



Digital books and the demon screen

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Katie Sparks argues that while indeed there are reasons to be concerned about children and excessive screen time, we may be judging the issue only from our privileged viewpoint



Think with me, if you will, of our world: a world full of screens.

Is it a terrifying thought? Are we moving inexorably towards the Orwellian dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? Are screens triggering addiction, depression, and anxiety, and impairing children's social skills?

Too much screen time is bad. Device addiction is real.

Both of these statements are true. But as fixed points of departure for how we view and use technology, especially where children are concerned, they limit ways of thinking about how we can and should be harnessing tech to enhance children's lives and encourage their development. While screens are used increasingly in schools for online lessons and coding classes, there is still much scope for making more digital books and audiobooks available, inside and outside the classroom.

It's worth pointing out that the demonisation of the screen is a very Western "thing". It's a social and moral view (always well meant) that can only be held by those of us privileged enough to have alternatives. Access to quality free schools. Libraries. Heritage sites. Money to buy books. Parents who can read, and who have the time and energy to worry about whether their children can read.

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For so many people in so many developing and poverty-stricken areas of the globe (and these are not "corners" of the world, but vast swathes), a device is not merely a screen but a window to the world. A window to knowledge, connection, better health, greater stability, financial security, new possibilities, and global belonging. Considering this, a world full of screens can only be a good thing.

A mobile device is potential in their pocket. Take, for instance, a small town in rural Guatemala, a place where I have lived and worked. How rural? Mostly impassable roads to the city. No mail service. No running water. What it does have in spades is human potential, and access to affordable or second-hand devices.



Builders use WhatsApp to send invoices. Drivers text schedules for delivering goods from local businesses. Non-profits use mobiles to track and monitor protected wildlife. Aspiring filmmakers and photographers finally have cameras of their own. Televisions and laptops are beyond these villagers' means, but a mobile device is attainable, and more and more families rely on them to take part in their communities, in business, and in the world.

And the kids? If they're lucky, they attend school for a few years. The schools, of course, are poor, with few resources. The teachers themselves may have had little schooling. There's no help to be found at home, as so many parents are overworked and illiterate. There's no town library. There's no bookshop. There's no Amazon.

Books, then, are precious, expensive, and difficult to obtain.

I know a man in this rural Guatemalan village named Daniel. Daniel and his wife share a dirt-floor, one-room hut with their six living children. He speaks a local Maya language and knows very little Spanish. He sells ice cream from a small, refurbished, very clean refrigerated trolley he wheels proudly about town. Business has grown since he saved up and bought a phone so that schools, families, and shops can book a time for him to bring and sell treats. Sales have rocketed. His kids are back in school, but Daniel and his wife still can't read.

However, their children are learning, bit by bit, and when they are at their home without books, they can use their dad's phone. They can read news, or Wikipedia, or stories, or watch videos, or listen to stories or music. They can discover the world through a tiny little window that so many of us take for granted, or feel guilty about using, or decry as a social poison.

Will Daniel's children find inappropriate material online? Possibly. Will they access things they shouldn't? Most probably. Will the benefits to this family (the children, but also the parents who have lived in hardship and deprivation for so long, with no escape - physical, mental, or emotional) far outweigh the negatives? Absolutely.

"We have the opportunity to make stories and information available to all children"

If the aim of global literacy is a driving force in publishing - and it should be - we must continue to embrace digital publishing as an opportunity to reach not only these rural, isolated communities, but those closer to home. In 2019, the National Literacy Trust published research showing that an estimated 400,000 children in the UK did not own a book of their own. At the time, there were an estimated 12.7 million under-16s in the UK; that means over 3% of children lived in a bookless house.

Then, of course, there are those who do have a book, or a few books, but no one who will read to them. Or those without books at the appropriate reading level. Those with reading difficulties or learning disabilities. For these children, wide access to accessibly priced digital books and audiobooks is essential.

"But, libraries!" I hear you shout. Yes, libraries. Always libraries! Libraries, especially in schools, are critical to children's wellbeing and development. They should be well stocked and well funded. Community libraries are vital for fostering a lively, vibrant community. And yet, there are many children out there, whether we want to admit it or not, who do not have a parent or carer who will help a library card find its way into their child's hand. Some simply do not have the time, the energy, or, sadly, the inclination.

Finally, what about those children who have a mobile device of their own at age 8, but who still read at a level far below their peers? They are indeed out there. We could continue the fruitless and futile campaign against the Demon Screen, or we could take a different, perhaps more balanced view. Could we learn to see the screen for what it is to so many in the developing world: a window to stories and information from the world



beyond?

In publishing, we have the opportunity and means to make stories and information more accessible to all children. They cannot use these wonderful resources if they cannot find them. The simple fact is, they're already looking out the window. It's up to us to give them the best view possible.

Dr Katie Sparks grew up in Texas. She has a PhD in Comparative Literature from UCL and has worked in fundraising, project and property management, academia, and the audio department at Pan Macmillan. She is now CEO of Cloudaloud, the children's audiobook subscription service.

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