

It's time to quit blaming smartphones

Americans are socially isolated. Digital devices at least allow us to interact.

By [Frank Lesko](#)

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Hardly a day goes by when I do not encounter at least one article bemoaning the "tragedy" brought upon us by smartphones and social media. If you believe the hype, today's youth are going to hell in a hand basket, lured by the incessant clicking and swiping of their ever-evolving digital devices. We are losing our very ability to interact with the people around us, these doomsday prophets warn.

And I get it—we are subjecting ourselves (especially our youth) to a profound social experiment. It's hard to say definitively what impact growing up immersed in digital-device use is going to have, but preliminary studies seem to indicate that they do affect our socialization and even our very brain chemistry. Social media contributes to a polarized society where it's all too easy to interact only with those with whom we already agree.

But we can also be led to think that somehow everything was just fine before the digital age. We can reach the faulty conclusion that kids were living in a social utopia where they played outside with other kids and where everyone sat on front porches singing, playing games, and listening to grandma's tales of yesteryear—and then along came smartphones and social media and all that was gone.

Except ... that's not how I experienced childhood at all.

I grew up as part of Gen X. I grew up in a world of shocking, mind-numbing social isolation. You can't blame digital devices, because they only existed in science fiction movies at the time. The World War II generation and baby boomers may have grown up in small country towns and tight-knit city neighborhoods, but virtually none of that made it to my generation. I grew up longing for it, and so did many of

my peers. Many people of my generation have labored intensely to discover and rediscover community through travel, intentional living situations, and all sorts of other social experiments. The need is huge. In fact, community was one of the reasons I initially got involved in Christian ministry—it seemed to promise stronger community connections than anything else in the secular world.

The World War II folks and baby boomers gave us the radio and television. They gave us air conditioning and climate control, which afforded us the ability to live locked in our own homes and automobiles, sealed off from the rest of the world. They gave us suburban sprawl, where kids could only interact with other kids if their parents drove them in a car to meet them at pre-appointed times. They gave us neighborhoods with pesticide-laden lawns where kids rarely played together outside. Older folks ran to the suburbs, away from the nosy drama of those tight-knit families and neighborhoods, thankful for the closeness they had growing up but anxious for some privacy. But my generation did not benefit from the closeness they ran from.

That is the world that existed when smartphones and social media arrived. It was a world hungry—dare I say, desperate—for community. Most kids from most countries around the world would be absolutely shocked to realize the level of social isolation that most American children experience. To compound matters, if a kid has any kind of shyness or social awkwardness, you have a recipe for a walking solitary confinement. Many American kids live in a quiet misery of profound isolation.

It is hard for most Americans to realize how socially isolated we are. Most Americans have gotten used to it, and many have found ways to cope, but there is nothing even remotely normal or healthy about it. In another country, a walk to the town market might involve lots of conversations and interactions along the way. In America, we are locked in the isolation chambers known as automobiles with the windows rolled up. After work and school, Americans lock themselves in their homes, often without even cracking a window, glued to their televisions but divorced from human contact. It's bad enough to live like this as an adult, but it's horrific to grow up this way.

Suddenly, the digital age happens. Into a world starving for social interaction, digital devices opened a door. Suddenly, that kid in his suburban bedroom alone could now chat with his friends or anyone else in the world. You can play games, share information, find a date, have long conversations, and discover the world. Family members displaced around the country and world due to a heavily globalized job

market can now stay in touch and be part of each other's daily lives. Instead of just passively watching a TV, smartphones and social media allow us a chance to at least *interact* with others. These devices may not be perfect, but they are better than the radio and television by the sheer fact that they are interactive rather than passive.

Smartphones and social media did not create the problem. They are a response to a problem that existed long before them. If you don't like it that your kid has his nose buried in his smartphone, instead of taking away the phone, you might want to make sure there are other options in his life for social interaction.

The irony is bitter: older generations glued to their television sets complaining about the younger generations interacting with others on their smartphones. If I had to pick, I'd say the younger folks are improving upon what was handed down to them.

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