

bate, each student should write  
g group's argument, noting its

ensorship infringe on individual  
roups and discuss how prohibit-  
amounts to censorship. (You first  
ea of what censorship involves.)  
hip in America today does your  
ow discuss what this censorship  
e. Finally, write a collaborative  
for or against censorship of an  
age.

that all drug use in religious cer-  
e outlawed, including the use of  
ader's reaction to your proposal  
th clear reasoning and concrete

hat our freedom of worship in  
e U.S. government does not stop  
cal religious traditions and the  
e today.

### glas Laycock

tion of the United States online,  
nent. Next, insert the key words  
research engine and review the  
th the religious use of peyote by  
right reference "Oregon Depart-  
smith" for the U.S. Supreme Court  
ummarize one of the articles—or  
—providing readers with specific  
an find the same articles online.  
it would be to write an argumen-  
futing the U.S. Supreme Court's  
ful reasoning and new informa-  
our claims. (See the Appendix on



## Mandana Mohsenzadegan

### OMG: Tweeting, Trending, and Texting

Mandana Mohsenzadegan is a 25-year-old Iranian-American woman and often has been put in the category "Generation 1.5." She immigrated to the United States when she was ten years old. Presently, she's an English graduate student at San Jose State, and hopes to obtain her Master's of Arts degree this upcoming May. Mandana also possesses a Bachelor's degree in journalism (with a minor in philosophy) and has published a feature article in *Access Magazine* (2005), and editorials in the *Spartan Daily* and the *Campbell Express* (2008), in addition to an op-ed that appeared in the *Palo Alto Daily* in the summer of 2009. Currently, she is a teacher's assistant in her English department at San Jose State University. A true "people person," Mandana plans to teach at community colleges once she graduates. She also enjoys creative writing and looks forward to publishing more of her creative and critical works in the near future.

### Pre-reading Questions

1. Do you or your friends keep track of who's "trending" on the Internet? How often do you "tweet" or "text" others and for what reasons?
2. Freewrite in your journal or notebook on at least two of the following topics: "texting," "tweeting," and/or "trending." What part do they play among your daily activities, if any?

*"Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds."*

—Henry David Thoreau

- 1 No matter which Bay Area Starbucks we walk into, the familiar text message ringtone of an iPhone (currently, the “glass” sound is the most popular) will be heard intermittently, as we wait in line for our double macchiato or white mocha. Cue the consequent noise of every customer digging into their purses or pockets—(was it mine?)—and we all start tapping away at our touch screens (or keypads, for a Droid or Blackberry loyalist), remembering someone we had forgotten to text or email this morning—a quick response to a friend’s joke, a relative’s dinner invite, or a boss’ inquiry about a project. Eyes remain wholly fixated on these small little devices, as we completely zone out of our physical environment—that is, of course, until a voice asks us what drink we would like to order and if we want a pastry with that. For a few minutes at most, we put away the “phone” (an odd name for a device that also gives us access to the World Wide Web, measures the number of steps we walk in a given day, and allows us to video-chat with someone halfway across the world). The short-lived silence shatters with the sound of glass, bell, or chime, once again notifies us that a highly imperative matter—a Twitter or Facebook update, a funny forward, or a text message—must be immediately answered, placing everything else on hold.
- 2 People demonstrate an addictive dependence on cell phones in many everyday situations. I once attended a dinner party in which a guest—a young woman around the same age as myself—would repeatedly look down at her phone, chuckling furtively (but perceptively) as she tapped away at the keys, while the host’s father—a very kind and respectable gentleman over sixty—attempted to hold a conversation with her on some political matter. The insulted look on his face was hard to miss, and I remember feeling disgusted at the woman’s rude behavior. And yet—are we not all guilty of interrupting an in-person conversation every now and then, because of the *clink-clink* of our phone—due to a compulsive need to look down at the received text message? Do we not subconsciously prioritize the world of virtual reality over the concrete world in which we live?
- 3 Perhaps my generation is too young to have any meaningful recollections of what life was once like when it was free from the mind-numbing dependency of telecommunications—we have no bittersweet nostalgia of a not-so-distant past when “FaceTime” was literal, and the most meaningful relationships arose not from sending four hundred text messages a day to your significant other or family member, but from showing up at their door and actually spending quality time with them.
- 4 I imagine that in such a time, people reveled in the excitement of long-distance relationships through nightly phone conversations (rather than “textversations”), so that they could hear and feel the emotions in their beloved’s voice; then, their attention fixed solely upon the warm

- loving exchange of words, rather than engaging in simultaneous activities or having the “freedom” to take twenty minutes to respond.
- 5 I imagine a time when our public and private lives did not merge in such a discordant sort of way—that if we were having a bad day or needed a shoulder to cry on, we did not report it to over hundreds of people we barely talk to (via a Facebook Status or Twitter update), but called up our most trustworthy and loving friend to pour our hearts out in a healthy sort of way.
  - 6 I imagine a time in which there was no “e” in front of mail, and there was actually a thrill of anticipation when the postman arrived at our door; yes, I am referring to the “archaic” practice of good ol’ handwritten letter writing—thoughtful missives which were not filled with the “OMG”s, “BTW”s, “LOL”s, and emoticons of our generation, but were creative, articulate, and meaningful expressions of affection (I strongly believe that whoever popularized smiley faces and “<3” signs in written communication was a moron—is it so arduous a task to spell out the four letters of “love”? Must we explain to our recipient that we are flashing our pearly whites, at least a dozen times through the course of five sentences? Ostensibly, expressing our emotions through words seems far too challenging.)
  - 7 Some may consider the letter-writing style of past generations—with the respectful “Dear” and closing salutations of “Affectionately” or “Always”—as dry and formal, but I would argue quite the contrary. The prose styles of traditional letter writing were far more genuine and heartfelt than our short, fragmented sentences and acronyms could ever be: within its supposedly “formal” structure, letter-writing allowed an intimacy and freedom of articulation—the well-written sentences, the organized thoughts, the creative diction, the well thought-out and expressive content—but oh, so much work! Why take the extra time and brain energy to deeply express ourselves to a loved one, when we have “emoticons” to do the job for us?
  - 8 We fail to recognize that in its attempt to bring us closer together, telecommunications have only drifted us further apart and placed a superficial veil over our interactions with others, leaving us feeling empty and discontent—despite our having 500+ “friends” on Facebook.
  - 9 Of course, influential electronic media does not simply affect our personal relationships with others; it has traversed that line and seeped into the very heart of our culture. An unlimited outlet for entertainment and perpetually growing source of information, the Internet controls our daily existence, governs our priorities, and reshapes our thinking. With a seemingly inexhaustible access to worldwide information, our attentions divert from one sound bite to the next. We can log onto Twitter to receive minute-to-minute updates concerning the personal lives of our favorite celebrities or politicians, and we can go on YouTube to watch

TV shows and movies, plug in our earphones and listen to the latest pop songs, with just the click of a button on our handy-dandy little gadgets. Have an obscure question that simply must be answered at this very instant? Have no fear! Google functions like a magic genie. Have a chronic pain but don't feel like going to the doctor? Not to worry, Medline.com allows people to self-diagnose! (And most likely *misdiagnose*.) Feeling too lazy to go the grocery store? Luckily, Safeway offers online shopping so its customers can get those tomatoes and celeries hand-delivered to their door.

10 Often, people feel incomplete without their technological conveniences. For instance, a student of mine wrote that he would never forget the panic that came over him and his father during a camping trip, when they realized they had forgotten their watches (and left their cell phones home due to lack of service). However, he then went on to write that it was the most peaceful, enjoyable trip he had ever had, fishing by the lake with his father, bonding together without any forms of distraction. Time had lost its importance to them, in those three blissful days spent in the woods, and it strengthened their relationship immensely.

11 Nonetheless, who has time for camping trips, when we spend our lives in a constant state of “Go, go, go”? Naturally we would choose to spend our downtime sprawled on the couch watching “reality” television, rather than take a walk in a park, or perhaps pick up a good book and immerse ourselves in rich and meaningful literature to stimulate our brains. Instead we choose to shut them off—let our televisions, Internet, and phones amuse us with endless entertainment—the majority of which is hollow and meaningless at its core.

12 Perhaps one of the greatest 20th century critics of telecommunications was Neil Postman, author of “Amusing Ourselves to Death,” a deeply analytic work that expressed his anxiety over the future of technology and what he believed was a subsequent disintegration of meaningful public discourse within communities. The most uncanny thing about his work is, of course, the fact that it was written in 1985—a time which most consider well *before* the boom of electronic media. The main focus of the book rests on television—a powerful medium of entertainment, which permeates, redefines and revalues our culture. Postman writes, “Television is altering the meaning of ‘being informed’ by creating a species of information that might properly be called disinformation.” He goes on to define disinformation not as false information, but as “misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented, or superficial information.” Eerily, the premise remains the same for our time, and becomes all the more powerful and relevant for future generations than it was for his. Whether we consider it his prophetic vision or simply a logically deduced prediction of what was sure to follow, the significance of his message remains the same: Take heed.

13 Postman's main arguments were hardly novel—many philosophers and writers before his time have posited similar assertions of resistance to the progression of telecommunications. During the 19th century in his *Walden* essay, “Where I Lived, And What I Lived,” Thoreau's wrote an often censured message condemning all aspects of technology that rang loud and poignantly clear: the nation, with all its attempts at self-improvement, had become “an unwieldy and overgrown establishment.” Postman himself credits Aldous Huxley for portending the same message back in the 1930s, with the controversial yet widely acclaimed novel *Brave New World*. Having paved the 20th century anxiety toward the advancement of technology, Huxley's message becomes what Postman terms, the “Huxleyan warning.”

In the Huxleyan prophesy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours . . . when a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when in short, people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility. (Postman 155–156)

14 I would hardly advise people to ditch their cell phones and laptops and run off to live in the woods. Fleeing from civilization, as chaotic as it may be, is never the answer, and would just be plain foolish. In fact, despite all of the grave and serious problems I see with our high-tech society, I am, at the same time, deeply aware and grateful of all the many blessings that it has brought with it. Still, such a long and obvious list hardly needs any extensive enumeration. I will say, however, that the same cell phone which consumes so much of our time also allows us to seek immediate help in natural disasters or accidents. That social networking site which wastes so many of our hours has also enabled the opposition movements of the Middle East and North Africa (Libya, Egypt, and Iran being at the forefront) to organize rallies and send minute-to-minute video footage, photos, and updates, of the brutalities which their ruling tyrants have subjected them to. And the myriad news sites on the World Wide Web, with their appeal to sensationalism and their many periphery headlines about celebrity gossip, offer us a constant sources of knowledge regarding domestic and international affairs—which, considering our current economic troubles, global crises, and involvement in two wars, is of great significance, if not vital importance.

15 Just as a great many things in this world, telecommunications has proven to be neither solely good nor solely bad—but comes as a mixed bag of both. Advocates of technological progress will be quick to point out—and justifiably so—the vast improvements seen in sectors such as medicine, education, and the military. However, critics of technological

progress will also be just as quick to point out the many added problems seen in these sectors. Whichever way the scale may tip makes no matter. Telecommunications are here to stay, for better or for worse. The primary problem with our consumerist-driven society, however, is the constant focus on the former, and disregard of the latter, as it attempts to veil our eyes and hide the serious consequences of our technologically-dependent lifestyles.

16 Like many people, I own an iPhone, am a member of a social network, check my email daily, and cannot imagine living a week without my laptop. Since I grew up in this culture, it would be exceedingly senseless of me to repel it altogether—to metaphorically live under a rock. And yet, I am acutely aware of the significance that comes with *how* I choose to use this double-edged sword. I am daily conscious of the amount of time I spend using my iPhone for entertainment: Rather than spend hours on YouTube or Twitter, I make the choice to pick up a book, or go for a jog and soak up the beautiful California sun. When I am having lunch with a friend or colleague, I choose to show them the dignity and respect of having my full attention, and turn off the sound on my phone. In electronic communication, I take particular delight in adopting the old-fashioned letter-writing style in emails to my nearest and dearest—I take the time to be as expressive with my words as I can be. They have expressed how much they appreciate it, and a few of them also share my preference and do the same in their own correspondences. I also make it known to those important in my life how deeply I prioritize and value face-to-face quality time with them.

17 All of these little daily decisions and countless others determine whether technology controls us, or whether we control it. Looking at younger generations, particularly the children of the 21st century—toddlers already using electronic devices with confidence and ease—I am both in awe and terror at what direction they may take our accelerating advancements in technology: What sorts of lives they will choose to lead? How they will shape the future with the potently powerful tools of our age? It is up to us, the young adults of this generation, to provide them a good example to emulate—to make them deeply conscious and heedful of the moral responsibility and discernment that comes with the uses of our man-made inventions. I know that someday, when I am a mother, I will try to avoid the mistake of past generations in using the television as my children’s babysitter (and the computer and Wii, for parents today), and instead, encourage the stimulation of their minds with books, nourish the growth of their little bodies with healthy home-cooked meals, and cultivate their intrinsic human bond with the natural world through constant exposure to the great outdoors. Call me old-fashioned, call me anachronistic, or

hopelessly devoted to post-World War II ideals; perhaps I am a little of all those things, and proud of it.

18 Alas, I have spent too many hours in front of this computer screen, and the softly sprinkling November rain on my windowsill is beckoning me to go out for a pleasant late-morning walk. I cannot help but smile at the prospect of spending a blissful hour away from my phone and computer. This would probably be where I add that smiley at the closing of my last sentence . . . but I have been told that I have a killer smile. An emoticon wouldn’t do it justice.

## Works Cited

- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. 20th Anniversary Edition. New York: Penguin Group, 2005.
- Thoreau, Henry David. “Where I Lived and What I Lived For.” In *Walden; Or Life in the Woods*. Annotated Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995.

## Post-reading Questions

### Content

1. Define an “emoticon”? Do you or people you know use “emoticons” when they text, tweet, or email others? Draw some example “emoticons” followed by their meaning.
2. Why does Mohsenzadegan take time to address and validate certain arguments about the benefits of telecommunications if her main objective is to point out its detriments?
3. Paraphrase what Postman refers to as the “Huxleyan warning.”
4. Why wouldn’t Mohsenzadegan advise others to “ditch their cell phones and laptops” and go live in the wild? How have people benefited from modern technology as a communication tool? List some of her examples.
5. In paragraph 17, what prompts Mohsenzadegan’s “awe and terror” as she considers the possible direction children may take our accelerating technological advancements?

### Strategies and Structures

1. How and why does Mohsenzadegan establish common ground with her readers in her opening paragraph?
2. Why do you imagine that Mohsenzadegan decided to develop most her essay using a first-person point of view? What does it accomplish?