Back to the Future

A collated interview, piecing together a teenager's nostalgia for a mobile-free childhood.

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This is an edited conversation between a researcher and a 17 year old high school student. This conversation was conducted over several days and across various mediums, including in-person dialogue, video call, text messages and audio voice notes. Pieced together from shorter responses - that were received by the researcher ad-hoc, and in various formats - the construction of this interview itself reflects the fragments of time and attention that the teen describes as being inherent in navigating life with and through their mobile device.

Eleanor Chin Derix, is a designer and researcher who has spent much of the last decade studying the use of technologies within families. Sascha is a Yr 11 student who has spent much of the last five years navigating life as a teenager, online and offline.

RAMPING UP

I definitely think, with (regards to) my tech history, that I've had a very different introduction to it (compared to most of my peers). Because I didn't have any sort of tech until I was about the age of six or seven. So, I used to live on a kind of communal farm and we didn't have a lot of tech. I spent most of my early childhood just running around with friends, climbing trees. I guess I find it nostalgic, in that sense of wanting to go back pre-tech. But then, as I moved into the city and other things in my life started ramping up, like I started catching a bus to school and other things meant that tech was introduced to my life, probably for my safety. And the way I see it, it's really been pretty exponential in terms of my tech use; yeah it really ramped up when my parents stopped dropping me to school and I started catching buses. So, I needed a phone. And then as I moved up through high school, a lot of other kids had phones and to stay in contact with them, I needed a phone that actually wasn't just a dumb phone so I can message my parents, but then could kind

of be interacting with them. Also, I needed to use more tech in the forms of computers and then smartphones to stay in contact with friends. And that just kept on ramping up, then video games, then I wanted a better computer to play video games. And then on top of that, I had a lot of like, ups and downs in my (family) life, a lot of struggles. And that just meant that my technology and my use of technology just increased even more exponentially as a way of escaping, when kids at other times might have used books or other kinds of things. I would just escape into video games and other worlds. I didn't have to think about what was going on in my actual life. And yeah, now we're here.

My move from a dumb phone to a smart phone was pushed in Year 7, because all my friends were getting phones to stay in contact with each other. And the only way I could stay in contact with friends, was to give them my mother's number. Then when me and my mate were caught having like a play fight (at school)...he accidentally messaged my mum saying "do you think we're going to get a detention for this?" After that episode she realised, I needed some more privacy and to have my own (smart) phone. So, that was all to join my friends on the messaging platforms. Honestly, it was, all of them; like Discord, Snapchat, Instagram, a bit of WhatsApp though WhatsApp wasn't really as prominent with younger kids at the time. And so yeah, I was about 13 or 14. And when I describe it then as exponential, that's where it takes off.

When it comes to my technology use, the phone has become a more prominent part of my life as I got older. In the early days, it was mainly my computer but the shift in prominence of mobile, I guess it was with Instagram. For a long time it was just like a photography account where I just take photos and stuff. And then I just kind of stopped taking photos for a while and that kind of just died and I wasn't using Instagram. I was mainly talking to people on Snapchat. And then as I've gotten older, I've gotten way back into Instagram.

CUTTING DOWN

I like posting about the adventures me and my friends get up to and like. But sometimes I've felt just...I just want to stop and get rid of it. But, I can't really, I've got friends overseas that I would never be able to contact if I, if I stopped using Instagram or I stopped using Snapchat and stuff. But the desire to stop, well that comes from it feeling just like a trap. That it doesn't really help me in any way. I mean, it's good to stay in contact with people, but, I don't know. I just feel like it'd be better without it. I just get brain fog and stuff like that. I feel that, because of (my mobile use), I can't form my own opinions. I've got other people to do that online.

I had the weirdest experience yesterday I was talking with someone on Instagram just a friend of mine and I mentioned one thing about how I've got to go break up with this girl and then I go onto reels straight afterwards (reels is like Instagram's Tik Tok) and it is all break-up reels and relationship reels and I had been on it minutes before talking about breaking up, and nothing like that just memes and the normal slop but I mentioned one thing and my whole fyp (For You Page) changed. I'm so annoyed I didn't get a recording of it.

Do I take deliberate breaks (from my phone)? Yeah kind of. I've been trying as much as i can just to cut back on my use of social media as such. Like I cut back, I'll still watch YouTube videos, but I try to stay to more long form content instead of just short form, just little dopamine spikes and try to actually find like content that like interests me. I only really use social media now to talk to people that try to stay away from scrolling and other stuff like that. It's just such a time waste.

And I've seen the rabbit holes and the propaganda that can be spread so easily through it. It's crazy.

And I think my experience is pretty similar to a lot of other children, whether they've grown up with or without a lot of tech. I just think I got more time on the good side of life. That I had more time being free. So, I have this stronger feeling

of nostalgia compared to (teens) who have never had that kind of experience. But in saying that, I do know a lot of people who still have that nostalgia, even though they've had no kind of recollection of it or no experience of that freedom.

I mean, we've had times where we've been away, like with school, we go away on like week long trips and everyone's just so much more invigorated afterwards. We don't have to think about all the politics and everything going on in the world. We can just be in ourselves and in our bodies...so...free.

I think I saw a Ted Talk about social media or technology as a whole and it's kind of like an angler fish in the sense that it drags you in with its light, then you just kind of get stuck, just transfixed to its light as it just swallows you. It just kind of keeps you in this constant loop of, "I need to be up to date with everything and what's going on in the world, or with my friends'. Just this needing to consume...whether its knowledge, information, or I guess, content. Yes, probably content over information. And then the need to produce content. For me, there is an aspect of that I do like, to (produce) though it's not anything that anyone who doesn't follow me is going to see. I'm not putting content out into the wider world, but it's just for my sake than others. I do like even that dopamine hit of just watching, even though it's everyone I know, and so I'd expect to like my post...but (even so) it's just that thing of, 'oh, that person Liked that'. So, that's still gratification, I guess and it's very self-centred.

But proportionally its way more consumption than production, by far. It's, it's a lot easier to consume than produce. I mean, I think that's the fact with a lot of stuff. It's a lot easier to just eat food instead of actually making it.

MOBILE-FREE

What proportion of my time do I spend 'consuming'? Definitely too much. It's kind of become a thing of just, 'oh, you're not doing anything, so you may as well consume'. You just sit there. There's no time to just be with yourself or think anymore. Not a lot of people can just be with themselves and just past time. We've lost this aspect of being able to just be with ourselves or even be bored. It's an alien concept. I see that in my friends and teenagers in general. Like, a lot of my friends, if even if we're sitting on a bus chatting, we will also be scrolling through social media or something else. Our conversations revolve around just showing each other something funny, and then maybe that we remember something about that or we give an anecdote. We just laugh and then just keep scrolling. So the consumption is very central to the time that spent with friends.

Not always though; sometimes if we're exploring something, we won't be just scrolling because we're stimulated in and we're actually doing something so we'll just talk and have genuine conversations. But we do spend a lot of it just numbing ourselves, I guess. Or being content slaves. It's kind of going back to that thing of just escape or whatever, but just like disconnecting from what's happening right now, just to be somewhere else in a sense. |It feels like time isn't linear in that sense. I guess time flies when you're having fun, where you just, you don't think about what you're actually doing or what you're actually waiting for. You don't have to wait anymore, you can just skip that in a sense.

My motivator to stop or reduce my use? I've scared myself some mornings before school where, I'll wake up, I'll be sharp, I'll be on it. And then, I'll be on the bus just scrolling and by the time I get to school, I'm just...just dead. Just kind of not all there. Just zoning out, kind of lost in a sense. Just can't really put two and two together. I've just been lost to whatever I've been consuming. It drags me away from what I probably should be focusing on in, like my schoolwork and it's also messing with my clarity. I can't really explain it more than that...it's just a feeling you have, that you're somehow not as sharp, just kind of lethargic. It's like a depression. I think it could be to do with the dopamine of consuming, just like the reaction you get from consuming. But by the end of the day, if I haven't looked at social media all day, I'm kind of back.

I think it's to do with being very stimulated, then just dropping off that stimulation to such a lower level that really messes with my mind.

I think when it comes to the quality there isn't really any high quality content being produced in my opinion, I'm very existential when it comes to myself and what I consume I try find deeper meaning or at least why I'm being shown this and what it's trying to tell me, normally it comes down to someone else's narrative or propaganda. I've lost my train of thought, but I feel there's a sense of complacency that is the real killer; it's the combination of the speed at which we consume and the highly politicized, emotive and reactionary content that wears us down. So, we become docile towards these narratives. We start to follow, rather than question. And that's where I feel trapped. That's why I want to be free. I want to be able to make my decisions for myself, instead of having someone on my feed (doing it for me).

I guess this goes back to your question about how I regulate my use, or minimize it...honestly, I find that my algorithm does it for me. It pushes me into such a bad place. For example, the alt-right pipeline I went down. It got to a point where I wasn't finding it funny anymore (like I had at first). So, I just had to stop. I just didn't scroll for like a day or two, and then my feed had gone back to the surface level slop. But I noticed that as I was scrolling, Instagram would lay these "little traps" I'll call them; they would show me some funny reels, maybe something about nature, then just try to sneak in like a snippet of Ben Shapiro or some right/left-wing political commentator and if I either watched it for too long or interacted with it, then Bang! I was back on the pipeline. It's a very interesting experience. But yeah, I will limit myself scrolling. I try to stay away from it as much as I can. I don't watch the things my friends send me I've found it easier and easier as I don't use it. But it is still hard sometimes; it's like any drug, it's easy to slip back into it. My best coping mechanism is to just try watch some long YouTube video essay. Admittedly, they all push a narrative about the show, book, game or thing they are talking about, but at least the ideas are fleshed out and not crammed into a 5 minute video. I'm about to get to school, I will try send you some more thoughts when I get time. Sorry I didn't get round to it last night.