

“Take anything you want — just don’t hurt my modem!”

BY MARK TIPPLE

ST. JOHN’S (CUP)—Last month, a mother of three was arrested in Ohio for criminal child negligence. Such an act is tragic in itself, but what makes it even more disturbing is knowing her neglect was the result of an infatuation with her home computer. While spending an average of 12 hours a day online, her children were left to rummage for food in their filthy home.

In Los Angeles, a 35-year-old accountant was fired from his firm after failing to show up for work for five days in a row. When asked about his absence, his response was that he was playing with his home computer and simply got “carried away”.

What would possess someone to sacrifice the well-being of her children to stare at a computer monitor for literally half a day, every day? How could a man trade his career and financial security for a Pentium processor and a high-speed modem connection? While these two cases are extreme, they do represent a growing trend in a society increasingly dependent on computers for everyday life: addiction to the Internet.

The growth of the Internet over the past five years has been nothing short of phenomenal. The explosive jumps in the number of users is no longer measured in years, but months.

A quick glance into the Internet’s infamous “chat rooms” shows just how popular this exploding communication network is. The electronic equivalent of your local bar, Internet chat rooms are a meeting place for computer users from virtually everywhere around the world. Visitors can talk with old “cyber chums” while sipping digital cappuccino under the cozy glow of a VGA monitor. The use of actual names is taboo in most chat rooms, so many people have nicknames, known as “handles”, which provide anonymity.

In the crowded *Tequila Sunrise* chat room, Krazy (a handle) discusses her love for the Internet.

While nursing a double digital espresso, she jokingly claims she spends so much time on the Internet that she should be receiving “frequent surfer miles”. The 21-year-old Montreal native says she averages about five hours a day, six days a week online (she never touches her computer on

Sundays). While Krazy admits she is addicted to the Internet, she says her use is under control and not a problem.

“I know lots of people who are addicted,” Krazy said. “They have fun one night, make some friends and then are hooked. It’s fun to talk to people and get to know them. It’s like a big phone line. [The Internet] is a way to communicate and get literally unlimited information on everything.”

Krazy says chat rooms are the perfect place to meet interesting people from around the world, and, “if you’re lucky enough”, to fall in love.

“I have friends who meet people on the ‘net all the time,” she said. “I know people who have actually fallen in love over their computers and then make that extra effort to make it work. I find it interesting because you get to know the person intellectually a lot faster than you would in real life. You really have deep, meaningful conversations.”

Dennis Kimberley of the Department of Social Work at Memorial University specializes in addictions and sex therapy. While he admits that there is a lack of empirical data pertaining to Internet addiction, he has encountered individuals who can’t keep away from their modems.

“All that I can say is that in Newfoundland, [Internet addiction] is prevalent. If I was more specific then that, I might be identifying people in a particular group and I can’t do that.”

Kimberley adds that chat rooms are a particular area of the Internet where people easily become addicted.

“I have dealt with people who have become addicted to chat lines, and some of them have a problem in that they are very lonely,” he said. “On a chat line, you can share some level of intimacy without really being intimate. It allows people to talk about things that interest them, and allow the sharing of deep,

dark secrets without having to expose who they really are.”

Peter, whose Internet handle is Crash Fool, knows all too well about attraction, obsession, and the Internet. The third-year Memorial arts student saved up enough money last September to buy a home computer, and says his first time on the Internet was “love at first sight”. That love, however, came with a price — he virtually abandoned his studies.

“The first time I logged on, I was

to quit cold turkey.

“Recently, I took some time away from the Internet, a moratorium on E-mail, web-surfing, and gophering to spend more time with my family,” Rutkowski said. “I enjoyed spending time with my children, mother and husband. I actually read entire books and started a stage play using a pen and a legal-sized tablet of paper.”

It was this break from the Internet that gave Rutkowski a new respect for its potential in people’s lives.

“I realized, however, that I had real friends in cyberspace who I wanted to hear from and communicate with. Without the Internet, my ability to stay in touch would be compromised.”

Peter, however, couldn’t wean himself off the Internet alone. A group of his closest friends, concerned about the amount of time he was spending online, constantly dragged him away from his computer to go to class and study for exams.

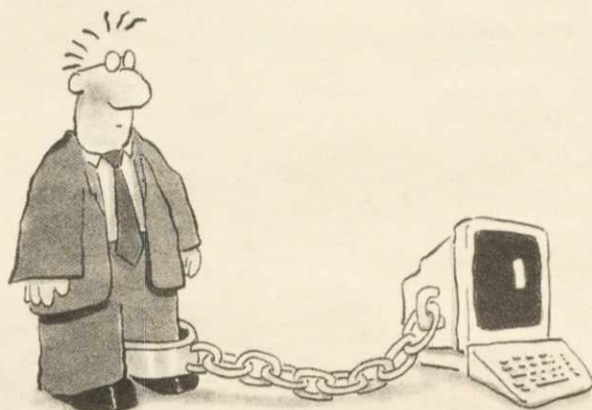
“Honestly think if it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be in university right now,” Peter said. “I’d probably be chatting away in some cyberbar or downloading X-Files pics. It sounds funny, but when you think about it, it’s pretty sad stuff.”

As computers and digital technology grow increasingly common in everyday life, the Internet wave is attracting an ever-increasing number of people worldwide. The question is: how will people adapt to this unprecedented means of communication? Will Internet users be able to control their use of this exciting new technology, or will this end up being pulled into the digital sea by the backlash of cyber addiction?

Krazy says as long as she can afford her Internet account, she will remain a regular at the *Tequila Sunrise* chat room.

“I’m really lucky because I have two computers at home now, and two telephone lines,” she said. My seven year-old sister is learning how to use the Internet. She goes into one room with her computer and I go into the other with mine. We sit around and chat back and forth to each other for hours. It’s really cool. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not some computer freak. I’m just having a bit of fun.”

Note: For purposes of anonymity, Krazy’s real name was withheld and Peter’s changed.



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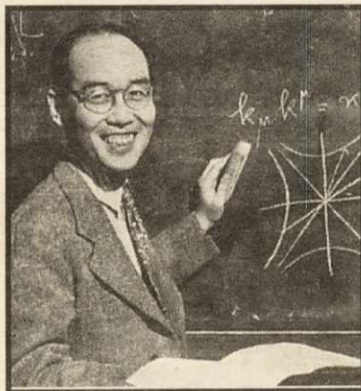
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