Character and . . .
Screen Life

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Fearless Integrity and Screen Life

Annalee R. Ward

"I'm just going to quickly check my feed." An hour later, you look up, shocked at how that time disappeared. Screens suck time, but there's an app for that! *Moment* will track your screen use, provide reminders, and help you set limits on your time and on your family's screen time. Feeling overwhelmed by the screen demands, needs to post, respond, view? Yes, ironically, there's an app for that, too! *Stop, Breathe, Think* or *Headspace* or *Calm* or any number of apps will teach you how to pause, how to clear your head, how to meditate.

Our screens—we can't live without them anymore, but living with them changes us and challenges us to be more mindful in our use of them. The tendency to think of our technology use as something apart from our identity emerged naturally enough for an older generation of digital immigrants, but for digital natives, a life lived apart from a screen seems quaint and out of touch.[1]
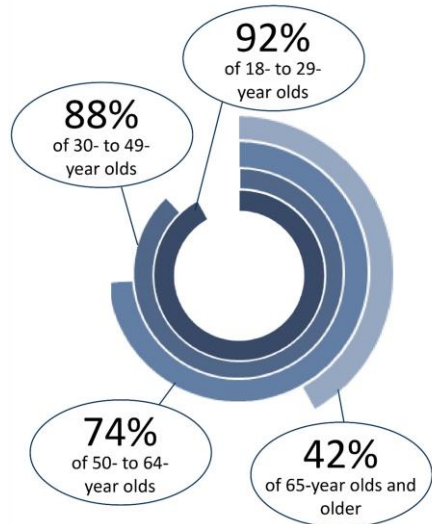

Subway life onscreen.

Because screens are so much a part of our lives, when it comes to thinking about character and screen life, we usually don't—think that is. Moral character may exist in the real life, but what we do on our screens seems divorced from our identity as moral beings. Not only are we spending more time on our devices, we are finding more ways to live

most aspects of our lives on them. Growing integration of the virtual and the physical blurs distinctions between the two. Habitually using these devices without thinking leaves us little ability to interact thoughtfully and reflectively with them or to be aware of what technology use is doing to us.

The articles in this issue all call for discernment in how we use our screens, all call for thoughtfulness, all raise concerns about mindless interactions. Are we alarmists? Perhaps just believers in free will and the necessity of exerting our humanity. More than dreamers, we hope we can learn to use technology appropriately, thoughtfully rather than being used by—perhaps even controlled by—the screen, but we are up against not only habits, but the technology itself. Wanting to investigate this pervasive screen life in our own use, we met together for a semester to read, discuss, and write. The result is this issue of critiques, concerns, and challenges to live out of fearless integrity as we actively engage with our screens.

U.S. Smartphone Ownership by Age[2]

92% of 18- to 29-year olds

88% of 30- to 49-year olds

74% of 50- to 64-year olds

42% of 65-year olds and older

Screen Immersion: Our Way of Life?

Some newly admitted students at Harvard, so used to living life on screens, thought a private Facebook group meant no one would see it. Imagine their surprise when Harvard revoked their admission because of the nature of their posts. Free speech remains, but Harvard's policy "reserves the right to withdraw an offer. . . if an admitted student engages in behavior that brings into question his or her honesty, maturity, or moral character" (Natanson). Unreflective and habitual

engagement with technology holds dangers for character formation and virtue development, but it is widespread.

U.S. Smartphone Household Ownership by Income[2]

64% 74% 83% 93%

| <$30,000 | $30,000-$49,999 | $50,000-$74,999 | ≥$75,000 |

Annual Income
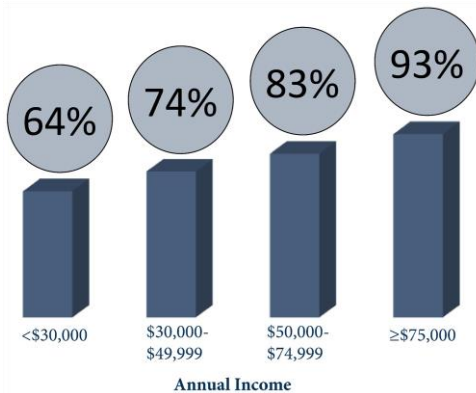
One Nielsen study reports that Americans are on their screens for almost 11 hours a day (Howard)! People are consuming media . . . and the media are consuming their "live" time. Living life both figuratively and literally attached to a screen changes people sociologically, interpersonally, and even physically, neurologically. Scan the recent academic literature on excessive screen time and one will discover concerns over social/interpersonal challenges (Martin), health related issues such as cardiovascular problems (Ford and Caspersen), weight concerns (Mark and Janssen; de Jong et al.; Wethington et al.), and sleep disorders (Goldfield et al.; Mak et al.).

This is not just a condition of the most developed countries. Although many places in the world do not have easy computer access, smartphones are increasingly enabling them to jump into screen life, as foreign as it may be to their current circumstances. As of 2016, about 75% of the world owns a mobile phone (Sui). In the United States, 92% of those who are 18- to 29-year-olds report owning a phone. And cost is apparently not a deterrent, as 64% of households earning less than $30,000 a year own a smartphone (Smith). Smartphones dominate screen use.

Technological pervasiveness blinds us to the ways it is changing us because it is so well integrated into our lives. That happens by necessity,

by habit, but also by design, as Adam Alter explores in *Irresistible*. We are making choices, but those choices aren't always conscious. A certain addictive quality is being built into the devices we use.

The business model that drives technological development incentivizes designers and producers to create more devices and content and integrate those into our lives without stopping to ask about best practices and impact. As basic city services, bill paying, banking, and even grocery shopping can all be done via technology, our habitual use shifts to use of necessity. Couple that with growing entertainment content designed for various devices, and screens become an extension of ourselves.

This change in the way we spend our waking days also affects our character, presenting both opportunities and obstacles to a life well lived. The pace of technological change has meant little time for reflection on what is lost and what is gained. Sherry Turkle reminds us, "Computers don't just do things for us, they do things to us, including to our ways of thinking about ourselves and other people" (26). More screen use impacts us, but *how* we are changing matters and is not simplistically a matter of good or bad.

Certainly the efficiency, speed, and access to vast amounts of information have improved lives. Educational opportunities are greater because of digital life. Increased access to information about health improves lives. Democracy is more accessible. Creativity, problem-solving, and even reflexes can improve through some video games. The list of positives goes on and our love of screens grows. But there is a dark side to too much screen time.

The gap between the technology-rich and technology-poor widens.

The gap between the technology-rich and technology-poor widens. Injustice grows with the lack of access to what has become a necessity. Personally, we lose abilities to communicate face to face, and our live interpersonal relation skills decrease as we use them less and less.

One study of almost 50,000 students at 156 universities found that heavy users of the internet had more problems and fewer successes than those who used it much less. "Nonheavy users had better relationships with administrative staff, academic grades, and learning satisfaction than heavy Internet users. Heavy users were more likely than non-heavy Internet users to be depressed, physically ill, lonely, and introverted" (Chen and Peng). As usage grows, people forget or perhaps never learn about how to interact well with one another in person.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing studies to challenge the belief that more or less screen time has little significant impact comes from Jean Twenge, who has spent years studying the relationship between adolescents' use of screens and their mental health. She found that the smartphone is not just a technological advance but also a factor affecting digital natives' very health. "The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health. These changes have affected young people in every corner of the nation and in every type of household."

While previous generations lament the onset of shorter attention spans and decreased social skills, Twenge argues that the focus should instead be on the growing rates of depression and suicide. "It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones." She concludes with an astounding assertion: "There's not a single exception. All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness." If too much screen time yields problems, changing our patterns of use requires courage and the character to follow through on changes.

> *"All screen activities are linked to less happiness, and all nonscreen activities are linked to more happiness."*
>
> *- Jean Twenge*

Fearless Integrity

Integrity   Virtue lies at the heart of excellent moral character; the virtue of integrity, understood as consistent truthfulness with practiced stewardship, is central. Living with a commitment to keeping one's word leads to trustworthiness, another key ingredient of integrity.

Stephen Carter, author of *Integrity*, posits a definition calling for the courage of one's convictions. For him, integrity means not only discerning between right and wrong, but acting on it, *and* being willing to speak out on why you acted the way you did (7). Action calls us to be not only role models of excellent character but educators to those who observe us. But virtue takes work. "Virtue is a discipline and will require both intention and practice." Jen Letherer in *Remote Virtue* further argues that we need rational engagement to demystify program content and create emotional distance (189).

Discernment   Integrity also demands discernment. There's an old-fashioned word—discern—to ferret out what's right and what's wrong, a kind of practical wisdom. God gave each one of us with the ability to discern right from wrong, gave us a conscience. Now we can ignore that conscience and it will weaken or we can sharpen it by listening to it, by reflecting on it, and by aligning our actions or decisions to our commitments.

Discernment is not the current fad of "whatever feels right for you is right for you." That is far from what we mean. Discernment draws from resources of tradition, faith, community, and wise living. We stand in the tradition of moral philosophy and moral theology that values reason, values a morality that is rooted in the One who is good and calls us to live up to the image of God in which each of us has been created.

Fearless, Risk-taking Integrity   What this journal is calling for is more than integrity, but *fearless integrity*—a kind of risk-taking courage that enables us to be consistent in living out our values, especially when it comes to screen use. This fearless integrity means we'll be the same person in public and private, willing to take risks and make sacrifices to do the right thing.

Roger Scruton argues that screen use promotes risk avoidance:

> When we click to enter some new domain, we risk nothing
> immediate in the way of physical danger, and our accountability to
> others and risk of emotional embarrassment is attenuated. . . .
> Accountability is not something we should avoid; it is something we
> need to learn. Without it we can never acquire either the capacity
> to love or the virtue of justice.

As we use our screens McCary Rhodes challenges us to approach them
armed with a spiritual practice of "prayerful awareness," of mindfully
questioning our need to use, to click, to watch the particular thing with
which we're about to engage and asking if it's hurtful or helpful (126).
Taking control of our screen lives can feel risky, but it is an exercise of
virtue, a practicing of fearless integrity.

Taking Control: A Different Way of Life

How we think and that we think about technology matters. How we
frame those thoughts also matters. Being proactive in living out our
values means making choices about not using technology or
thoughtfully, purposefully engaging with it.

Reject Screen Use   Rejecting technological advances and refusing to
make screens a centerpiece of life is an increasingly rare choice. We see
it in particular communities such as the Amish or in some "rugged
individualists" who live self-sufficiently off the land. Cloistered religious
communities offer refuge for others. Commenting on a retreat he took
with Benedictine monks, Jonathan Taplin, author of *Move Fast and
Break Things,* exclaims,

> The connectedness we all experience online is only a simulacrum of
> real community. And, "being human" is not "fulfilling all desires,"
> but rather requires contemplation, discernment, and the control of
> our desires. We have built and are building a world where that is
> less and less possible. (Dreher)

But for most people, jobs and lifestyles make it difficult to avoid
screens.

Technology Fasts   Another option is suggested by Susan Forshey in this issue. Consider a technology fast. A fast opens up space that may at first seem boring, but with that boredom comes refreshing creativity. In an interview, author of *Bored and Brilliant* Manoush Zomorodi talks about how screen time has come to dominate our lives. ". . . [P]eople feel so unmoored or unsure of what to do when it comes to some of their personal digital habits, and how to exist in the world without being connected all the time . . . " (Katz). A fast provides needed reflection time and interrupts habitual, mindless use. We need to bring our desires, our rational abilities, and our personal commitments to lived practice. Pauses in use, short and long, bring perspective and a return of conscious choice in our use.

Responsible Technology Design   Yet self-control or active choosing is not the only force involved in our screen use. The very design of the technology pulls us toward addictive behavior. We are responsible for our technology choices, but not solely culpable. Interruptions in our screen use become more important than ever when we understand that increasingly designers, developers, and producers of technology, company shareholders, and C.E.O.s—all have a hand in making value choices—choices such as whether to build in addictiveness. Designers are responding to the growing volume of information on how the brain works by building in ways to bypass rational choice. That some of Silicon Valley's most prominent producers refuse to let their children use their products or significantly limit use reminds us that screen "control" implies more than a user's self-control. (Alter; "What Is 'Brain Hacking'?").

Should a product that encourages addictiveness even be designed? When choosing what to invest money in, is the common good considered? We must find ways to encourage designers to develop screens in ways that give us more agency. Support those hardware and software designers who refuse the pressure to make the screens addictive. Seek out companies and programs that develop technology responsibly.

Active Choice for Good   Another way to thoughtfully use screens focuses on the purpose of the screen use. Rather than endless leisure use, pursue ways to be a force for good through the technology. Be a

person who both models virtuous behavior and makes an active difference in the world. Consider Franklin Yartey's article that calls for online philanthropy. Listen to Rafic Sinno's plea to be responsible in our game use. Heed Sarah Slaugter's concern for privacy and our need to be more careful in what we agree to accept in our privacy agreements.

Character and . . . Screen Life

This issue is bad news for readers who want to be affirmed in their comfort—these authors challenge us all that to live a life of integrity means taking action. And action requires effort to get off the couch, to read agreements, to exercise restraint in our engagement with technology—particularly when using it for entertainment or diversion—and to research the organizations and sites we visit. But it's also an issue of good news—it reminds us that we are not victims who must yield to some mysterious technological power. The authors offer suggestions for interacting with, managing, and using technology as a force for good.

Susan Forshey explores the cognitive, emotional, and physical effects of binge-watching from the standpoint of a scholar, but also as someone who has indulged in it. Mindful that too often we simply talk about escapism or wasting time, she also considers the physiological changes that occur with the habits we form when using our screens. While there are benefits from screen time, she challenges us to pursue a more meaningful life by actively living out our "own story," providing practical suggestions for how to do that.

We live in this time of growing dependence on screens and the potential for inhabiting screens as we move into augmented reality devices. Augmented reality games such as Pokémon Go grabbed Rafic Sinno's attention in his essay. "Allured," notes Sinno, into playing the game much more than he intended, he reflects on the nature of responsibility and the need to commit to stewardship as a key to thoughtful engagement. But he doesn't simply call for more willpower; he notes the responsibility designers and producers share when it comes to developing not just games, but all kinds of technology.

Similarly, Sarah Slaughter places responsibility on creators of user agreements. Privacy concerns abound when it comes to downloading

apps and programs, but the policies seem to have been designed to discourage responsible use. Wanting access to the technology, we often abandon our responsibility to opt out, and our desire to use the product immediately overrides our desire for privacy. Philosopher Hannah Arendt suggests that privacy is necessary for goodness to exist in a human being. "A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow" (71). Recognizing that human life flourishes best when we have some control over our privacy means we must become more engaged in calling for better agreements from the producers and in knowing what we're giving away when we accept the terms.

Franklin Yartey acknowledges the power of screens to impact the world positively. Examining microfinance organizations, particularly Kiva and Zidisha, he informs us of options and encourages us to use the online resources wisely. Intelligent giving has the power to transform lives. Giving through organizations that are culturally sensitive matters. Giving to organizations that use the money wisely without taking advantage of people matters. To do that he provides a guide for best practices.

Finally, Quentin Schultze talks of portals and mirrors of our desires. He masterfully weaves the essays together by recognizing the distinction between adopting technology thoughtlessly and adapting it with wisdom to serve others. He encourages us to find ways to adapt technology for our neighbor's good, rather than for self-seeking satisfaction.

Conclusion

Fundamentally this issue calls for fearless integrity to live out our values and our ethics in our screen lives. Day after day, night after night, decision by decision, action by action, we build habits that help us or habits that steep us in activities that pull us away from living better lives. Integrity calls for consistency. Fearless integrity brings risk and sacrifice. Fearless integrity on screens calls us to be reflective and discerning. Should we use screen technologies at all? If the answer is yes,

Fearless integrity brings risk and sacrifice.

then what are the best practices? Awareness about habits reminds us of our free will to choose. Choose how many screens you own. Choose where and when you use them. Choose why and how you use them. Choose physical activity. Choose face-to-face conversation. Choose to write your own story of your life, for it is a precious and fleeting life.

May you be both challenged and encouraged to live intentionally out of wisdom, to discover the joy that comes from discerning the Narrow Path, which leads to flourishing by living thoughtfully and intentionally with your screens.

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Photo credit p. 2: Annalee R. Ward

Notes

[1] Digital natives—generally considered those born after the late 1980s, as Marc Prensky notes ("Digital Natives Part 1"; "Digital Natives Part 2"), who live and learn without the memory of life before smartphones and screens that digital immigrants hold.

[2] Source: Mobile Fact Sheet. Pew Research Center, 12 Jan. 2017, www.pewinternet. org/fact-sheet/mobile/.

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