

April 29, 2011

Quality Time, Redefined

By ALEX WILLIAMS



Yana Paskova for The New York Times

Michael Combs, second from left, and Dianne Vavra, with their children, Tom and Eve Combs, in their living room in **Huntington, N.Y.**

IT was a vision of family togetherness out of a [Norman Rockwell](#) painting, if Rockwell had worked in the era of WiFi. After a taco dinner one Wednesday in March, Dianne Vavra and her family retreated to the living room of their Cape Cod-style house in Huntington, N.Y., where they curled up on the spacious beige sofa amid hand-stitched quilts as an icy rain pelted the windows.

Ms. Vavra, a cosmetics industry executive in Manhattan, looked up from her [iPad](#), where she was catching up on the latest spring looks at [Refinery29.com](#), and noticed that her husband, Michael Combs, was transfixed, streaming the [N.C.A.A.](#) men's basketball tournament on his laptop. Their son, Tom, 8, was absorbed by the Wii game Mario Kart on the widescreen television. Their daughter, Eve, 10, was fiddling with a game app called the Love Calculator on an [iPod](#) Touch. "The family was in the same room, but not *together*," Ms. Vavra recalled.

One family. One room. Four screens. Four realities, basically. While it may look like some domestic version of “The Matrix” — families sharing a common space, but plugged into entirely separate planes of existence through technology — a scene like this has become an increasingly familiar evening ritual. As a result, the American living room in 2011 can often seem less like an oasis for shared activity, even if that just means watching television together, than an entangled intersection of data traffic — everyone huddled in a cyber-cocoon.

Call it what you will, it is a wholly different form of quality time.

The culture of home-based iDistraction has already become a pop-culture trope, and no wonder: Never has there been so much to consume, on so many devices. On a recent episode of ABC’s “Modern Family,” the character Claire Dunphy explodes when she tries to serve the family breakfast, only to be ignored by a husband adjusting his fantasy baseball roster on his iPad, a son playing video games on his PSP and two daughters e-mailing each other from across the table. “O.K., now that’s it, everybody, gadgets down, now!” she declares. “You’re all so involved in your little gizmos, nobody is even talking. Families are supposed to talk!”

Haley, the eldest daughter, writes to her sister, Alex, “Mom’s insane,” as everyone returns to their screens.

[Billy Crystal](#), in an interview with [Jon Stewart](#) on “The Daily Show,” joked that couples these days have no qualms about texting someone else during sex — “Oh, is that you!” “Yes!” “LOL!”

CERTAINLY, people have been hyper-wired as long as there have been laptops, and the tendency became more pronounced with the advent of wireless Internet. Nearly 60 percent of American families with children own two or more computers, and more than 60 percent of those have either a wired or wireless network to connect to the Internet, according to studies by the [Pew Research Center](#)’s Internet and American Life Project. A third of all Americans log on from home multiple times a day, nearly twice the number that did so in 2004.

On top of that, iPads have inundated homes since they were introduced a year ago, as have fast-downloading smartphones. Media companies are jumping on board to make sure their content is available at any time, on any device. In the last six months, Netflix has added thousands of movies available for instant streaming, via its Watch Instantly option. In March, Time Warner Cable made selected channels available on an iPad app. Subscribers to MLB.TV can stream major league baseball games any day of the week through a \$14.99 [iPhone](#) app. And Amazon recently announced a plan to make e-books from 11,000 public libraries available on its [Kindle](#) this year.

That amounts to more screen time in homes where everyone already seems glued to their BlackBerrys or sucked in by Facebook, Twitter, blogs — or work.

It’s a profound shift, and one that is not lost on cultural theorists who study the online habits of Americans.

“The transformation of the American living room into a multiscreen communication and entertainment hub” promises to “change our domestic sphere,” said Lutz Koepnick, a media professor at [Washington University](#) in St. Louis who studies digital culture. “Individual family members might find themselves contently connected to parallel worlds almost all the time.”

Indeed, Brad Kahn, an environmental consultant in Seattle, said he often communicates with his wife, Erin, by e-mail even when they are seated a few feet apart on the sofa with their laptops. He will cut her off if she starts instructing him orally about what he calls his “honey-do” list of weekend chores, he said, and ask her to send it electronically.

To Mr. Kahn, 40, it’s simply more efficient. “If I misunderstood any directions, having a written record can be very useful in maintaining marital bliss,” he said.

Such behavior is not limited to the sofa. Evan Gotlib, who runs advertising sales at [blip.tv](#), an Internet company in Manhattan, recalled sitting in bed recently with his wife, Lindsey Pollak, as both were using iPads. He was playing an online version of Scrabble against his sister, Val, remotely, and at one point said, “Val just got a 46-point word!”

“Ugh,” his wife said, “she just hit a 32-pointer against me.” At that moment, Mr. Gotlib realized his wife was also playing her own game against his sister.

Typically, at their home in Manhattan, Polly Blitzer Wolkstein and her husband, Mark Wolkstein, settle into the sofa around 7 p.m., perch their respective laptops on opposite armrests, place their BlackBerrys between them and surrender to their multiplicity of screens, often until midnight.

If they’re not catching up on work — he is a partner at financial research firm, she runs the Beauty Blitz Web site — Mr. Wolkstein, 38, might be half-watching one show on [Hulu](#) on his laptop, another movie on Netflix on his iPad and carrying on a game of Angry Birds. Ms. Blitzer Wolkstein, 35, will be right there beside him, tapping out texts on her BlackBerry while she chases down bonus footage of reality shows on the network Web sites.

Even efforts to have a date night, when they watch the same movie at the same time, go nowhere.

“We gradually migrate to polar ends of the couch, where we balance our laptops and iPads on the arm of the couch, then cyber-indulge during the entire movie, and have to rinse-and-repeat the next night because we missed the entire thing,” Ms. Blitzer Wolkstein said in an e-mail. “We’ve been meaning to watch a documentary about ventriloquists called ‘Dumbstruck,’ and tonight is supposed to be our 4th attempt.”

Sometimes they hold hands while looking at their screens. But failing that, the couple has developed a form of physical shorthand, an “ ‘I’m still here’ signal” in which “one of us will tap the other one a couple of times with an index finger.”

It’s not hard to interpret such moments as evidence that technology has become an alien, and alienating, force in the contemporary home. That view has no shortage of proponents.

Prominent among them is Sherry Turkle, a professor of social studies of science and technology at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), and the author of “Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other.” The book argues that people’s reliance on technology to establish emotional intimacy — whether by “friending” strangers on Facebook or nuzzling robotic Furby pets — can actually increase our sense of feeling inundated and empty. “The new technologies allow us to ‘dial down’ human contact, to titrate its nature and extent,” she writes.

It’s a concern shared by Ben Schippers, who runs a software development company in Brooklyn and spends many evenings with his wife, immersed in virtual worlds of their own.

Such evenings, he admits, are rare these days. His wife, Hedda Burnett, is attending veterinary school at [Iowa State University](#), so they manage to see each other in person only every few weeks and otherwise keep in touch over [Skype](#). Mr. Schippers finds evenings oddly similar, whether his wife is in Ames, Iowa, or in New York beside him. Either way, “She’s on her LCD, I’m on my LCD,” he said.

He wondered about a cost in emotional intimacy in American homes, as more households adopt a similar evening ritual. “What does a television in the bedroom do to someone’s sex life?” he asked. Now screens are popping up between people throughout the house.

James Gleick, the author of the new book “The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood,” said he has been known to spend evenings at home with his wife, each tapped into their own iPad, white cords dangling from their ears. In the near future, he said jokingly, “A new skill that will be taught by relationship counselors will be knowing when and how to interrupt one’s loved ones: Is a particular joke you’ve just read on Twitter worth her yanking out her earbuds?”

Joanne Cantor, a professor emerita and a director of the Center for Communication Research at the [University of Wisconsin](#), suggests it’s almost as if adults and older children are reverting to a form of “parallel play,” the developmental stage when toddlers sit beside each other in silence, playing with toys of their own. Even in the very recent past, when family members would be watching TV together, she said, “We all had conversations during the commercials, even if it was just to say, ‘Wasn’t that stupid?’ ”

THEN again, this is not the first time that the appearance of home media has caused an outcry — perhaps needlessly, in hindsight.

“If you go back 200 years, there were similar complaints about technological devices, but it was books at that time,” Dr. Koepnick said. “The family room filled with different people reading books created a lot of concerns and anxiety, particularly regarding women, because all of a sudden they were on their own, their minds were drifting into areas that could no longer be controlled.”

Likewise, the emergence of television led to decades of hand-wringing over the specter of American families transformed into sitcom-addicted zombies. Dr. Koepnick also points out that those evenings of family television usually involved a struggle over the channel knob, or later, the remote.

In that light, iPads and laptops can be a tool of democratization, if not détente. Now, he said, “everyone has their own device, streams their own films, their own media, so there’s no longer a struggle or challenge within the family over what is it we want to see.”

Even before iPads, there was evidence that Web-centric home life might not, in fact, be eating away at family unity. Barry Wellman, a professor of sociology at the University of Toronto who studies the effect of technology on social communities, said that his research supports the findings of studies like a 2009 survey of 4,000 people by a Canadian market research company indicating that people believe technology is bringing the family together, not pulling it apart, by a substantial margin.

This might be even truer in households nowadays, when the proliferation of devices and media options makes it easier for family members to pursue their interests online while seated in the same room, Dr. Wellman said.

Behavior inside a cyber-cocoon can be surprisingly interactive. “There’s a lot of, ‘Hey, look at this!’ ‘Let’s plan our trip to Vegas!’” he said. “People get up from their laptops, come together on one screen: ‘Hey, look what I just found, isn’t this weird?’ It isn’t the image of one person huddled in isolation with their screen.”

Robert Rosenthal, who runs a marketing company in Manhattan, also recalls his youth, when his mother had to call around to friends’ houses in the evening to find him. “When everyone is doing their digital thing out in the open,” he said, “the total death of privacy is a parental advantage.” Now, he usually just needs to check the far corners of his living room. There’s Ariana, 15, doing her homework online or poking friends on Facebook. There’s Veronica, 11, iChatting with friends, next to his wife, Carolyn Kremins, who might be shoe shopping on Gilt.com on her MacBook, while Mr. Rosenthal, himself, catches up on work e-mail.

Mr. Gotlib, of Manhattan, said that new online hardware and media options allow him and his wife to “to experience new levels of closeness.” In recent weeks, they sat next to each other in the evening; he was wearing

headphones and watching an entire season of “The Wire” that he’d downloaded off iTunes on his iPad, while she read “The Art of Immersion” by Frank Rose on hers.

“Three or four years ago, I would have been downstairs watching TV, and she would have been upstairs reading,” Mr. Gotlib said. “I guarantee that we spend 80 percent more time together because of the iPad.”

Rather than a sign of a dysfunctional relationship, such behavior can actually be interpreted as the sign of health, said Ronald Levant, a professor of psychology at the University of Akron. “People who think every minute we’re together we have to connect are going to drive each other crazy, because we all need some alone time, no matter how compatible a couple might be,” Dr. Levant said. “At a certain point in your relationship,” he added, “your task to keeping the relationship vital and refreshed is managed togetherness and separateness. Technology could be used as a tool to assist that.”

In the end, that was the conclusion that Ms. Vavra, the cosmetics executive, reached after a series of nights like the one after taco night. Even though she and her husband were moved to declare “tech-free Sundays” so they could pursue outdoor activities, far from the clutter of devices, she has learned to appreciate the interchange that comes from nights when everyone is peering up from screens of their own.

“There’s a lot of crossover,” she said. “My daughter will be doing something on the iTouch, and say ‘Mommy, look at this!’ I’ll be doing something on my iPad, and she’s interested in what I’m doing. And my son is excited because he ‘un-locked’ something on Mario Kart. I don’t know exactly what that means, but we’re all there to witness the unlocking.”

Arguably, she said, an evening like that can bring more closeness than a night spent huddling over a board game back in the days of analog.

“ ‘Together time’ in the past was sometimes an effort, and a forced moment, where we would schedule it — ‘O.K., after dinner every night at 7 we’re going to watch this or play this,’ and the kids would say, ‘But Mom, I wanted to do this,’ ” Ms. Vavra recalled. “Now, it’s not forced at all. It just organically happens. Everyone gets to do their own thing, rather than, ‘Do we have to play Clue again?’ ”