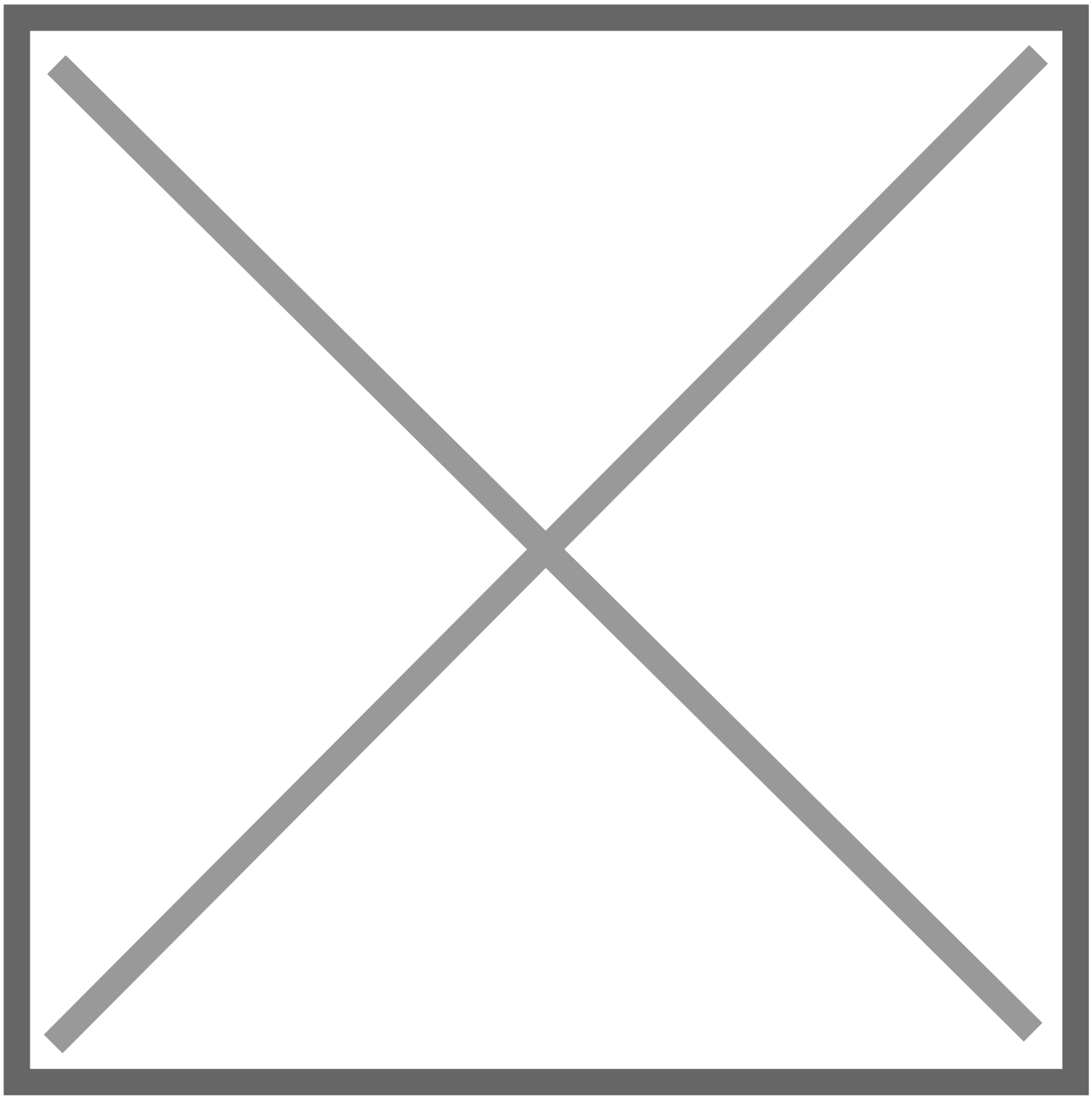
Culture



A scene from "Screened Out" (Courtesy of Dark Star Pictures)



by Rose Pacatte

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One day, Canadian filmmaker Jon Hyatt looked at his three sons, his wife and his own screen time use and started asking questions: who or what is in control of our devices? What are these devices, these screens, doing to us, influencing us, impacting us? How are social media and online gaming pulling us away from work, children and relationships? What is so much screen time doing to the brains of children and their relationships with their parents? Are we addicted to them? And if so, how did this happen?

Hyatt deleted his social media accounts and got his wife to do the same — to a degree. With three children and all their activities, she needed to, and wanted to, stay connected. To answer these questions, he set off across Canada and the U.S. to find out what the experts were saying.

"Screened Out," Hyatt's newest documentary, will begin streaming across multiple online platforms on May 26.

Some of the statistics Hyatt discovered are noteworthy. Adults spend 70% of our waking time, or 4 to 7 hours a day online in non-educational or work-related tasks, and "80% of those hours logged are on a mobile device." For children up to 8-years-old, it's three hours a day. Kids ages 8 to 12, it's five hours and teens from 6 to 9 hours. One expert says that all the characteristics of gambling addiction are evident in our screen time, addictive mechanics are built into them because screens are mesmerizing, especially for children. Social media and online gaming platforms want our information and every time we click, they make money.



Poster for "Screened Out" (Courtesy of Dark Star Pictures)

Sean Parker, former president of Facebook, says in the film that "these tools rip apart the social fabric of what society has created." He says that Facebook knew very well about how checking a user's "likes" and "loves" would provide a dopamine hit as part of the "social validation feedback loop" that our brains crave. The hook cycle starts with a trigger, the action phase, in anticipation of a reward that will make you feel good. When our smartphones alert us to any kind of message, they prompt us to respond immediately in anticipation of that reward.

Although not mentioned in the film, you might remember when Facebook made its IPO in 2012. People asked Mark Zuckerberg how a free online site like Facebook

would make money. The obvious answer was advertising. But just how, people wondered? The film answers this question: by selling users' information to consumer and political advertisers and using the dopamine loop to keep users coming back. Zuckerberg didn't explain that part.

Did you ever wonder how many algorithms it takes to capture what you just searched for on Amazon or Google and then the product shows up in your Facebook feed? The loss of privacy, and how we just give it away for the satisfaction we get from social media, is something that concerns Hyatt, too.

But not only is the social fabric of our culture disrupted and changed, so are our brains. Michael Rich, associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, is the founder and director of the Center on Media and Child Health, is just one of the experts attesting to changes from endless stimulation of the brain by interactive screens. Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, says that screen use stimulates all parts of the brain. The concern is that no one knows what the effect will be long term of screens creating this "dopamine reward pathway" on children.

As for gaming, it is an open-ended experience that can go on forever without consequences. These tech companies want to build in future consumers for their products from an early age. And if young people are not addicted to it, it can still become a compulsion. Twenge recommends a limit of two hours a day of screen time while others recommend that parents examine their own use of devices because their children are going to emulate them no matter what they might tell them.

Hyatt goes trough the negatives of too much screen time. He speaks of cyberbullying, catfishing, blackmail, and though he does not cover this in the film, sex trafficking is there by implication. There is a strong correlation between teen depression and suicide rates since the advent of smartphones in 2011-2012. One teen girl from a low-income family recounts how she became so unhappy about not having the perfect lives other teens showed on social media that she decided to step off the balcony of her family's apartment one day and end it all. Her father saw what was happening and stopped her. She went into treatment and developed new skills and made changes in her online life.

One statistic Hyatt shares is that South Korea has 400 internet addiction treatment centers for young people. The U.S. is catching on. In 2009, Hilarie Cash and two

colleagues founded reSTART in Washington State. Their goal, according the website, is to address and treat video game addiction, internet addiction and screen-time overuse for teens 13-19 and adults 18 and over. These inpatient programs run for 45-90 days, mostly for young males, and also address co-occurring conditions such as depression, anxiety and addiction to pornography.

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The film acknowledges we have free will, but with addictive social media sites and gaming, it's not always a sure thing that a person can change his or her online life without intervention. Professionals are questioning the ethics of how companies take advantage of questionably willing users for profit, but so far, little has been done to challenge this global scheme. "Screened Out" is a good start.

I asked Hyatt why the film didn't look at ethnic groups or those with less access to internet or smartphones. I told him that the digital divide became immediately apparent to the Los Angeles Unified School District in March when the pandemic-caused lockdown occurred. The school district found that 15,000 of its students now continuing classes at home had no access to computers, devices, or had internet access. Two months later, almost every student has a device and access.

Hyatt explained that lack of access and how ethnic groups use gaming and social media would be for another film. He and his team tried to interview students of different ethnicities, but the students were reluctant to participate. His focus was on social media and online gaming for mostly white middle-class young people and families, though he would have preferred a broader group to investigate.

He acknowledged that education is a good use of technology and reiterated that it is how we use screens, no matter who we are, and whether or not we have the will to control our behavior, to change, to exercise self-discipline for the sake of our children, that concern him. He and some experts recommend letting children get bored because boredom breeds creativity. They recommend media mindfulness, that we reflect on our relationship with our screens and what we do with them and make changes when our online life impacts relationships, family and work. They also remind us that going outside and seeing the world firsthand is a good thing.

"Screened Out" is guaranteed to hook you once you start watching. I couldn't stop if I'd wanted to.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the founding director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]