Are we addicted to technology?

Addiction has been present in human society for thousands of years. The majority of such addictions stem from the consumption of plants and plant derivatives, such as alcohol, cannabis, and nicotine, otherwise known as chemical addictions. However, recent scientific exploration has revealed another distinct type of this illness, behavioral addiction. Humans who suffer from this illness become addicted to “the feeling brought about by the relevant action” and have no physical symptoms. This discovery has greatly broadened the types of behavior which are considered addictive. One such example is the addiction to technology.

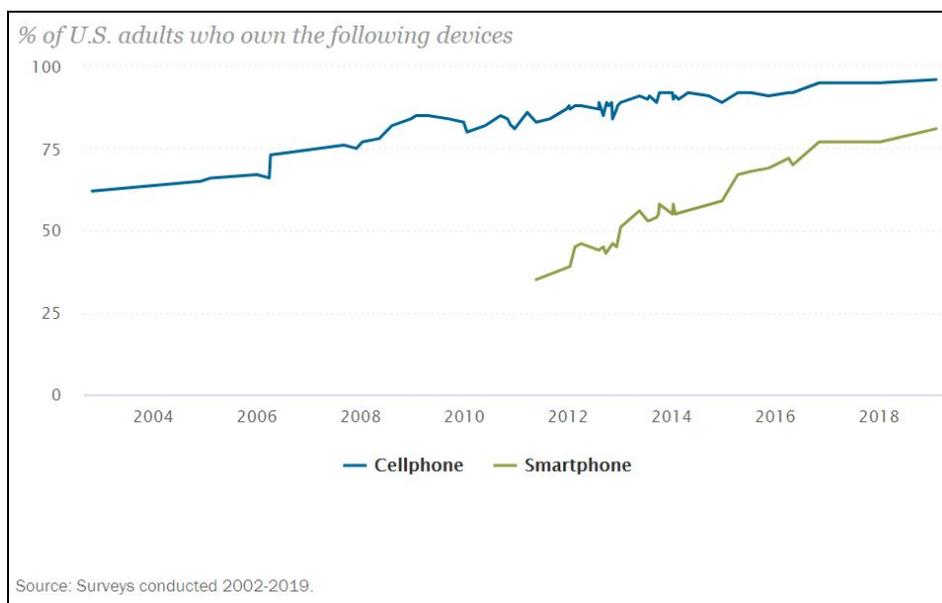
To understand the history of addictive technology, one must begin at the creation of the Internet. The precursor to this technology, ARPANET was developed in the 1960s by researchers at various universities, including MIT, Stanford, and UC Santa Barbara. However, this system was quite cumbersome because computer networks did not have a standard way of communicating with each other. On January 1, 1983 the solution to this problem was born in the form of the Internet.

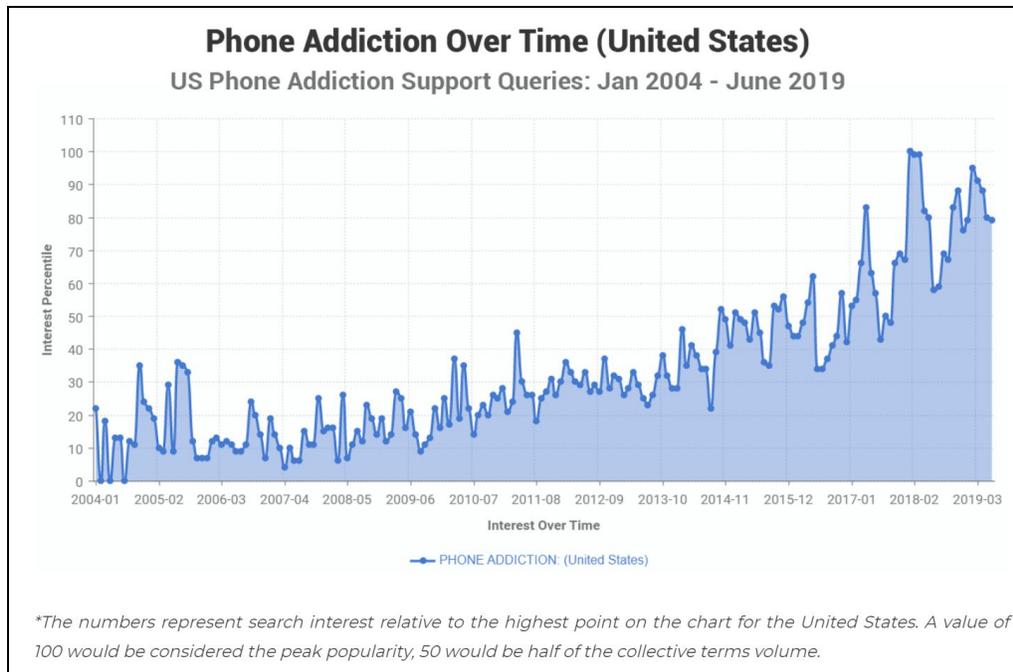
This technology would grow to allow users to access information from millions of sources and communicate with now billions of other users. The nearly limitless possibilities of the Internet began to pose the threat of addiction.

The first recorded case of Internet addiction occurred in 1995. Kimberly Young, a clinical psychology student, was contacted by a friend whose husband would spend upwards of two consecutive days on AOL chat rooms, which cost \$2.95 per hour at the time. His addiction led to financial stress on his family and eventually a divorce after he

met other women online. Young published a report on her findings in 1996 and a subsequent research article in 1998 titled, “Internet addiction: Emergence of a new clinical disorder”. Her work pioneered the study of this addiction, being cited almost 4000 times over the next twenty years.

The next major event in the history of technological addiction was the development of the smartphone. Precursors to this technology included IBM’s Simon and Nokia’s Communicator developed in the 1990s, but the first true “smartphones” were created in 1999, the Blackberry and Japan’s NTT DoCoMo. These devices allowed users to access the Internet from anywhere with phone service, rather than only from their home or workplace. Over the next twenty years, improvements to this technology have been made almost constantly, including the release of iPhone and Android devices and the implementation of the 4G (LTE) network. Modern smartphones allow users to access nearly any part of the Internet, share pictures and videos, check their bank accounts, and a host of other applications. However, these capabilities come with a much elevated risk of addiction.





As seen in the graphs above, the United States population has become increasingly reliant and addicted to smartphones. 96% of Americans report owning a cellphone, 81% of which use smartphones, and the average user checks their phone 63 times per day. This addiction has been linked to anxiety, depression, decreased sleep, and academic struggles. It is now clear that addiction to technology has increased significantly over time from the development of the Internet to the near constant use of smartphones by the majority of the US population today. The logical question to ask is how will this trend shape society in the future? To answer this, we turn to science fiction.

One such science fiction piece is T. Coraghessan Boyle’s “The Relive Box”, which provides an extreme vision for addictive technology in the future. His story features a world in which a device called a Relive Box allows users to experience any past memory in perfect detail. Wes, the main character, spends hours and hours on his Relive Box

every single day. It comes to the point where he has no motivation to do anything else, which ruins his relationship with his daughter. His addiction is exemplified by the line: “I went to the kitchen and dug the biggest pot I could find out from under the sink, brought it back to the reliving room, and set it on the floor between my legs to save me the trouble of getting up next time around.” Even the most basic tasks, such as going to the bathroom, become a nuisance to Wes, and all he wants to do is relive old memories. This story theorizes a rather dark possibility for the future of addictive technology.

Ideas similar to those of Boyle in “The Relive Box” can be found in the 1995 film, *Strange Days*. The plot of this movie revolves around SQUID recordings, which “allow the user to directly experience the emotions and events of another”. This technology is very similar to “reliving” in Boyle’s piece, except users experience the memories of others rather than themselves. A black market controls the creation and sale of these tapes, centering the entire business around violence. The characters in the film go to extreme

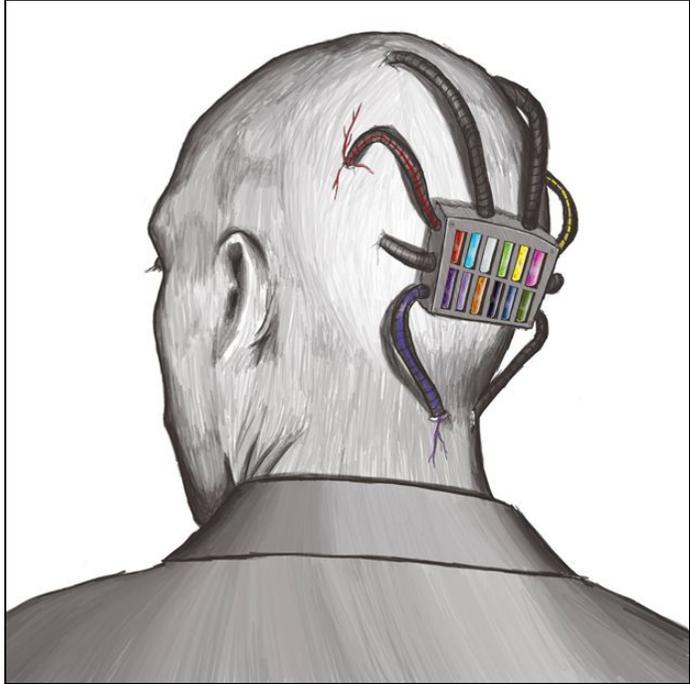


lengths to obtain SQUID recordings, and many of them are murdered in the process. The plot of the movie evokes similar ideas to those of “The Relive Box”. The technology created in both stories severely harms their respective characters, and the addiction to reliving and watching SQUID recordings is prevalent throughout each society. *Strange Days* differs in the violence surrounding the SQUID market, which serves as an additional warning against the addiction to advanced technology.

A similar warning is issued in E.M. Forster's piece, "The Machine Stops". Written in 1909, Forster imagines a society which is completely reliant on technology. Humans live underground in small hexagonal rooms powered by the "Machine", which provides everything they need to survive. When they need something to eat, the Machine provides it. When they fall ill, the Machine gives them medicine. When they want to communicate with others, the Machine sets up a video conference. These people simply could not survive without this technology. The main character, Vashti, epitomizes society's dependence on the Machine when Forster writes, "O Machine!' she murmured, and caressed her Book, and was comforted". This technology has become an almost omnipotent power, with humans being subservient to it or even worshipping it. However, when the Machine begins to fail, society's addiction to this technology rears its ugly head.

Towards the end of Forster's story, the Machine loses the ability to repair itself, and the subservient humans are powerless to help. What results is a complete collapse of society, both figuratively and literally. The Machine slowly deteriorates until it stops working completely, leaving society unable to complete the most basic tasks. Soon after the entire underground civilization is destroyed, killing everyone within it. Before their demise, Vashti and her son, Kuno, come to realize how detrimental the Machine was, as it cut off all connection with the natural world. Vashti tells Kuno that she thinks someone will restart the Machine, and he replies, "Never. . . . Humanity has learnt its lesson". This society has realized its addiction and overreliance on technology, but only after an extremely catastrophic event. Forster envisions the destructive nature of technological addiction and seems to warn against it.

George Saunders seems to put forth a similar message in his short story “Escape from Spiderhead”, yet he shows a different side of this addiction to technology. His piece focuses on the development of technology rather than its consumer use, as in the above-mentioned stories. In his society, the development of pharmaceutical drugs has been taken to an extreme extent.



These drugs can improve speech, sexual attraction, and even induce the feeling of love, among a host of other emotions and physical feelings. Testing of this technology is conducted at Spiderhead, which is essentially a prison. The inmates are forced to be subjects of trial after trial of various drugs. Initially, these experiments seem somewhat unethical but not particularly harmful. However, it soon takes a dark turn when Spiderhead starts testing a drug called Darkenfloxx. It causes unimaginable pain, and one of the prisoners died within minutes of it entering their system. To stop this madness, the main character, Jeff, injects himself with the drug and kills himself.

“Escape from Spiderhead” displays the addiction to technological development, not technology itself. The pursuit of improving technology has consumed the human species for thousands of years, and Saunders delves into the downfalls of this effort. It may seem like a noble effort to create advanced pharmaceutical drugs, but this practice

can be detrimental to society if put in the wrong hands. In Saunders' view, humanity's addiction to this development could be detrimental to society moving forward.

The development of ability enhancing drugs is also covered in Alan Glynn's novel, *The Dark Fields*. His story centers around a copywriter turned stock trader who abuses the drug MDT-48, which increases intelligence, the ability to learn, and creativity. This drug is quite widely used in society and is pushed as a way to become more productive and successful. However, it has horrible side effects and is highly addictive. While also incorporating discussion around chemical addictions, the main takeaway from this novel is very similar to that of Saunders' short story. Although the development of drugs which enhance human abilities is appealing at first glance, it can severely harm society and cause addiction for both the developer and the user.

Science fiction theorizes many different possibilities for the future of technological addiction. Although it is impossible to determine how our society will proceed in this area, it is a development to be wary of. Addiction is a massive problem around the world, and technology has the capacity to become increasingly addictive. As society continues to invent and improve new devices and software, we must ensure that it does not become detrimental to the functionality of human life. The next time you instinctively pick up your phone or open your laptop, ask yourself this question. Am I addicted?

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