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DIGITAL PRESENCE

From phubbing to cheating on your partner with Netflix, our obsession with screens can be a relationship disruptor. But one married woman is thankful.

By JACQUELYN FRANCIS

THINGS CAME TO A HEAD WHEN I STARTED WATCHING *Friday Night Lights*. Until that point, watching TV with my husband was how we unwound together after a long day. I thought I had found our next escape in *FNL*: Colleagues waxed poetic about hunky “Riggs” or “Vince,” and one in particular (bless her soul) mentioned that the series, which ended in 2011, could be streamed online. For some reason, my husband showed no interest in watching a show about hot teenage boys who observe football in small-town Texas as if it were a religion. So one night I went rogue and watched the pilot alone. It was love. Soon I was stealing moments alone on a tablet—before breakfast, after the kids were asleep—while he was in another part of the house screening guitar pedal reviews on the laptop. A wee gulf was growing between us.

Now if this was the only digital distraction in my relationship that might be fine, but the truth is we’re both on

our phones a lot. In other words, we’re guilty of “phubbing,” you know, phone snubbing. And while “Netflix and chill” (youth slang for “come over and shag”) sounded tempting, my interpretation of it is quite literal, and solitary. Between Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, *espn.com* (him) and streaming, it sometimes feels like my husband and I barely communicate throughout the day except for the odd text.

Five years ago, when iPhones entered the mainstream, a friend revealed that she and her husband had become “two ships in the night.” Not long after she made that comment, her marriage came to a messy close. When a relationship in your circle blows apart, you want to console your friend, tell her it’s going to be OK, but selfishly you’re wondering when this decline began and how close you are to the same fate.

In the 2015 book *Modern Romance*, actor/comedian Aziz Ansari spends more than 200 pages detailing how technology has reinvented the dating scene. Aided by sociologist >



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Eric Klinenberg, Ansari looks at how a new generation finds love and sex by way of a smartphone. In the back there is a mere 50 pages on how committed couples navigate the tech options available. Writes Ansari: “Technology hasn’t just changed how we find romance; it’s also put a new spin on the timeless challenges we face once we’re in a relationship.” No kidding.

“Couples that are formed pre-digital or post-digital are going to have different levels of comfort online,” says Jenna Jacobson, a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, who studies the impact of social media use. “Let’s say that one partner loves to share every single part of their day. The other partner might not be involved on any social media site. The difficulty is navigating what they both feel comfortable with.”

My other half isn’t on any form of social media and his online footprint is limited to things I’ve written about him (*s/h/z*). So did he tease me when I Insta’d cocktails the night of our eighth anniversary? Yes. But when he wanted to share vacation photos with his mom over dinner, he asked if I would show her my Instagram.

In 2014, the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C., released its “Couples, the Internet, and Social Media” report, which found that 25 per cent of married or partnered adults felt their partner was distracted by their cellphone when they were together. They felt phubbed.

Jacobson, a newlywed herself, feels strongly that technology is not the problem in any relationship; it’s how we use it. “This is an age-old story that’s repeated with every single technology.” I think of my mom, who watched a lot of sports in the name of hanging out with Dad but not once in their 50-plus years together connected by mobile phone. “If we were to look back and say the telephone is ruining relationships, would it even be a question today?” says Jacobson.

In our hectic lives, a lot of people just want some “me time,” explains Carmen Littlejohn, a psychotherapist with the Helix Healthcare Group in Toronto. “Most people’s way of being alone nowadays is to ‘check out’ through Netflix or Facebook or other digital ways...It’s a way to not be in demand to somebody.”

She’s onto something here. But so, surprisingly, is Ansari when he raises the two stages of romance: Passionate love and Companionate love. Brain scans have proven that in the first stage of your relationship, your brain’s pleasure centre lights up. Guess who falls into companionate love? Relationships like mine. When we look at pictures of our partners, the regions of our brain associated with anxiety are calm. “If passionate love is the coke of love, companionate

love is like having a glass of wine or smoking a few hits of some mild weed,” writes Ansari. This helps explain why someone like me—who enjoys a glass of Merlot—can be sequestered in her room on Pinterest.

Cheryl Harasymchuk, an assistant professor at Carleton University in Ottawa who studies issues related to avoidance and disengagement in relationships, cites the benefit to our connectivity. “I’ve heard more about technology providing another means of promoting intimacy,” she says. “For instance, if something great happens to a person when the partner is not there, technology allows people to include their partner in that moment.” The same applies to the mundane, like the change room selfies my husband sends when he needs help shopping.

I ask a 20-something colleague who met her boyfriend on OkCupid how she cuts through the digital noise in her new relationship. But technology is not noise to her. Social media and connectivity are part of the total package. “He had to be good at texting,” she says. “It’s a huge part of how I communicate.” Or, as Jacobson puts it: “We often like to [consider] the ‘real’ as offline and the online as sometimes less real,” she says. “Our online lives are real.”

The power of texting is also acknowledged in the Pew Research Center study, which found that 21 per cent of its survey subjects felt closer to their partner because of online exchanges or texts. All this reminds me of a digi-perk I take for granted: My husband is great at texting.

Bubbles of beauty and pearls of platitude appear at the most essential times in my day. If quality is more important than quantity, then maybe that’s OK some of the time. In fact, one of my most-loved photos is a screen capture of a random midday exchange. Bubble one: “Do you still love me?” Bubble two: “Yes I do.” □



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