Coronavirus Ended the Screen-Time Debate. Screens Won.

We’ve tried all sorts of things to stop us from staring at our devices. Digital detoxes. Abstinence. Now? Bring on the Zoom cocktail hour.

By Nellie Bowles

March 31, 2020

Before the coronavirus, there was something I used to worry about. It was called screen time. Perhaps you remember it.

I thought about it. I wrote about it. A lot. I would try different digital detoxes as if they were fad diets, each working for a week or two before I’d be back on that smooth glowing glass.

Now I have thrown off the shackles of screen-time guilt. My television is on. My computer is open. My phone is unlocked, glittering. I want to be covered in screens. If I had a virtual reality headset nearby, I would strap it on.

The screen is my only contact with my parents, whom I miss but can’t visit because I don’t want to accidentally kill them with the virus. It brings me into happy hours with my high school friends and gives me photos of people cooking on Facebook. Was there a time I thought
Facebook was bad? An artery of dangerous propaganda flooding the country’s body politic? Maybe. I can’t remember. That was a different time.

A lot of people are coming around.

Walt Mossberg, my former boss and a longtime influential tech product reviewer, deactivated his Facebook and Instagram accounts in 2018 to protest Facebook’s policies and negligence around fake news. Now, for the duration of the pandemic, he is back.

“I haven’t changed my mind about the company’s policies and actions,” Mr. Mossberg wrote on Twitter last week. “I just want to stay in touch with as many friends as possible.”

Back to the Facebook basics. Here for the friends. Portal, Facebook’s countertop video tool, doesn’t seem so crazy now.

Initiatives that were formed explicitly to help people escape screens are now adapting to, well, screens.

“I started the Forest Bathing Club to get people and myself off screens in the 2-D world and into nature to experience the real world,” said Julia Plevin, a designer and founder of the Forest Bathing Club. “Now we’re doing virtual forest baths.”

Avoiding screens guided the life choices of Arrington McCoy, a therapist in Boston, for many years.

“I picked jobs based in large part on screens not being part of the equation,” she said, like becoming a backpacking instructor and now a therapist. “And as of 10 days ago, I am singing a different tune.”

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One friend of mine admitted averaging 16 hours of screen time a day, often on multiple devices at once.

I’m 31 and have lived almost all my life in San Francisco, which means my friends are all having babies or they’re hosting forest baths.

Given our demographic, most of those having babies crafted careful plans to keep those fresh eyes from screens. Plans to keep the babies from using screens, of course, but also away from even seeing the screens in use. How are those plans going now?

“That went out the window last week,” said my friend Ashley Spinelli, an administrator at the University of California, Berkeley, who just had a boy, Nico.

Shary Niv, a parent of a toddler, said, “I beg her to watch whatever children’s programming PBS is peddling on Amazon Prime.”

Or there’s Miju Han, the director of product at HackerOne, a cybersecurity company in San Francisco. “My 6-week-old is starting to only know his grandparents from FaceTime,” she said. “The American Academy of Pediatrics is technically against this, but the grandparents really want to see their baby grandson.”
The screen-time surrender isn’t just a San Francisco phenomenon.

Daniela Helitzer, a doctor of audiology in Boca Raton, Fla., said screen time used to be a constant debate among the parents in her town. She had some friends with toddlers who had never even seen a television turned on before this. Not anymore.

“We’ve all officially lost the battle,” said Dr. Helitzer, who has a 2- and a 3-year-old.

“I’ve accessed every educational app you can. I’ve used every online interactive worksheet I can find,” Dr. Helitzer said. “If he’s sitting on his iPad for two or three hours a day, I literally don’t even care. It’s like, ‘Use that screen as much as you can.’”

Covered in screens these past few weeks, I have noticed some positive changes. I FaceTime my friends so much that I know them better than I did before. I decided to learn what TikTok was, and I love it. I spend hours with my chin tucked into my chest and a weird smile on my face, watching. I’m using Duolingo, an app to learn languages.

Carolyn Guss, a mother of two and a vice president at PagerDuty, a cloud-computing company in San Francisco, was once very screen strict. Her children, 8 and 9 years old, did not own any devices. They could watch only very limited television. On the first day of quarantine home school, Ms. Guss wrote up a schedule geared at keeping them off screens.

“By Day 3, I had given up,” she said. “I think the fact that it rained on the first weekend broke my spirit.”

Suddenly she was giving them her phone. She was sitting them at laptops. They were double-devicing. It felt like defeat.

Then something surprising happened. They started doing pretty impressive stuff on those screens.
“My son taught himself iMovie, and now the kids make videos of themselves doing basic things — making Jell-O, shooting hoops — then cut it into pretty professional looking footage,” she said. “Then they screen share it with their friends on Zoom.

“These kids had no screen access before, and they leapfrogged me within days.”

Screen-skeptics see this as an apocalyptic moment. Many activists spent years fighting online learning in schools. Face-to-face experience with teachers is irreplaceable, they argued.

“Ed tech companies now are jumping on this and saying, ‘See, we told you,’” said Emily Cherkin, a screen-time consultant in Seattle. “Many of them are offering their services for free right now. It’s disaster capitalism.”

But even some of the godparents of the screen-wary movement are coming around.

One of the most prominent voices on this issue is Sherry Turkle. For years, she warned that technology was tearing social fabric apart. She wrote the book “Alone Together,” about the social pain that comes from silent family dinners and people walking, chins down, staring at their phones.

Now, she is saying maybe some of the movement she inspired is focused in the wrong direction.

“I think that this reveals the screen-time issue as a misplaced anxiety,” Ms. Turkle said. “Now, forced to be alone but wanting to be together, so many are discovering what screen time should be.”

It should be about learning and connecting. It should be humanizing, Ms. Turkle said. All those Zoom cocktail hours are good screen time.
Even parenting coaches, once hired to draft strict screen-time rules for the family, are saying it is probably time to throw those out.

“Be gentle with yourself,” said Rhonda Moskowitz, founder of Practical Solutions Parent Coaching in Columbus, Ohio. “These are extreme times.”

She said she was now meeting with her trainer via FaceTime and had attended a happy hour on Zoom, which was “a riot.”

And the last thing I have noticed about myself is how absolutely thrilled I am now to see a human in the flesh. It is a small party every time. The more I use FaceTime, the more I hate not being able to hug my friends. Toasting a screen is not the same. In my pre-quarantine life, I could be a homebody, and I often worked from the living room. When this is done, that is, too.

By all of us suddenly guzzling screen time, we might start to see the limitations of its high. Now that touch is the rarest thing of all, I crave it. The first thing I want to do when this is done is high-five every stranger I meet. That is not something I considered doing before.

“Going on Week 2 of quarantine, our kids are desperate to see, touch, feel, smell their friends,” said Jon Steinberg, the creative director for Epic, a production and publishing company. “Weirdly, Gen Z could come out of this with a permanent, lifelong, forged-in-disaster appreciation for physical connections over digital ones.”

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