



# Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

BOOK REVIEW

Issue Two / 2013

## Breaking Free of Internet Addiction

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**Kimberly Young and Patrice Klausung**, *Breaking Free of the Web: Catholics and Internet Addiction* (St Anthony Messenger Press, 2007).

**Kimberly S. Young and Cristiano Nabuco de Abreu (eds)**, *Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide to Evaluation and Treatment* (Wiley, October 2010).

In July and August 2013 the UK press reported comments by Baroness Greenfield, professor of pharmacology at Oxford University, on the possibility of social media such as Facebook and Twitter significantly reshaping self-identity for some users, and how they relate to one another (and not for the better either). Even more disturbing, in the same month CNN carried a report about the rise and rise of global cybersex trafficking of vulnerable young women, detained and forced to perform in front of webcams for paying customers. Not long afterwards, Britain's *Daily Mail* reported on the rise of websites allowing couples and individuals to upload their sex lives for the world to see, even in real time. As far back as the 1990s internet addiction was seen as a real problem in places like South Korea, which has been at the forefront of internet growth. In fact the *Daily Telegraph* this year reported on "digital dementia" caused by overuse of modern technology like phones and consoles.

*Breaking Free of the Web* and *Internet Addiction* both look at online gambling, social networking, cybersex and pornography, and gaming. Both also try to explain why addiction happens, its stages, and ways to break free, based on theoretical and practical experience of helping those in need. Arguably the whole sphere of sex and the internet is the worst of all. In other areas – online shopping, gambling, or gaming – users act unvirtuously with things, such as money, credit cards, and console systems, even fake identities. When it comes to sex it's people themselves, whether voluntarily or not, that are the users, the suppliers, and the content. It entails the dehumanization and desacralization of people and sex.

When it comes to sex, the online world and the real world are not two utterly distinct entities; one could argue that the concept of "online world" is redundant. The editors note in *Internet*

*Addiction* the difficulty of distinguishing between addiction and necessity (checking email, websites for work, and messaging services on phones) as we are so reliant on the internet. It's not a matter of flicking a switch on and off. Men and women in pornographic films, made in the real world, are real people with lives; so too are those that view them. Images and videos are now gleaned from reality TV shows, or hacked from people's computers. Members of the general public can now drift between appearing in a reality TV show and performing in a pornographic film, all the while being lauded as "brave" and a "star." What of those trapped in the sex industry and forced to perform for customers? Online sex shows can have a devastating reality in the real world. Online sex is very much part of the real world; it's a digital space where the real flows over – often some of the more perverse and appalling. The authors in both books note that the anonymity, ease of access, and apparent freedom from consequences for users are big factors in fuelling the online sex industry. A whole sector of literature on how internet pornography can re-wire and harm the brain's functions and change the way we interact with the opposite sex has sprung up in the last few years.

According to World Internet Stats there are now over 2.4 billion internet users worldwide, a 566.4% increase between 2000-2012. Google Internet Stats says 71% of people in the developing world are now online. There are an estimated 555 million Twitter users and 1.11 billion Facebook users. In 2012 21 million (80%) of UK households had had internet access, and 85% of the US adult population used the internet. In fact internet penetration rate is a standard telecommunications measurement, even the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) carefully monitor the growth and use of broadband internet. We could add statistics such as internet access and use on smartphones and ipads, but it's not only the numbers that we might find interesting, it's the fact that the internet, and in turn the content of the world wide web, can and is accessed pretty much wherever a person might be, including the home.

Looking for knowledge, shopping for consumer goods or sex, and interacting with others online promises speed, ease, and variety. The internet can be used in the privacy of one's home – kitchen, lounge, bedroom, in bed, seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This is what, coupled with certain types of content, has led to the facilitation and rise of internet addiction. However, *Breaking Free* and *Internet Addiction* speak more about compulsive behavior than "addiction." The application of the concept of addiction to internet behaviour, though becoming more common, still has its critics.

When looking at the reasons why some people compulsively search for pornographic content or engage in long stints of gambling or gaming, several possibilities are offered. Of course there is the "chemical balance in the brain" approach (Hollander, Arias-Carrión, PÖppel), but there are also other possibilities. One of those is the theory that people are looking to make up what they lack in real life: a spouse, the ability to make new friends, a parent, someone to connect with, an outlet for aspirations and goals, and a place of refuge from the harsher realities of daily urban living. In this sense there is something tragic about the lone man or woman glued to their laptop or phone, hearts and minds seeking fulfilment and happiness in all the wrong places and in the wrong ways. It's also a wake-up call. We need to think carefully about how we build our families, shape our homes, and live our duty to be our brother's keeper.

*Breaking Free* is specifically aimed at Catholics. However, there are a number of paragraphs that do not convey Church teaching clearly, and show the influence of Freud, whom philosopher Peter Kreeft has called Freud one of the "pillars of unbelief" and an "enemy of the Faith." The authors write: "Because one is dealing with addiction (some level of compulsion and lack of freedom), universal moral teaching may not be possible or appropriate." But it is

precisely moral teaching on virtue and vice, human freedom and sin that is much needed in this area. Universal moral teaching is there to safeguard and guide, not oppress. The authors do not explain why compulsion and lack of freedom mean universal moral teaching can be dispensed with.

Another example. “When it comes to marriage, some would say the church teaching was obvious... [But] there is also a clear and unequivocal teaching about primacy of conscience, which in the final analysis cannot be violated.” Canon law, annulment, and the internal forum of conscience are complex and delicate areas. Such statements are misleading, since they do not explain Church teaching on the correct formation of conscience.

In *Internet Addiction*, an academic book with extensive references and index, we find the following passage in the chapter on cybersex addiction: “not all online sexual activity should be viewed as having a negative impact on consumers...both youth and adults report using the internet to research sexual information on issues such as preventing the spread of sexually transmitted infections, purchasing and reviewing options for contraception, exploring healthy sexuality, and so forth.” Indeed the same chapter tells us that 80% of people who engage in online sexual activity can be considered “recreational users.” Therefore, there is nothing in principle wrong with sexual activity online. The problem is only when the behavior gets out of control, becomes compulsive, outside the range of the individual’s control.

Catholic readers of these books need to refer to the *Catechism* and authoritative magisterial documents. The guidance of one’s parish priest, spiritual director, or diocesan canon lawyer in the delicate areas surrounding marriage is invaluable. There are however some important suggestions at the end of most chapters in *Breaking Free* on log keeping, regular prayer, and community service. There is also a chapter on the very necessary role of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Without a grounding in the spiritual dimension, the viewing of pornography comes to be seen merely as a therapeutic pastime that has gotten out of hand. In reality we are dealing with sin, and the vice of lust that has taken root in the heart. If this vice kills the life of grace in the soul it also destroys the ability of the person to flourish and live a healthy life for themselves and others. All that time in front of a computer also takes away the time we owe to family, friends, those in need.

For a well-rounded appreciation of how the Catholic Faith and Catholic anthropology can inform our understanding of internet addiction and its treatment, readers would do well to become familiar with the US-based Institute for the Psychological Sciences, and the St Michael’s Institute of the Psychological Sciences. In fact, renewed interest in the thomistic psychology of the late Drs Conrad W. Baars and Anna A. Terruwe would be a welcome contribution.

