

# Review Article: Life in An Era of Techno-Anxiety

**Edward A. Irons**

Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (New York: Penguin, 2024); Julio Vincent Gambuto *Please Unsubscribe, Thanks! How to Take Back Our Time, Attention, and Purpose in a Relentless World* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2023); Christine Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience: Being Humans in a Disembodied World* (New York: Norton, 2024).

## **Abstract**

Techno-optimism and its close ally, transhumanism, are perennial publishing categories. Not all of the news is rosy, however. Recent titles express real doubts about our increasingly digitized lifestyles. The three works reviewed here attack from different angles. Jonathan Haidt summarizes social science data to make a convincing case for reigning in the use of social media and cellphones by children and teenagers. Vincent Gambuto takes a confessional approach to show how electronic media dictates much of our awareness. He suggests we go deep within to find the resources to counter the digital enticements imposed on us. Christine Rosen raises the alarm at a macro level by noting how experience itself is being refashioned by digital media. From micro-habits like selfies to our inability to savor the spontaneous or unplanned event, our experiences are increasingly mediated. Experience as a result becomes indirect; ourselves are increasingly distant from the object of experience, and the senses become less central to a shared sense of being than they ever have been. These three works on digital aspects of experience open up critical issues for our age. And these issues are worth considering deeply. Collective decisions at every level—governmental, educational, familial and personal—will shape much of social reality in the near future.

**Keywords:** Digital Technology, Transhumanism, Anxiety, Experience, Futurism, Youth

## **Introduction**

All cultures depend on enabling technologies. The current global order, call it what you will, post-industrial or new-liberal, is wedded to digital forms of technology. This was not inevitable. We were doing OK in the pre-digital days—not perfect but getting by. Then from the late 80s we were eased into an expanding digital universe. There was a palpable sense of euphoria when the internet first appeared in the mid-1990s. But tech optimism began a shift toward tech pessimism following the dotcom crash of 2000, and proponents on both sides continue to argue. Yet digital tools and communications continue to burrow deeper and deeper into our lives. Increasingly we are subject

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to a new ontology, a digital logic that governs our options.<sup>1</sup> And some feel unease about the shifts from that increasingly distant, pre-digital past. The three authors discussed here see problems with tech dependency. Each in their own way call for a rethink.<sup>2</sup>

### Tech's Impact on Children and Teens

Jonathan Haidt focuses exclusively on one of the most vulnerable cohorts, young people. He takes the position that the introduction of smart phones around 2014 has led to a mental health crisis for the children of America. We see problems in the generation Z adults now entering the workforce. While previous generations all had their problems, he shows through studies that psychological problems have increased to serious levels in Gen Z, and he concludes that the phone is the most likely culprit.

Haidt cites strong evidence that there is indeed a mental crisis among children, and that it affects girls most. From 2010 rates of major depression in girls 12-17 have increased 14%, and now stand at 30% of all girls reporting some kind of depression. For boys rates have increased by 161% and now just over 10% of all boys report mental issues.<sup>3</sup> Haidt calls the period from 2010 to 2014 “The Great Rewiring,” since fixation on screens and social media involved the literal rewiring of our children’s minds. The increase in depression coincides with an increase in anxiety, defined as the “anticipation of future threat.”<sup>4</sup> Most troubling, ER visits by girls have gone up 188% since 2010, while they have remained steady for boys.<sup>5</sup> Suicide rates have also gone up since 2010, by 167% for girls and 91% for boys, all this coincided with the spread of a new technology, the smartphone, by 2016 79% of teenagers had a smartphone, as did 28% of children 8-12.<sup>6</sup>

We now face an urgent social crisis. There is a general sense of unease and panic among parents, who struggle with finding the right way to manage their children’s cellphone activity. Our society has indeed moved from what Haidt calls a play-based childhood to a phone-based childhood. Free play time has dwindled as screen time has increased. This trend collided with another one, parent’s fear of harm. Beginning in the 1980s parents began to hover and not allow free play. The result has been the rise of “safetyism.” Both safetyism and the smartphone have served as experience-blockers. The result has been the rise of mental fragility.<sup>7</sup> Unlike many who see the problem and simply wring their hands, Haidt does offer practical steps, including policies

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hassan, *The Condition of Digitally: A Post- A Post-Modern Marxism for the Practice of Digital Life* (University of Westminster Press, 2020), 132-3.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (New York: Penguin, 2024); Julio Vincent Gambuto *Please Unsubscribe, Thanks! How to Take Back Our Time, Attention, and Purpose in a Relentless World* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2023); Christine Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience: Being Humans in a Disembodied World* (New York: Norton, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> The metric was whether or not the individual had one major depression in the past year. U.S. National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

<sup>4</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, pp. 31-34.

<sup>7</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 97.

of no phones before high school, no social media before 15, phone-free schools, and an increase in unsupervised play for children.<sup>8</sup>

Unwittingly we as a society have become participants in what Haidt calls the largest uncontrolled experiment in human history.<sup>9</sup> Haidt cites several studies showing similar results that show that teens now spend six to eight hours on some sort of screen-based activity each day,<sup>10</sup> with young people receiving an alert on their smartphones once every five minutes, on average.<sup>11</sup>

## Other Voices

For all cries of social emergency on any topic there are bound to be counter-arguments that the fears are overblown. Humans can engineer our way out of climate change, for instance. And in the case of smartphones, we will adjust to protect children's health. There is some evidence that playing electronic games, including multiplayer video games, brings benefits.<sup>12</sup> And my own subjective interaction with Gen Z has shown many to be admirable. The problem is probably one of balance as "unfettered access to everything, everywhere" is probably not good for anyone, and this is a problem with how American society is structured. It becomes an acute problem when the issue is pornography, or the drop in social interaction.

Another problem with screens and cellphones is that as a society we are drawn to technological innovations. Additionally we allow ourselves to be manipulated by larger forces, such as Big Tech. We have certainly reached the point where social action is called for. Here Haidt's account is exemplary. He lists steps that can be taken at many levels, focusing primarily on the home and school. He also lists social action organizations taking the first steps. In a way the anti-smartphone movement parallels the environmental movement, which took years to become installed in our minds through social action.

Smartphones and the internet have also been a blessing, allowing people to access information and services easily. Haidt simply points out that there is little evidence that social media in particular has had a positive impact on the *mental* health of adolescents.<sup>13</sup>

## Solutions

There are possible solutions to the issues Haidt raises, available at many levels—individual, social, technological, and legal. Companies can be forced to build in robust age-specific safeguards. The government can pass a strong age-appropriate design code (AADC) similar to that passed in the UK in 2020, which would replace the U.S.'s weak COPPA law of 1998. Age verification can be strengthened through technology. Schools can ban or severely restrict cellphone use. Schools can

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<sup>8</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 290.

<sup>9</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 314.

<sup>11</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 190.

<sup>13</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 137.

design in more play time. Public space can include play-friendly zones. Vocational offerings can be strengthened. Haidt devotes a chapter to how parents can negotiate the different age years, including allowing more independence and time structure in the home.

His essential recommendations are straightforward:

- No smartphones before high school
- No social media before sixteen
- Phone-free schools
- More unsupervised play and independence.<sup>14</sup>

He directs readers to explore both the *Anxiousgeneration.com* website, and Haidt's own substack 'After Babel,' however, it is essentially up to each parent to organize at the family and community level, which means speaking up about the issue.

Haidt is unique in including a spiritual analysis in his text, devoting most of chapter 8 to how social media degrades the spirit. He does not go into any particular spiritual tradition, simply saying that there exist in all traditions an understanding that certain activities are enhancing and admirable, others are degrading. He offers six practices that can counter spiritual decay, including becoming part of fixed communities of practice (as opposed to transient and disembodied networks); engaging in ritual action, including eating; training the self to go into a discovery mode of being, as opposed to defensive mode; promoting self-transcendence, allowing the self to occasionally leave the profane world; developing the subtle emotions of forgiveness, grace and love; and contact with Nature.<sup>15</sup>

### **As For the Adults...**

While Haidt focus on the harm social media and smart phones have done to children and adolescents, Julio Gambuto addresses us as adult "users." Who hasn't had the nagging feeling that all of this screen time may not be healthy? The problem with addressing adults is the strong case for utility. Gambuto bolsters his critique with a broader argument, one against consumerism. He sees the internet as simply the latest iteration in an attempt to control people and our habits. The argument is one in favor of speed. Speed is sexy. Coupled with government resolve to not regulate economic activity, we have "click-up economics" and supercharged spending. "We are," he states, "scaling whatever flaws in moral judgment are built into these systems."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, p. 290.

<sup>15</sup> Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*, pp. 202-216.

<sup>16</sup> Gambuto, *Please Unsubscribe, Thanks!*, p. 23.

What we have is capitalism on steroids, and only acts of intense personal will-power can resolve the issues. Online businesses now use the dominant model, subscriptions. We are no longer consumers, we are subscribers. With an average of twelve media subscriptions per person, and eighty apps on our phone, we are in a constant state of subscribing.<sup>17</sup> We find ourselves on autopilot, stuck in infinite loops of behavior automation. We are subtly encouraged to treat ourselves as brands, to commodify ourselves. Truly addicted, we lack downtime from the never-ending cycle of consumption.

If these descriptions sound uncomfortably familiar, it proves that Gambuto is onto a widely-felt sentiment. Our addictions are driven by a fantasy that tech is always and everywhere amazing. The result is that Big Media, merging with Big Data, dictates where we focus our attention. Called “chokepoint capitalism” by Cory Doctorow and Rebecca Giblin, this system locks audiences up and in turn gouges content creators and artists, the answer, says Gambuto, is to simply unsubscribe.<sup>18</sup>

One area where adult experience mirrors that of adolescents is in relationships. Both Haidt and Gambuto note how online relationships degrade human interaction. We expand our connections well past the 150 that a normal human can handle. In so doing we allow much more toxicity into our lives than we did in a world of flesh and blood interaction, our relationships are increasingly managed online as the equivalent of two and a half hours a day is spent on social media.<sup>19</sup>

But Gambuto’s recommendations run into trouble as he essentially asks us to fall back on our inner reserves. The second half of the book is filled with ideas on how to unsubscribe, first from social media, but also from relationships, capitalism, or anything. Most of his many recommendations have the flavor of online advice tidbits with Gambuto admitting that his ideas came to him while he was cooped up alone due to COVID restrictions. They all feel a bit washed-out, here is a sampling:

You do you—don’t listen to experts  
Play a bigger game than you think you are ready for.  
Life begins at the end of your comfort zone.  
Yes is not your friend.  
Count up your subscriptions.  
“The inbox is nothing but a convenient organizing system for other people’s agendas”  
Keep [no more than] ten icons in your dock.  
Do not accept cookies.  
Clear your browser history  
Turn off notifications and location services  
Clean out your contacts  
Commit to no television

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<sup>17</sup> Gambuto, *Please Unsubscribe, Thanks!*, p. 29, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Gambuto, *Please Unsubscribe, Thanks!*, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> Gambuto, *Please Unsubscribe, Thanks!*, p. 77.

Stop ordering by logo  
Stop ordering online  
Stop using autopay  
Use slow banking (remember that?)  
Don't use autofill for credit cards  
Clear your calendar (put everyone in the "parking lot")  
"Guard your calendar like you guard your home."  
Only keep in your life people who respect.... (fill in the rest)  
Take an audit of who you want in your life...  
Get comfortable with getting uncomfortable.  
Think about what your mission, vision and values statements would tell you.

With this turn Gambuto moves from a focus on tech and has entered into the realm of personal coaching. And like much of pop psychology, the advice sounds both trite and commonsensical. He helpfully mentions the possibility of entering the "dark well" of depression during the digital detox. By this point the reader has concluded that he is offering a Path of Redemption, a Way to Change the World Through Collective Action, in a fairytale world.

Gambuto's book will be of interest because it helps us think through real problems of tech dependence. The solutions section is unfortunately over-prescribed and could fruitfully be cut down by two-thirds.

## The Embodiment Problem

Christine Rosen offers a different angle on digital life—its effect on our sense of being. Methodically and convincingly, she walks the reader through gallery after gallery showcasing how we have allowed technology into our lives. "Allowed" is the operative word, because we have done so willingly, with enthusiasm for the ways our lives are enhanced by all the wearables, algorithms and screens that we take for granted. This is no luddite screed. From the printing press to the photograph to online dating, we have always been of two minds when new technologies upend our lives. So, the operative question is: how is this time different?

She builds her case by digging deep in different digital realms. First, the smartphone. The cellphone, she notes, has caused an epidemic of civil inattention in which we treat each other as objects registered but not otherwise engaged with.<sup>20</sup> In the process we experience negative social well-being, feelings of inadequacy and being out of step.<sup>21</sup> In evolutionary terms it turns out that humans crave physical proximity and are lost without it. We have also dropped a slew of embodied, physical practices that used to define us as human—handwriting, drawing, tinkering, unstructured play, and day-dreaming, all the arts which subtly taught us patience and perseverance. Instead, we automatically opt for speed, novelty, and convenience in every realm. We no longer have the patience to wait in line. While not advocating communist-era lines for the sake of lines, Rosen

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<sup>20</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 45.

reminds us of Auden's view that impatience is the only cardinal sin. It is impatience which drives us out of Paradise, and out of harmony with our surroundings.<sup>22</sup> The disappearance of patience has forced us into an eternal present, a bias toward nowness, our horizons constricted into the time it takes to upload a web page. As Herbert Simon notes, we suffer from a wealth of information and a poverty of attention.<sup>23</sup>

But Rosen's overall point is that experience itself is being refashioned. We are no longer content to have experienced travel. It must now be confirmed through a mountain of selfies. We are no longer satisfied with sticky, messy sex. It is now channeled into porn, which users contend is also satisfying. The body is no longer needed for experience. Experience is undergone in non-physical spaces created for us by, you guessed it, Big Tech. We go on field-trip simulations instead of messy, boring bus rides.

Rosen's work amounts to a big red flag. She urges us not allow our collective complacency to lead us into the great slide down the hill of no return. We are about to plunge headlong into that pool Walter Benjamin labelled the poverty of experience. In the process we are easily distracted, impatient to a fault, unable to connect to place, and obsessing over internet-centered issues. Experience is now all about information, not sensory contact, as a result what it means to be human is changing.<sup>24</sup> Mirroring an obsession found in tons of sci-fi, we have missed that we are becoming less human even as we obsess about whether robots will be human.

Rosen gradually reveals what she means by human. And her argument is a well-fleshed philosophical position. Humans accept that experience is messy. Not every interaction will be seamless. Chance and rupture, as she quotes Richard Sennett, are part of life. Travel involves frustration and serendipity. It also involves other humans—“breathing the same air, sensing one another's unspoken feelings ... being attuned to one another's gestures”—in other words, all the things we learn in our crucial first years of life. Are these elements suddenly not part of being human? For me the most meaningful point she makes is the importance of a wandering mind. “Openness to experience,” something I have always assumed was a trait of my (Baby Boomer) generation, involves a slew of related psychological traits. These are listed in a quote by psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman as:

self-awareness, creative incubation, improvisation and evaluation memory consolidation, autobiographical planning, goal driven thought, future planning, retrieval of deeply personal memories, reflective consideration of the meaning of events and experiences, simulating the Perspex time of another person, evaluating the implications of self and others' emotional reactions, moral reasoning, and reflective compassion.<sup>25</sup>

And we are giving that up in favor of what, efficiency? A bias toward instant gratification, of “nowness?” No thanks. The ideal condition of humanity, Rosen implies, is one in which we have

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<sup>22</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 95.

<sup>24</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 17.

<sup>25</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 97.

the opportunity, the time, and the right to enter flow, a state of total absorption.<sup>26</sup> So how does total absorption in your cellphone not equal flow? Digital interaction, it turns out, does not evoke two key humanity-defining attributes—patience and empathy. Without these the absorption is ephemeral, superficial. With these two qualities, which can only be built up over time, a mature human can choose total absorption. Without, we are seduced into a state of absorbed dependency.

The failure to inculcate patience and empathy leads to a radically flat emotional landscape. We now prefer less interaction with others. We have faux, “one-click” empathy. We rush through public spaces oblivious to others. We don’t have time to reflect on feelings. They’re too messy anyway—why bother? Let someone else do the birthday party. But it is exactly the contingent, complex nature of emotional interactions that creates our sense of self as human. This is the poetry of life. Rosen quotes Lewis Mumford’s insight that technological change alone does not define an era. Each era is characterized by a “reorientation of wishes, habits, ideas and goals.”<sup>27</sup> Is she calling for a wholesale repudiation of technology? Certainly not. But conscious choosing is called for, instead of letting Big Tech lead us into our own extinction experience.

Rosen is at her best in the chapters on mediated pleasures. We are increasingly experiencing life through digital platforms, leading to what Ian Kerr describes as the “evidentiary society.”<sup>28</sup> No trip is real without selfies to prove it. In fact, the real thing is often a let-down. Pornography raises the bar so high that real-life sex can never measure up. This same “forced mediation” is now appearing everywhere. We can ski, hunt or bird watch virtually, and we accept virtual balconies on cruise ships without batting an eye. At the same time, we have lost our appetite for the vague bewilderment or the sense of the ineffable that unplanned travel can bring. And we sense that our curated lives are becoming spice-less, bland.

Yet I am not overly pessimistic. The impact of online tech on emotional habits, while real, seems like something we are already managing. My son and his wife, both busy doctors, pick up their phones at home only to answer calls or to schedule something. Otherwise, their phones remain face-down as they interact with family members and go about their many chores. In other words, surfing the web or hanging out on Tik Tok are simply not options if you lead a busy life. Nor are the enticements of the internet enough on their own. There is a whole generation of young people able to keep their distance from mediated experience.

The problem may lie with Gen Z, those born after just before and after the year 2000, whose lives have been massively impacted by social media. Leaving aside the COVID experience, I think it’s too soon to simply write this generation off as hopelessly addicted, turning their brains into puddles of mush. Like previous generations they can find a happy medium. Humans are adaptive. And it will take more than bright shiny tech toys to reshape human nature. Rosen has given us a thoughtful, systematic warning about the unthinking adoption of online habits and enticements. With the help of such thinkers, we can handle it.

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<sup>26</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience*, p. 175.



## **Dystopia as Fate**

Technology is transformative on culture, but not determinative. Our fates are not pre-determined. We have options, both as individuals and as citizens. These three works all call for an end of blind acceptance of a digital reality that has been foisted upon us. By becoming aware of the problem, we can act. This does not mean a turning away from technology's promise. From my own perspective I can acknowledge that transhumanists have strong arguments. But every technology has downsides, and it is time to deal with them directly. Already schools are acting to limit access to smartphones, as are families and corporations. Excessive optimism can be tempered by practical action.