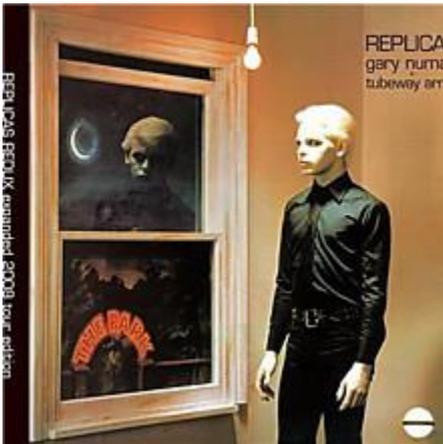# Are Friends Electric?

You know I hate to ask
But are friends electric?
Only mine's broken down
And now I've no-one to love

Are Friends Electric?, Gary Numan / Tubeway Army (1979)

You can't help but avoid the plethora of scary and unnerving statistics flying around nowadays about the invidious effects of electronic devices and software on the young. It sometimes feels like all the troubles of the world, and certainly, the complications of adolescence, have been laid at the e-door, though we need to keep things in perspective.

Electronic technology has helped and benefitted us in numerous ways over the last century or so and you would be hard pushed to find anyone who could make the argument that electricity is simply bad stuff all-round. Gary Numan himself has attributed his success as an electronica pioneer to a chance encounter with a Minimoog synthesiser someone had left by mistake in his recording studio. Once he turned it on, he knew that his punk days were behind him and that this was the sound of the future.

Numan's music and lyrics of the late 70s and early 80s, however, often pointed to darker prophecies of an electronic future. His excellent single *Down in the Park*, menacingly later covered by the rather terrifying Marilyn Manson, drew on his interest in sci-fi writers such as J.G. Ballard and Philip K. Dick to evoke a futuristic park where androids kill human beings to entertain (android) spectators looking on from a nearby club. If that's not bad tech voodoo, I'm not sure what is.

Whilst such dystopian views of the future thankfully still remain in the realms of fiction, there is no doubt that the increased use of mobile phones, gaming and social media have had mixed consequences for young people today. Their sensible and measured use has arguably improved

communication and made people much better connected, as well as provided various means of relaxation, pleasure and enjoyment.

The excessive, and at worst addictive, use of such technology, however, often leads to far more unsavoury and toxic consequences. It's a sad fact that over two thirds of bullying cases in schools today take place via mobile phones and social media. There's also the issue of 'perfectionism' where children, continuously exposed to images of flawless people and lifestyles, grow up deluded in believing that a happy and contented life is dependent on such things.

Excessive time spent gaming can be particularly detrimental to the young, not simply in terms of the hours spent in front of screens in place of more healthy and productive activities. The chronic lack of sleep caused by late-night gaming and excessive screen time is hugely damaging to students' ability to operate effectively in school. One recent survey showed that chronic gaming addiction usually leads to school performance dropping by two to three GCSE grades over sustained periods for 14-16-year-olds.

With the worrying increase in mental health issues amongst children, we really do need to keep an eye on the negative effects of electronic technology. The way social media companies are writing their allonyms means that they are drawing people in to use devices more as they can then make more money with advertising. Nothing is free as they say. Your time on devices is being monetised.   Michael Burke, the veteran newscaster said, 'young people today are swapping real relationships that make them happy, for virtual relationships that make them sad'.

There is no doubt; however, that mobile phones, gaming and social media are here to stay and there is also no doubt that electronic devices will become even more integral and prevalent in our children's future lives. We, therefore, need to encourage these digital natives to use such devices in productive, responsible and sustainable ways. We need to find ways of harnessing their immense and increasing capabilities without becoming their slaves or victims.

Digital Awareness UK recently to produce #techcontrol videos and teaching resources that promote such sustainable use and last week's conference involved the launch of the second video, *Break the Habit part 2*. This provides three excellent case studies of young people, all of whom admit to different types of technology addiction and all of whom have worked out ways of returning to responsible use. The video can be accessed here.

The last thing to say on this tricky topic is that we, as adults, need to lead by example in terms of responsible technology use, particularly in front of our children. In this respect it's worth a look at the first tech control video released last year – *Break the Habit part 1.* If the parent at the start of this video feels in any way familiar, then perhaps we should be asking ourselves Gary Numan's famous question too.