Henry David Thoreau once complained that he almost never got any mail worth opening and there was little value in looking at a newspaper. It is almost humorous to contemplate what he'd think of a world of emails, social networking, and cell phones. But one does not have to be a transcendentalist to see that although there are some individual benefits of emerging technology, our reliance on these technologies is harming our communities.
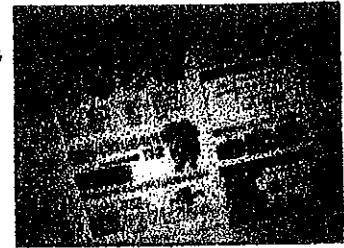
There is no doubt that technology has created a nation of multi-taskers, but is this trait beneficial? Although some businesses encourage young workers to stay happy, in a poor economy, more and more companies are banning (and blocking) employees from accessing social networking because they believe employee productivity is declining when their workers are spending hours of the day in chatrooms, updating their social status, or doing anything other than the work they are supposedly performing. The popular culture image of Homer Simpson eating a donut while working at a power plant can be replaced in modern America by employees updating their Facebook status, tweeting about the monotony of their jobs, and checking their online dating accounts for a potential Friday night date, all while purportedly working. During the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, CBSSportline, which broadcasts the games online free to millions of viewers a year, even created a "boss" button that would quickly hide the basketball game in case an employer walked into the room while an employee was supposedly doing work. While all of this may seem innocent, it could be costing American corporations tens of millions of dollars a year in work. While individuals may be benefitting, distracted workers could be financially harming corporations and the business community.

But technology can be causing actual physical harm, as well. In May of 2009, a Boston MBTA trolley-car rear-ended another trolley and injured 49 people when the driver ignored a red light because he was texting his girl-friend. It was a rare case of public-transportation drivers being accused of texting while driving, with innocent citizens on their way home from work being injured because of a cell-phone-obsessed driver. More states continue to pass legislation regulating or banning texting while driving or using cell-phones while driving, but in many cases drivers ignore these laws. It is nearly impossible to drive an hour in America without seeing several drivers talking on cell phones or texting while driving. About one in four accidents is believed to be caused by a person on a cell phone, and one in five drivers admits to texting while driving, which in some studies is shown to be equally as dangerous as driving while intoxicated. New technology has allowed more drivers to become distracted and put all drivers on the road at risk.

And yet the biggest benefit of emerging technology and social networking is thought to be the educational and communication benefits. But for all the amazing potential, the reality is that technology can impede classroom performance and negate intended benefits. New studies show students spend more than seven hours a day using technology—and this doesn't include time spent using text messages, which studies show adds an extra hour or two to the busy life of a student today. Students who are frequently emerged in a multi-tasking world at home are at risk of developing shorter attention spans and some studies suggest they are suffering from an inability to actually listen to fellow students. They are so used to immediately acting—typing, interacting, or performing some task that they cannot interact successfully in social situations where technology isn't involved. This lack of socialization is not simply a danger for students.

Psychologists and sociologists warn that people who spend too much time on computers—especially in alternate worlds in video games or on social network chatrooms—run the risk of secluding themselves from hours or typical human interaction. They perceive that they prefer to interact with their associates online. Although some interaction with people with common interests is certainly important, this can in actuality be isolating. By not spending time socializing with actual members of their local community, people run the risk of never learning proper socialization cues and never truly being able to engage in proper behavior in situations where technology isn't present or appropriate.