

Obama Was Right On Gadgets, Gaming, Internet

Contributed by Experian Simmons
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Your Apple(AAPL) iPad, Microsoft(MSFT)'s Xbox and Sony(SNE) PlayStation are distractions, and not just because the president says so.

When President Obama warned Hampton University's graduating class that gadgets such as the beloved iPad are blunting America's education, fanboys and bloggers heard a BlackBerry-toting, Facebook page-having, YouTube-addressing hypocrite growling "gadgets baaaaad!"

What they didn't see -- mostly because nothing kills a commencement speech quite like a PowerPoint presentation -- were the numbers and nuance underlying Obama's argument.

According to a one-year survey released earlier this year by the Kaiser Family Foundation, American children ages 8 to 18 are spending more than seven and a half hours consuming media through electronic devices.

That's up from six and a half hours five years ago. But that's misleading because multitasking crams nearly 11 hours worth of media into that seven and a half hours.

Among the heaviest users, who consumed 16 hours of media a day, 47% had grades of C or lower and reported boredom or trouble at school, compared to 23% of those who consumed three hours or fewer.

Devices like the iPad have the potential to enhance education -- Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pa., and George Fox University in Newberg, Ore., will be giving them to incoming students - but, right now, they're not living up to it.

Here are four examples of how technology has excelled in turning information into distraction:

Phones and smartphones: Remember the first Research In Motion(RIMM)'s BlackBerrys and the Palm(PALM) Treo, whose primary -- and almost sole -- functions were communication and organization?

Stop napping, grandpa. The Yankee Group found that Americans spent an average of 11 minutes a day accessing the Internet via their mobile devices, with smartphone owners logging far more time.

As of 2008, well into the iPhone era, ComScore(SCOR) found that smartphone-owning Americans were spending nearly five hours a week browsing the Internet, nearly double the rate of their British counterparts.

The overall mobile market fares no better, with ComScore's latest mobile-market survey finding 64% of subscribers texting, 30% browsing the Internet, 22% playing games and 19% checking social-media sites.

That latter segment, the one playing Farmville and Tweeting all of their friends' usernames on Follow Friday, has increased its ranks from 6.5% of all mobile-phone users last year to 11% this year. That includes a 112% jump in mobile Facebook users and a 347% hike in Twitter usage.

If you think usage is getting smarter with advancing generations, the Pew Research Center and media marketers assure you it's not. Pew found that last year, 88% of teens use their phones primarily to text their friends, with roughly 54% texting daily.

Overall, the Yankee Group found that texting ate up 27 minutes a day for the average American.

Is all this making us dumber?

Not necessarily. A study conducted last year by Experian Simmons found that mobile devices are helping Americans multitask better by cramming 38 hours worth of activity into a 24-hour day.

But considering a Best Buy(BBY)'s survey last year that found 47% of supposedly savvy smartphone were confused about how to operate their devices, the quality of the 38 hours of activity they're performing is open to debate.

Television: After decades of hacks calling it the "boob tube" and more than a decade of assaults from other media and technology, you'd think TV would eat up less of our time than it has in the past. Wrong.

According to Nielsen's Three Screen Report, Americans averaged 35 hours a week, or five hours a day, in front of the television in 2009.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation study, despite a 25-minute-a-day decline in regularly scheduled television watching within the past five years, 32% of media consumed by children comes from television, the largest percentage of any media.

The racial disparity of that consumption is pronounced, with white children viewing three and a half hours of television a day compared to five and a half hours for Hispanic children and six for black children.

While there's a chance that "Sesame Street" and other educational programs are softening the blow, the ratings for Nickelodeon's "SpongeBob SquarePants," "iCarly" and "Penguins of Madagascar" -- which all cracked Nielsen's cable top 10 last week -- indicate otherwise.

Video games: Defensive gamers had one question for Obama after his swipe at the PS3 and Xbox:

How dare you?

Considering all the data regarding distraction caused by video games, their question elicits another: Are you kidding?

According to Nielsen, 54% of U.S. households own a game console and use it an average of 3.4 hours a week.

Among kids ages 2 to 17, however, NPD reports that 82% consider themselves gamers, use an average of 2.5 systems for gaming, account for more than 45% of game revenue and, when they reach ages 12 to 14, spend 10.6 hours a week playing.

For active gamers across all ages, that use jumps to 14 hours or more a week, with NPD-defined "extreme gamers" clocking in a mole-eyed 39 hours a week. Is that time being spent on LittleBigPlanet or anything of educational value?

Considering that the top five games sold last year were Activision's(ATVI) Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, Nintendo's Wii Sports Resort, New Super Mario Brothers, Wii Fit and Wii Fit Plus, the best one could hope for is a little Wii-based exercise.

So what?

Isn't the point of video games to create a pleasant distraction?

Yes, but when that distraction results in significantly worse reading and writing skills -- as it did in a Psychological Science study of boys 6 to 9 released earlier this month -- it's a cause for concern.

Meanwhile, a Canadian study also found that boys who spend the most time with video games spend the least amount of time reading, with 27% of the most active gamers not reading at all.

Granted, most turn out fine, but most also turn out to be the more than 11 million U.S. workers that Nielsen's State of the Video Gamer says are playing Solitaire, Free Cell and Hearts when the boss walks by, prompting a quick CTRL+Tab.

The Internet: The good news, Forrester Research (FORR)Â tells us, is that Internet browsing leveled off at 12 hours a week for 2008 and 2009 after climbing for roughly a decade. The bad news: Users are spending more than half of that time on Facebook.

The biggest audience tallies still belonged to multifaceted search-based sites run by Google(GOOG) (158 million users), Microsoft (137 million) and Yahoo(YHOO) (133 million), according to last month's Nielsen data.

However, they're only spending about 2 hours a week at any one of those sites compared to roughly seven hours a week on Facebook (117 million) alone. Compared to a scant 15 minutes a month for Wikipedia, Facebook is the star athlete to more informative sites' sweaty nerd.

The iPad was supposed to change all of this, though, as the most popular app downloads immediately after the tablet's April launch included NPR, USA Today, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Popular Science and Time.

A month later, apps like iBooks, The Weather Channel and ABC's player remain among the Top 10 iPad apps, but are being crowded out by game apps like Dizzypad and Pocket Pond and, of course, so bees Facebook app.

The president may have been quick to judgment on the iPad, but considering a games-heavy list of top apps for the iPhone, the leap from information tool to distraction can happen just as quickly.

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