Screen Time

Michel Desmurget, **Screen Damage: The Dangers of Digital Media for Children,** Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023, 303 pp. $24.95 (paperback).

Phillip Maciak, **Avidly Reads Screen Time**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 168 pp., $14.95 (paperback).

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Despite the repeated assurance of the benefits of technological development and the various ways computer and smartphone screens will be able to replace everything from the movie theater to the school teacher, the admonishment of the dangers of too much "screen time" creates a collective anxiety of time spent "the wrong way." Screen time has emerged not only as a metric of time but as a qualifier of that time as wasted on digital media. Screen time and too much of it precede a caution: Screens are in danger of replacing human connections, and their addictive qualities are indeed so effective that as a unifying concept the majority of us can condemn our own excessive use. The moralistic discourse on "bad" screen time is dependent on narratives of productivity and wanting to optimize technology as a tool rather than another avenue for self-destructive impulses. The harmful and addictive side effects are likened to the marketing strategies and financial influence of industries such as tobacco and alcohol. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, popular journalism and TV news warned those at home that excessive screen time would lead to heightened anxiety and depression. The dangers of "doomscrolling" and overindulgent dependency on social media in the desperate search for human connection were understood to be a universalizing problem: We *all* must monitor our screen time.

These two texts tackle the issue of screen time from different perspectives: the scientific and psychological impact, and a cultural analysis of the current screen time era.
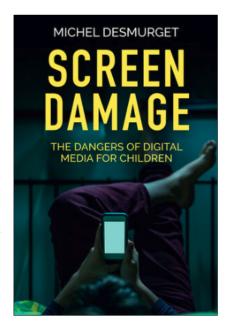
Michel Desmurget's **Screen Damage: The Dangers of Digital Media for Children** chronicles the various detrimental impact of screens on children and adolescents. Desmurget as a neuroscientist sets about systematically debunking each myth of the benefits of a generation of so-called digital natives. Containing ample quantitative evidence and drawing from research in fields such as neuroscience, child psychology, and pediatrics, the language (translated from the original French) is nevertheless accessible and any audience will be able to comprehend his arguments without the deterrent of overly complicated scientific terminology. Setting up a lineage of scientific research that extends from studies of the impact of television on child development to studies in social media and gaming, Desmurget condemns screens of all kinds, from the living room television to a video game console to individual smartphones.

Part 1 focuses on the repeated fallacies that "digital natives" constitute a "different generation" with different neurological and technical advantages. The claim that children born surrounded by screens will grow

to be more technologically adept than their predecessors is proven false by multiple studies warning of the "low digital competence" (p. 11) and technical ineptitude of students. The conflation of social media expertise with technical ability underestimates the gap between the user-friendly experience and the backend complexity of how apps and technologies are constructed. While repeated behaviors change the brain's architecture, the skills ingrained through digital engagement are often nontransferable. The organization and thinking a child adopts while playing *Super Mario* will create changes in the brain but the strategic thinking entailed will not impact a child's capacity to excel at math or chess—what is learned is how to play *Super Mario* better (p. 21).

Part 2 presents the research and structuring questions for the rest of the text: What are the types of screens being analyzed, what are the metrics for current screen time along differing childhood age groups, how are those demographics impacted, and which populations are being studied by which characteristics? Part 3 looks at the negative impacts of digital consumption in three parts: academic success, developme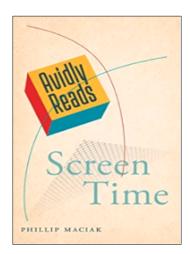nt, and health. In addition to the cognitive and developmental consequences such as language acquisition and concentration skills, the author demonstrates how excessive screen time, and the bad habits associated, contribute to sedentary behavior, leading to physical health issues such as obesity, cardiovascular problems, and musculoskeletal disorders.

The author is particularly invested in disproving the validity of misleading "noisy headlines" (p. 126) from popular journalism sources surrounding technological promises that misattribute or miscite statistical research. The author dismantles claims such as "Video games can help develop greater focus" (p. 121) by proving that any attention to detail or spatial orientation learning through video games are nontransferable skills, admonishing that these misleading statements are "grotesque propaganda" (p. 18). Identifying the deliberate design strategies employed by tech companies to make their screens and platforms addictive, he demonstrates how these qualities lead to compulsive use and dependency that is especially damaging to young minds.

One main takeaway is while there are better and worse ways to spend time on a screen, *any* alternatives in the nonvirtual world are all preferred, as they are proven to be better for child development. He suggests spending recreational time with family, reading, exercising, and playing with others as examples. The author disproves the promises of the educational benefits of children who grow up with screens both in the home and in the classroom, and argues instead that classroom technologies lead to decreased reading comprehension and reduced critical thinking skills. The author contends that classroom technology hopes to replace the benefits of a trained educator, making obsolete the qualified teacher and replacing them with a cheaper alternative (p. 97). Educational content is no substitute for engaging person-to-person learning, and even children's programming, which may reinforce basic understandings of the ABCs

and naming colors, is comparatively less than would be learned in the same amount of time spent learning among others. Insistent that "the content ultimately mattered much less than the container" (p. 47), the author aims indiscriminately at audiovisual entertainment streams and video games alike during a child's peak developmental years: "These are arid hours, devoid of developmental fertility—destroyed hours that cannot be made up for once the great periods of brain plasticity specific to childhood and adolescence have closed." (p. 48)

This text will be useful for social scientists and researchers eager to apply statistical frameworks for understanding the gap between the promises of digital natives and the actual outcome and damage being evidenced. It may be helpful for parents hoping to provide legitimation for their strict enforcement of screen time limits in the household. For an intended audience of parents and educators, the text reads as a warning and wake-up call to the continuing potential harms that are dismissed or downplayed by journalists functioning as techno-utopian mouthpieces. Desmurget formally recommends to parents and educators no screens for recreation before the age of six, even if labeled as educational, and after six years to enforce no more than sixty minutes daily screen time for any combined use of recreation or educational content.

Phillip Maciak's **Avidly Reads Screen Time** examines how screens, particularly televisions and smartphones, mediate our experience with the world. As part of the *Avidly Reads* series "about how culture makes us feel," Maciak, who has devoted much of his career to television criticism as the TV editor for *the New Republic* and the former TV editor for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, is invested in ways screens play an important role in how we make sense of the world. Maciak's reading of screen time is both personal and contextual within screen studies and television studies as scholarly subject material. Looking to where screen time either "feels good" or "feels bad," this intimate volume preserves the relationship between critic and content. Television and digital media scholars, as well as individuals trying to come to terms with the addictive nature of the screens that surround us, will enjoy Maciak's thoughtful consideration of the screen ecosystem.

While the original definition accounts for a specific actor's time on screen, Maciak uses Tom Engelhardt's (1991) definition of the user experience in front of the television screen (p. 8). Moral panic surrounding the damage of staring at screens becomes a panic about time:

> By focusing so much on time itself—its waste, its value, its expenditure—screen time becomes a concern about productivity. A person who is losing time to screens—perhaps becoming mentally or physically disabled by that interaction—is a bad worker and a bad consumer. They themselves become a waste. (p. 27)

Maciak wrestles screen time free from the confines of solely negative or solely positive interpretation. Rather, the screen as a mediator is an educational tool, entertainment platform,

information provider, news disseminator, and a platform for communicating with friends and family, as well as broader social media networks. There are all kinds of screen time—a lot of it "feels bad," but simultaneously, there is "screen time that feels good" (p. 84).

Tracing various intimate encounters with virtual platforms and content, the text is both personal narrative and a reflection based on years of thinking through screen-centered knowledge. Maciak highlights instances when screens facilitate an active engagement, such as "appointment viewing" television that demands attentive viewers like *Game of Thrones* (p. 55), or brings people together such as watching the Super Bowl or facilitating glitchy FaceTime conversations between grandparents and their toddler grandchildren. Much of his reflective work on the nature of our relationship with screens is based on personal affection for shows such as *Mad Men* (p. 30), looking at how, within the show, the television is established as a central background figure. Other examinations of screens within screens on shows like *Twin Peaks* (p. 44) and *WandaVision* (p. 64) internally reference the prominence of television genres within their televisual storytelling.

Maciak's ruminations on digital media additionally trace ways screens create connections instead of invoking the "bogeyman of screen time era: isolation" (p. 59). Looking to the bygone app Vine, where creators uploaded six-second looping videos, he fondly recalls the digital space where Black creators in particular were able to gain a foothold, if only for those "Black Viners" to create value that was then sold (p. 99). Remembering the cultural influence of Vine as an app that traded on self-referentiality and user awareness of the act of viewing provides a solid foundation for newer scholarship on TikTok. Referencing his relationship with Twitter, Maciak makes it clear that the social aspect of social media balances the anxieties surrounding "bad screen time."

Desmurget rarely identifies which types of digital media are likely to cause the most harm, as he cautions parents that enforcing time limits on children's screen time is always more beneficial than allowing children unfettered access. This clearly is a separate set of inquiry from Maciak, who looks at the form and content of the media itself concerning his personal enjoyment of television and the online communities built around its discussion.

Looking at these texts in tandem reveals a surprising consensus that children under the age of two should have no screen time whatsoever. Speaking of his own young daughters, Maciak is not the permissive apologist parent of the zombified "digital native" child but an informed and wary supervisor of children's engagement with screens. Where Desmurget's polemic operates as an unequivocal warning, Maciak offers a nuanced representation of the love and anxiety he experiences in his relationship with screens, diving into the affective terrain created between screens and their viewers.

Desmurget and Maciak are concerned with two separate aspects of the same concept: the former on the impact of the screen itself, the latter on what is playing out on the screen, the content, and how that has a distinctive impact. Maciak acknowledges the harmful potentials of screen addiction as he reflects on his personal screen time, but any overarching dismissal or disapproval foregoes the reality that screens co-constitute our reality today. He queries, "I have a *self* with that screen—an imperfect self, an anxious one, but a responsible and meaningful self too. Who would I be without it?" (p. 129). Neither of these texts

propose what comes after this screen time era or who we are without screens, but both are attentive to the ways the discussion of how we consume digital media and interface with screens impact our lives and our decision making. Regardless of user age or type of content, screen time is something to be taken seriously.