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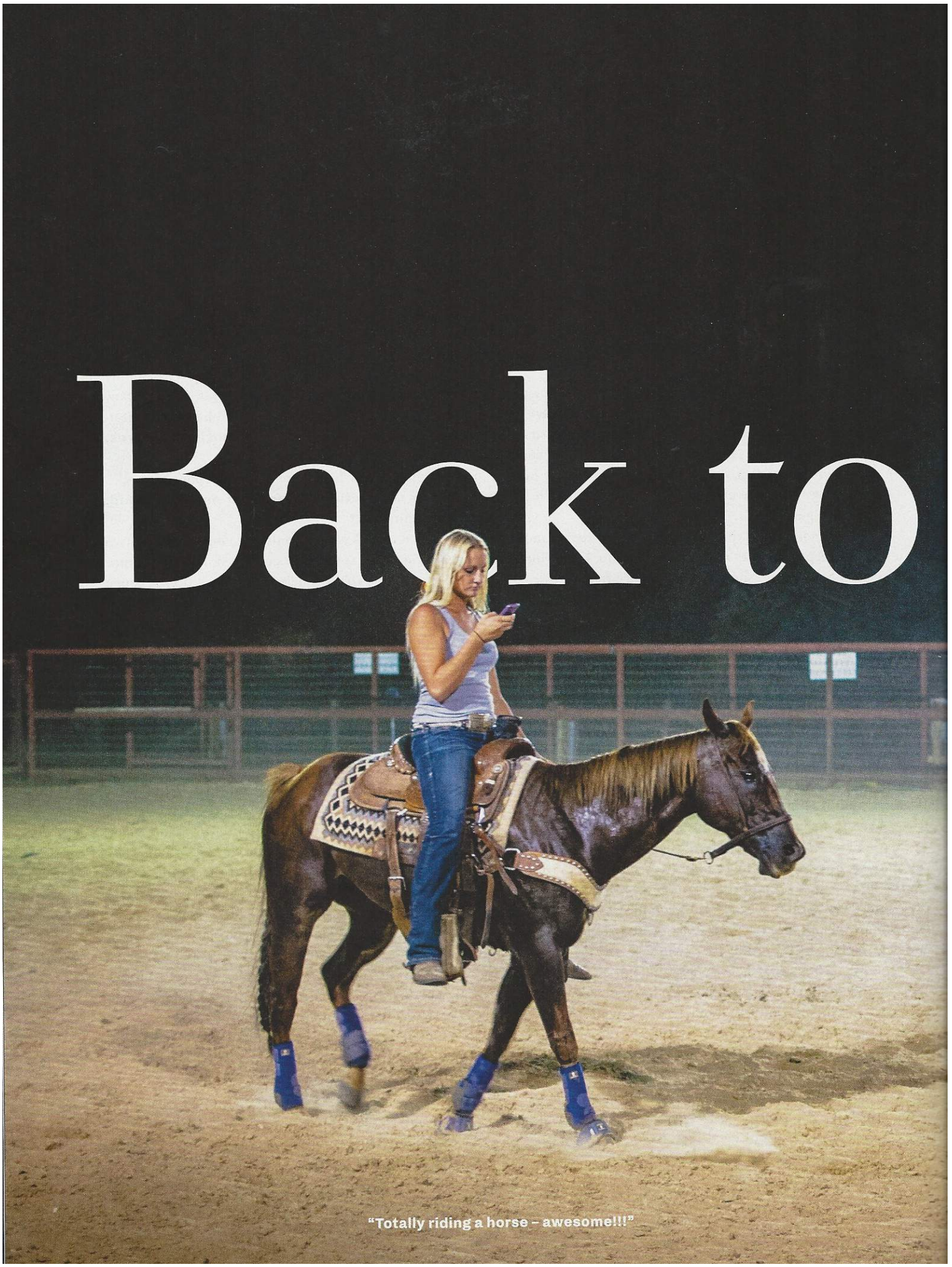


"Totally riding a horse – awesome!!!"

Reality

Thanks to our smartphones, we are constantly distracted from our surroundings and from our own thoughts and feelings. Luckily, some app developers, psychologists, and other forward thinkers around the world are discovering new, practical ways of bringing us back to the here and now

By JÜRGEN VON RUTENBERG

It costs seven euros to enter the place where you can't be reached, a magical spot in the center of Paris with the mysterious name Seymour+. Here, behind a bright white façade on a bustling boulevard, you can get something that you won't possibly find at the Louvre or on top of the Eiffel Tower: an intense flashback to what your life used to feel like before you got your first mobile phone.

Seymour+ is "a haven for your mind that offers you a respite from technology and other distractions," according to its website, which even an offline hideaway like this obviously needs. Visitors are invited to temporarily "sever their Internet connection and reconnect with themselves."

And so all cell phones, watches, tablets, and cameras are stowed in lockers by the entrance. In a huge hall

with white walls, a series of five "interactive environments" begins with the "Selfie Booth." It's just like a photo booth, except – it doesn't have a camera. Instead, a square mirror hangs on the wall inside. There's a felt tip pen, and there are some sheets of paper, along with instructions to create a self-portrait, with or without words. Who is that person you see in the mirror? And how do you feel, really?

That first rush of emotions, triggered by the glimpses of your offline self, can be taken straight to the "Projection Room" a few steps away, a dark movie theater where ten comfortable chairs are covered in soft white rugs, shimmering like clouds in the night sky. The daylight entering through a round opening in the back wall falls onto a blank screen. The film is created in the your mind and lasts as long as you want.

Downstairs, in the "Surf Your Mind Lounge," a dozen surreal thrones, closed off on three sides, invite you to hide in them for a while, perhaps to get over the movie you just saw. Or to get ready for the next interactive environment, a large sandbox called "Wish You Were Here," where you can sit down at a little desk and write a heartfelt letter, maybe to someone you kept seeing on the screen in the projection room. There are envelopes, there's a mailbox, and, yes, properly addressed letters will be taken to the post office. The final stop on this offline journey is "The Secret Garden," a windowless room filled with plants in various stages of bloom and decay. There is a stopped clock on the floor, erasing the last lingering sense of time.

All this may seem like quite a lot of effort just to get away from your iPhone for a while. But the fact that a place like Seymour+ exists – and that a lot of people really do pay for that experience – is a sign of how far we've come in merging with our gadgets.

The thing is, humans and smartphones are a perfect fit. As if we had spent centuries yearning for just such a symbiotic relationship, the ever-present smartphone seems to make up for many of our human failings, such as forgetfulness (photo albums, Google), ignorance (Wikipedia), shyness (Facebook, e-mail, text messages). As a portable arcade, disco, and TV, the smartphone has eliminated boredom. It is also the place where our personal and professional lives come together. No wonder we're always fiddling with it. How quickly all this has happened was summed up nicely a little while ago in a tweet by the Internet pioneer Marc Andreessen. The man who became rich and famous in the 1990s when he created the Netscape-browser put it this way: "From 'only nerds will use the Internet' to 'everyone stares at their smartphones all day long' in 20 years. Not bad, team :-)."

Certainly not bad for people like Andreessen, who has benefitted from this development by making zillions of dollars as an investor in firms like Facebook and Twitter. For the rest of us, though, who really do spend all day staring at our little screens, a number of downsides of our new hybrid mindset are beginning to become apparent. But you can't just blame the smartphones for that. It's also our own fault.

Seymour+ in Paris has only been open for a few months. It's an experiment run by a non-profit organization, but mostly by one woman, Melissa Unger. "I used to be a parody of the whole *Sex and the City* lifestyle," she says about her earlier life in New York. She was neurotic, she says, stressed out, always available, always on call. This had a lot to do with her job; for many years she worked as a personal assistant for stars such as Robert De Niro, Daniel Day-Lewis, Martin Scorsese. Then her father, Seymour, died and she moved to Paris – without a job, without a plan, and without a laptop. "I walked around the city with my eyes wide open and rediscovered reality, my life." That was 13 years ago. Ever since then she has devoted

herself to the question of how we can maintain our sanity, intuition, and creativity in the digital age. She says that Seymour+ grew out of some of the methods and exercises that have helped her over the years. Her greatest concern, she says, is that Seymour+ could be misconstrued as either "art" or "esoteric bullshit." For her, it's all about simple, practical, necessary steps.

In that sense, her avant-garde project has something in common with some drastic measures taken by the no-nonsense car manufacturer Volkswagen. In response to data documenting the health risks of being constantly reachable, the company implemented a strict rule at the end of 2011: No e-mails are to be forwarded to company smartphones between 6:15 p.m. and 7 a.m., nor on weekends or public holidays. This, too, is an experiment, and also one definitely not based on "esoteric bullshit."

The more researchers find out about our relationship with our smartphones, the better our understanding not just of the medical side effects but also of our growing psychological dependence on the devices. You can literally watch how humanity is increasingly adjusting and succumbing to its great new enchanter – and only occasionally, here and there, trying to rebel against it.

What would you do if you noticed you left your smartphone at home? Would you turn back? Last year, people in 2,000 US households were asked these questions. One in three of those surveyed ticked the box for "Yes – however long it takes."

One in two Americans under the age of 30 considers it perfectly okay to send and receive text messages during a meal with friends and family, according to an extensive study conducted in 2013. That stands in sharp contrast to the answers given by people over the age of 30 in the same study: Nine out of ten still held the old-fashioned view that this behavior was rude and disruptive.

One reason why we have become so unable to resist our smartphones was revealed in a study in which 700 Americans kept track of all their impulses and activities for several weeks. It turned out that the impulse the participants gave in to most often was actually the one they didn't think was very strong: Compared to their need for sleep, food, drink, and sex, they had rated their need for "media use" as the least intense – and followed exactly that weak impulse more often than any of the other, stronger ones. The study's authors attributed this surprising pattern to the ever-present "availability" of media and the lack of "effort" required to tap in.

Apparently we don't really want to stare at our phones all that much – but we do it all day long, anyway. Until, at some point, there's just no way for us to change our habits.

Neuroimaging techniques show how certain pleasure centers in the brain are stimulated by activities like chatting and posting on Facebook – the same areas that are stimulated by food and during sex. And the human brain is incredibly good at adapting to new surroundings – even to a digital world we access on our phones. Scientists call this ability neuroplasticity. "The vital paths in our brains," Nicholas Carr wrote in his 2010 book *The Shallows*, become "the paths of least resistance. They are the paths that most of us will take most of the time, and the farther we proceed down them, the more difficult it becomes to turn back." Before writing this book, Carr himself had begun to notice that after his first few years of intensive Internet use, his mind would repeatedly drift off in the analog world, too: "It was hungry," he writes. "It was demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it – and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became."

The effects of this new kind of constant hunger are revealed in the numbers gathered by a Bonn-based research team through their smartphone app Menthal. This program, which hundreds of thousands of people have installed on their phones to keep tabs on their smartphone consumption, has shown that, on average, people use their smartphones for three hours a day and pick it up every 15 minutes – sometimes for just a few seconds, usually for longer. Which means there is really not that much time or attention left for life beyond the screen. Or for one's partner. In the last few years, one study after another has confirmed the suspicion that a partner's excessive smartphone use can provoke feelings of rejection and loneliness (provided one isn't equally fixated on a device oneself).

As if the smartphone was trying to mimic a passionate love affair between two humans, it seems to fulfill our every wish – while also causing a lot of stress. In a 2009 study by TK, a major German health insurance company, a third of those surveyed cited "information overload" and "being constantly reachable" as the main sources of stress. Only very few people who spend all their days typing and swiping away on their little screens will fall asleep with a sense of fulfillment at the end of the day.

The main findings of several shelves worth of happiness research could be roughly summarized as follows: Spreading ourselves too thin makes people unhappy, aggressive, distracted, and stupid; whereas reaching the state of "flow," this creative concentration on a single thing, will let us happily experience the depths of the self. And, of course, you usually do feel better after a walk in the woods than you do after a few hours at the shopping mall. An evening at a movie theater gives you more of an experience than four hours of watching TV while keeping an eye on Facebook.

The funny thing is that, although most people are familiar with this principle and therefore know how they could experience real happiness more often, they don't. Quite the opposite: Some can't even get away from the bluish glow of the small screen when looking at it is illegal or, yes, could kill them – when they're driving a car, for example.

Or when their professional future is on the line. According to a report published by TK recently, which is based on diagnosis data from over 190,000 students, roughly half of them were suffering from stress-related exhaustion. One in five were diagnosed with mental health problems in 2013 – an alarming increase compared with previous years. And while there might be other factors pushing this trend – a changing job market, more competition among students – the biggest obvious change of the last few years is the increasing pull of smartphones and laptops. "The students of the smartphone generation, who have just now entered higher education, find it difficult to switch off," Jens Baas, the head of TK, said about the study's findings. This interpretation is supported by a Forsa survey carried out among 1,000 students. Half of them declared themselves "distracted from studying" by digital media, while two thirds agreed that the Internet has "the potential to become addictive."

To simply "turn off," "shut down," and "go offline" to get away from the flood of information, as countless well-intentioned articles and self-help books have been recommending for years on end, is just so much easier said than practiced in everyday life. Whenever the yearning for some kind of offline existence flares up, it is quickly pushed aside by the meek assumption that any resistance is futile.

But before we all give in to the power of the smartphone entirely, let's take one more look at how much emancipation from our gadgets is possible and realistic in 2015 – this side of the life of a hermit.

It's not very organized, but a kind of countermovement to the rise of the smartphone is well underway. A staggering number of workshops, books, conferences, and studies are built around buzzwords like "digital detox" or "unplugging." Inevitably, the campaign against information overload has produced its own information overload.

Nevertheless, it is possible to filter a few insights out of it that could actually help us lessen our dependence on our smartphones. The solutions range from high-tech to no-tech.

The most common piece of advice – the equivalent of "fresh fruit is better for you than greasy fries" – calls for keeping smartphones out of the bedroom. For that empty space on the bedside table, buy yourself an alarm clock (and, while you're at it, a watch as well). A crucial moment in our relationship with the smartphone comes in the very first few seconds of the day, before we're even fully awake. It usually goes like this: The smartphone's alarm goes off, we reach for it, and already we're looking at the latest updates on Facebook or at whatever is in our inbox – and we are instantly degraded from human beings (with fuzzy memories of odd dream imagery or perhaps of the previous night's conversation) to mere data recipients. This memory-erasing ritual is performed by hundreds of millions of people all over the world every morning. What hope is left for us if we already begin the day with the question: "Dear smartphone, what should I think?"

Another existentially important reason to keep your phone away from your bed is this: Its blue light has been proven to disrupt sleep. Doctors specializing in sleep disorders advise that you stop checking your smartphone at least two hours before you go to bed.

But even putting simple advice like this into practice requires quite a bit of determination. And, just as many of us can't manage to keep our hands off a chocolate bar, an enormous amount of energy is needed to resist the constant lure of the smartphone. What we need, then, are more effective solutions that don't make such constant demands on our willpower.

This is exactly what Alexander Steinhart, 32, co-founder of the Berlin company Offtime, has been putting a lot of thought and effort into. "We want to create intervals, that's our vision," says Steinhart. We're meeting at Betahaus, an office building in the Berlin neighborhood of Kreuzberg, where his firm is devising software for the digital future alongside dozens of other start-ups – except that Offtime is going in an opposite direction. While investors and programmers all over the world are looking for ever more sophisticated ways to get even more people hooked on their screens for longer periods of time, Steinhart and his team want to use the arts and sciences of software and psychology to let us get away from our smartphones. They want to give us tools to discipline our phones – so that we don't have to constantly discipline ourselves.

On Steinhart's Offtime app, released at the beginning of this year, users can set various levels of availability. The options range from temporarily blocking individual apps and messaging services to completely deactivating the entire device for hours or even days – with no way of revoking this decision once it's made. In the meantime, the app responds to incoming calls and texts with reassuring, conciliatory messages such as: "I'm in a meeting, will be offline until 5 p.m., and will view my messages then."

Similar programs for laptops have been around for years, proudly named "Freedom" or "SelfControl." Some of the most successful writers in the world, including Jonathan Franzen, Dave Eggers, Zadie Smith, and Nick

Hornby, swear by them. These programs make it possible to be fully immersed in writing on a computer – without any of the distractions of the Internet.

Applying this idea to smartphones, Steinhart says, is a bigger challenge. "Everyone knows that I always have this device with me," he says. "So as soon as they can't get hold of me, all hell breaks loose." The Offtime app is designed to help manage expectations: "We want to create acceptance by saying: I'm structuring my time offline – and therefore I'm allowed to be offline."

Here in the café on the ground floor of Betahaus, we are surrounded by people who are drinking coffee while staring at their computers. How is Offtime's idea being received around here? "In the start-up world," Steinhart says, "we usually have to explain the problem we want to fix another two or three times. In their tech-based thinking, it doesn't immediately make sense." To reflect the difference, Offtime calls itself a "post-tech company." "Though we are offering a technology-based solution, we do recognize that technology is part of the problem." Their company, Steinhart says, is about finding out "how technology can serve to improve our well-being and our independence, not just our efficiency."

The Offtime app has already been downloaded more than 500,000 times – and that's just onto Android devices; the app has not been approved for the iPhone. Steinhart says that companies like Apple and Facebook "are not interested in concepts like these yet." The tech giants argue that people can decide for themselves how and when they want to use their smartphones. For Steinhart, this is reminiscent of "the old argument tobacco companies used to make."

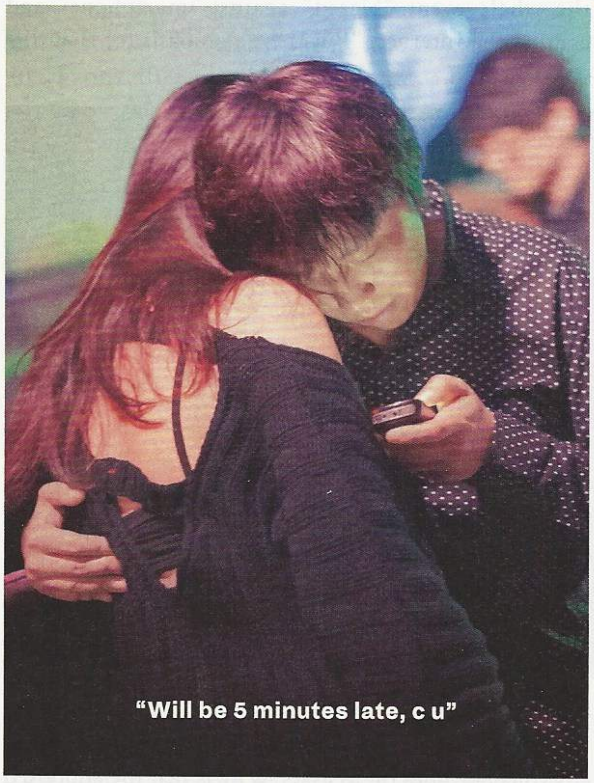
For now, most of us will have to keep practicing our digital self-control on our own. But where do we actually draw the line between normal and excessive smartphone use?

About 30 teens and twenty-somethings are hoping to find an answer to this question at a workshop in Hamburg on a sunny day in June. The workshop is part of the YourNet convention, an annual event dedicated to the opportunities and dangers of digitization, especially for young people. Hundreds have traveled here from all over Germany. The host of this workshop is the 45-year-old doctor and psychotherapist Bert te Wildt. He has been treating Internet addicts at the University Clinic in Bochum for 12 years, so he's more than familiar with the very worst effects of this dependency: loneliness, depression, and health problems ranging from obesity to cardiac arrest. Earlier this year he published his book *Digital Junkies*, in which he vividly describes different manifestations of pathological computer addiction and explains how it can be treated.

The participants are sitting close together, crammed into a white tent. Bert te Wildt asks them to calculate on a piece of paper how many hours a day, on average, they spend online. One man in the second row, he must be about 20, raises his hand and says: "Is 17 hours a day normal?"

If te Wildt is appalled by this number, he doesn't show it. He carefully avoids any judgment. Instead, he says that the notion of "normal" is always a relative one, and points out that there are indeed people who spend "practically all of their waking hours" on the Internet – in other words, 17 hours.

One of the four older people in the audience, a woman in her mid-40s, introduces herself as a leader at a youth center: "I've noticed that social skills are getting much worse. Ten girls will be sitting together and they'll all be looking at some photos on their phones." That, she says, happened even at her own birthday party: "Everyone is always distracted – so what am I left with?" A blonde woman around the age of 20 protests: "But one thing doesn't exclude the other!" she cries. "Sure, we may back out from time to time and check our phones, but we're still there." And then she says something very true: "Older people just can't understand how we communicate."



"Will be 5 minutes late, c u"

Taking that generational divide one step further, Bert te Wildt then asserts that dependence on smartphones is only going to increase: "Just look at the way three-year-olds today have tablets and smartphones pressed into their hands," he says. "Oh yeah, that's really bad!" one of the young women exclaims. She says that she

recently watched some young children playing tag on the playground: "One of the boys who were running away suddenly stopped – he had to check his phone." Many of the teenagers in the tent frown or shake their heads. One young man declares that this was going too far and that "young children should be playing with toy blocks, not with cell phones."
Just like their smartphone-obsessed parents, the young people here in the tent believe that they have everything under control, and only see the excesses of the next generation as cause for concern. The smartphone problem is always somebody else's problem.
Finally, the 17-hour-man speaks up again. He has been listening patiently but now he's had enough: He finds the whole event "biased" against smartphones and against the Internet. "But there's no basis for that dis-

"Made it to the Met. Greetz from NYC!"

approval whatsoever," he claims. With a sharp tone in his voice, he goes on to ask: "Why is real life supposed to be so much better? This is all just fear of change, fear of the future. This is just like it was 50 or 60 years ago with rock 'n' roll. That was also supposed to be really bad for young people."
And that is a strong argument. Who wants to be the 2015 equivalent of those squares in the 1950s who saw rock music as a threat to Western civilization? We all want to be open-minded, ready for the future. Why shouldn't we use our smartphones for as many hours per day as we want to? The workshop ends without a real answer to this big question. Maybe we'll find one by talking to Bert te Wildt in a more focused way.
We meet in his hometown of Dortmund. High up on the viewing platform of a landmark and events center simply named U, we have a splendid view of the whole city – a good place to look at our new smartphone world from a certain distance. So: How can you convince someone who claims to be living in a happy symbiosis with their digital device, someone like the 17-hour-guy, that they need to change?
Bert te Wildt says he likes to challenge people who deny they're addicted to their smartphones by telling them: "Then try going for a week without it."
But you would have to be in a really bad place before you'd even try that, wouldn't you?
"Oh, I don't know if the motivation always has to be some terrible suffering," te Wildt says. "Simply noticing the wealth of what the offline world has to offer could be enough. There's so much to discover in nature, in museums, at the theater, out on the streets."
But there's a lot to discover on the Internet, too.
Bert te Wildt considers this for a moment. Then he replies: "If you ask people if there's something they've always wanted to do, what they really yearn for, then most of them will mention things having to with sports, travel, sex, love, human contact." It's important, he says, to admit to yourself what you're missing out on while you're looking at that screen. He believes we've already lost things that no one even notices anymore, like the ability to really look at one another: "A lot of people believe you can look into someone's eyes via Skype. You can't."
For most people, the problem is no longer that our phones interrupt us with a ringtone or a vibrating alarm – these can be turned off. It's that we constantly interrupt ourselves to check the latest flood of random info. Bert te Wildt calls this "that itching in your pocket."
But recovering smartphone addicts have discovered that once you're aware of the pattern, you can actually try, every now and then, to resist the reflex of reaching for your phone. This simple experiment, which you can do anywhere, anytime, can immediately reward you with a weird and wonderful moment of a new kind of happiness that was unimaginable only ten years ago, in the era before smartphone-saturation: the feeling of being free to choose, just for the fun of it, to experience your current surroundings with all your senses. "Nobody knew this feeling before," says te Wildt. "Expect perhaps for a yogi."
Little exercises like this one, te Wildt says, offer a healthy counterpoint to the "abstract" quality of the digital world. That also explains, he says, the enormous success of the "mindfulness" movement.
Mindfulness. This word always comes up sooner or later when people discuss how they can get over their digital fixation. "It is a big issue here in Silicon Valley," says media psychologist Sarah Genner (via her smartphone, calling from San Francisco). "Many technology firms here use mindfulness techniques. For example, before a meeting they'll say, 'Put all your gadgets away!' Then there's a minute's silence, and everyone

reflects quietly: What is the purpose of this meeting? Why am I here?"

One of the most prominent advocates of the mindfulness concept is *Huffington Post* founder Arianna Huffington. She discovered the benefits of mindfulness after suffering from burn-out (another buzzword of the smartphone era). She presents her new mindset in great detail in her book *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom and Wonder*. You can't begrudge her the joy of her newly found wisdom, even if it hasn't slowed down Huffington's hyperactive news site one bit. The same applies to the tabloid mogul Rupert Murdoch. He, too, has given the methods of mindfulness a try (not without announcing it on Twitter right away).

Despite the many real benefits of mindfulness, it is quite telling, amusing even, how much of a fuss is now being made over a basic human ability that was pretty much taken for granted not too long ago: noticing what goes on around us and within ourselves. This overarching trend toward the tangible, the handcrafted, the "artisanal" has spread out all over today's consumer culture, manifesting itself in quirky craft beers, profound coffee bean expertise, even in the widespread obsession with tattoo art and beard pruning. Pretty much any phenomenon that has had the "hipster" label slapped on it over the last ten years can be interpreted as the product of an attempt at mindfulness – and, in that sense, as a countermovement. It's no coincidence that these things are being made and relished by the most digital generation in history.

The pursuit of all this new variety could even be a way of escaping the smartphone – if it weren't for the fact that every pretty milk foam pattern or moustache twirl has to be instantly photographed, posted, and commented on.

Nevertheless, Bert te Wildt believes that the rediscovery of real life will continue: "The rich and famous set the trends. And soon it could become commonplace to say: I'm savoring my time offline." So he tells smartphone addicts, "Listen, in the very best restaurants, where only the biggest stars can go, phones have to be handed over at the entrance." Bert te Wildt believes that, "the true luxury is not to always be reachable. Soon, the great luxury will be allowing yourself as much analog time and space as possible."

Andre Wilkens, a Berlin-based political scientist, has come up with the perfect slogan for this emerging form of luxury and made it the title of his book: *Analog ist das neue Bio*, which translates as "Analog is the New Organic." This seems like a plausible theory right away – and even more so on closer inspection.

We meet at a café in the heart of this blossoming analog culture, a retro oasis in the Mitte district of Berlin. This neighborhood actually inspired Wilkens to write the book in the first place: Strolling along the blocks around Bergstrasse and Ackerstrasse, you will encounter places like The Record Store, which only sells vinyl records; several small patisseries; a gallery-like video rental store; a pottery workshop and other crafts stores; a piano school and a large storefront studio advertising its services as "analog photography." All of these places were founded recently, in our smartphone era. The area doesn't have a suitable nickname yet, but you could call it Analog Valley.

"One day I was standing in front of this new, lovingly curated video store and I asked myself: Is this a trend?" says Andre Wilkens. In his book he describes plenty more examples of this retromania and sings the praises of the analog lifestyle. Wilkens, who is 52, discovered its charms after many years of being an enthusiastic computer user. He sounds very convincing when he talks about the joys of building things with his hands instead of pushing pixels around on a screen; going to the flea market instead of bidding on eBay; chatting face to face rather than online. "Analog is limited," he writes in his book, whereas "digital is limitless, to be copied." The limits, he says, are "the basis of true luxury. Digital is Zara; analog is Prada."

The organic movement, he says, gained momentum "once people realized that an organic tomato just tastes better than an industrially produced one." The return to analog that he has in mind is therefore not about being anti-Internet or about reluctantly sacrificing the pleasures of the digital world. It is, on the contrary, about a better quality of life.

The response to his book gives Wilkens hope: "I've hardly met anyone who says it's all nonsense. What I do get occasionally are people who say: 'You have a point, but what can you do? There is no alternative to digitization.' I think it's awful to think like that. That alone makes me want to find alternatives." And perhaps the progress of digitization really isn't entirely irreversible. It certainly isn't linear: "Just look at how many of the computer millionaires in Silicon Valley are sending their kids to computer-free Waldorf schools," Wilkens says. "Once more, the pioneers over there are one step ahead of us."

In the struggle for a little emancipation from your smartphone, you can go to enormous lengths – you can visit a poetic refuge in Paris, install complex software to keep yourself offline, or practice your mindfulness until you become a Zen master. But there are easier solutions, too. In his personal life, Bert te Wildt uses a no-tech method that is so revolutionary, so daring, and so obvious, that no one has thought of it for years. "I make a plan to meet my friends in the evening – and then I leave the house without my smartphone." It can be done.

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