

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Truth isn't the only victim of our digitally addicted

Having made it through our recent experience with Covid, I can't help but remember the dangerous and wacky behaviours and beliefs that were propounded, advancing both more therapies (sunlight, ivermectin, hydrogen peroxide, etc.) and less (no masks, no isolation, disregard of others), as well as contrary and conflicting views regarding vaccination. The illness, perhaps luckily, has settled to a more manageable state, but the tumult attending our experience has left us cranky and alienated.

I doubt that a recurrent epidemic or even a totally new affliction would find us any better at combat than with our first exposure.

We've begun to mull over why things went so poorly. There are likely many causes. We were afraid for our lives, not used to being so fallible and so close to economic instability. The illness effectively removed many of us from the support we count on from our work and the social structures of our lives.

I'll argue further that although we're already some decades into the computer-based revolution of our lives, this hasn't helped. With digital speed, we were able to find a hodge podge of diverse, often bizarre and unsupported opinions and were able to link up with vocal but inexperienced internet citizens who somehow made sense to us.

Truth has been a singular victim of our digitally enhanced lives, a notable but concerning development given our penchant for signalling our avid pursuit of veracity in conversation and in our political and general discourse. Science and academia may have had a tough time accommodating this shifting state of affairs, having long looked to support assertions regarding the world through observation, hypotheses and experimentation.

When it comes to social discourse, we've left much emphasis on truth behind. We've barged on in our digital evolution and have added new entertainment abilities to phone and internet, with glitzy, attention-grabbing social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) add-ons to our mundane lives. A common theme is a little excitement or dopamine support to the tedium of existence. Digitally enhanced, we proceed, buying things we mostly don't need, saying things that are often best left unsaid, signing on to schemes that are devious, petty or manifestly untrue.

We've only recently come to recognize that we have problems. Neil Postman argued that we are [*Amusing Ourselves to Death*](#), in a book which predated social media, and there have always been authors such as [Jaron Lanier](#) who warned us of the future. As I write this, I'd note that superheroes from the sports world, such as our own Connor McDavid, are appearing on television ads aimed at weaning school children from the 5.2 hours per day of screen time, which has evidently become the norm.

The backstory is an interesting one. Truth isn't the only victim of our digitally addicted world and direct harm to children has become impossible to disregard. Generation Z (born between 1997 through 2012) youngsters, in enormous numbers, report feeling lonely, anxious or suffering mixed anxiety and depression that has been found largely

related to early, extensive social media use along with severely compromised person-to-person interactions.

The most effective warning that childhood preoccupation with screens and digital images has become addictive and problematic has come from Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and author at New York University's Stern School of Business. Haidt specializes in determining how technology and social media are affecting young minds.

In [*Coddling of the American Mind \(2018\)*](#) and [*The Anxious Generation \(2024\)*](#), he proposed that altered childhood experiences with widespread adoption of smart phones, along with over-parenting, were major factors in a developing dilemma.

Haidt has proposed new norms for children in schools: no smart phones before high school, no social media before age 16, phone-free schools and more real-world responsibility.

The message of Haidt and others has hit home – some would say, finally – and constituencies as far away as Spain, Norway and Australia have found that smartphones compromise both the educational experience as well as mental health and have restricted their use.

The larger message, I'd contend, is that restricting all of us from marathon time in front of digital screens is long overdue. It's okay, and even admirable, to start with school-age children, but what about the rest of us? Loneliness, anxiety and alienation have become hallmarks of our time: the computer age needs guardrails.

We've been reluctant to develop these. I can hear the angry remonstrations of libertarians, much as I remember protests at seat-belt laws, but I think that our new technologies – all of them – put us at risk of preoccupation and neglect of our lives.

Motherhood: there's no substitute for the real thing. Secondly, the motivation – the business case – underlying our technologies is never completely transparent and merges with the devious and even ridiculous falsehoods intended to sway us politically or to prompt us to purchase the next elixir or doodad that may finally repair us.

It has become axiomatic that information is not wisdom and failure to recognize this may be our biggest deficiency.

If truth has fallen victim to our times, its blood-relative trust has suffered grievously as well. Our information ecosystem will have to change. Independent and credible journalism is needed.

I'll conclude on something I know little about. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is either here or close at hand.

Perhaps we'll be able to go to Mars?

If we can afford to.

But I wish we didn't have to.

Editor's note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author's and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.