The dramatic influence of rapidly growing social media, computers, telephony, television, movies and the Internet continue to surprise us all. Among the most fascinating developments is what we are learning from brain research using Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). Results are revealing specific outcomes affecting the brain and behavior. Media psychology is now an official sub-specialty in the field of psychology. Recently, in Washington, D.C., I participated as member of the board of directors of Division 46, the Media Psychology Division of the American Psychology Association (APA) when we examined some of the new knowledge about the good and bad effects of video games, online learning and internet resources such as Google, Yahoo and other media that most of us use every day.

Recent studies now validate the reality of Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD). IAD can cause tremors, shivers, nausea and anxiety in some addicts. Many professionals now consider IAD analogous to substance abuse. They include it among other pathological behaviors such as gambling and eating disorders. Try removing a young "gamer" from a video game in a hurry. You will discover how difficult it is to break the attachment between the teen and the screen.

In short, some people use broadcast and Internet media as a mental and emotional retreat and refuge. Addicts are connected to their screens; their minds trapped for hours to the exclusion of the world around them. Addicts neglect family, work, studies, social relationships and themselves. This is an addictive obsession that is human-centered and screen-deep. Mind-altering media applications may be found in video games, iPods, YouTube and other evolving communications applications. In general, these negative aspects of media and behavior are being widely discussed simultaneously with the discussion of the beneficial contributions media makes as an important source for positive behavioral change.
Telemedicine, teletherapy and telehealth are yielding new information and better understanding that will lead to improved services to the public. The value of positive psychology has been validated. Positive media messages are helping to improve public understanding of major social and medical consequences of issues affecting the public such as body weight, diet and lack of exercise, high cholesterol, and hypertension to highlight only a few. Increased public awareness and understanding through media is leading us to positive behavioral changes. Media psychology applied to major social issues can be a force for good. In addition, the growth of new Internet applications in commercial areas such as online buying and banking are positively contributing to the world’s economy at an astonishing rate.

Media-centric education is also growing apace. Education, from kindergarten through graduate school, corporate education and career learning, is being transformed by media. The art and science of teaching and learning in virtual environments is a highly specialized field that now requires specific understanding and expertise. I recently enjoyed dinner with Apollo astronaut Buzz Aldrin, with whom I serve on the Board of HiTechHigh, Los Angeles. We talked about the current state of education, media and technology. Buzz, who earned a Ph.D. in astronautics from MIT, observed that “children today have more computer power at their fingertips to do their homework than was onboard the space vehicles that first carried us into space.” When I asked Buzz if this is a good or bad thing, he shot back, “It’s good….absolutely.” Media and social media are distributors and drivers of social change. We need increased understanding of the effects of media to help manage our future. Our community must grapple with our cultural or religious sensitivities. If we don’t shape our future, it will shape us.

THE GOOD MEDIA EFFECTS:

- IQs are rising, according to the Education Testing Service. Much of the increase is due to advances in media assisted learning and interactive game playing.
- Girls are advancing in the field of science. Some studies attribute this to increased numbers of females engaging in interactive game play.
- The nexus between media and learning is increasingly popular and we are learning more about learning.
- Communication is increasing across cultures.
- Media has helped foster public understanding of many crucial issues.

THE BAD MEDIA EFFECTS:

- Attention spans are decreasing because of exposure to excessively stimulating and fast-paced media. A direct link between exposure to media stimulation and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) has surfaced from research.
- Violence in media causes desensitization to violence. It may facilitate violent acts. Violence may be contagious by observational learning and social agreement.
- Media-assisted crimes like identity theft and child pornography are taking new forms.
- Average number of sleep hours per night decreases in inverse proportion to the average number of hours per day of Internet use.
- Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) is increasingly diagnosed by professionals.
CONCLUSIONS:

Research has found that playing action video games has a positive effect leading to improvements in visual attention. Therefore, research is revealing both problems and benefits from the relationship between media stimulation and attention. More study is important.

Media studies, media and culture, media and communications psychology, are central to our early 21st century world. New knowledge is emerging. We presently know a lot more than we understand. As responsible parents and citizens, we must "pay attention."

I am pleased to have the opportunity to share some of the new knowledge from the field of media psychology, especially as it relates to the family, and to discuss questions as part of our effort to create a positive future together.