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SCREEN SOCIETY

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Screen Society

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Screen Society

palgrave
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Contents

Screen Society: Timeline

1696

Demonstration in England of a device that will become known as a magic lantern, a primitive form of image projector used for showing images on a screen.

1839

Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre presents the first practical photographic process to the French Academy of Sciences, establishing the technology that will yield practical photography. In the same period, magic lantern shows are commonplace in Europe and America.

1850s

Theatrical entertainment grows in popularity, principally through a music hall, which offers a mix of songs, comedy, conjuring and speciality acts. Audiences sit in spacious theatres with seats and a stage on the understanding that they respect others' comfort. GAMECHANGER

1895

In Paris, Auguste and Louis Lumière exhibit their kinetoscope, which lets viewers view moving images through a peephole. This starts a period

of rapid experimentation, leading to the development of the cinematograph, which allows simultaneous viewing by multiple people.

1910s

The popularity of the cinematograph encourages the production of silent films to entertain paying audiences. By the end of the decade, there will be a fledgling film industry. GAMECHANGER

1921

The Kid, a silent black and white film featuring Charlie Chaplin is released.

1922

BBC Radio launches. Radio will become the dominant broadcast medium of the period.

1927

The Jazz Singer is released. This is the most successful film with sound to date.

1930

Film is established as a mainstream entertainment, supplanting theatre.

1936

BBC launches Britain's first regular tv service at 3 p.m. on November 2, but only for two hours per day and to London audiences only.

1937

Walt Disney Studios (later to become Disney) release their first feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; an animated production that offers a new type of family entertainment.

1939

Gone with the Wind, the 221-minute epic film based on Margaret Mitchell's novel, sets new standards in cinema and will go on to become one of the highest grossing films (when adjusted for price inflation).

1941

Konrad Zuse creates the first functional electro-mechanical binary programmable computer, a forerunner of today's devices.

1949

BBC televises beyond London.

1950s

Sales of domestic television rise dramatically. GAMECHANGER

1952

Cinema responds to the challenge to its popularity with colour stereoscopic 3D and CinemaScope.

   Bell Labs, the American research and scientific development organization, invent the modem, a device that converts digital signals back to electrical signals and back again, enabling communication between computers.

1951

I Love Lucy, which started as a radio comedy, is turned into a television sitcom and airs on American network CBS. The series will run till 1957 and will be screened internationally. Such is the popularity of the show that it will greatly assist the rise of television as a genuine challenger to cinema.

1960

The first universal standard for computers ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Exchange) is developed and permits machines from different manufacturers to exchange data.

1963

Abraham Zapruder films the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy on his Model 414 PD Bell & Howell Zoomatic Director Series camera. The 26.6 seconds of footage is the only film of the shooting and will assume iconic status in the years that follow. Zapruder's camera is one of the home movie cameras that are popular in the early 1960s. The films are developed and shown on portable screens years before video (see below, 1978).

1965

Polaroid's Swinger camera allows users to see photographs without sending them off to the chemist for development.

1967
Decca introduce colour television with its model CTV 25.

1969
An estimated 600 million people watch the Apollo 11 landing on the moon live on television, a world record until 1981, when 750 million people watch the wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer.

A computer-to-computer link is established on the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, or ARPANET, which is funded by the US government. The first transmission is sent by a UCLA student programmer to Stanford Research Institute's host computer. Fifteen years later, the first email will be sent. GAMECHANGER

1970
The first IMAX screen is unveiled in Osaka, Japan.

1971
Ray Tomlinson implements the first email programme on the ARPANET system, a precursor to the internet.

1973
Flexible removable, magnetic disks, popularly known as floppy disks enable users to save and transport documents, though a whole disk can't store a whole song.

CEEFAX, a text information system is integrated into television sets.

1975
Sony introduces the Betamax machine: this records and plays back television programmes on plastic cassettes (about as big as hardback books), enabling viewers to tape and watch programmes at their own convenience.

1976
JVC release the first video home system, or VHS, machines in Japan (then in the UK and USA in early 1977). This rivals Sony's Betamax (see above, 1975).

1980
The Sony Walkman cassette tape player is launched. Sales will reach 200 million worldwide.

1981

The Acorn BBC Micro Computer is used in schools.

1982

Kilnam Chon, a professor at Keio University in Japan, develops the first internet connection in Asia.

1984

Apple Inc. introduces the computer mouse. GAMECHANGER

The first email arrives in Germany from the US on August 3.

Van Jacobson solves internet congestion by developing algorithms for the Transmission Control Protocol. They are still used in over 90% of internet hosts today.

Brewster Kahle invents the first internet publishing system. It is the precursor to today's search engines.

1986

Digital cameras are available at retailers, though most models only hold 6 pictures.

1987

The film *Wall Street* features Michael Douglas as "Gordon Gekko," who uses a brick-like mobile phone, the Motorola DynaTac 8000X. It weighs two pounds, or 902 grams, and is over a foot long (32 cm). The phone had been on the market since 1983, when it was priced about $4000.

The Finnish company Nokia introduces a mobile phone called the Mobira Cityman 132. It weighs 1.7 lbs, or 760 grams, and is 7 × 3 × 1.7 inches, or 18 × 8 × 4 mm.

1989

World Wide Web (www) begins as the European Organization for Nuclear Research, better known as CERN, initiates a project called ENQUIRE. GAMECHANGER

American Online (AOL) launches its Instant Messenger chat service and uses the now-famous greeting "You've got mail."

1990

Tim Berners-Lee develops a computer programme with a graphical user interface for displaying Hypertext Markup Language, or HTML files,

which is used to navigate the World Wide Web. This becomes known as a browser. The term "surfing the net" becomes popular over subsequent years.

Nintendo Game Boy, the handheld games console, is introduced, giving rise to what becomes known as the "Tetris Effect," in which gamers have hallucinations of slotting bricks after hours of playing. It takes its name from the video game *Tetris* and is probably the first disorder attributed to spending time in front of a gaming screen.

1991
Phil Zimmerman creates email encryption software package that is published for free. It becomes one of the most widely used packages.

The World Wide Web is made available to the public for the first time on the internet.

The Lithium-ion battery makes lighter, rechargeable gadgets possible.

1992
The laptop makes its first appearance, liberating office workers from the shackles of the desktop computer. IBM's 300 Thinkpad weighs 6 kg, or 13.3 lbs.

StarWorks offers a commercial on-demand video service originally known as "store-and-forward" video, but which is later called streaming. Six years later, Netflix will appear on the market (see below, 1998 and 2007).

The first ever text message is sent when a British engineer uses his computer to send "Merry Christmas" to an Orbitel TPU 901, a mobile phone weighing 2100 grams, or about 4.6 lbs. This is made possible by SMS, or short messaging service. By 2017, 200,000 text messages are sent every every second.

1993
CERN makes its World Wide Web technology available in the public domain.

The computer system, Windows 3.1 means that users could click on pictures and icons rather than typing demands on a keyboard.

1994
Stanford University graduate students Jerry Yang and David Filo create Yahoo!

1995

Amazon.com, advertised as "The World's Biggest Bookstore" opens.

The world's first online dating agency, Match.com, begins.

Playstation1 sells 100 million consoles worldwide. Its popularity lead many to assume it has addictive properties.

1997

Nokia introduces a light, portable mobile phone, the 6110.

Google.com registers it name as a domain (i.e. a distinct subset of the internet under the control of a particular organization or individual).

1998

The first blog (i.e. weblog) appears spurs on by the advent of web publishing tools that have become available to non-technical users.

Netflix offers a new mail order service: sending DVDs to homes.

DVD Players allow customers a high quality cinematic experience in their own homes. Higher quality than video's anyway!

1999

Nokia continues to lead the mobile phone market, introducing its 3210 model, which can fit in the palm of a hand. 160 million 3210s are sold and the model remains in circulation into the twenty-first century.

Craig Newmark founded Craigslist which changes the way people use classifieds, transforming it into a largely internet based industry.

2000

AOL acquires Time Warner for $165 billion, creating the world's biggest media organization (the company will split into two after ten years when the original companies resume trading independently).

Aaron Swartz co-creates RSS, a program that collects news from various websites and puts it in one place for users.

2001

Jimmy Wales starts the collaboratively written online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. Contributors become known as Wikipedians; within a year, there are 20,000 entries.

iPods are introduced to the market, making the Sony Walkman (see above, 1980) seem primitive by comparison. Music can now be stored digitally on a portable device.

2002

Microsoft launches its Xbox, an online multiplayer gaming service.

Mobile emails: BlackBerrys allow users to check emails on the go.

Camera phones become widely available making selfies inevitable. In 2016, 24 billion *selfies will be uploaded to Google.*

2003

Apple's iTunes opens for business, offering 200,000 tracks for a price.

Skype launches.

2004–2005

Web 2.0 enables interactivity. GAMECHANGER

Facebook is founded. By 2014 the social networking site will have 1.2 billion users. GAMECHANGER

The SatNav is brought to the market in 2004, revolutionizing the road trip by devolving responsibility for navigation to the GPS device.

2005

YouTube launches using user-generated content—the hallmark of Web 2.0. Its very first video is still available for viewing here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNQXAC9IVRw.

Broadband surpasses dial-in connections for the first time.

2006

Twitter is launched.

High definition television arrives, screens go flat.

Spotify gives users access to millions of tracks for free.

2007

Apple introduces the iPhone (with OSX), a device that allows watching films, listening to music and browsing the internet as well has having a 2 mega-pixel camera. Its effects are manifold: by 2017 1.2 trillion digital photographs per year will be taken, 85% on phones. This is the first type of smartphone. GAMECHANGER

With its mail order DVD business faltering due to competition from, among others, Apple, Netflix launches a revolutionary concept: delivering movies directly to consumers' computers.

BBC iPlayer let viewers watch programmes whenever they wish, presuming they have broadband.

2008

Apple launches its first App store with 500 applications.

Music Streaming grows in popularity. Revenues will rise from zero in 2007 to £125 million in 2014.

2009

Uber starts, using an on-demand taxis app.

Advertising online surpasses traditional forms.

The fitness tracker Fitbit becomes available.

Kindles are available to buy, enabling users to download thousands of books on one portable device made by Amazon.

2010

Instagram, the photo-sharing application and service that allows users to share pictures and videos, is launched. By 2017, it will have 700 million users.

China dominates internet usage with over 450 million internet users.

The first iPad tablet is designed, developed and marketed by Apple. It is 13 mm, about a half-inch thick, and will help Apple become, by 2017, the world's most valuable company with a value of $170bn.

2011

Live streaming of Prince William and Kate Middleton's wedding is the most-watched event on the internet to date.

2013

Twitter launches a music app.

2014

City authorities in Chongqing, southwest China introduce a dedicated 30 meter (99 feet) walking lane for pedestrians who habitually stare at their phones or other screen devices. The newly coined condition "distracted walking" is recognised as an omnipresent feature of Screen Society (see below, 2017).

2015

Apple's Smartwatch, which is oriented to health capabilities and integrates with other Apple products is launched.

2016
The Smart Hub arrives: the Amazon Echo answers questions, plays music, reports the news and is thought to be the forerunner to artificial intelligence in the home.

2017
Pedestrians looking at the screens of phones or tablets while crossing the street can be penalized after Honolulu becomes the first major city to pass legislation aimed at reducing injuries and deaths from "distracted walking." Texting while driving is already illegal in many parts of the world.

   Chewing gum sales fall 15% since 2007, the year in which the iPhone is launched. The speculative, though plausible explanation being that supermarket checkout queues have chewing gum displays to tempt consumers into buying as a way of staving off boredom. With smartphones, there is less boredom and hence less impulse to purchase the gum!

1

Introduction

A Screen-Less World

Suppose we had no screens, those flat panels on which images and data are displayed. Electronic devices, such as televisions, computers and smartphones have them. And when we go to the cinema, we see gigantic screens, the biggest IMAX being over 35 metres (100 foot) tall. Every city has advertising hoardings, or billboards, which used to be printed on card, but are now more likely to be digitally projected on huge screens, the online betting company Betfair boasting one in Vienna the size of 50 football fields.

Wherever you are, you can probably raise your head, look around and see some kind of screen in your immediate environment; that's in addition to the one you're carrying. Screens are so ubiquitous and inescapable that we barely notice them. Try to find public space, whether in a bar, restaurant, department store, or in the street where there is no screen pleading for your attention with moving text and images.

History would be different in the parallel screen-free universe: one in which no one came up with the idea of projecting images onto a blank surface in the early sixteenth century and no one saw the potential

in turning this into a way of distracting us in an agreeable way in the seventeenth. We wouldn't have been entertained by the magic lantern, as it was called, and we wouldn't have been captivated by moving images called motion pictures in the early twentieth century. And we wouldn't have had our culture transformed in the 1950s by arguably the most influential invention in history: television.

Television changed culture and, by implication the people who create culture—we humans. The idea of not having to travel to and gather at public places to be entertained by sound and image had far-reaching effects on practically every aspect of our lives. In its day, early tv sets were like portable Aladdin's caves: instead of going somewhere to find a place filled with an exotic miscellany of strange and precious items, we could have a cave of our own; even better, we could take it with us wherever we went.

From the concept of a screen that's our own possession and which we can use whenever and wherever we choose, we've fashioned any number of portable devices. Personal computers arrived in force in the 1990s. Then in 1997, Nokia introduced its 6110 model phone, which was light enough to carry around. And the merger of phones and computers brought us smartphones, Apple's first iPhone arriving in 2007.

How could we cope without them? What would we do first thing in the morning if not check our email inbox? How would we communicate without sliding and tapping our fingers? From where would we get our information, including world news, if the particulars of events weren't right in front of us? How could we organize our days and nights without a constant flow of instruction about who's going to where and when? Perhaps most fundamentally, how could we sustain social life without them? We've created and maintain a culture in which we live through and depend on media. And we access that media through our screens.

Think about how you get your knowledge: your facts, information, intelligence and understanding of a subject. Obviously, we talk to each other face-to-face, though scholars and politicians often complain that we don't do enough of this. They probably don't grasp that communicating via the phone or tablet is as rewarding and meaningful as standing next to someone and exchanging thoughts. Often it is

more enjoyable. This is one of those basic points that's frequently missed by self-appointed authorities who pontificate on the uses and abuses of digital media. People use their devices for communicating because they enjoy it. Simple but true: users derive pleasure from using their devices. If they didn't, they probably opt to communicate via different methods, or communicate less.

The pleasure people take from their computers, phones and tablets is, like many other types of pleasure, not necessarily intelligible to those who are not habitual users. In this sense, it's like music. Some people will listen to hip-hop and scratch their heads in wonder why it's one of the world's most popular genres. The minimalist music of Steve Reich or Philip Glass some listeners will find tedious, while others will rhapsodize over the different musical languages and decree that outsiders just don't get it. As we'll argue later in this book, many critics of social media are not just like but actually *are* outsiders, who are trying to fathom out a new language word-by-word, but without any understanding of its grammar.

In a screen-less world, it's difficult to fathom how we'd learn about practically anything. And by learn, we don't mean learn in a narrow academic sense, but in the broader sense of becoming aware by receiving and transmitting information. Everything we know and much of what we do is mediated. It's connected through other people or things. It involves an intermediate agency. How could it not? We couldn't possibly experience first-hand everything we know about the world. There never was a time when people did that. There's always been a category of people, like messengers, town criers, or things, like newsheets, books, and, before them, scrolls or even wall drawings such as hieroglyphs in the ancient world. Most knowledge is mediated in some way.

Yet there is something different about today. There's never been a time in history in which we spend so much time engaged with the media and rely on it to such an extent, not only for our knowledge but for our friendships. Print media has been with us theoretically since the mid-fifteenth century, when the German printer Johannes Gutenberg developed movable type on the machine known as the press. The term became shorthand for print media. Four hundred years later, the world relied on the press for its information about almost everything.

Print media made demands on us: the ability to read being the principal one. It became, with printed books, one of the catalysts of literacy. To understand the content of newspapers, gazettes, magazine, newsheets and the several other forms of press the consumer needed a working knowledge of the written word. Radio made no comparable demands on its consumers: they could just listen to spoken words. From the early twentieth century, sound messages carried information to us through electromagnetic waves and the transmission became known as broadcasting.

Like television, which followed in mid-century, it tended to tax consumers less: broadcasting information required consumers to listen or look and to think, though not necessarily concentrate in the way they would when reading. It took until the late twentieth century before university scholars argued persuasively that listening to radio or looking at tv required cognitive action or interpretive skill comparable with reading a written text. In fact, the output of radio and tv was actually called text and the process of making sense of it was called—in the manner of rendering the written material comprehensible—reading.

Amusing Ourselves

Think about the very concept of watching a screen. Audiences in the eighteenth century, or possibly before, would have gasped at the images they saw projected onto blank screens by the invention known as *laterna magica* and we will trace this history more thoroughly in Chapter 2. They would have probably suspected some kind of magic or a diabolical deception to induce their attention. Three hundred or so years later and there are still people who insist our fixation on screens is the devil's work.

Twentieth century audiences, as we'll also discover in later chapters, were used to big screens. The first known cinema was built in 1894 and movie theatres sprung up across Europe and North America in the following decades. Sitting in a crowded auditorium was not uncomfortable

for audiences brought up on theatre, music hall and, in the USA, ragtime. Yet the gigantic stationary, flat, two-dimensional screen was a big change from a stage populated by live performers.

Readers of this book will not have known a time when television did not have a prominent presence. Anyone born before 1940 may have a recollection of the age before television, though the majority of their lives will have been lived in an environment that will have been massively affected by television. Practically every habit was, in some way, influenced by our captivation with tv.

In a way, film prepared audiences for television. Goggling at a 12-inch (30 cm) diameter tv screen (that was the size of the early models) was actually not so different from staring at a cinema screen. The big difference was that audiences were obliged to keep quiet while a film was playing and couldn't dictate when to switch on or off (though they could always walk out, of course). But televisions were portable: tv sets were either bought or rented, so they were effectively our possessions; our own private screens. Television ownership soared in the 1950s. By the early 1960s, no home was complete without at least one set. For a while, it seemed it would wreck the film industry. But what would it do to us?

The scares about television were many: watching tv would shorten our attention spans, delimit our social abilities, break down families, affect our propensities, particularly to violence, and so on. There were dozens of possible harmful effects. But no one seemed interested as programmes proliferated and sales of domestic sets climbed.

There was what seemed a wilful disregard of the informed opinion of the time (we should bear this in mind when we think about today's habits). Television was seen as one of the most menacing developments around. It cultivates abnormal relationships, pins us in our homes and nurtures passivity, said critics. One of the most brilliant books on television, written in 1985 by the American media critic Neil Postman, had the title *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. The idea being that we were feasting on too much entertainment. And, the book's justifiable assumption was that television is good for only one thing: entertaining us. This supposition is worth unpicking.

Every time we turn to our screens we expect to be entertained. If not we're disappointed. Obviously entertainment has to be entertaining, but nowadays, so does politics, crime, health reports, and so on. If they don't entertain us, we dump them. By entertain, we mean engage us in a way we find agreeable, even better enjoyable. Notice we don't include words like superficial, shallow or trivial in our definition of entertain. Some forms of entertainment might be all of these, but other forms require serious thought and deep consideration. We can learn at the same time we're being entertained.

Entertainment might be regarded as a mode for everything: a way or manner in which politics, crime, health, education, even religion are expressed and experienced. If anything is going to get our attention for any length of time it had better be presented in a style that engages us agreeably. Television started with different ambitions. In the US, it was intended to be an extension of radio, which itself was an advertising medium; the programmes were merely to catch and keep listeners rapt.

In Britain and other European nations, tv was launched with loftier ambitions. BBC television was, like its American counterpart, a descendant of radio; but radio in Britain carried no advertising and was never envisaged as having commercial value. Rather it was meant to contain quality arts programmes, major documentaries about history and culture, and large-scale live coverage of major national events and anniversaries. A theatre of the airwaves, as it was known. Television in both the US and the UK and everywhere else in the world, succeeded because it was supple and flexible in its design and adapted effectively to suit changing environments. Actually, tv didn't just adapt to environments: it became a catalyst in instigating changes. It was the captivating medium not only of the twentieth century but of all time.

There had never been a phenomenon like television for inciting peoples' attention. In 1969, 530 million people, that's 14% of the population of the world at the time, watched the moon landing. Even this seems modest compared to the estimated 2.5 billion who watched in some part the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997. These were unique events, though some sports events, particularly football's World Cup Final and the Super Bowl regularly attract hundreds of millions. Television arrived after cinema, but was much more influential

in inculcating audiences into the habit of staring at screens while they made sense of the unfolding narratives. Postman was a piercingly intelligent critic of television, but even he couldn't accept that the cognitive work required when watching tv was comparable with that needed to engage with other media.

Television had no competitors up till quite recently. The fortunes of the film industry fluctuated, though it survived tv's initial onslaught, then withstood pressure from home videos, DVDs and piracy. It remains afloat. For a period, it appeared television too would be under threat from social media sites like Facebook and YouTube. The latter in particular sent a frisson through the advertising industry when the numbers were revealed. A YouTube star like Zoella could remain anonymous in traditional media but command 6.5 million subscribers on her YouTube channel. Companies such as Pepsi started to advertise more on digital platforms than they did on conventional media. Since 2010, the amount of television watched by those aged 16–34 has fallen steadily. But, far from going under, traditional tv has prospered from the internet, sharing platforms with streaming providers and subscription broadcasters, so that its content can be consumed on a variety of portable devices, not just the home appliance. It's probably inaccurate even to call it traditional television nowadays: there are so many ways to view television that there is little traditional about it. In fact, television remains an integral part of the *Screen Society*.

Some say it was the defining invention of the twentieth century: not only did it change our social habits and our cognitive abilities, but it made the world smaller. News of events in any part of the world could circulate, at first in days, later in hours, and eventually in minutes, thanks to rapidly changing technology. Television also induced a reliance that we may not have shrugged. It became the main source for news and current affairs as well as entertainment. Cinema, theatre, nightclubs, bars: none of them had magic strong enough to rival television's.

Its relevance to the current century is uncertain. But television's legacy will be felt for the next several decades. It was the device that habituated us to screens. We became habituated to them very easily, it seemed. Despite the warnings, we accepted television as we might

welcome a new friend who brought with her or him an endless trove of delightfully amusing treasures. Almost paradoxically, that meant staring for hours and hours at a limited surface. We still do this. The big difference is that we can now carry the screens around with us.

Were we speculating on this development twenty years ago, we might have argued persuasively that consumers will use the portable screens as and when they needed to watch a show, an item of news or some other presentation they wished to enjoy. The implication would have been that we will not binge, that is indulge excessively in the activity. Who could imagine a world in which people are constantly holding their screens in front of them, gazing perpetually while they attempt other, sometimes tricky endeavours, like climbing stairs, walking through crowded shopping areas or trying to concentrate on a lecture? Twenty years ago, remember. Today, this is a reasonable description of how we live.

Bad for Society?

Does this mean digital media is bad for society? This is a crass and value-loaded question, but it's intended to be: the answers are usually just as crass and value-loaded. Consider the following selection of headlines (mostly from traditional media) that issue warnings about the consequences of our current engagement with social media.

UNDER-5s GLUED TO SCREENS 4 HOURS A DAY
(*Daily Mail*, 15 November, 2016)
ELECTROSHOCK THERAPY FOR INTERNET ADDICTS
(*New York Times*, 13 January, 2017)
FACEBOOK, TWITTER AND GOOGLE HAVE BECOME A 'RECRUITING PLATFORM FOR TERRORISM'
(*Telegraph*, 25 August, 2016)
HOW TO STOP CHECKING YOUR SMARTPHONE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT
(*Telegraph*, 26 September, 2016)
WE SPEND 1.3 YEARS OF OUR LIVES DECIDING WHAT TO WATCH ON TV

(*ShortList*, 3 November, 2016)

FRAUDSTER ADDICTED TO TV SHOPPING STOLE £370,000 FROM HER EMPLOYER

(*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 9 January, 2017)

We'll investigate all these arguments and the assumptions or research that informs them later. There is certainly a formidable body of opinion and research that personal and social life is suffering as we turn away from each other and towards our devices. Perhaps the most suggestive contribution of recent years is the report published in December 2017 in the *Journal of Health Psychology* by a team of researchers from the University of Oulu, Finland, and Nottingham Trent University, England. This report focused specifically on video games, a subject we cover in Chapter 9, and which the researchers argue, "have increasingly become an integral aspect of individuals' leisure activities and everyday life."

The researchers accept the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition, which includes "internet gaming behaviour," or IGB, and wish to extend this with their own "problematic gaming behaviour," or PGB, which is "a behavioural pattern encompassing persistent and recurrent engagement with both online and offline games, leading to significant impairment or distress," as they put it on page 2 of their article. (We'll detail all the research and other kinds of publications we quote or cite at the end of each chapter.)

The research team led by Niko Männikkö found PGB has several "adverse health-related outcomes." It contributes to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and many physical ailments including cardiovascular stress, wrist pain, issues with sleep and the nervous system. Gamers are also at risk of mental side effects, ranging from obsessive-compulsive behaviour, a lack of concentration and self-control and impulsiveness. It's a prodigious list of infirmities, considering gaming is a leisure activity (and a professional sport, actually) that's meant to be enjoyed.

The report is statistically detailed and examines data from more than 130,000 gamers, aged between 12 and 88. The problem is: we don't hear from any of them: no space is allowed for their own accounts, apprehensions and experiences. The report is what's known as a meta-analysis,

meaning it collects data from 50 other studies into video game addiction, all similarly uncritical of the orthodox view that there is something inherently problematic and addictive about gaming. It may not be a typical study, but it does reflect the prevailing convention in studies of this kind. Most are conducted by psychologists, neuroscientists and health researchers. Few seem interested in the social, cultural or historical contexts in which gaming takes place, or the perspectives of the people who engage in the activity themselves—the gamers. As such, they present the view of "experts," not users. We believe there is much to learn from the users—and much to criticize when we're offered the findings of "experts."

For example, smartphones have been singled out for promoting sleep deprivation and mental health disorders. There's no doubt we do stare at screens a lot: wherever you go next, look around you and notice how many others are staring at computers, phones or tablets; and how many others are talking on the phone; and how many others are listening to something through their ear pods. It might be easier to spot those who are not. But is this practice as threatening as the headlines and the studies indicate? After all, similar warnings were sounded but went unheeded when television started to invade our lives to the point where we became what Brits still call "telly addicts."

But overuse is a misleading term in this context: it means people use their smartphones too much. In the same way, many of us use the phrase "you know" too much in our conversations; or we use our cars too much for short journeys instead of walking. This doesn't mean we couldn't improve our conversational skills by using "you know" prudently, or shouldn't contribute towards saving the planet by sparing the environment CO_2 fumes. But, when we apply the phrase to smartphones, the questions arise: what constitutes overuse and who or what benefits from cutting back on using smartphones? This is where the debate slides between facts and values, science and morality. There are no absolutes in this debate. It seems that, as with television, a practice has become so universally popular in such a relatively short period of time that self-appointed experts have enthusiastically but perhaps mistakenly assumed there are problems. Something so popular and so clearly enjoyable and which confers so much pleasure to so many must have a downside.

Apples and Oranges

Barely a day goes by without a new piece of research either issuing cautions or giving assurances about our media habits, usually the former. For example, in his 2017 book *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* Adam Alter, a professor at New York University, warned connectivity threatens the health of not just our children, but everyone. He described a scenario that could have been taken straight from the tv series *The Wire*, which depicted how young children are given crack as a gift, just to get them into the habit. "As a kid I was terrified of drugs," Alter remembered. "I had a recurring nightmare that someone would force me to take heroin and that I'd become addicted."

Alter was careful to distinguish between an addiction, which he argued is an indulgence which brings pleasure, and a compulsion, which he contended is an indulgence which merely brings relief from restless anxiety (a distinction that we will question in Chapter 4, in which we will offer a different perspective to that of Alter).

But consider the results of earlier research from The Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, where Keith Hampton and his colleagues painted a rather different and more complex role that digital media play in people's lives, emphasizing the positive impact of the widespread use of social networking for establishing new relationships based on, among other characteristics, trust, tolerance, support and political engagement. In this 2011 study, the media, far from being frightening and addictive, offered plenty of benefits. There was no evidence that users were any more likely than others to become inured in particular habits by cocooning themselves in social networks of like-minded, and perhaps similarly addicted people—as Alter and many others fear.

There's no formula for comparing studies such as these; in fact, some readers might think we are comparing apples and oranges. In other words, they're considering different aspects of media use. It's conceivable that someone could be hopelessly addicted to the net because it keeps bringing them new, rewarding relationships. Conceivable, perhaps;