

■ OFF CAMPUS ■

What about our parents' screen time?



ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

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There's a TV blaring loud enough to be heard from all corners of the house, and a phone in my father's hand. Two different screens with two distinct things playing on each of them. My mother, on the other hand, averages 12 hours of screen time. What does she do on her phone? She sends me AI generated reels, which I always have to remind her aren't real.

This entire ordeal makes me feel more like a parent, one who has been tasked with the insurmountable task of reminding my parents to put their phones away during dinner, except I continue to be reprimanded like their child.

It's strange growing up in a time when children are warned about screens, yet somehow, it's the parents who seem just as glued to them, if not more. When we were younger, it was us who were warned about how much time we could spend in front of the TV, urged instead to focus on books instead of devices. Now the TV runs in the background while they watch videos on their phones.

What worries me isn't just the time they spend on their phones, but the fact that

they were suddenly exposed to the internet without ever really learning how it works. We grew up alongside it and learned what spam looks like, what fake news sounds like, and what not to click. To various degrees, we learned to scrutinise what we saw online, to double-check headlines, and to assume that not everything that is on the internet is true. For our parents, the internet arrived all at once: fully formed, overwhelming, and so very interesting.

Another thing that makes all of this harder now is how difficult misinformation and AI content have become to detect. Videos have realistic voices, clear visuals, and confident narration; nothing immediately feels suspicious. AI can generate faces, news clips, and even "expert" explanations that seem completely real at first glance. For someone who didn't grow up closely analysing online content, it's easy to get swept up by how pristine and professional something looks – signalling its authenticity and thus, how much it can be trusted.

Naturally, for my parents, who are already trusting by nature and not used to double-checking sources, it's even harder to tell what's real and what's made up.

They're also the perfect target for ads. Advertisements don't even look like advertisements anymore. Instead, they're disguised as normal videos, recommendations, or someone casually raving about a product. At that point, it feels more like advice than marketing, which can potentially take away some of the scepticism that consumers usually reserve before making any purchases. This is especially true for my parents who might not even question why something is being shown to them or who is trying to sell it.

If a video confidently says a gadget works or a supplement fixes everything, they're more likely to believe it. Sometimes they'll show me products they're thinking of buying that clearly came from a sponsored post, which they don't even realise is an ad. The algorithms quickly learn what they click on and continues to feed them similar content, keeping them in a loop. The more they watch, the more the algorithm realises what works, and the easier it becomes to retain their attention.

What is particularly concerning is that this doesn't necessarily bother them. In fact, I am starting to suspect that it might be

somewhat enjoyable for them. The phone has become more than just a device; it's entertainment, connection, and comfort all wrapped up in one. It's how they relax after a long day, how they keep up with relatives, and how they escape boredom. So, when I try to say anything against their phone habits, it feels hypocritical. After all, I use my phone too. I scroll, watch videos, and text my friends. Who am I to lecture them about screen time when I'm not exactly screen-free myself?

While I may have learned how to navigate the tricky terrains of the internet, I haven't exactly learned how to go about my way without it. And maybe that is what I can teach them: not to completely forego their devices but to help them figure out how to use them more mindfully. The roles may have reversed but the sentiment that compels us to care for each other perseveres. No amount of blaring of television sets nor mind-numbing reels can take that away.

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