

A few mildly informed, biased words on

Entertainment Dependency

A month ago, I started this project with a clear core question in mind :

Am I addicted to entertainment? Is everyone?

This is a question that has been bothering me for quite some time, and an issue that I felt was impacting every part of my life and my surroundings. At the time, I simply made the broad statement that I believe me and most of my generation are - to some degree - addicted to entertainment. Over the course of the past four weeks, much of my approach has shifted and I have revised many of my previous generalized assumptions, so I will try to detail my research journey in this little blabbermouthed essay.

There have been many studies on various digital media addictions within the past 20 years – with the rise of the internet, the constant further development of mobile phones and personal computers, the phenomenon has gained immense traction, and is only expected to keep growing in the future.

“Gaming Disorder” was the first of the bunch to be officially included in the WHO’s International Classification of Diseases (1) in 2019, but the rest are sure to follow. Be it “Problematic Smartphone Use”, “Social Media Addiction”, “Internet Addiction Disorder” or even “Netflix Addiction”, the scientific community grows ever more aware and alert to the presence of these new potential risks to mental health all over the world. Though studies are being done concerning these topics, the methodology is not perfected yet. Since the problems addressed are very broad and can have completely different outcomes depending on individual circumstances, it is quite hard to draw empiric, concrete conclusions.

“What becomes evident when reviewing the literature is the lack of clear cut evidence for a link between digital technology use and well-being, partly driven by a lack of high-quality research in the area. The review therefore concludes with concrete suggestions about how research could improve in the future.” (2)

Still, I would like to present a couple of interesting conclusions, statistics and studies that I have come upon, and the thoughts they spurred in me. Later on, I will be shedding the pretense of neutrality and scientific fact and detail my full opinions on the topic, and why it concerns me so much.

Full disclosure, please do not take anything that I write in the following for scientific fact, I am but a humble art student who judges the sources she finds as best she can, but I cannot guarantee for anything. The way I reproduce the findings of these studies may also be slightly unscientific or biased, though, again, I’m trying my best not to be.

I'd like to start off with an old quote by General David Sarnoff, which in some ways applies very well to my findings.

“We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value.”

This is a very calming quote, to the flustered citizen of the 21st century. It gives us the feeling of being in control, that technologies are nothing but tools that we can use however we want to, and that it's the behaviour of the humans that is problematic, never the design of the machine.

This idea is echoed in many studies on social media use and its ties to mental well-being. Though it is possible to draw connections between frequent social media use and low self-esteem, social anxiety and depression, it is also possible to link it to general well-being, social capital and connectedness.

“Yet even when examining the same outcome, positive and negative results can coexist because effects of social media can vary across users and time frames: it is therefore likely ‘that some users experience positive outcomes while others (and possibly the same users at different points in time) experience deleterious outcomes’“(2)

Researchers hypothesise that active use of social media, such as posting, chatting, liking and commenting positively affects the well-being of the individual, while passive use (browsing newsfeeds, scrolling through profiles and news) increases upward social comparisons and envy, in turn decreasing well-being. (2)

I tend to agree with this viewpoint – I don't think that the technologies we have at our disposal nowadays are generally bad for humans, or that no one should ever use them. My basic thesis is that a balance between digital media use and activities in “the real world” allows for a healthy, happy life in these confusing times. It's a very personal decision, and the right balance for each person may vary wildly, but some sort of balance there must be. (I state, boldly, as if that's not the most barebone thesis a person could think of. I've also heard it's really important to breathe air!)

But upholding this balance is not as easy as the quote by Sarnoff might make it seem. When looking at the statistics of problematic digital media use, I cannot help but question how we can expect people to be able to control their media use themselves, without any sort of education on the matter. Many modern digital media have addictive properties which were (unconsciously or consciously) programmed by their creators, people who are mainly looking to do what's good for their company. Which is, of course, getting people to engage more with their product, to get lost in it, addicted to it. This is - at least among my peers - a widely accepted fact, but as of yet, there don't seem to be many measures taken to address the problems it creates.

Here now, is finally the time to get to Marshall McLuhans immortal quote:

“The Medium is the Message”

Though I will not go into the finer details of this highly complex idea, I would like to look at modern media through the lense it provides, Youtube and Netflix in particular. These media are made to facilitate never-seizing consumption, with the Autoplay function serving you the next episode or video before you can even make a conscious decision about whether you should watch it or not. The same applies with social media platforms such as TikTok, which allow for potentially endless sessions by constantly refreshing the feed section of the interface. The interaction with these platforms shapes the way we consume content, and what kind of new media become popular.

“Social media has become the recent focus of technology concerns as it allows for a more mobile, immersive and continuous form of technological engagement. Social media completes the erasure of the medium as it is inherently diverse and ever-changing: its content is highly individualised and can differ from person-to-person on an hour-by-hour basis. The diversity of social media, and its inherently social nature, makes it attractive to younger generations.”(2)

The message the media of our times conveys is, if you ask me (so beware, highly personal unscientific opinion incoming!): “Consume! Consume more of me! You never have to stop being entertained!”

Which, in turn, makes me highly aware of my incredibly privileged position, having been raised by scientifically minded parents who controlled my media intake a lot (except books, to be fair), which in turn lead to me being able to see my later problematic media use as, well, a problem and not something completely normal. I am able to take a step away from my situation and to judge what I think is good for myself. Again, I am not trying to say that we should not use any media, but I do think that many people, particularly “digital natives” of current and future generations, will not be able to consider whether their amount of media use is good for them because it is the undisputed standard in their environment to be entertained at all times. It is hard not to give in to the endless possibilities that all of our devices offer us, which are so much easier to take than the often comparatively dull-seeming activities that the “analogue” world has to offer. This particularly irks me when concerning children, because I do think that excessive media use in important developmental stages cannot be ideal for a growing child - particularly when it goes hand in hand with physical health risks like obesity which are ever on the rise in western societies.

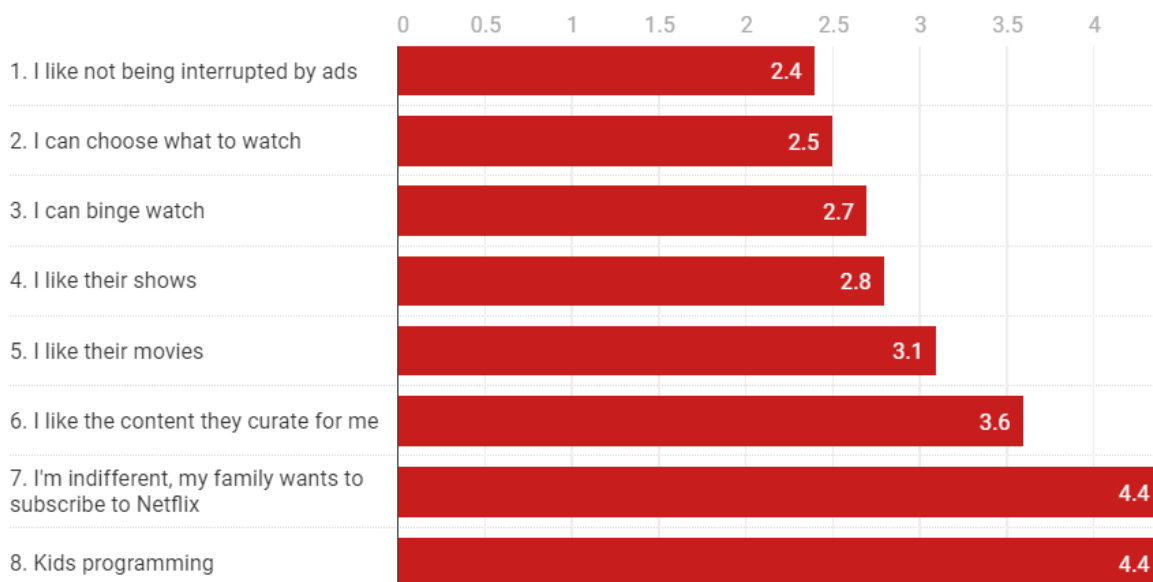
When we take a look at statistics of popular apps (which, sadly, are mainly available in detail for the citizens of the USA) we can see that media use is steadily becoming a bigger part of our lives, starting at younger and younger ages.

Daily TikTok Usage in children aged 4-14 years, between May 2019 and February 2020 increased by 116 % in the USA (from 38 to 82 minutes daily) and by 150 % in Spain (from 24 to 60 minutes). Of course, we can account this to TikToks rising popularity, but an average of 82 minutes daily in children aged 4-14 is still a remarkable statistic that I think we ought to keep in mind. Especially considering the fact that in July 2020, TikTok claimed that more than a third of its 49 million daily users are most likely 14 years or younger (3)

Then there is this survey posed to Netflix Users, which I really cannot guarantee the validity of – it was used by the most dominant app statistics platform, but it seems – as a lot of surveys do – like it can't really be a comprehensive and accurate representation of the situation worldwide. But I believe it can be cited to register a trend in viewers -

Top reasons people have a Netflix subscription

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the highest score



Data represents the weighted average of the ranked answers.

Source: MoffettNathanson

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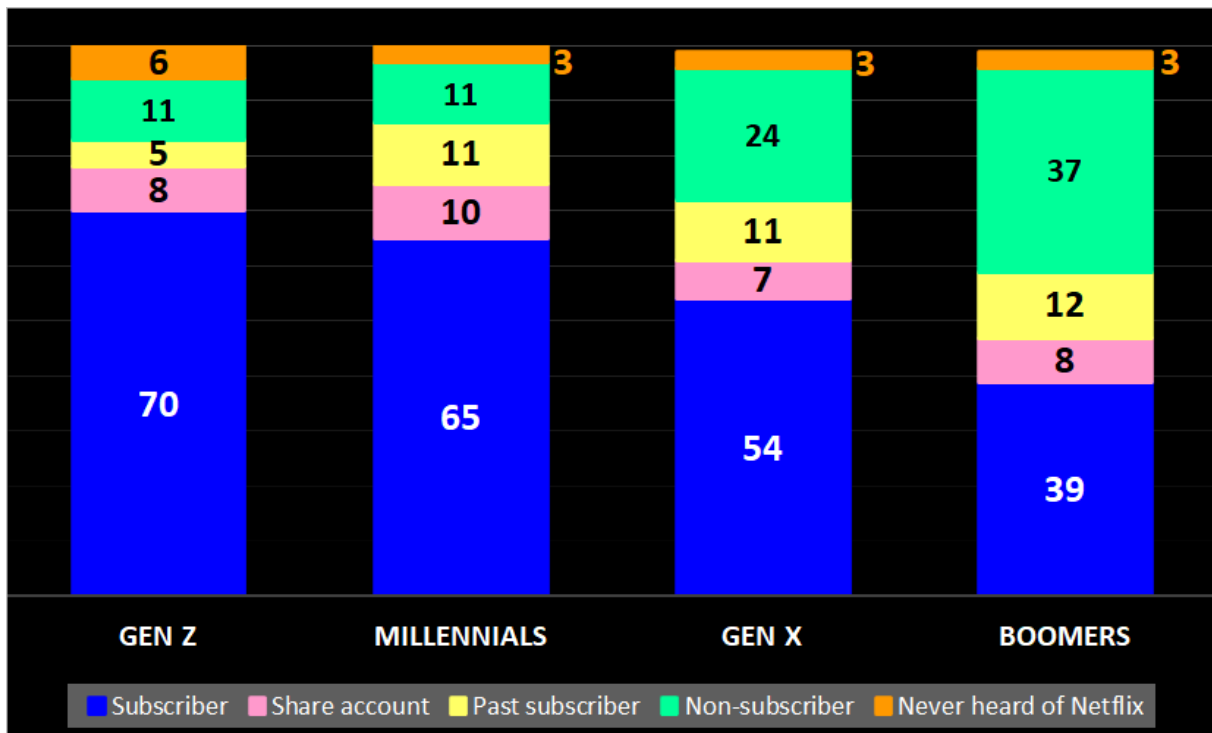
The top reason people in this survey subscribe to Netflix is children's programming.

This, once more, shows just how much media children consume nowadays – of course, ever since the invention of the TV, children have been one of its biggest consumer groups, being naturally captivated by anything entertaining, colourful and loud. Still, a long-time study has found that despite the presence of “TV-Time” in the daily schedule of (US) children in the 1980s, there has since been a steady decline in time spent in active sports and outdoors-activities, while “screen-time” has grown disproportionately. (8) This is unsurprising, considering the vast repertoire of new media forms we have at our disposal.

The amount of screen time engaged in has risen in the past years, while the amount of time spent solely watching TV has fallen . Technology use patterns are therefore changing from very distinct uses like TV viewing, to more diverse uses of screens throughout the day. While technologies like radio or television only support a small number of activities, digital devices such as smartphones or tablets are now the host of an increasingly diverse array of activities ranging from radio and television, to gaming, reading and social media browsing .The widespread focus on screen time as the measure of digital technology use can therefore be explained by our increasing inability to differentiate between various forms of screen activities, making ‘screen time’ a helpful umbrella term when voicing concerns about an increasingly digital world. (2)

Now, we will be taking this essay back from a quick excursion on media use in children to more reliable statistics, in order to provide a little more proof for my bold claim that digital media use is becoming a bigger, more dominant part of our daily lives each year, particularly concerning young people.

“2As adolescents (12–19 years) and emerging adults (20–29 years) access the Internet more than any other age groups and undertake a higher risk of overuse of the Internet, the problem of Internet addiction disorder is most relevant to young people.” (8)



In this statistic displaying “Netflix penetration by generation of US viewers” (as the survey site so unashamedly calls it), we can clearly see the deep reach Netflix has in the youngest generation, suggesting a future trend for ever growing Netflix viewing.

Next to the number of people using Netflix, it is also interesting to look at the way they use it.

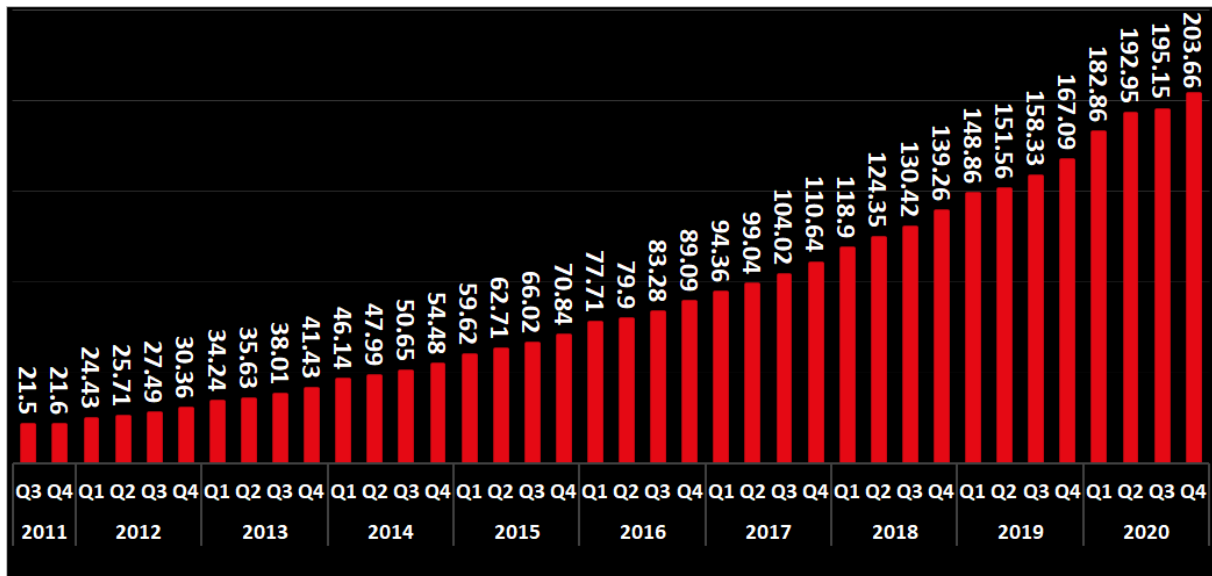
“A PCMag study from September 2019 found that 52% of US streamers watch between one and 10 hours per week. Going up through the viewing hours, 24% watch 11-20 hours, 10% watch 21-30 hours and the last 14% watch over 31 hours. Breaking that last group down a little further, we see 4% of survey respondents reported watching over 60 hours of Netflix per week. That’s a quite-frankly terrifying average of at least 8.5 hours every day.”

“Interestingly, those who subscribe to Netflix in conjunction with another service seem to use Netflix more often, with close to 60% logging in a few times per week.

“The trend continues for those with three subscriptions, with two-thirds watching multiple times a week. Perhaps the takeaway is that users with more subscriptions are more deeply engaged with streaming. And that those who are spending more money will be more inclined to make sure they’re getting their money’s worth.”

“Overall, we see 32% of American streaming subscribers sticking with a single service, 30% with two subscriptions, and 30% with three. A mere 9% do not subscribe to any.” (4)

So, we can clearly see a growing normality in streaming.



(An illustration of Netflix’s recent path to domination)

I haven’t even touched upon the many other ways we consume media nowadays. The user statistics of Youtube, Amazon Prime, Instagram, Disney Plus, Facebook and all sorts of other apps and platforms paint a similar picture – one of continuous growth in user bases and engagement time. I think the trend is clear and needs no further elaboration. For one reason or another, we spend more and more time online, using apps, streaming audiovisual content.

While digging my way through these statistics, reading studies on different kinds of media addiction, I realized something:

Addiction is a very hefty word to use, and it does not do to throw it around lightly. For the first two weeks, I thought I was doing my project on Entertainment Addiction in our society, since I had, in personal experience, often felt like me or people around me were addicted to being entertained by our various media, but I hereby take that judgement back and reformulate my approach:

Though entertainment addiction certainly does exist and is a growing problem all throughout the world, my interest and main concern lies in its subtler variety: The mundane, basically unstudiable “Digital Entertainment Dependency” that I believe a lot of people I know, including myself, have developed over the course of our lives, and the fine line we tread on that separates casual use and the sort of use that impacts our productivity and wellbeing.

The desire to consume media is in itself an absolutely natural human trait: Humans crave entertainment.

We have an insatiable desire for media, looking for information, input in everything we see.

Throughout human history, we have always thrived on ways to entertain ourselves, be it through music, painting, telling stories or flights of the imagination. Entertainment, moments of “Play”, activities that go beyond the securing of mere survival are fundamental to human societies, to the very fabric of our cultures, to what makes us human.

However, the way we lead our lives nowadays is unprecedented in the sense that very large portions of people in (western) society live lives of freedom and relative wealth. Due to the highly specialized jobs that an industrialized, capitalistic society makes possible, we have more free time than ever before - far more time to play and entertain ourselves, far more time to be bored.

This seems to be the blessing and curse of current and future generations.

The rate at which we consume entertaining media, and the way we consume it has changed immensely, and I think this is where we begin to encounter difficulties – because, superficially seen, having too much free time and an infinite stream of entertainment doesn’t seem like a problem whatsoever. But when there is so much time in a persons existence that needs to be filled, and easy access to an unlimited resource of (more or less) passive entertainment, it can easily become a habit that takes over their life, without them necessarily being consciously aware of it. The way digital media are engineered, feeding on the ancient biochemistry of our brains, giving us the possibility of an easy dopamine fix every second of the day makes them incredibly attractive to pretty much every human being.

Boredom has always been the problem of the rich – the wealthy ancient romans felt it, medieval kings ached of it, and in the 17th century the French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote down the following thought:

“Condition de l’homme.

Inconstance, ennui, inquiétude.”

(The Human condition : Fickleness, boredom, worry)

The feeling of boredom is a longstanding enemy of privileged humans, and we have the means to seemingly erase it from our lives. It’s the perfect recipe for a dependency: An unpleasant feeling that we instinctively would rather go without, a simple solution that requires no effort on our part.

So I guess that’s fine then? We’ll just be entertained all day and be happy?

I personally don’t think that’s possible. Though entertainment is a fundamental need in every human, it is not the only one.

Human beings need to move, to socially interact, to love and belong, to learn, to be outside, and many other things. (6) I think I also need to actively use my brain to really feel good, and to have periods of undisturbed introspection. (No source on this but my little feelings)

The need for entertainment seems to be able to overwrite the desire to partake in other parts of human existence when entertaining media are available at all times. I do not mean to say people never go outside anymore, and have no social connections, but it cannot be denied that large parts of the common Generation Zers day (at least in my bubble) is taken up by the interaction with media they consume. When going outside, they will most likely be listening to music or a podcast, when being with their friends their smartphone will not be far away, so as to bridge uncomfortable moments of silence with a quick rush to Instagram. When working on projects, be they for school and passion, there will most likely be some audiovisual content running in the background. In the interviews I’ve done with my peers, an all too common answer to the question:

“How much time do you spend with media?”

was

“All the time”.

“From the moment I wake up to the moment I go to sleep – there’s always something running.”

Now, I have been in phases like this, quite recently. During my week of entertainment abstinence, I noticed just how much I rely on my entertaining media to keep me emotionally balanced. Though my recent behaviour wasn’t exactly problematic, I do know myself well enough to know I’m not that far from falling into a heavy use pattern again when I’m not mentally well. When you find yourself in a media loop, watching one thing after another, the idea of exiting your state of constant consumption seems daunting and, for a long time, does not appear to be necessary at all.

I’m fine, am I not? I’m doing my work, and living my life and there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong, so why on earth should I stop?

Because it waters down the way you experience your existence.

Being with friends or family, creating an artwork, being outside, or watching a movie or a series – I think we should strive to encounter all of these situations with an open, dedicated attitude, to be in the moment without a (second) device taking away our attention. To be there, in the whole absurd glory of the human experience, which we have the very best prerequisites to take in fully in all of its many joys and pains.

And the ironic thing is that one of the products of these very privileges that we enjoy might be a factor in keeping us from experiencing our life in the best possible way. The addictive properties of social media, streaming platforms and games ensnare us in a casual stranglehold, keeping our minds in an unexplorative, passive state.

There are far too many studies on the correlation between social media and digital technology use and mental health issues in teenagers to deny the impact it has and will have on society. (7) One of the most concerning statistics is the increase of suicide among young girls in the USA, the rates among 10 to 14-year-olds having risen 170 % between 2009 (the introduction of smartphone based social media apps) and 2017. (9)

We can safely say that new technologies do have the potential to do a lot of harm, just as much as they have made wonderful and liberating changes to our lives.

And, again, I am not really that interested in the extreme cases, the people who lose everything because of an addiction or other horrible circumstances. I am thinking about the “normal”, everyday people, all of my friends, all of our peers, all the people who will go through their life not ever having to seriously worry about their well-being or the healthiness of their media consumption patterns. It will be - it is - normal to live your life half here, half there. And I know it's not like people from earlier generations were all constantly jumping through the scenery taking everything in with all their might, and I know the hardships that less fortunate people throughout the history of humanity as well as nowadays endure all of their lives are not something to be romanticized.

I'm just thinking – it's such a shame that we're in such an amazing position to get all that is possible out of human life, to live lives of pleasure and fulfillment, with enough free time to try and change the world and we're muddling it all up because of these damn wonderful addictive things we have created.

You need space in your brain to think – to become okay with yourself, and the more irritating parts of you. To explore all the things that you can learn and be and all the ideas your brain can make – of course, you need input to start with, but a phase of silence, of introspection belongs to every great idea, or at least I feel like it does.

And we need motivation to achieve great things, big and small.

We should use the means we have at our disposal not only to passively consume media, but to make changes to the fabric of society, to the way people think – the digital age is just beginning, and we as digital natives should strive to push the boundaries of how digital spaces are used, redefine them, use them for good.

Next to that, in order to care about the world, to care about the future, we need to be among material things sometimes. Walking through nature and realizing its beauty, without being distracted by somebody in your ear talking about how to put plumbing in the deathstar.

Being with people and seeing the magic that runs through us all, the ridiculous incredible machine that human beings are, completely aside from all of our inventions. Being with ourselves and realizing even more what a wondrous thing the human body and mind is. We can entertain ourselves, we can learn and achieve most things if we just try hard enough.

We can be magicians that do magic tricks with pens, wood, instruments, our own body. And that's beautiful, so very valuable, and just a way more interesting part of human existence than consuming media can ever be.

And then, when we know ourselves, and the things around us, we will find the motivation to want to do better for future generations - to live an active life, to keep our minds nimble so we can think of solutions, however small they are, for all the horrendous troubles we are facing.

We need that, now more than ever, and we could be like that, now more than ever. And of course, there's many people who are already accomplishing all kinds of wonderful, admirable things and doing their very best, for themselves and all of us.

But I think there could be more.

I would like to thank all the people that helped me form the opinions I have detailed in this essay. The many conversations with incredibly smart people I've had in the past weeks have helped me in figuring out how I want to relate to digital media, and how I would like to lead my life from now on.

It has been wonderful, and I thank you all for taking the time to talk with me – in particular Prof. Jos de Mul, Dr. Awee Prins, Dr. Roel Lutkenhaus, Dr. Teresa de La Hera and Dr. Christian Strub.

Also a great big thanks to all the people I interviewed at school, those conversations were absolutely integral to understanding the relevance of this topic to our generation.

(I'm sorry for not quoting any of you directly in the essay, but I couldn't figure out how to do it in the proper MLA8 format when it is based on nothing but an audio recording. Excusez-moi!)

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