

Civility in the Digital Age

Brief: The future of civility depends on whether we make wise choices about how we use digital technology.

Learning Objective: Understand the impact of digital technology on listening behaviors and which behaviors help reduce distracted listening.

Key Terms:

- Civility: Behaving in ways that support good citizenship.
- Distracted Listening: Obstacles to the listening process that block attending to the speaker's message.
- The Digital Age: A historic period characterized by an economy based on information technology.

Our Digital Age

We're living in the Digital Age, a historic period characterized by an economy based on information technology. Our Digital Age has many positive aspects, including greater



interconnectedness, easier communication, and the exposure of political information that in the past could have been suppressed.

Our Digital Age also has many negative effects, such as information overload, Internet predators, forms of social isolation, and media saturation. Personal digital technology is pervasive. Many people find it hard to put down the phone or turn off the laptop.

Listening in the Public Square

Civility, behaving in ways that support good citizenship, is also at risk. To practice civility effectively we must actively share our views in “the public square”—exercising our right to articulate our opinions and ideas, our freedom of speech. Implied in our right to freedom of speech is the assumption that others will listen to us. In our Digital Age, personal digital technology offers us endless opportunities for distractions that get in the way of that listening.

At the same time, that same technology offers us new opportunities that support listening. Digital technology is a mixed bag, neither good nor bad. The future of civility depends on us and whether we make wise choices about how we use it.

How Digital Technology Impacts Public Speaking

Most everyone has experienced the benefits technology can provide to an audience's listening experience. For those who find it difficult to sustain focused listening, electronic presentations

can incorporate photographs, sounds, charts, guided outlines, and other features that can help them maintain attention and absorb complicated ideas.

When not used properly, technology can become a barrier to effectively engaging your audience. Poor or outdated equipment can malfunction, causing disruptions to the listening process. Excessive or unnecessary audio/visual components to a technological presentation can distract attention from important speech content.

Technology and the Listener

Beyond technology being utilized by the speaker, technology used by the listener can also hinder effective listening. Taking notes on a laptop, tablet, or cell phone is convenient, but it is also convenient to check Facebook. If someone in the audience is talking or texting during the speech, technology becomes a major distraction for everyone involved.

Technology Tips for the Speaker

Speakers can avoid distractions caused by technology by doing the following:

Before the presentation, the speaker should silence his or her cell phone or any other device that might make noise and provide an interruption.

The speaker should request that the audience do the same, to have a distraction-free environment.

If using technology as part of the presentation, the speaker should do a test run to make sure that everything is set up properly to avoid malfunction later during the speech.

If possible, the speaker should do a sound check.

The speech should not include too many sources of visual stimulation such as visual aids, PowerPoints, charts, laser pointers, etc., which can cause message overload for the audience as they try to divide their attention between what they hear and what they see.

From Concept to Action

Reflect on your listening habits. When (in class, with friends, with family, etc.) are you most likely to be a distracted listener? What's your most persistent distracted listening habit (texting, watching videos, checking Facebook, etc.)? What one new behavior choice could you make that would increase your listening effectiveness?

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