

Headline 6-48-1

By MATT RICHTEL
REDWOOD CITY, Calif.
— On the eve of a pivotal academic year in Vishal Singh's life, he faces a stark choice on his bedroom desk: book or computer?

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He typically favors Facebook, YouTube and making digital videos. That is the case this August afternoon. Bypassing Vonnegut, he clicks over to YouTube, meaning that tomorrow he will enter his senior year of high school hoping to see an improvement in his grades, but without having completed his only summer homework.

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Students have always faced distractions and time-wasters. But computers and cellphones, and the constant stream of stimuli they offer, pose a profound new challenge to focusing and learning.

Researchers say the lure of these technologies, while it affects adults too, is particularly powerful for young people. The risk, they say, is that developing brains can become more easily

habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks — and less able to sustain attention.

"Their brains are rewarded not for staying on task but for jumping to the next thing," said Michael Rich, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and executive director of the Center on Media and Child Health in Boston. And the effects could linger: "The worry is we're raising a generation of kids in front of screens whose brains are going to be wired differently."

But even as some parents and educators express unease about students' digital diets, they are intensifying efforts to use technology in the classroom, seeing it as a way to connect with students and give them essential skills. Across the country, schools are equipping themselves with computers, Internet access and mobile devices so they can teach on the students' technological territory.

It is a tension on vivid display at Vishal's school, Woodside High School, on a sprawling campus set against the forested hills of Silicon Valley. Here, as elsewhere, it is not uncommon for students to send hundreds of text messages a day or spend hours playing video games, and virtually everyone is on Facebook.

The principal, David Reilly, 37, a former musician who says he sympa-

thizes when young people feel disenfranchised, is determined to engage these 21st-century students. He has asked teachers to build Web sites to communicate with students, introduced popular classes on using digital tools to record music, secured funding for iPads to teach Mandarin and obtained \$3 million in grants for a multimedia center.

He pushed first period back an hour, to 9 a.m., because students were showing up bleary-eyed, at least in part because they were up late on their computers. Unchecked use of digital devices, he says, can create a culture in which students are addicted to the virtual world and lost in it.

"I am trying to take back their attention from their BlackBerrys and video games," he says. "To a degree, I'm using technology to do it."

The same tension surfaces in Vishal, whose ability to be distracted by computers is rivaled by his proficiency with them. At the beginning of his junior year, he discovered a passion for filmmaking and made a name for himself among friends and teachers with his storytelling in videos made with digital cameras and editing software.

He acts as his family's tech-support expert, helping his father, Satendra, a lab manager, retrieve lost documents on the computer, and

his mother, Indra, a security manager at the San Francisco airport, build her own Web site.

But he also plays video games 10 hours a week. He regularly sends Facebook status updates at 2 a.m., even on school nights, and has such a reputation for distributing links to videos that his best friend calls him a "YouTube bully."

Several teachers call Vishal one of their brightest students, and they wonder why things are not adding up. Last semester, his grade point average was 2.3 after a D-plus in English and an F in Algebra II. He got an A in film critique.

"He's a kid caught between two worlds," said Mr. Reilly — one that is virtual and one with real-life demands.

Vishal, like his mother, says he lacks the self-control to favor schoolwork over the computer. She sat him down a few weeks before school started and told him that, while she respected his passion for film and his technical skills, he had to use them productively.

"This is the year," she says she told him. "This is your senior year and you can't afford not to focus." It was not always this way. As a child, Vishal had a tendency to procrastinate, but nothing like this. Something changed him.

When he was 3, Vishal moved with his parents and

older brother to their current home, a three-bedroom house in the working-class section of Redwood City, a suburb in Silicon Valley that is more diverse than some of its elite neighbors.

Thin and quiet with a shy smile, Vishal passed the admissions test for a prestigious public elementary and middle school. Until sixth grade, he focused on homework, regularly going to the house of a good friend to study with him.

But Vishal and his family say two things changed around the seventh grade: his mother went back to work, and he got a computer. He became increasingly engrossed in games and surfing the Internet, finding an easy outlet for what he describes as an inclination to procrastinate.

"I realized there were choices," Vishal recalls. "Homework wasn't the only option."

Several recent studies show that young people tend to use home computers for entertainment, not learning, and that this can hurt school performance, particularly in low-income families. Jacob L. Vigdor, an economics professor at Duke University who led some of the research, said that when adults were not supervising computer use, children "are left to their own devices, and the impetus isn't to do homework but play around."

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students often juggle homework and entertainment. The Kaiser Family Foundation found earlier this year that half of students from 8 to 18 are using the Internet, watching TV or using some other form of media either "most" (31 percent) or "some" (25 percent) of the time that they are doing homework.

At Woodside, as elsewhere, students' use of technology is not uniform. Mr. Reilly, the principal, says their choices tend to reflect their personalities. Social butterflies tend to be heavy texters and Facebook users. Students who are less social might escape into games, while drifters or those prone to procrastination, like Vishal, might surf the Web or watch videos.

The technology has created on campuses a new set of social types — not the thespian and the jock but the texter and gamer, Facebook addict and YouTube potato.

"The technology amplifies whoever you are," Mr. Reilly says.

For some, the amplification is intense. Allison Miller, 14, sends and receives 27,000 texts in a month, her fingers clicking at a blistering pace as she carries on as many as seven texting.

Headline 6-42-1

By STEPHANIE
CLIFFORD
WEST CHESTER, Pa.

A FEW seconds before going on the air here, the QVC host Sandra Bennett hurries onto a set that looks like a suburban American kitchen. Rachael Ray is waiting behind a counter stacked with her cookware, on sale today at \$49.76 for an eight-piece set.

Ms. Ray, the television personality, author and chef, knows a thing or two about selling. But QVC knows a little more.

"You tell me what to do, and that's what I'll do," Ms. Ray tells Ms. Bennett.

As the cameras roll, Ms. Bennett embraces Ms. Ray like an old friend, tells her how cute she looks and notes that Ms. Ray's cookware is selling quickly.

Behind the scenes — down a hallway and up some stairs — a producer, Stan Odenweller, scans nine television and computer screens. A live database shows him that all of the

cookware is selling at a rate of \$7,844 a minute, which is a little low for QVC.

Mr. Odenweller has a line into the women's earpieces, and he nudges them to focus on pieces of the cookware that his databases show are popular with viewers — in this case, the red versions. Almost as soon as Ms. Bennett begins describing them, QVC's call volume starts to spike.

"They're loving the red," Mr. Odenweller tells the two women.

When Ms. Ray lifts the lid off a red casserole dish, Ms. Bennett gushes over the variety of colors on offer, adding that the purple versions are brand new and that shoppers love them.

Mr. Odenweller glances at the database again. The purple version is selling like crazy, so Mr. Odenweller prompts Ms. Bennett: "And fewer than 300."

"We now have fewer than 300 remaining, so if you want the purple, this could be it," Ms. Bennett says.

Then: "150 remain ..."
"If you do want that purple, now is the time, only 150 remaining," Ms. Bennett says.

"QVC.com," Mr. Odenweller adds, coaching her to mention the company's Web site.

"And if you go to QVC.com, you can find lots and lots of recipes from Rachael," Ms. Bennett says, wrapping up.

By the end of the 12-minute segment, customers have bought about \$350,000 worth of cookware. Over at QVC.com, in the 24 hours after Ms. Ray first goes on the air, shoppers have purchased 13,500 of her baking sets.

It was only several years ago that analysts and even Michael George, now the company's chief executive, were wondering if the Internet had made QVC a relic.

But Mr. George said he had an epiphany of sorts after he was approached to join the company about five years ago: QVC's strong

points — direct feedback from customers, limited-time offers and live sales data — were the Internet's strong points, too.

Over the last few years, QVC has been fine-tuning its Web site and offering mobile phone, interactive-television and iPad apps.

It has also added exclusive products from reality stars like Kim Kardashian and Rachel Zoe, along with expensive products like \$5,000 high-definition televisions. Today, QVC.com, a once-negligible part of the QVC empire, accounts for about a third of QVC's domestic revenue.

In the third quarter, QVC had revenue of \$1.8 billion, up 7 percent from the same period a year earlier. That is more than two and a half times the revenue of HSN, its closest competitor. And about a third of QVC's sales now come through the Internet rather than television.

"A few years ago, I had more of the perception that this was a television-

shopping business which would be extremely vulnerable to the Internet and e-commerce," says Douglas Anmuth, an analyst at Barclays Capital. "They've really caught up."

Still, catching up is not winning. Online, QVC has hundreds of rivals, from traditional retailers like Wal-Mart and Nordstrom to startups like the Gilt Groupe, which offers discounts on designer items.

Yet digital retailing is a medium where the lowest prices, along with free shipping, tend to influence customer decisions. QVC rarely guarantees either. And the channel's hybrid of talk show and pitching, which goes out to more than 98 million American homes a day, is hard to duplicate online.

"Candidly, when I first started talking about it, my instinct was, having spent my life in retail, that this is an old idea that the Internet is passing by," says Mr. George.

"It was a bit of an unnatural act to take this company that was so successful, and you've got such a well-grooved process, and say, how do we make this a multimedia company?" In 1986, Joseph Segel, founder of the Franklin Mint, the mail-order coin company, founded QVC. He was trying to mimic the success of the Home Shopping Channel. The first broadcast showed a guy in a red blazer talking about a shower radio, and other early programs ran sweepstakes to attract viewers.

Luis' Deli
Ad
2x3

Wal-Mart Ad
4x6 (color)

Mom's
Shop Ad
2x4

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Photo by Luke Skywalker

John Smith spends his dinner on Saturday night glued to his phone. Like him, thousands of other teens can't disconnect.

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