THE CASE FOR MORE SCREEN TIME

WE'RE FREQUENTLY SCOLDED FOR EXCESSIVE SMARTPHONE AND LAPTOP USE. BUT WHAT ABOUT ALL THE GOOD THAT COMES FROM STARING AT OUR DEVICES?

BY KEVIN ZAWACKI

For many of us, a certain mundane habit produces a surprising amount of guilt: Staring at a screen.

We're tethered to our displays throughout the workday, and then again at home when relaxing with tablets and gaming consoles. There are those in between moments, too, when the smartphone makes an appearance. But there's a litany of literature declaring the damaging effects of this habit. The admonitions are endless: It strains the eyes; it stymies our kids' emotions; and, per that seminal Nicholas Carr story in *The Atlantic*, it could be making us stupid.

But might there be a silver lining? Even if the perks don't outweigh the perils, can we walk away from a day of emails, spreadsheets, and YouTube distractions with certain cognitive functions boosted, rather than sapped?

"There are some positive aspects for sure," says Dr. Lisa Strohman, a clinical psychologist and the founder of the Scottsdale, Arizona, Technology Wellness Center. "The research is limited in a sense because it's easier to find the negative than it is the positive."

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"There are proponents and opponents of media—and mainly, we hear about the opponent side," adds Sandra Calvert, a professor of psychology at Georgetown University and the director of the school's Children's Digital Media Center. Indeed, Calvert notes time spent with a screen need not be scorned.

Photo: Flickr user foam

Calvert says screen time can boost "executive function skills," those competencies like reasoning and problem solving. For youngsters, time spent with the proper video games—like the MIT-developed Scratch—can boost hand-eye coordination and foster logic, Calvert explains. And as we rely more on texting and email, Calvert says small, positive symptoms could emerge: A knack for brevity, or a renewed appreciation for propriety, brought on by events like the recent Sony hack.

Nicholas Carr—the author of that 2008 Atlantic essay and, most recently, a nonfiction book covering similar ground The Glass Cage—largely explores the detrimental impact of Internet usage and automation. But there are some benefits to sitting in that LCD glow, too, he says.

"There seems to be pretty good evidence that our visual acuity improves," Carr tells Fast Company. "People's ability to keep track of lots of different images or other bits of information simultaneously gets better."

Online "lots of things tend to happen," Carr adds. "So, the more time you spend online, you get quicker in your ability to shift your visual focus from one thing to another." Carr points to research that suggests certain professionals—like surgeons, pilots, and soldiers—can hone their craft through video games. (There's a tradeoff, however: "Making that kind of improvement in your ability to shift your focus also seems to reduce your ability to maintain your focus," Carr says.)

And what of the social impact? Lee Humphreys is an associate professor of communications at Cornell University. She specializes in the social effects of technology and the use of mobile phones in public spaces—and is swift to debunk the notion that whipping out a cell phone in public is taboo.

"We tend to romanticize history and the past in thinking that before cell phones, we were actively talking to the person next to us on the bus or in the park," she says. "Of course, that was not the case at all. We have used media—whether it be newspapers, or books—as kinds of privacy shields historically."

Besides: Time spent socializing with others through screens can be time well spent, Humphreys adds.

It might be presumptuous to use "screen time" as a catch-all idiom, anyway, says Daphne Bavelier, who studies the human brain and cognitive sciences at Rochester University and University of Geneva.

"'Screen time' is meaningless—what matters is what you do while on the screen," Bavelier says. "The good, the bad, and the ugly faces of screen time will all have to do with which activities you engage into."

Adam Gazzaley, a cognitive neuroscientist at University of California, San Francisco, agrees. "Screen time is a very heterogeneous topic," he notes. "A lot of it depends on what you're doing."

In his lab, Gazzaley builds video games that improve players' cognitive abilities. He says it's not impossible that one day, a clever programmer could adapt the mechanics of these games to more dreary tasks, like email. "It's certainly not an impossible thought, or a bad thought at all."

Which means one day, having an overflowing inbox might be palatable—and educational, too.