

We've Got to Do Better



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Each year, thousands of film buffs gather at the Sundance International Film Festival in Park City, UT, U.S.A., to see the offerings of the world's brightest filmmakers. If it's true that movies reflect the preoccupations and obsessions of the larger culture, it's eye opening that three of the twelve contenders for international documentary film this year address the dark side of screen technology.

Love Child, looks at the tragic 2010 death by neglect of a three-month-old baby named "Sarang" ("Love" in Korean), when her parents spent up to twelve hours a day playing the game *Prius*, caring for their avatar child "Anima," while leaving their real child alone to starve to death [1].

Web Junkie goes behind the scenes of a Chinese detox camp for adolescent video game addicts, documenting the draconian measures they employ. The Chinese declared Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD) to be a clinical disorder in 2008 [2].

Happiness documents the introduction of technology to one of the remaining "net-free" spaces on earth—rural Bhutan. The film centers on an eight-year-old boy raised to be a Buddhist monk, as he and his family take a three-day trek to the city to buy a television. When asked if the television will bring him happiness, he unhesitatingly exclaims "Yes!" Of course, we viewers, wiser and more jaded, think of the mind-numbing time waste of reality television and cluck our tongues, saddened to think how quickly he will learn that things are not as he might imagine them to be [3].

These issues are not just coming to a head in Asia, but everywhere screen technologies are in use. Israeli filmmaker Shosh Shlam of *Web Junkie* explains that IAD is "a universal issue that is becoming progressively all encompassing, as the boundaries between the real and the virtual become increasingly blurred" [4].

The Look Down Generation [5]

There is a reason this theme is playing out on the big screen: it reflects the drama playing out on little screens everywhere, in nearly every human life in the industrialized world. From smart phones to Wiis, from iPods and iPads to Xboxes – excessive screen time resonates with nearly everyone, especially those of us with children, or with even the slightest inclination towards addiction ourselves.

Let's face it, if not addicted, we've grown uncannily fond of the glowing mobile devices we carry with us all day long and the gaming consoles we plug ourselves into at night. The benefits of speedier communication, instant access to information, and cheap and plentiful entertainment make them almost too compelling to avoid. But we're beginning to see that these benefits come at a considerable

cost. If we lose our spare time to these machines, is that too high a price to pay?

Artists are often the first to sound the alarm at society's excesses, but you don't have to go to Sundance to see that we've all been collectively mesmerized. Nor do you need a research grant to see the socio-ethical impacts all around you. You can do your own field observations on your way to work, in a coffee shop, on campus. How many people, young and old,

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are immersed in the screen [6]? Closer to home, consider how your own family life has been affected by the hours you, your children, and your spouse spend online instead of relating to each other [7].

Of course we are not writing this editorial from an Amish village [8]. We've been down the same road of time-wasting, mind-numbing technology use, and like everyone else, we've watched our own screen time increase at an alarming pace in the last few years. In 2009, the average U.S. adult spent 8.5 hours a day on digital devices, but tablets and smart phones have raised that figure to a staggering 11.5 hours per day. Barring sleep, we have just 16 hours each day to live our conscious lives. If we spend 11 of them online, at a console, or in a game, that's 69% of our waking lives. No matter how you slice it, that's a lot of screen time [9]. Even those figures may underreport the problem. A recent study from comScore and Jumptap shows total U.S. Internet use nearly doubled between 2010 and 2013, from 451 billion minutes to 890 billion minutes [10].

Horror stories in the news abound, of parents disregarding their kids to the point of starvation, students flunking out of school, gamers dying from heart attacks, even kids poisoning their parents to get online [28]. We shake our heads at these previously unimaginable stories of excess, but lately they've begun hitting closer to home. How many readers have seen close friends, even family members seduced away from their meaningful relationships by the promise of a *Second Life* or a tryst in *World of Warcraft*? It's the elephant in the room, the skeleton in the closet, the emperor parading naked down the street. Clearly something is going on.

Although the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) in 2012 identified Internet Addiction as "an issue deserving of further study" [11], we're not here to debate that topic. Nor do we want to argue about whether screen time can be instructive, or useful, etc., as those discussions are already raging elsewhere, with both sides ably defended. Instead we're concerned about the millions of everyday users – male and female, adult and child – who would never consider themselves Internet addicts, yet still spend countless hours staring into a flickering screen or wiggling a game controller – perhaps long after common sense has told us to stop.

Most of us legitimately require screen time for work, but we often get stuck there. How many times have we said, "I'm just going to check my email, or update my professional profile, or play one more quick round of this game," only to find ourselves, stiff and aching, two hours later, with papers ungraded,

chores undone, and dinner unmade? And even though we recognize this, we keep repeating the cycle.

The Great Sucking Sound

At the end of the day, the main currency of a human life is time, and time spent engaging the virtual world displaces real life activities. This tendency to be time-sucked by our devices seems to be a universal feature of the technology, experienced by all cultures that have adopted it. It's not just South Korea and China, but all of us who are allowing our real lives to fade into secondary importance as we spend ever more time *locked-in* by the always-on, ever beckoning digital world. Filmmaker Shlam gets it right when she warns that "something is getting lost" in our physical, real, everyday lives [12].

The great sucking sound associated with these technologies is the wholesale waste of billions of hours of productive and meaningful living time from the world's people into fruitless pastimes that yield few tangible rewards [13]. The productivity void of all these wasted hours is already beginning to alarm U.S. employers, as analysts bemoan that employees spend one quarter of their online time at the office on non-work related Internet surfing, thus squandering an average of five hours per week [14]. Yet where are the experts calculating the loss of quality

parenting hours? Marriage hours? Study hours? Playing, tinkering, walking, cooking, exercising, dancing, music-making, lovemaking, stargazing, *living* hours [15]?

We're just beginning to realize that time spent in the electronic vectors of nothingness is contributing to the decay of our meaningful, face-to-face, heart-to-heart, and skin-to-skin relationships [17]. Does this surprise anyone?

All those online hours come at a high cost. We feel pressured, like there is never enough time to get everything done [18]. And kids suffer when their parents are not there for them. "Time, time, there's never enough time." It's ironic that all of our labor saving devices and technologies, especially since the arrival of the personal computer, have not liberated us. Instead, where they give us additional time on the one hand, they steal it back with the other [7].

Ask the Difficult Questions

The real concern is whether we can leave the screen behind when we need to. To see if we are in control, ask yourself a few of the following questions.

- 1) Is your phone or computer the first thing you go to in the morning after you get out of bed?
- 2) Do you turn to the screen out of boredom or habit?

Time spent in electronic vectors of nothingness is contributing to the decay of our meaningful relationships.

- 3) Does your screen time seem to expand to fill the available space?
- 4) Do you go on “sprees” or “benders” of screen use that you later regret?
- 5) Do you often say, “Just a moment,” to loved ones when you are using technology?
- 6) When online, do you get annoyed with family members when they ask for your attention?
- 7) If you reduced your non-necessary screen time, would other areas of your life improve?

Take Control of the Screen

Mostly everyone would answer “yes” to at least of a few of these questions. So what is the answer? We’ve got to do better. There is still a chance to recapture our human value and our dignity, reaffirm the rights of our children to have undistracted parents, and get back to a time when our children looked us in the eye clearly and brightly when we spoke to them [26]. We still have time to reaffirm the value of reality [27]! We can change. We can do better.

The next time you tell your children and your spouse you love them, do it in the real world, not just over SMS or email. In fact, if you’re reading this at home, get up off your chair right now and go searching in the physical space to reach out to that family member who is absorbed with a screen. If it’s not easy to get them to look up and make eye contact with you, take that as a sign that you need to make some necessary changes. [19], [20]. Consider planning your next family vacation to an unspoiled paradise and leaving the devices behind [21]. When you return, tell yourself you will not go back to your old ways and hold your ground [22]. Be patient with yourself and your family members as you find new ways to relate to one another and discover new activities to fill your time. Take courage. The hardest journeys begin with resolve, and then taking those first decisive steps.

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