

Are you a Google-stalker, maybe a Wikipediolic, perhaps a photolurker or even a MySpacer? You are not alone

Internet addicts caught up in web

SHAN ROSS

THE internet has spawned a new breed of obsessives who are showing symptoms of addiction to using Google, Wikipedia and other websites, according to scientists.

The new addicts who have acquired nicknames such as Wikipediolics, MySpacers or photolurkers are believed to have developed these traits because of the instant access to sites which fascinate them.

Research in the December issue of *New Scientist* says while only a small group of people can be considered true dysfunctional "hardcore" technoaddicts, the syndrome may be becoming more prevalent.

Examples of behaviour of those verging on the obsessive include spending hours "Google-stalking" – tracking down previous partners or work colleagues but having no intention of contacting them.

Researchers at the journal compiled research projects from a number of universities worldwide to investigate whether these new web syndromes and technological tics are new versions of old affiliations or if we are developing new mind bugs.

Mark Griffiths, an addiction researcher at Nottingham Trent

University, said the early stage of developing a bad habit was fairly easy, he said: "You can become addicted to potentially anything you do because addictions rely on constant rewards."

Researchers involved in previous studies say there is also evidence to suggest drug addictions and non-drug habits share the same neural pathways.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia which allows people to update its entries has bred a tribe who see themselves as a community rather than entry-level addicts. There are currently more than 2,400 "Wikipedians" who have edited more than 4,000 pages each.

Dan Cosley at Cornell University in New York who has studied websites such as Wikipedia and similar sites said: "It's clearly like crack for some people. To committed Wikipedians, the site is more than a useful information resource, it's the embodiment of an ideology of free information for all."

Another new group known as "photolurkers" spend their time on photolog sites such as Flickr, sifting through strangers' online photograph albums looking at wedding day or holiday photographs.

Professor Muffy Calder, head of computer science at the University of Glasgow, said manufacturers used consumer psychology techniques to keep people online.

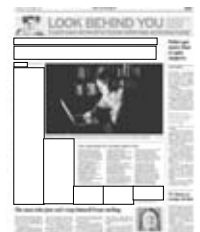
"This isn't really too surprising when you consider a lot of research has gone into the interfaces and that's one of the main reasons why people get hooked.

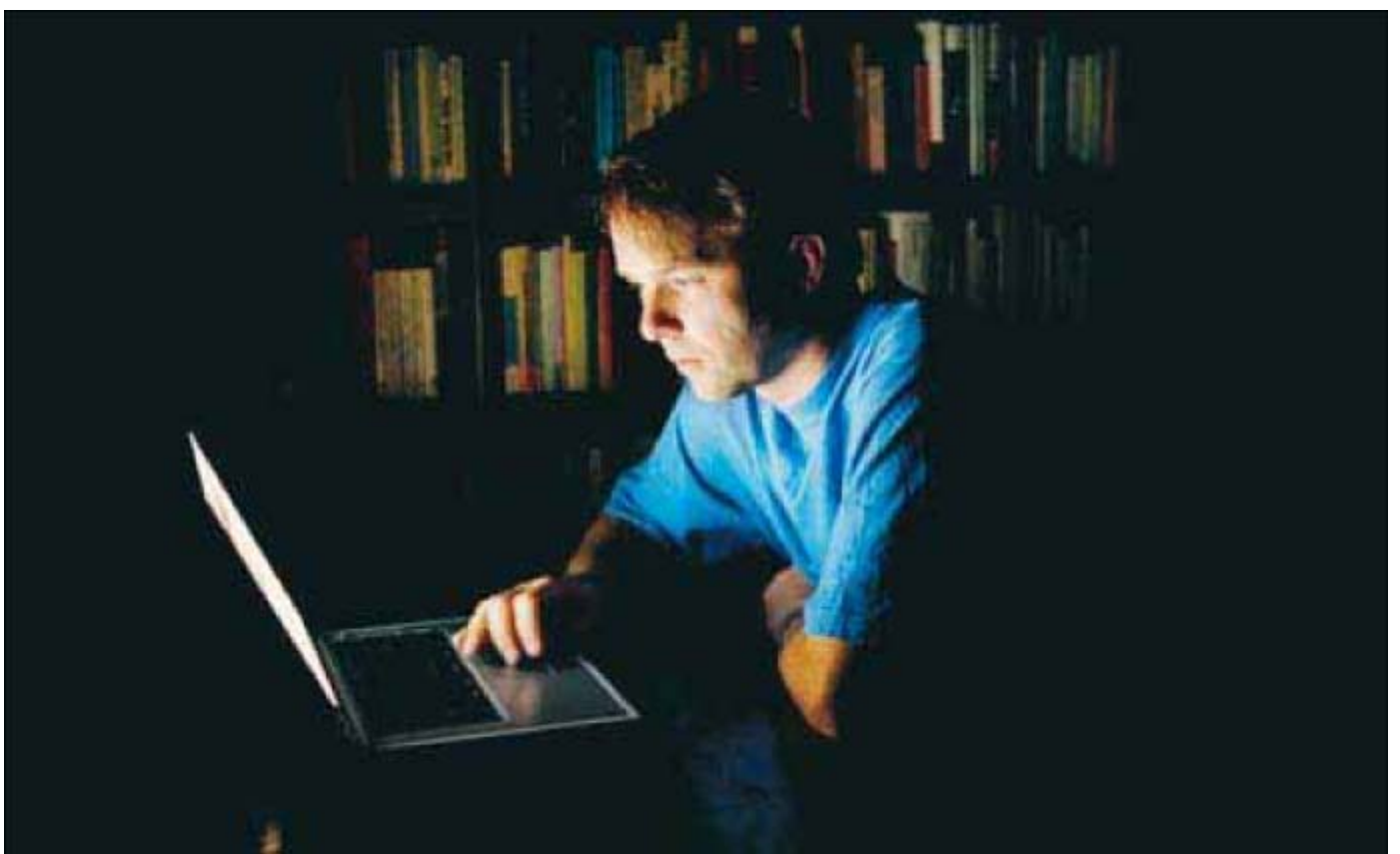
"It may seem a bit sad for adults to spend hours on an internet site but they probably have the sort of personality which would be sucked into something else if they weren't on the computer," said Prof Calder.

But Dylan Armbrust, editor-in-chief of *Computer Active* magazine, said fears about addiction were exaggerated.

"I suspect that a lot of this so-called addiction is just a fad where a site such as YouTube has become the flavour of the month. It will only be a matter of time until people get bored with it and with all the others, like MySpace, which come and go.

"A lot of people watch hours and hours of television but no one seems to give them a hard time about it. Going online is not so very different."





Scientists say easy access to compelling web content has led to a breed of obsessives who show symptoms of addiction

THE LANGUAGE OF TECHNO ADDICTION

THE new range of techno addictions has spawned a series of nicknames derived from obsessive use of their parent sites or new gadgets.

■ Wikipediomania is an excessive devotion to the online collaborative encyclopedia which allows fans to edit its pages. Wikipedians consider themselves to be a group bonded by a unique community spirit of sharing new information.

■ Crackberrys are usually

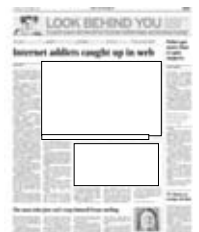
young to middle-aged professionals who are unable to stop checking their Blackberry for important and vital messages, even during family funerals.

■ Photolurking is an activity where addicts can't stop viewing other people's boring wedding and holiday photographs, or even pictures of their pets.

■ YouTube narcissism is the ideal site for exhibitionists who have the freedom to post hours and hours of their

holiday videos online. These often involve particular dancing or waving teddy bears or mascots in front of iconic world sites such as the Kremlin or Eiffel Tower.

■ Google-stalking may develop into excessive snooping on old friends, colleagues and partners to find out where they live or how their careers are going. Addicts rarely want to make physical contact even when telephone numbers and addresses are available.



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