

Transcript for Professor Gernsbacher's Lecture Video: "On the Internet, Seriously?"

SLIDE: I have been teaching Internet-based courses at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for over 15 years. I've taught Internet-based classes as small as 5-student graduate seminars and as large as 120-student survey courses.

Often, when I tell my colleagues that I not only teach on the Internet but that I do so by choice, they look at me with *that* look. I know *that* look quite well.

It's the look that says,

SLIDE: "One the Internet? Seriously?" And I can just imagine what my colleagues are thinking. They're thinking, don't you know that

SLIDE: If the Internet craze continues, we are destined to become a nation of morons.

SLIDE: Look at Snapchat, and you'll see

SLIDE: how many teenage girls hang out from morning to night, to the neglect of their school work and their mental health.

SLIDE: And texting.

SLIDE: So enthralled are young people by texting that "they have developed the habit of dividing attention between

SLIDE: the humdrum preparation of their school assignments and the compelling excitement of texting. Not to mention sexting.

SLIDE: Sexting is the devil's agent, as are video games.

SLIDE: People of all ages are spending way too much time playing video games. Don't you know that

SLIDE: playing video games does not add a single new fact to the mind; it does not excite a single beautiful thought.

SLIDE: nor does it serve a single purpose.

SLIDE: And how many marriages have been by tormented by Fantasy Football. As one spouse complained:

SLIDE: "You come in and plunk yourself down in a chair and start to play Fantasy Football and don't even say a word.

SLIDE: You act as though I'm not even here."

SLIDE: And Facebook

SLIDE: It's a dangerous time when Facebook takes the place of human intimacies. Don't you know that

SLIDE: the concept of being in touch with millions brings only a greater and greater poverty in intimacy.

SLIDE: And then there's YouTube, with its plethora of cat videos.

SLIDE: and all of those silly pratfall videos

SLIDE: YouTube threatens to change us into creatures with eyeballs as big as cantaloupes with no brains at all

SLIDE: And what about the mental laziness enabled by our being able to Google anything we can't remember?

SLIDE: Surely, Google creates forgetfulness because people who use Google stop using their own memories.

SLIDE: So why on earth would an award-winning teacher, much less an award-winning cognitive neuroscientist, turn to Internet-based learning?

SLIDE: Aren't Internet-based courses, as a substitute for live, in-person courses,

SLIDE: merely a spurious form of progress?

SLIDE: Don't we agree that we should only be teaching face-to-face courses

SLIDE: not mechanical Internet-based courses? And that we should

SLIDE: join millions of others in the ...

SLIDE: Musical Defense League.

Alas, the fear that Internet-based courses are a spurious form of progress ("like a loom converting good wool into shoddy") was not about mechanical, Internet-based courses as opposed to live, in-person courses. Rather, the fear was about mechanical, or recorded music, as opposed to live, in-person music. In movie theaters. In the early 1930s.

SLIDE: [PAUSE FOR AUDIENCE TO READ] Here is one of the ads fearing the advent of accompanying motion pictures with recorded music rather than having live musicians perform in person, sitting in each and every movie theater, during each and every cinematic screening.

As this ad illustrates, recorded music was feared to be a robot's lullaby that would lull otherwise mature audiences back to infancy.

SLIDE: [PAUSE FOR AUDIENCE TO READ] Similarly, this ad promoted the fear that recorded music in movie theaters, so-called canned music, was merely musical mince meat.

However, as anyone who's been to a movie theater in the past 85 years knows, the fear about recorded music soon abated.

SLIDE: As for the fear that "If the Internet craze continues, we are destined to become a nation of morons."

that fear was voiced in a 1950s commencement address, given by Boston University's president, who feared the 1950s technology called

SLIDE:: television. [PAUSE WHILE THEY READ]

SLIDE:: Similarly, the fear that "YouTube threatens to change us into creatures with eyeballs as big as cantaloupes with no brains at all," that, too, was a fear expressed in the 1950s, also about the fearful rise of

SLIDE:: Television, and this particular fearful statement was expressed by Fred Allen, a well-known radio personality.

But even radio was not immune when it first became widely adopted. There were fears about its deleterious effects. The fear that I shared about young people and texting,

SLIDE: So enthralled are they that they have developed the habit of dividing attention between the humdrum preparation of their school assignments and the compelling excitement of texting”

That fear pertained to young people and

SLIDE: listening to the radio. In the 1930s.

SLIDE: For many hours each day the youngsters gather round the radio and listen with rapt attention to the thrilling adventures of their beloved comic strip heroes and heroines.

SLIDE: So enthralled are they that they have developed the habit of dividing attention between the humdrum preparation of their school assignments and the compelling excitement of the radio’s loud speaker”

As for the fear about fantasy football ruining marriages, and the spouse who complained,

SLIDE: “You come in and plunk yourself down in a chair and start to play your fantasy football and don’t even say a word. You act as though I’m not even here.”

That marital complaint and thousands more like it was from the 1960s, complaining not about fantasy football but about

SLIDE: reading the newspaper.

This spouse also complained about their spouse reading the newspaper at the dinner table. So common was the complaint about spouses reading the newspaper at the table, while ignoring other people, that stock photos capture the phenomenon.

SLIDE: [older stock photo – pause to let view] Similar to stock photos that capture the modern day phenomenon.

SLIDE: [newer stock photo – pause to let view]

Indeed, before the invention of smartphones and the ability of smartphone users to take their smartphones everywhere, people took their newspapers everywhere.

SLIDE: The subway

SLIDE: The train

SLIDE: The street

SLIDE: The lecture classroom.

SLIDE: People even read their newspapers while walking down the street, just as we read, well some of us read,

SLIDE: our smartphones will walking down the street. As for the fear of Facebook bringing

SLIDE: a “dangerous time when ... Facebook takes the place of human intimacies, and the concept of being in touch with millions brings a greater and greater poverty in intimacy,” that fear was espoused about telephones. Landline telephones

SLIDE: [Pause for time to read]

This specific quote is from celebrated author Anaïs Nin, in the 1940s, when the U.S. had just witnessed the 30 millionth landline telephone being installed.

SLIDE: As for the fear that playing video games “does not add a single new fact to the mind; it does not excite a single beautiful thought; nor does it serve a single purpose for polishing and improving the nobler faculties.”

SLIDE: That fear also dates back to an earlier past time.

SLIDE: No, it was not QUOTE “youngsters listening to the radio with rapt attention to the thrilling adventures of their beloved comic strip heroes and heroines.” UNQUOTE

Rather, it was a fear about

SLIDE: playing chess. [Pause]
In the 1800s, chess was considered

SLIDE: “a mere amusement of a very inferior character, which robs the mind of valuable time that might be devoted to nobler acquirements, while at the same time it affords no benefit whatever to the body.” Sound familiar?

SLIDE:. [pic of video games]

SLIDE: As for the public’s distress about so many teenage girls who hang out on Snapchat from morning to night, to the neglect of their school work and their mental health? That fear dates back even earlier, this time to the 1700s, and the use of those newfangled gadgets called novels.

SLIDE: “Many teenage girls hang over this pestiferous reading, from morning to night, to the neglect of their school work and their mental health.”

Indeed, in his 1778 essay on morality and literacy, British schoolmaster Vicesimus Knox opined that

SLIDE: “If it be true that the present age is more corrupt than the preceding, the great multiplication of novels has probably contributed to its degeneracy,

SLIDE: because fifty years ago there was scarcely a novel in the kingdom.” Other scholars in the 1700s predicted that

SLIDE: “the increase of novels will help to account for the increase of prostitution and for the numerous adulteries and elopements that we hear about.” In fact,

SLIDE: in a list of reasons for admission to the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum,

SLIDE: we find novel reading, adjacent to nymphomania and opium addiction.

SLIDE: As for Sexting being the devil’s agent morally and physically in thousands of instances, that fear was promoted about

SLIDE: the bicycle. [Pause for a second] And more specifically

SLIDE: women on bicycles in the 1800s. Lastly, as for Google rotting our memories? That declaration was made by Socrates about the invention of writing:

SLIDE: “This discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use their memories.” Indeed, Socrates believed that those who relied on the new-fangled technology of writing

SLIDE: “will appear to be omniscient, but will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom but without the reality.”

And speaking of writing,

SLIDE: when ball point pens were first invented, they too were feared by some people. Remember the Hollywood movie, *Doubt*, starring Meryl Streep and Phillip Seymour Hoffman? Set in the 1960s, Meryl Streep plays a strict head nun at a parish school who becomes suspicious of the parish’s Father, played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman. What is the initial source of the head nun’s suspicion? The Father uses a ballpoint pen.

SLIDE: Even the humble pencil eraser was feared when it first appeared. The fear was that

SLIDE: if the technology makes error correction easy, students will make more errors.” Such fears continued to underlie more recent technologies like Word Processors and Spell Checkers.

And lest we forget the fears concerning

SLIDE: pocket calculators. When pocket calculators first appeared on the scene, professors often banned them, for fear that their students would lose the ability to calculate math by hand –

SLIDE: or by slide rule. Seen any slide rules in colleges classes lately?

[Pause] Because I was a child of the 1950s who witnessed the advent of numerous important technological inventions,

SLIDE: such as Barbie Dolls, Mr. Potato Head, McDonalds restaurants, and drive-in movies, along with

SLIDE: seat belts, the microchip, the cardiac pacemaker, and the antibiotic, tetracycline, I was imprinted on the power of technology. Specifically regarding the power of the Internet, I have been struck with its amazingly fast

SLIDE: saturation speed. By saturation speed, we mean the number of years required to achieve saturation through half of all households.

SLIDE: For the telephone, and here I’m talking about landline telephones

SLIDE: saturation through U.S. households took over 50 years;

SLIDE: for air conditioning, saturation took nearly 30 years.

SLIDE: For the automobile, it took over 20 years. However, for the Internet,

SLIDE: saturation has been achieved in a remarkable dozen years, second only in saturation speed

SLIDE: to the smartphone, which of course everyone uses to access the Internet.

So when I tell my colleagues that I not only teach on the Internet but that I do so by choice, and they look at me with *that* look that says,

SLIDE: “On the Internet? Seriously?”

I remind my colleagues that many other technologies were initially feared, and believed to cause moral decay, cognitive distraction, mental or physical weakness.

SLIDE: The technologies that we look back on now ever so fondly, were once just as feared as the technologies about which we are now ever so suspicious.