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TETHERED

## It Don't Mean a Thing if You Ain't Got That Ping

By [MATT RICHTEL](#)

THE [BlackBerry](#) network went dark last week — cache-flow problems, apparently. Service stopped for a mere 12 hours, but to bereft users, 12 minutes was too long. Information feeds our lives, they protested, and the BlackBerry provides it. What if we miss the e-mail message that makes or breaks our happiness, or our bank account?

That's always possible, of course. But what if what the users were missing was more primitive and insidious than uninterrupted access to information?

Experts who study computer use say the stated yearning to stay abreast of things may mask more visceral and powerful needs, as many self-aware users themselves will attest. Seductive, nearly inescapable needs.

Some theorize that constant use becomes ritualistic physical behavior, even addiction, the absorption of nervous energy, like chomping gum.

This behavior is then fueled by powerful social motivators. Interaction with a device delivering data gives a feeling of validation, inclusion and desirability. (It's no fun to be the only un-pinged person in the room.)

James E. Katz, director of the Center for Mobile Computing at [Rutgers University](#), said the data coming from the devices was really secondary. "Look at a lot of the communication — it's idiotic in terms of substance," Mr. Katz said. "But it's vital in terms of meaning."

Mr. Katz argues that participation gives people a sense of belonging, one traceable to the atavistic desire to congregate and cooperate for safety and survival. In addition, he said, the constant checking is an exercise in optimism, like being an explorer or a gambler. Eternal hope delivered in tiny bits while you're on the go.

"It's random reinforcement," Mr. Katz said. The fact that you don't know when important news will come, he said, "means you will quickly engage in obsessive compulsive behavior."

These social needs and yearnings may drive the use. But at some point, that use becomes an end unto itself — a physical ritual that can take on some of the qualities of actual addiction, said Dr. John Ratey, a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard, where he specializes in neuropsychiatry.

Several years ago, Mr. Ratey began using the term "acquired attention deficit disorder" to describe the condition of people who are accustomed to a constant stream of digital stimulation and feel bored in the absence of it. Regardless of whether the stimulation is from the Internet, TV or a cellphone, the brain, he said, is hijacked.

"I liken it to a drug," Mr. Ratey said. "Drug addicts don't think; they just start moving. Like moving for your

BlackBerry.”

When the BlackBerry system faltered on Tuesday night, Steven M. Krausz, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist, was attending an industry dinner at a conference in Washington, D.C. The malfunction didn't interrupt his habit.

“I checked it at least a dozen times during dinner,” Mr. Krausz said, in part because he was curious about when service would be restored but also because the constant checking was a placeholder for less desirable activities.

“I'd rather reach for the BlackBerry than reach for bread or dessert and put some high-cholesterol item in my mouth,” he said, calling his habit “a reflexive response.” Besides, he added, he checked his device regularly “because it was a boring dinner speaker.”

There were two speakers, actually: Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and Dr. Tadataka Yamada, executive director of global health for the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#). Not the least boring to some listeners, but the threshold for boredom is low these days, say compulsive device operators.

BlackBerry users do half-joke that they have become junkies, insatiable data tokers. But because the tool is tied to productivity, defined by some as essential to modern employment, overusers don't really regard their habit as the digital equivalent of firing up a Marlboro outside work.

Perhaps they should re-examine the tie to productivity, however. The technology creates the allusion that every moment can be a productive one, said Tara Hunt, 33, a marketing director for a technology consulting company in San Francisco. When you're not participating, it's like you're suggesting that you're not keeping up, she said.

“I might think I'm missing out if [Google](#) bought another company and I wasn't part of the echo chamber around it,” Ms. Hunt said, referring to the chance she'd miss news of an industry development. “At the end of the day, it doesn't matter a whole lot.”

B. Marc Averitt, a technology investor, said that on the face of it, his fear was that someone would send him a message, become frustrated and bored if there wasn't an immediate response, then go look elsewhere for an answer. He keeps up, he said, because everyone else is doing it, forcing his hand.

But on a deeper level, Mr. Averitt said he found a frustrating, even counterproductive, psychological fixation. And one that he sometimes has to satisfy in secret. On vacations, he said, he has been known to check his BlackBerry even after promising his wife he wouldn't. His wife says the activity takes him out of the real emotions of the present.

And perhaps, for some, that is the point.

Dr. Roney, from Harvard, likens the problem to a food addiction, which is one of the most beguiling for psychiatrists. After all, he said, food is essential for life, but problematic in excessive doses. And that's what makes breaking technology addiction so difficult.

Sometimes the habit is there even when the device isn't. Users talk of phantom urges, like (no kidding) the feeling of a hip vibrating, as if to suggest a belt-hooked BlackBerry is buzzing when, in fact, the person is the shower.

Others hear a beep in the night, say from outdoors or an alarm clock, and reach for the device.

“It’s like Pavlov’s dog,” Mr. Averitt said.

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