

Students face withdrawal, distress when cut off from Internet

By [Jacqui Cheng](#) | Last updated about 5 hours ago

University students faced with a sudden Internet and media blackout begin to feel withdrawal symptoms after 24 hours, according to a [study](#) conducted by the University of Maryland's International Center for Media & the Public Agenda. The study followed the reactions of 1,000 students around the globe after they were asked to abstain from all forms of media for a day, leading the researchers to believe that Internet addiction is a real phenomenon, even if there's debate about it as a clinical diagnosis.

Students from 10 countries—including the US, Mexico, China, Argentina, the UK—all reported distress, isolation, confusion, boredom, and a feeling of addiction when they had to go 24 hours without any form of media, including Internet, music, games, news shows, and their cell phones. However, the numbers were not all equal—students from the US and China (mainland and Hong Kong) showed the highest percentages of feeling addicted, at 23 and 22 percent respectively.

Argentina had the highest percentage of students who said they failed completely at the experiment—23 percent—and, incidentally, Argentina also had the highest levels of isolation at 21 percent. Comparatively, Ugandan students were best able to go along with the experiment, and had the highest number of students who saw the benefits of unplugging—36 percent. (Perhaps Ugandans know something about life balance that the rest of us don't.)

Failure at completing the task was split between those who had moments of weakness and those who had to use media for work or their studies. As one student from Uganda pointed out, “The next day [my friends] called, sent mails, informed me since I had missed to meet the bosses to discuss on the progress of the video production course in Kampala. I cannot imagine life without media.” For most, some form of media use was necessary, though others simply said they couldn't live without their entertainment or news.

Despite this, though, students from practically every country were quoted saying they envied those who aren't so dependent upon media. “I am always wondering why I become so dependent on these media now. When I was a child, I did not have these but I was also very happy everyday. Why? Why [does it look] like that today?” one student from China said.

Based on some of the other quotes highlighted in the study—one student from Argentina said he “felt dead” without media, one from the US said she was “itching like a crackhead,” and a Lebanese student simply said the whole experience was “sickening”—it's no surprise students feel conflicted about their dependence on media. It's the ultimate “can't live with it, can't live without it” situation; students recognize that there are other joys in life besides media, yet most can't get through a single day without feeling distress over being disconnected.

The researchers, led by University of Maryland journalism and public policy professor Susan D. Moeller, said one of the most striking takeaways was that students no longer simply search for news—news comes to them via Twitter, Facebook, Web sidebars, e-mail, breaking news alerts sent to their phones, and so on. The report says that students themselves need to be taught how to properly curate their own news streams “as a life skill they need in both their personal and professional lives.”

Undoubtedly, such a skill would help cut down on the feeling of media overload that many of us experience from time to time, and could even help temper feelings of anxiety when we don't have as much access to the Internet as we're used to. When we feel like we don't have to see *everything*—only the things that are truly important—it's easier to deal with a lack of media access.

As for whether Internet and media addiction is a real phenomenon, Moeller and her team didn't try to argue either way (they make a note in the report that they are not healthcare professionals, after all). They did write, however, that students reported not only a mental craving for information, but a physical craving for devices, with many addictive drug references. The medical profession itself is torn on Internet addiction as well—though [some studies](#) and [physicians](#) have supported the idea of Internet addiction as its own diagnosis, [psychologists remain skeptical](#).

That skepticism hasn't stopped treatment centers from popping up, though. For example, a center in Washington state called reSTART opened up in 2009 and offers a 45-day treatment program for \$14,500. Of course, learning about the program involves heading over to reSTART's website—better hope you have access to a device with an Internet connection. D'oh!