

Our toxic smartphone addiction

 [chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-smartphone-addiction-wilhelm-1013-story.html](https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-smartphone-addiction-wilhelm-1013-story.html)

Heather Wilhelm

10/13/2017

When I think about social media, smartphones and other internet-based rabbit holes, I like to remember one of my favorite poems: “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota.” Written by James Wright and originally published in *The Paris Review*, this famous short verse opens with a sun-soaked pastoral scene, detailing those quiet and oft-overlooked moments of everyday magic.

“Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,

Asleep on the black trunk,

Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.

Down the ravine behind the empty house,

The cowbells follow one another

Into the distances of the afternoon.”

The sun begins to set. The poem moves on, tossing out a few more verdant images as it winds down. I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on. A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.

And then comes the last line, a sudden kick in the gut: *I have wasted my life.*

If there's a better one-line summary of our society's addiction to constant streams of often-useless information — and the smartphones that deliver those streams — I haven't seen it.

Who among us hasn't looked up at least once, smartphone in hand, slightly dazed, only to discover that precious bundles of minutes or hours have somehow slithered by, lost to all eternity, usually in exchange for no discernible enlightenment at all? A photo gets a new “like.” A Kardashian or a sports star or a president says something amusing or absurd. Strangers squabble. The phone tightens its leash. Are there any updates? Any infinitesimal variation on the news? We must check again, even though we know we shouldn't.

We are wasting our lives.

According to the latest data from Apple, smartphone users check in compulsively, averaging around 80 times a day. (A 2013 Kleiner Perkins report estimated the number at a whopping 150 times a day.) American adults eat, sleep and breathe media, according to a recent eMarketer survey, consuming an average of 12 hours a day.

“The smartphone has become a repository of the self,” wrote Nicholas Carr in the Oct. 6 *Wall Street Journal*, “recording and dispensing the words, sounds and images that define what we think, what we experience and who we are.” For many, this is increasingly true. It's also flat-out creepy. As Carr and a growing number of smartphone resisters note, our foremost national addiction isn't good for anyone's mental health.

Studies have linked smartphones to decreased concentration, lower problem-solving skills, a general sense of “brain drain” and depression. A growing number of Silicon Valley insiders — including Justin Rosenstein, who invented the Facebook “Like” button — are publicly pushing back against highly developed and intentionally addictive social-media apps that they compare to heroin.

If adults can't handle smartphone technology, how could kids possibly stand a chance? Despite this, and despite the fact that it seems highly questionable to hand an immature young person what is essentially a very expensive portable internet porn finder/social-media stalking system/mean girls text center, American kids are getting smartphones at earlier and earlier ages. The average age of acquisition, in fact, is currently 10 years old.

It's not working out well. Writing in the September issue of *The Atlantic*, Jean Twenge — the author of a new book on today's "superconnected kids" — argues that smartphones and children can make for a disastrous combination. "Between 2010 and 2016, the number of adolescents who experienced at least one major depressive episode leapt by 60 percent," she notes. Suicide deaths among young people, she writes, have also "risen sharply."

A survey funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse uncovered a likely culprit in these distressing trends. "The results could not be clearer," Twenge notes. "Teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy."

This seems, by the way, to be true for adults as well.

So why flock toward newer and bigger and "better" phones, and why give them to kids? Many parents, if they're honest, cite a reason as old as time: Everyone else is doing it. Kids who don't have a smartphone, the reasoning goes, will be left out.

But what if a group of families decided to flip the script, rallying together and pledging to hold off on smartphones until at least eighth grade? Brooke Shannon, an Austin, Texas, mom and a friend of mine, launched a movement called "Wait Until 8th."

Shannon says: "There is definitely strength in numbers when it comes to waiting on giving your child a smartphone. My daughter now has more than 50 peers waiting until at least eighth grade for a smartphone. She is not 'the only one,' and that makes it easier for her and me as a mom."

The Wait Until 8th pledge is now active in all 50 states. We probably need a similar pledge for adults that might limit phone-usage minutes, mandate certain "phone-off" zones, and outlaw phones from the dinner table. As Confucius should have said, "He who conquers the smartphone is the mightiest warrior." OK, fine: He actually said "He who conquers himself is the mightiest warrior." But when it comes to the contemporary smartphone debate, isn't that pretty much the same thing?

Heather Wilhelm is a National Review columnist.