What it feels like to be the last generation to remember life before the internet

By Leo Mirani – August 21, 2014

Technology has a lot to answer for: killing old businesses, destroying the middle class, Buzzfeed. Technology in the form of the internet is especially villainous, having been accused of everything from making us dumber to aiding dictatorships. But Michael Harris says that "technology is neither good nor evil. The most we can say about it is this: It has come."

Harris is the author of "The End of Absence: Reclaiming What We've Lost in a World of Constant Connection," a new book about how technology affects society. It **follows in the footsteps of** Nicholas Carr, whose "The Shallows" is a modern classic of internet criticism. But Harris takes a different path from those that have come before. Instead of an investigation into the effects of constant connectivity on human behaviour, Harris looks at a very specific demographic: people born before 1985, or the very opposite of the "millennial" demographic.

These people, says Harris, are the last of **a dying breed**. "If you were born before 1985, then you know what life is like both with the internet and without. You are making the **pilgrimage** from Before to After," he writes. It is a nice concept. Harris, like your correspondent, grew up in a very different world, one with limited channels of communication and fewer forms of entertainment. It was neither better nor worse than the world we live in today. Like technology, it just was.

Harris argues that being in this situation puts us in a privileged position. "If we're the last people in history to know life before the internet, we are also the only ones who will ever speak, as it were, both languages. We are the only fluent translators of Before and After."

That means being able to notice things like the way younger generation uses technology. "For teens, if a tweet gets retweeted a couple of hundred times, that must mean that my thoughts are worthy. If my Facebook photo is 'liked,' that must mean I am good looking. One of the things that concerns me about it is that we lose the ability to decide for ourselves what we think about who we are."

Harris isn't protesting against these things, though. He doesn't prescribe fewer internet hours or complain much about "kids these days." Instead, he acknowledges that his worries **stem** mainly **from** his anxieties about his own behavior. Like many of us, Harris checks his email on his phone first thing in the morning. "When you wake up, you have this gift of a blank brain. You could fill it with anything. But, for most of us, we have this kind of panic. Instead of wondering what should I do, we wonder what did I miss. It's almost like our unconsciousness is a kind of failure and we can't believe we've been offline for eight hours," he says. It is habits like this that are **insidious**, not the internet itself. It is a personal thing.

Toward the end of the book, after having investigated our **penchant for** online confessionals, the dangers of public opinion, and technology's impact on everything from sex to memories to attention spans, Harris writes about his decision to take a month off from the internet.

Did he experience an epiphany? Not really. "But it's the break itself that's the thing. It's the break—that is, the questioning—that can bring you some perspective," he writes. I asked Harris if he would recommend it to others. "A full month off is a huge luxury which I was able to take because I was writing a book. For most people, taking a month off would mean losing your job," he says.

Still, Harris says an occasional break can be helpful. "I think what you get is a richer interior light and the ability to see yourself in a critical light, living online. Because if you're in the middle of something you can never see it properly."

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