

The Truth About Technology - Gaia Bernstein

I am a 21st century mom. I have three kids. The oldest was born in 2002. My kids grew up into a world of screens, social media and smartphones. They did not know life without the internet. I'm also a law professor. I study how people use technology and what the law has to do with it.

Today we have a generation of kids who spent over a decade in front of screens and we are seeing the results. Teens spend an average eight and a half hours on screens. They interact in person much less.

Things are very different for my kid's generation. In high school, I used to spend my afternoons after school hanging out with my girlfriends in our bedroom, talking, trying on makeup. But today, when I look outside my New York apartment window, I see kid after kid walking down the street, staring at their phones, heading home to spend time in their bedrooms alone with their screens.

We know now that time spent on screen matters. Studies show that heavy social media use is related to deteriorating mental health in kids. In fact, since 2010, depression rates in teens more than doubled. What does this mean? It means that if you took a class of 40 kids in 2010, three would be suffering from depression. But a decade later, the same class would have eight kids suffering from depression.

I remember starting to notice things changing around my kids. I saw children at birthday parties no longer playing with each other, but instead sitting down looking at their phones. I attended school performances, but suddenly I could barely see the kids on stage. Instead, my view is obstructed by parents holding phones, taking pictures of their kids.

In my role as the Director of the Institute for Privacy Protection in my law school, I decided to do something about it. I created a program for kids at the age in which they get their first cell phone and for their parents. I thought that once parents realize there's a problem, we're using our technology too much, things will change. So I stood there with my slide offering self-help measures, like no phones at dinner or use parental controls to limit time. And the parents took out their phones and took pictures of my slides.

At first, I felt things were on the right track. The program was pioneering and innovative. It was featured in national media. I even intended to write a book about technology addiction and the power of awareness. But after the first year when technology addiction actually became a hot media topic, I realized that awareness was not making a difference.

I recall a woman who came up to me after one of these lectures. She told me how her family drove home late at night. Her son was playing with the iPad and wouldn't give it up. She took it away from him so he could get some sleep. He climbed over the front seat to grab it back, accidentally knocking over the arm of his father who was holding the wheel. The car swayed off the road. "We nearly died because of this iPad," she told me. "Do you think my son is an addict? Should I use better parents controls." She blamed herself. She blamed her son. The only one she did not blame was those actually responsible: the tech companies.

This is still the case. We were hearing about the dangers of social media and screens for years. But if we know how bad it is, why can't we fix it? We're not failing because we're bad at self-control. We're failing because the tools that tech companies give us, like time notifications or parental controls are not created to help us succeed.

They're created to shift the responsibility from them to us because if we have the tools and our kids still spend too much time online, then we are to blame. And blame we do. We blame ourselves, we blame our partners, and we blame our kids. But instead of blaming ourselves, we should target the actual culprit: the tech industry.

Instead of guilty, you should be angry. You should be angry for what tech companies did to you, for what they manipulatively took away. They took away not just your kid's childhood, but also your right to be a parent, your right to navigate your kid's life to make sure that they flourish. You should be angry because you did not bargain for this when you became a parent.

Tech companies have molded an entire generation of children into a collective of screen gazers. The tech industry is the tobacco industry of the 21st century. There are only two industries that call the consumers users: tech and drug.

Kids are so dependent on the product, they do not realize the impact of their addiction. I recently spoke to an audience of college students. One of the students raised her hand. She said, "But professor, our generation just prefers not to speak to people."

Kids and parents have always argued, but when we speak to our kids today, they're not talking for themselves. They have become puppets on the strings of the tech industry. They are mouthing the words indoctrinated by their masters. Many kids, and now young adults simply do not see the problem so they have no reason to try to fix it. We have no choice but to advocate on their behalf.

And it's not impossible to solve the technology addiction problem. In fact, things are already shifting in the right direction even though it may not seem like it. But advocating for change in the tech industry poses a unique challenge. Most industries rely on physical sources. The car industries use aluminum, glass, and iron. Electrical companies use oil, coal, and natural gas. The tech industry is different. It uses us.

The dominant business model on the internet for over two decades uses people as its resources. Our kids like us, get products for free. They get Instagram for free, they get Snapchat for free, but they pay with their time and with their data. Tech companies need them online for as long as possible so they can collect their data and then they need them there so they can target ads at them. Their revenues depend on this.

In fact, minors are a huge part of tech companies' revenues. A recent study showed that social media companies alone make \$11 billion from advertising targeted at minors under 18. In a lawsuit against Meta, an internal email was revealed in which Meta valued the worth of 13-year-old child at \$270. \$270! This means they're willing to take over so many of your kids' waking hours to eventually make \$270!

Recall the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood who eats up Grandma then dresses up in grandma's clothes, pretending to be her luring little Red Riding Hood and swallowing her up as well. As long as the tech industry holds onto this business model, they'll remain the wolf in grandma's clothes. To survive, they need to keep gobbling up data and time, ours and our kids'.

You may be thinking, but changing the business model that dominated the internet as we know it is a big deal. And yes it is, but change can happen. We've seen it before. Before the 1990s, we could not imagine smokeless bars and restaurants, and now it's a reality.

Change can happen with pressure that makes this business model less lucrative and less profitable for the tech industry. And action is already underway in courts and legislative halls around the world creating cracks in this business model.

You may also wonder, but what can I do? Stop beating yourself up for what you think you are doing wrong, and always remember who's really responsible. It's time to turn our anger into action.

So far, we focused on kids and families, but this is really about all of us, and I believe that the best way to create change for all is to create change for kids first. One, because kids suffer the greatest harms. And two, because kids are the Achilles heel of the tech industry.

We've always enacted laws to protect kids. Kids can't gamble, kids can't buy cigarettes. They also don't drive. Once the tech industry has to change its business model and addictive designs to protect kids, it becomes a less attractive way of doing business. And when this happens, we can reimagine a different internet for all.

By supporting the legal movement already underway, we could avoid a dystopian and lonely future for all of us. We could see a reduction in anxiety, depression, and suicide, as well as a decrease in social isolation.

Technology addiction is a big problem, which demands a big solution. By turning guilt into anger and anger into action, we could create a world in which children, families, and indeed us all are once again the masters of our time. Thank you.