SLAYING
DIGITAL
DRAGONS

ALEX J. PACKER, PH.D.

Tips and tools for protecting your body, brain, psyche, and thumbs from the digital dark side

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Fountas & Pinnell Guided Reading Level Z+

The "Do I Have an Achilles Heel?" challenge on page 48 is adapted from The Gaming Disorder Test (Pontes, Halley M., Bruno Schivinski, Cornelia Sindermann, et al. 2019. "Measurement and Conceptualization of Gaming Disorder According to the World Health Organization Framework: The Development of the Gaming Disorder Test." *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00088-z). The term "gaming" was changed to a blank space that teens can use to assess any problematic screen activity. The parenthetical examples of significant problem areas in Question 4 were altered slightly to better represent the experiences of young people. The backward-looking timeframe cited in the instructions was modified from twelve to six months to acknowledge a younger audience with frequently shifting screen habits. The scoring information guidance was also changed to eliminate clinical terms, create three general self-assessment categories along a continuum from healthy to problematic screen activity, and to reflect the self-assessment/empowerment focus of this book.

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Dedication

For Mateo, Leonie, and Emily
and the
Resistance Generation

Acknowledgments

"Acknowledgments" is where you thank the "team"—the people whose advice, expertise, and encouragement contributed to making this book possible. (See page 310 on thanking the team.)

I would like to express my appreciation to Max Banta for providing a helpful "young person's" perspective on the gaming parody in Chapters 2 and 3; neurologist Shelley Cross, M.D., for reviewing and sharpening Chapter 4; James Hallowell for his astute reading of the manuscript and willingness to tell me which jokes bombed and had to go; Alex Lobo for creative inspiration and sharing the fruits of his decades of work with teenagers; and David Waterman for sparks of insight that ignited my motivation whenever it flagged.

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PART III: RESET

LIST OF FORMS

See page 407 for instructions for downloading digital versions of these forms.

REFLECT

START SCREEN

Joining the Resistance

I don't need to tell you how wonderful smartphones are.

> **Something tells me you're about to.**

Snuggled in a pocket or purse, your phone is a ticket to the world. You can use it to do homework, learn how to fix a bike, and connect with friends. You'll find clever vids and *whatever* kids. Cute cats and snooty rats. You can query Siri and perplexa Alexa. You can be a gamer or lion tamer, learn the guitar or make an avatar. Take pics or watch flix. Send Snaps or check maps—

> **Is this a book or a poem?**

—plan trips or post clips, play tunes or draw baboons, buy clothes or—who knows?!

Who knows? You do. That's because most teens spend hours a day on their phones, tablets, gaming consoles, or laptops. And if you do, you know how wild, wacky, and wonderful the digital world can be. The world at your thumb tips. Music. Movies. Friends. Games. Videos. Questions. Answers. Yup, you can find anything and everything online anytime.

Well, not quite. You can't inhale the smell of brownies baking in the oven. You can't watch the sunset until the last sliver of purple disappears. You can't ruff-ruff-house with your dog or give your best friend a hug. You can't get in the zone on a long run or stare up at the stars and wonder if there's life in outer space.

2

Think of some of the things you enjoy doing the most. Things that fill you with joy, put a smile on your face, make you feel good about yourself, make your parents✱ proud of you, cause your younger siblings to look up to you. I bet a lot of those things—maybe even all of them—happen offline.

✱ FAMILY PHANTASMAGORIA

In a perfect world, the term I use to refer to the adult(s) with whom you live would exactly describe *your* particular domestic circumstance. But that would mean that every time I mention these creatures, I would have to say "your parents, or parent, or grandmother or grandparents, or aunt and uncle, or mom and stepdad, or dad and dad, or foster parent, or two moms, or dad and stepmom, or adoptive father and his girlfriend, who's from Saturn (but that's a secret)." And *that* would mean by the time you finished reading this book you could have teenage children of your own.

So please know that whatever term I use, it's meant to refer to *your* family life and the people who take care of you. This book will work for you whether you live with one, two, three, or four-and-a-half adults (Uncle Albert being *very* immature); whether your folks are divorced, separated, unmarried, twice married to each other, gay, straight, transgender, or gender fluid; whether you share a roof with one mom, two great-grandparents, three siblings, four stepbrothers, five cats, thirteen hamsters, or . . . I think you get it. Got it?

> Got it!

Along with the magic and information, the connections and games, the friendships and support, the texts and tweets and tags and shares and likes and posts—along with all the wonderful, positive things smartphones, social media, and the internet have made possible, there's another side to them.

The Dark Side.

You may have encountered it. Smartphones and social media can be used to hack and attack, tattle and rattle, brag and nag, hurt and blurt, roast and ghost, feud and brood. People can be mean and obscene, gross and morose; they can lie and defy, cheat and mistreat, steal and conceal, hate and berate.

> They can also make waaayyy too many rhymes.

The internet is full of misinformation, scams, viruses, phishing, blackmail, fake stories, fake videos, and fake people. That "nice kid" who says he's in tenth grade

at a school in your town and wants you to send him photos of yourself may be a 70-year-old who lives 5,000 miles away. Not everything you find is true. Not everyone you meet is who they say they are.

You may be rolling your eyes and thinking . . . *if one more person tells me not to send naked selfies; that anything I post lasts forever; that there's no privacy online; or that I shouldn't put my home address, social security number, and combination to my locker in my profile . . .*
I'M GOING TO SCREAM!!!
. . . *and* post a video of it.

I hear you.

(It was a loud scream.)

I know *you* probably know about all these risks and the precautions that go along with them. But not everyone does. Some people spend so much time online, they can't imagine life without smartphones. And they shouldn't have to. These devices are great and here to stay. But the digisphere✱ offers so much pleasure, opportunity, information, social connection, and fun that it's easy to forget or deny its dark side—the side of surveillance, scams, hacking, subterfuge, manipulation, and invasion of privacy.

✱ *Digisphere* is the term I use to mean all things digital: phones, tablets, laptops, gaming consoles, apps, social media, the internet, etc.

You—Bot and Sold

In the grand scheme of things, we're still just beginning to understand the consequences of social media and a world in which anyone, anywhere, can use the internet to do just about anything they want. Even though the digisphere can be a place of hope, positive action, and connection, it can *also* be used to spread hate, lies, and bigotry; to bully and shame; to undermine elections and democracies; to distort truth, facts, and reality.

Here's something else to consider. Just by using the internet, *you* have become a product. You're not a customer. You're a commodity. Governments and Big Tech—that's the major companies like Apple, Google, Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft—watch you online. They can scan your messages and calls. They know where you go and what you do. They know what you like, what you buy, what you search for, what you worry about. They have a file on you—millions of data points—that they share with and sell to other companies. They invade your devices, placing tracking cookies inside your phone and tablet and laptop to monitor you. They design their platforms and games to manipulate you—and, yes, addict you—for your clicks, likes, attention, and money.

Teens for Sale

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 Teenager IP 17.22.481.01	
Servings Per Device 1 (age 15 5'7" 60kg)	
	% Daily Value
Total Time 7.5 hours	**330%**
Saturated Social Media 4.5 hours	**220%**
Trans Insta Fat 0 hours	
Polyunsaturated Texting 0.5 hours	**26%**
Sodium Snapchat 2 hours	**98%**
Gender Female	
Sexuality Questioning	
Likes Granola Koalas Leggings Yellow Soccer	
Dislikes Rain Nose Rings Pimples Torn Jeans	
Total Mood Fiber	
Depressed 0.5 hours	**2.5%**
Lonely 1.5 hours	**15%**
Happy 4.5 hours	**50%**
Scared 0.5 hours	**2.5%**
Confident 3 hours	**30%**

Life online can threaten you from the outside—cyberbullying, bogus information, mean comments, ransomware attacks. Scammers, politicians, governments, and corporations can intentionally try to hurt or use you for their own benefit. Too much time spent online can also harm you from the inside, just between you and you—affecting the way you feel, learn, grow, and relate to people—and yourself. It can affect your moods, grades, self-image, self-confidence, and self-control. It can change your brain and the way you think. It can affect your health—even your posture!

Social scientists (those are scientists who *really* like to party) have studied whether screen time affects kids and teenagers in negative ways. There's data that suggests yes and data that suggests no. It may take decades more to know for sure, since certain effects can only be identified through long-term studies. It's similar to what happened with tobacco. There were indications as far back as 1920 that cigarette smoking was harmful and might cause cancer. But it wasn't until 1964 that

the US Surgeon General's report linking it to cancer finally came out. And it took decades longer after that for laws and societal attitudes and behaviors to push back against the dangers of smoking.

> **I don't smoke.**

> Glad to hear it.

I believe that in 5, 10, or 30 years, we will have evidence that digital devices and platforms are also causing developmental and societal harm (even while offering many benefits), and then we will wonder why people didn't rise up earlier.

In one sense, though, it doesn't matter what the research finds. It doesn't matter if 20 percent, 50 percent, or 80 percent of teens experience certain negative (or positive) consequences. All that *really* matters is what YOU experience. Think of allergies. Some people have none. Some people have a few allergies that are easy to avoid or ignore. And some people have allergies so severe they can be life-threatening. If YOU have an allergy, whether common or rare, then it's irrelevant to you how other people react to pollen, dog hair, mold, or bee stings.

The same holds true for people who may experience "allergic" reactions from their exposure to the digital world. It doesn't matter what the research says or how it affects other people. The reaction that counts is your own. The good news is that this book will provide you with knowledge and self-awareness you can use to assess whether you might be having an unhealthy "allergic reaction" to any aspects of your device use. And if you are, you'll discover how to strengthen your online immunity and protect yourself from the worst aspects of Big Tech.

By now, my point of view may be sneaking up on you.

> **How about crashing into me like an 18-wheeler.**

I do believe that digital devices, social media, and the internet—as useful, essential, miraculous, and even life-saving as they are—also have the potential to harm teens (and adults) and society. I believe they *have* done harm, and will continue to do so.

Whether this is the case for you, I don't have a clue. This is because (sadly) I don't know you. I don't know how much time you spend on a screen, how you use it, what else is going on in your life, what kind of personality you have, whether

you're a cat person or a frog person, what your family is like, whether you put ketchup or mustard on a hot dog.

Perhaps you aren't consciously aware of whether your digital life is causing you harm, either. I say "consciously" because I believe teens are deeply intuitive. They often know something in their gut long before they know it in their head. Meanwhile, their gut may be causing them feelings of stress, guilt, worry, or fear, leading to conflicts and problems. Moving "knowledge" from your gut to your head is one of the best ways to deal with negative or troublesome feelings. That's why keeping a journal, talking to a friend or trusted adult, or seeing a therapist can be so helpful. They are all processes that bring thoughts and feelings into the light of day.

> *My* gut is telling me I shouldn't have eaten that third burrito.

When I hear that a Common Sense Media survey found that roughly 40 percent of all teens say they "feel addicted" to their phones, I suspect that many of those teens have unexamined, troubling feelings in their gut. They may feel confused, ashamed, helpless, scared, or out of control. They may wonder why they can't cut back despite wanting to; why their willpower lets them down. Disturbing as these feelings can be, they are a perfectly natural response to the power and manipulations of Big Tech and social media. The important thing to remember is that you *can* take charge. Using the smarts in your head (and this book), you'll be able to reap the best—and repel the worst—of the digital world.

Tech Alert!

LEFT TO YOUR OWN DEVICES

You'll see the words *phones* and *smartphones* throughout this book. In some cases I mean specifically that little device you take everywhere and use to say, "Hello, hello, can you hear me?" In other cases, which you'll know because you're clever, I mean any digital device with a screen, whether a smartphone, tablet, watch, laptop, gaming console, or television, that you use to make calls, send messages, visit social media, play music, browse the internet, play games, watch videos, etc.

Join the Resistance

Don't get me wrong. The internet's riches are beyond imagination. Social media is an incredible way to connect with people. Smartphones are technological miracles. Together, they have saved many people's lives and improved life for even more people. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed how interwoven these technologies are into the fabric of our existence. Without them, there would have been no remote learning. No working from home. No online shopping and contactless deliveries. No rapid-fire data crunching, no complex modeling of disease trajectories, no medical breakthroughs in record time, no videos of country singers serenading their cockatoos.

And because of the digisphere, we were able to stay in touch with friends, teachers, and grandparents; to be inspired by stories of courage, sacrifice, and triumph; to be saddened by stories of tragedy, despair, and heartache; to separate fact from fiction, truth from spin, genuine hope from magical thinking; to hear balcony arias; to be mesmerized by a cascade of 100,000 falling dominoes. The internet kept millions of people from going bonkers while being confined to their homes for weeks and months. Think of all the wonderful memes and videos that linked the world as millions of people shared them. Kind of gives new meaning to something going *viral*.

But the underside of these worlds—the things we don't know, and how these devices and the time we spend on them are affecting us as individuals, communities, and societies—is . . .

Chilling.

It's *so* chilling I have to wear my parka even when it's 80 degrees out.

People are just beginning to realize the extent to which digital devices, social media, and spending hours a day online have the potential to change human behavior, emotion, communication, interaction, and attitudes in both positive and negative ways. That a few giant corporations now control how we think and feel, what we do, and what we buy would have been unimaginable 20 years ago. That social media can be used by anyone, anywhere, to dispense lies, promote division, and influence elections is a destructive force that early innovators never contemplated. (At least I hope they didn't. Although I wish they had.)

I'm not saying this to scare you (well, maybe a little) or to tell you that these devices are inherently "bad" (they're not). But their misuse can hurt you and people you care about. It can stain your life and future in ways that you may not be able to undo.

The internet is a vast, unknown world. To make sure you're the master of your devices and online life—to make sure your smartphone is *your* tool, and you're not *its* tool—you need to be aware of the risks and dangers, so you can stay healthy, safe, and wise.

And that's what this book is about.

Putting you in charge. So that your phone works for you. And not the other way around.

Menu

To accomplish this, the book is divided into three parts.

Part 1: REFLECT

These first three chapters will get you thinking about the issues. You'll encounter a series of nine **challenges** and **missions** that will reveal to you the nature of your screen scene. The intel you gather will encourage you to reflect (get it?)—

Yeah, I get it.

—on how you use your devices and how that may be affecting you for better or worse. If the challenges reveal or reinforce concerns you have about your screen time, you'll be able to use that intel to tune up your digital life, using strategies discussed later in the book.

Part 2: RESIST

These six chapters look at ways screen time can affect your body, brain, relationships, psyche, privacy, safety, reputation, and life balance. Some of these ways you

may already know or sense. Others will be new—and maybe even disturbing—to you. You'll find tons of tips that will help you to resist (get it?)—

> **Jeesh! Yeah, I get it.**

—and protect yourself from Big Tech's meddling with your mind, emotions, and future.

Part 3: RESET

This is where you pull it all together. In these final three chapters you can combine the intel you gathered about your screen scene with the boundless knowledge you've gained to—

> **Lemme guess. Reset.**

> **You got it!**

—your digital life. No matter where you find yourself along the continuum of screen time, whether 36 minutes a day or 36 hours a day, you'll find steps you can take to give yourself an App-endectomy—

> **Give myself a WHAT-endectomy?!?**

> **App-endectomy. That's an operation where you cut out any unhealthy aspects of your screen scene. Get it? APP? APP-endectomy?**

> **Are you gonna do this throughout the whole book?**

> **Count on it!**

—to ensure that your screen scene enhances, rather than harms, your life.

Book Alert!

If you are especially observant, you may have noticed that this is a, er, how to put it, a *longish* book. But I don't think you'll find it long and *boring*. On the contrary, I think you'll find it's full of useful, interesting, and important information. So I hope you'll read it from front to back (I don't recommend reading it back to front). But if you're not sure, if you're still thinking *them there's a lotta pages,* it's fine to dip into the book. (Pretend it's guacamole and you're the chip.)

You could start with chapters 2 and 3, which have lots of challenges to get you thinking about your device usage and habits.

> Those are good. I peeked.

You could then dive into the RESIST chapters that interest you most. You'll find loads of information on how screen time can affect you, and tips for living a healthier online life and not being Big Tech's sucker (or lollipop). And if you think you might like to make some changes in your digital life, check out the RESET chapters. They'll show you how.

So, feel free to hop, skip, and jump in and out of the book. There's no rule that you have to start at the beginning and finish at the end. (I checked.)

The resistance has begun. It's in its infancy. But people are waking up. They're realizing how digital devices affect emotions, health, and human interactions. They're exposing the motives and misdeeds of tech companies that influence and control our lives. These internet revolutionaries are reducing or eliminating their own presence on social media. They're turning off their phones at night. They're taking steps to fight back against Big Tech and Peeping Tom corporations.

Use your phone. Love your phone. (I know I do.)

> You love MY phone?!?

> No. MY phone!