

Screen Age Man and our Terror of Silence: A Personal Reflection

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SYNOPSIS

From the TV to the computer to the smartphone and tablet devices, humans are spending increasing amounts of time looking at, and relating to, screens. There are serious grounds for concern about the effect of this digital revolution on childhood, in particular, and on children's development and well-being. Additionally, this technological revolution is intimately linked to what some social commentators are calling our 'surveillance society', a process whereby we could, over time, be drifting towards becoming a police state. Further, the capture of our minds by the new technology, and ultimately by the corporate and Government interests which they serve, provides a ready distraction from our deepest existential anxieties which are only really faced in silence and solitude, which are becoming anathema to Screen Age man.

Some 30 years ago there was much anticipation of the leisure revolution. We were all going to be working many less hours, and have a great deal of time for leisure pursuits. This was going to be brought about by the advent of something that was being called the 'information highway', which would give us so much time, we would not know what we were going to do with it.

Humanity has passed through the Stone Age, Iron and Bronze Age, Dark Ages and Middle Ages. We have passed through the agricultural and industrial revolutions, but whatever happened to the leisure revolution? We now live in what I want to refer to as the 'Screen Age', as increasingly we have become a screen-dependent society. Such dependence is illustrated by the time the bank cashier informed me that 'only limited business can be carried out because the system is down'. In a similar vein: it is 4 p.m., and one by one the 20 plus tills all go 'down' around me in the supermarket. They are 'off-line', leaving the store at a stand still with queues of disgruntled shoppers. Staff gazing at 'frozen' screens are told to guess how much they think each trolley and basket full of shopping would have cost, estimate down and charge the customer whatever they think would be the total!

Our children hop from the television set, Play Station, Wi and X-Box, to the DS-lite, to the Lap Top and Mobile phone screen, absorbing their minds hour after hour. It is nearly midnight, and there is a growing queue outside Sainsbury's waiting for the door to open on this special night: the next edition of 'Call of Duty' will be available in five minutes, and the supermarket is re-opening just to sell this single item. Screen Age Britain has spent £5 billion in the high street on screen-based games, with 4.6 million copies of Batman being sold in the UK within six days of it going on the shelves. In total, just fewer than 30 million of us play computer games in Britain.

In 2011, a group of 228 experts wrote to *The Daily*

Telegraph warning that childhood in Britain was being put at significant risk, and amongst other concerns, the Government should warn parents about the dangers of screen-based entertainment. In addition, a United Nations report published in September 2011 warned British parents that their children were being caught in a 'compulsive consumerism', and that our children spend ever-increasing time at home on screen-based activities rather than on outdoor activities and play. The childhood experts voiced their view that British children have the 'lowest level of well-being in the developed world', and that Britain is more often than not 'at or near the top of International league tables on almost all indicators of teenage distress and disaffection'. The group expressed concern about children developing a 'consumerist, screen-based lifestyle'.

A poll carried out by the Sleep Council found that 58 per cent of boys aged 12 to 14 had a telephone, an audio player, a television plus a games console in their bedroom, and 25 per cent of these admitted falling asleep with the television switched on. This also opens up children's access to Internet pornography and television channels such as Babestation. The largest user group of Internet pornography is boys aged 11 to 15. A recent UNICEF survey found that two-thirds of adolescent children in Northern Ireland get their sexual knowledge from Internet Pornography. In the United States over 75 per cent of prime-time television contains sexual content, with the amount of sexual activity on American television doubling between 1997 and 2001. Seven out of nine longitudinal studies showed children's exposure to sex on television led to sexual activity at an early age, and doubled the risk of teenage pregnancy.

Sally Goddard Blythe, director of the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology in Chester, noted that children were failing to develop motor skills in the way they did 20 years ago, and that British children are spending increasing time in front of screen-based games and electronic media. Professor of Pharmacology, Susan Greenfield, who holds a Chair at Oxford University, has raised concern about the long-term effects on children of screen-dependent life styles.

Information Is Not Knowledge

Professor Greenfield suggests the possibility that children's brains will become locked into the 'literal present', with computer-generated images that mean nothing beyond the surface. Greenfield points out that when a book is read, 'it is because you care about the characters, and their relationships with others, and their fates; their past, present and future and interrelations with other characters give them meaning'. Professor Greenfield continues, 'In the world of

screens, actions are at a premium, while individual thoughts, expressed so readily through characters in a book, are far harder to convey with literal images'. Another argument raised by Greenfield is that information is not knowledge, and that information processing is not the same as understanding. Computer games cannot embrace abstract thinking and metaphor, yet as Professor Greenfield notes, 'metaphor is a crucial hallmark of the adult human brain that distinguishes us from our nearest relatives, the chimpanzees'.

Another Screen Age cultural phenomenon is that of voyeurism. In the Screen Age this is seen in the unrelenting growth in 'reality television' programmes. There are the armchair voyeurs who stare at programmes such as 'The Only Way is Essex' (although much of this may be staged), 'Educating Essex', 'The True Wives of New York', 'What Kate Did Next', and many others. Programmes such as the Jeremy Kyle Show also provide an often pitiful feast for the voyeur.

There are those who watch the notable increase in reality programmes such as 'The Police Interceptors', 'Road Wars', 'Brit Cops: Rapid Response', 'Police Stop' and 'Police Camera Action'. Police reality television has created theatre for the police officer who, rather than working to protect the weak, now has an ethos of enforcing compliance. These television (vision from afar) broadcasts appear to disregard the notion of personal privacy. Police Officers can be heard telling people whom they have 'stopped' to ignore the camera, implying it is nothing to do with them whether they are filmed or not, even when it is clear that they do not want to be screened. There is no indication whether or not those filmed in airports being questioned by customs officers have given any consent.

The Screen Age has also seen the establishing of what commentators have called the 'surveillance society'. The huge networks of CCTV cameras that have grown up in our towns like uncontrolled weeds are supposed to respond to the atmosphere of anxiety on our streets. But is this anxiety growing out of our community from the streets themselves, or is it being nurtured by State Authority, as it seeks to tighten its grip due to its own unease, creating a situation whereby England and Wales are increasingly ebbing towards becoming a police State? The British Government declined to accept Article 38 of the European Human Rights Act, which respects the rights of people to have private lives.

Privacy is being increasingly eroded, as the means to trace everyone's steps can be achieved through the use of CCTV, records kept of debit and credit card transactions, and through our spending records on loyalty cards. Travel cards, such as London's Oyster scheme and bus passes, can also be used to trace people's steps. Those who use mobile

phones can be tracked by GPS. Big Brother is more than able to put together an image of your life in the Screen Age. Your text messages can be accessed by third parties, and are available after you thought you had deleted them. Electronic mail is also stored away when you assumed it had been erased for ever.

British Screen Age Man surely lives in a Surveillance Society. This has been compounded by the previous Government's Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act which was passed in 2000. The Act was aimed at countering terrorism, but has been significantly abused by State authorities. Since the Act was passed by the State it has been used to issue 20,000 warrants to snoop into people's telephone calls, electronic mail and Internet usage. There have also been at least 2.7 million applications to gain access to people's telephone bills and information about their location. In addition, there have been 186,133 permissions given under the Act for covert surveillance by various law enforcement organisations, 61,317 direct surveillance operations by 'public bodies' which includes local councils, and 43,391 for what are known as 'covert human intelligence' sources.

Worryingly, but highlighting the transformation of Britain into a police state, only 0.16 per cent of authorisations issued under the Act were approved by Judges. Permission to invade people's privacy in all other cases was given by bureaucrats, with only a small number of the largest intrusions into people's lives involving the agreement of the Secretary of State. The Act has been used by local authorities to spy on people to make sure that applicants really did live within a school catchment area. For example, an ordinary everyday couple, Jenny and Tim Paton, were spied on for two weeks by their local authority under the suspicion they were not living in the correct area for a school application

Television crews and photographers are allowed to camp outside people's homes, and the 'paparazzi' can chase people down the street. In any other context this would be called stalking and harassment. Newspapers are active and enthusiastic voyeurs, with one tabloid gossiping to its readers that it can now 'reveal' that such-and-such a person split with his wife of 25 years, six months ago. This revelation was splashed on the front page of the newspaper, but why did this newspaper reveal anything to me? Why are they peering into the private life of a family and spreading gossip, with the assumption that I really need to know? And why is this gossip so important that it is on the front page?

It seems that our society has a great deal of difficulty in minding its own business, preferring to be gossiping and generating rumours. The roots of gossip and rumour-

mongering may well be the existential anxieties and fears of facing the reality of our own mortality and destruction, particularly in a competitive consumer-based culture. People do not stop talking, gossiping and judging others, lest we find ourselves alone with our own self. Thus we drive out silence from our lives. Why are we so entertained by others' misfortunes, crises and behaviour? Perhaps our self-righteousness and a sense of 'I would never do such a thing', or 'I am so relieved that this is not happening to me', drive this unholy phenomenon. It also distracts others from looking too closely at us. Thus, by voyeurism we distract from our own inner-life.

Screen Age Man is surrounded by the constant din of piped music that is designed to beckon us into shopping mode and lure us to part with our money. Each store in the shopping centre calls to us through its own music genre and pulsating neon lighting. This saturation of noise, busyness, crowds, possessions, constant telephone calls and texting fulfills the need for Screen Age Man to block out silence and prevent solitude. Sound is natural, created by the rhythm of life, whereas I suggest that noise is human made and artificial. Sound is harmonious, and reminds us of our accountability to nature and finality, with noise being intrusive and driving out the natural world.

People who want to live private and simple lives, and particularly those who are deemed by society as loners, are regarded with suspicion. Those who do not consume and comply with the Screen Age are often called odd, weird, socially inept, aloof, running away, and worse – held as hiding something, or being perverts or paedophiles. Those who do not want access to the Internet are penalised if their utility statements cannot be e-mailed, and suddenly the bills are higher if they do not want to use direct debits. Those who choose privacy, and not to lay down an electronic trail of their everyday lives, are deemed to be digitally silent, and such digital silence is not appreciated by State authorities. Britain has the largest DNA database in the world, and also the largest number of CCTV cameras.

Silence and solitude are often equated with punishment – a child is sent to their room without any supper, and the prisoner is placed in solitary confinement. The school child is excluded from the classroom. Screen Age Man finds silence to be a terror in his life. What do we do with silence? Silence gives no cue in the Screen Age visually based world. Worse, silence leaves us in the company of our own thoughts. We are not accustomed to silence, and do much to avoid it. Solitude is not isolation, but Screen Age Man experiences the latter when he is not texting, twittering, e-mailing, staring at social networking sites, and endlessly talking.

Mobile telephones seem to have become part of the anatomy of the human body. Screen Age Man is forever displaying himself as a consumer product for others, living in the fear of disapproval and rejection; thus, screen-age society is a generator of fear. The significant difference is that fear was previously focused on the village down the river, or invasion by another country; now we fear each other and social rejection. Events now can be judged on the basis of them being 'Facebookable'. Ongoing fear and the inability to embrace existential anxiety may be responsible for much of the increase in rates of depression.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that depression was the 4th leading contributor to the global burden of disease in the year 2000. The WHO further predict that by 2020, depression will be ranked 2nd in the Disability Adjusted Life Years, used as a measure of global health. Depression, however, has already reached the global 2nd ranking for DALY's among the 15–44 age group. Mixed anxiety and depression is the most common 'mental disorder' in Britain. The British Office for National Statistics Psychiatric Morbidity report (2001) states that 8–12 per cent of the UK population suffer depression in any one year. It has been suggested that self-harming (intentional cutting, burning and poisoning) in Britain could as high as 33 per cent of young people. Self-harming appears to be rooted in self-reproach, and attempting to dull emotional pain.

The information highway has not brought about the leisure revolution; instead, it has brought new diagnostic terms to the therapist's table, such as Internet and text messaging addictions. Stress is another familiar phenomenon for Screen Age Man, a notion more domestic than battle fatigue or shell-shock. The Health and Safety Executive reports that in their view, 60 per cent of all work absence in Britain is the result of illness that is stress related. Interestingly, work-based stress is cited as the second highest reason for calling in sick by non-manual workers. Screen Age Man tends to pathologically label the weary, fearful and exhausted, deeming those with covert existential anxiety as 'failing to cope' and being 'unwell'. However, is it they who are disordered, or society itself?

But what are the advantages of silence and solitude, as terrifying as they are to Screen Age Man? Making time in our lives 'to get away from it all' is a ploy used by the travel industry to convince us to part with our money, but this is far removed from simply distancing oneself from the visual and auditory onslaught of the Screen Age. Making room for external silence is to nurture internal silence. Internal silence allows for contemplation, where we can listen to our voice within. Screen Age noise snuffs out the candle of inner life, where we come face to face with our deepest fears and existential questions.

Sitting in the company of such awareness, opens our eyes to the illusion of Screen Age values, and creates the channel for the gentle voice of God to break through the chatter and clutter of life. Dallas Willard notes that 'Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the stark reality of our life'. Professor Greenfield suggests that 'the constant self-centred readout on Twitter belies a more childlike insecurity, an existential crisis'. Screen Age Man is addicted to noise; he needs noise because silence is creepy and disturbing.

The act of putting opinions, judgements and self-promotion to one side enables us to listen in to the rhythm of our own souls. Henri J. M. Nouwen suggests that 'it is a good discipline to wonder in each new situation if people wouldn't be better served by our silence than by our words'.

Is it time to reduce our digital footprints for the sake of our souls?

The need for stillness has been embraced as a new interest in our world as psychotherapists. In the societal move away from religion, we may have become the new clergy for the screen age. As new clergy, particularly the much-promoted Cognitive Behavioural Therapists, there is much celebration about the new 'Mindfulness' approaches to human healing. These approaches are in fact, as with many things in our profession, rooted in Buddhism and the practice of the Christian Desert Fathers in their contemplative spirituality. We are building upon what was known 2,000 years ago and beyond by theologians, philosophers and contemplatives. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy can find roots in the thoughts of the 4th Century Christian monk, Evagrius, for example.

There are two demands placed upon Screen Age Man: to Consume and to Comply. The problem of embracing a spirit of silence is that it cultivates a space where we realise that we spend much of our lives chasing things that we do not really want, desire or need. Much is made of reducing our carbon footprint for our physical well-being. Perhaps it is time also to reduce our digital footprints for the sake of our souls. Carl Jung's view that most of his clients' problems were spiritual/existential may be worth remembering when our profession is being pulled into the values of the Screen Age through pressure to adopt the medical model. The Screen Age has therapy under surveillance. ●



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