THE NEW ATLANTIS
A Journal of Technology & Society

The Ruin of the Digital Town Square

Preserving Real-Life Childhood

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The awkward moment of truth came when Senator Richard J. Durbin, Democrat of Illinois, asked Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg at a congressional hearing whether he would be comfortable sharing the name of the hotel he stayed in last night, or if he would be comfortable sharing the names of the people he had messaged this week.

"Senator, no. I would probably not choose to do that publicly here," Zuckerberg responded at the hearing last April.

"I think that may be what this is all about," Durbin said. "Your right to privacy. The limits of your right to privacy. And how much you give away in modern America in the name of, quote, connecting people around the world."

There is no doubt we have given away a lot more than privacy in the name of connecting people around the world. We've abandoned civility, trust, any sense of perspective, and we have lost a lot of sleep as well. In an effort to save their own hides, some social media heads have proposed technological and policy solutions to these problems. We could change the algorithms so that we see less "fake news"; we could install more controls on devices and apps that would help limit the amount of time we spend on them; we could do more to police "hate speech" on social media; we could pass laws that would create stiff penalties for online harassment or bullying.

I am not particularly optimistic about any of these solutions, for reasons that others have observed for years. Writing things to or about people when they are not in front of you and you can't see their reactions makes one more prone to nastiness. Not being able to hear another's tone of voice makes misunderstandings more common, and the escalation from confusion to anger is quick and often irreversible. Being able to publish or send things immediately—without waiting to find an envelope, a stamp, and then a mailbox the next morning—makes it easier to write things

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you will later regret. Even, and perhaps especially, professional journalists and academics say stupid, obnoxious things without the check of an editor. Human beings simply enjoy seeing the immediate and massive positive reactions to things they blurt out online. And audiences most enjoy reading things that are outrageous and shocking, even if they strain credulity.

The only way around these problems is to remind ourselves continually of the tastes and temperaments that make real life enjoyable and meaningful, and to foster these experiences in our children, who would otherwise grow up with little memory of life off-screen. We can't hope to improve our digital habits, including the way we talk online, if we don't strengthen our capacity for non-digital interaction with the world around us. And if we don't develop this capacity in childhood, perhaps we never will.

As adults we know when we have spent too much time on screens. We stay up too late scrolling through our feeds or watching Netflix. When we wake up in the middle of the night, we check our phones and then can't get back to sleep. We waste hours looking at Facebook, jealously eyeing pictures of other people's vacations, wondering what ever happened to some old friend (or, more dangerously, old flame). We go down rabbit holes, shopping for products, trying to find a YouTube video someone sent us last year, comparing home prices on Zillow. We often mindlessly consume content simply because it happens to come across our path, not because we think it's worthwhile. But at least somewhere in the back of our minds we are aware of the pleasures of life off-screen.

Those of us who are over the age of, say, thirty-five can recall a time when we played outside for hours (till the streetlights came on) without thinking for a moment whether someone was trying to contact us. Our only concerns were the other kids playing capture the flag or kickball. The feeling of total freedom to wander from one backyard to another, the complete concentration on winning the game—the immediacy of these experiences is hard for children today to recapture. If it is not their friends trying to contact them, or writing things about them while they are away from the screen, it is their mother or father wanting to know where they are and when they'll be back.

Adults can remember what it is like to plant themselves on a couch and read a novel in one afternoon because it was just that good or maybe because there was nothing else to do. They remember what it was like to actually read entire pages of books, not just scan them like we do a web article. They remember what it was like not to worry about the time flying by or the buzzing device next to them on the couch. Or what it was

like to not know (and not care) what their friends were up to at that very moment.

Though those days may seem far in the past, the fact that we can still conjure up these memories and feelings puts us at a distinct advantage today: We know an alternative to digital life. If being able to focus for long periods of time on books or face-to-face conversation is a virtue, then at least we have been at some point habituated to it. Many of our children have not.

A Pew survey last year reports that 54 percent of teens say they spend too much time on their cell phone, and 41 percent say they spend too much time on social media. They are even conscious enough of the problem that many have tried to cut back. More than half have said they have tried to reduce their cell phone use, their time on social media, and the hours spent playing video games.

We don't yet fully know how deep the problem goes, but a growing body of research—for example the work of psychologist Jean Twenge—is pointing us toward the conclusion that the rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide in teenagers are correlated with the amount of time they spend with their devices. Some perhaps just say there's a problem because they're getting guilt-tripped by their parents—but more likely, they realize their parents are right.

What children and teens lack, though, is alternatives. Can they remember a time before phones and tablets consumed their attention? When they had no GPS attached to their backpacks? Do they recall experiences in their lives when they weren't having to stop what they were doing to have their picture taken for Instagram or when they did not have in the back of their minds the constant hum of their friends talking to and about each other on social media? Do they remember when it was easy to get their parents' attention—without asking them to put a device down? Sadly, many do not.

Parents are often told that life lived on screens is the one our kids have to get used to, and this is, unfortunately, largely true. But our goal should be to put off our children's entry into that phase as long as possible. The point of doing so is not to deny the inevitable—they will most likely have personal and professional lives that will demand they carry a powerful computer in their pockets someday—but rather to create as many experiences as possible without screens so that they can later remember what those experiences were like. Without those memories it's hard to imagine alternatives to life on screens. In particular, without memories of good

face-to-face conversation, it's hard to form habits of civil discourse online, or to know how to respond when people say things on social media that they would never say in person.

Of course, we can't stop other kids from getting phones and social media accounts, and that will inevitably affect our own children's social lives—though it would be useful to find other families who are adopting the same kind of delay tactics. But we can still give our own children space outside of life online. Sometimes kids are happy when their parents give them excuses to not do things that their peers are doing. Answering texts at all hours of the night, taking the perfect selfie, posting the funniest videos—it's a lot of pressure, and "my annoying parents won't let me on Instagram" can be a way out.

Imagine an extra year or two of the freedom from that kind of pressure. Imagine the number of times your children could sit uninterrupted with a novel or go for a bicycle ride or stay up talking to friends at a sleepover without having to check a phone to see whether they are missing out on some other experience, or what other people are saying about the experience they are having right now.

Forming these habits when our children are young is the only way to make sure they will know what is going awry whenever they do eventually join social media and observe how people talk to each other, and to understand how to adjust their own lives accordingly. And it is the best way to guarantee that we have more of the kind of meaningful, in-person interactions that social media tends to short-circuit. Online communication thrives on the quick reaction, the snarky comeback, the parodying of people on the other side of the conversation for the entertainment of a larger audience. If we want to improve our personal interactions, both private and public, we need more experiences in person and fewer online.

Many teens and young adults have a feeling that something is missing in their daily lives, a certain calm that comes from time away from screens, but they are not quite sure how to create it and what to do when they put down their phones. Our devices provide us with a simulation of direct human interaction, the ability to *seem* as though we are intellectually or socially engaged with people in front of us. But if we want to fix our national dialogue, we will need to remember how to do the real thing.