SMARTPHONES · 1 day ago

Steve Hilton: Smartphones have turned us into tech-addicted zombies. Here's why we should ban them for kids

By **Steve Hilton | Fox News**

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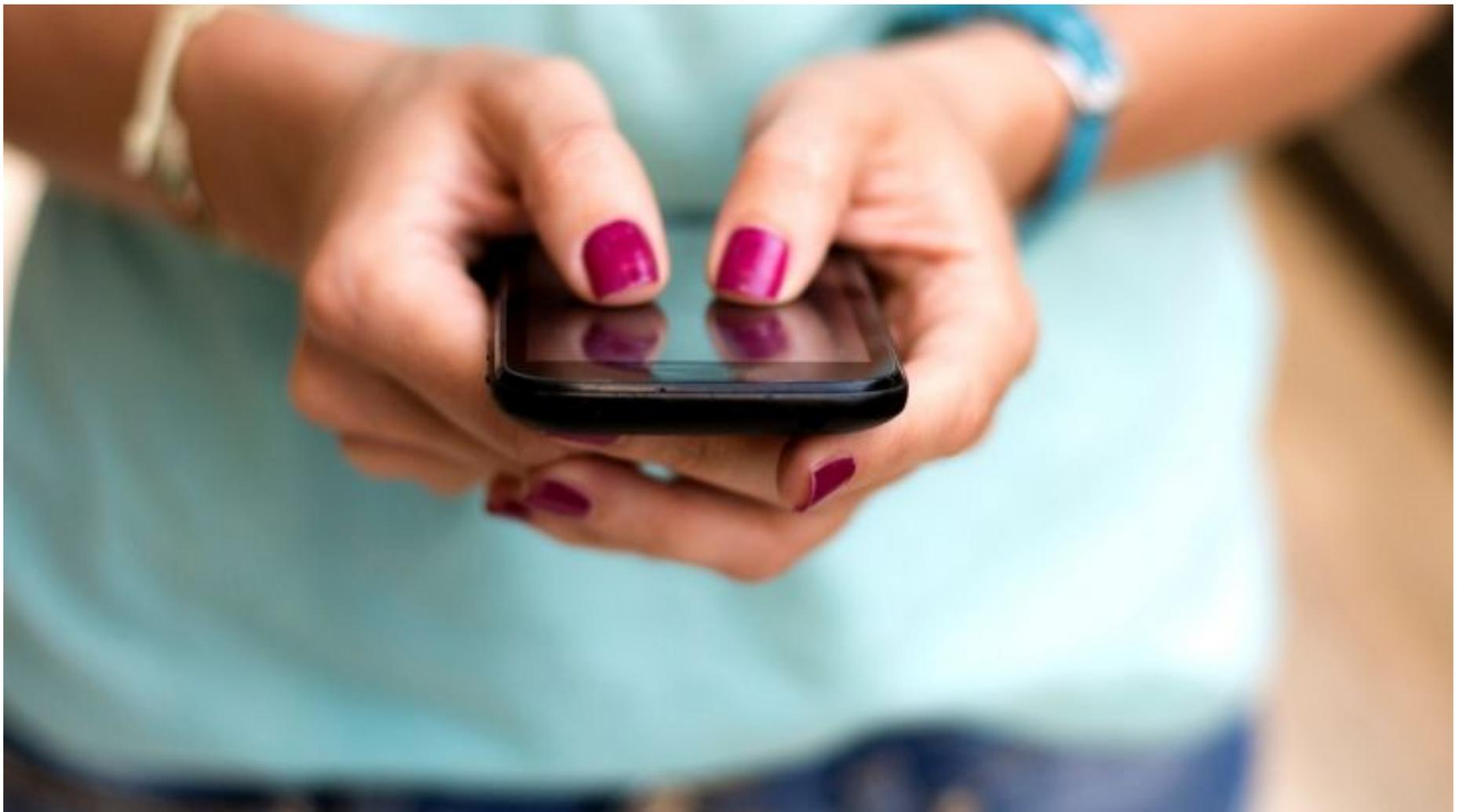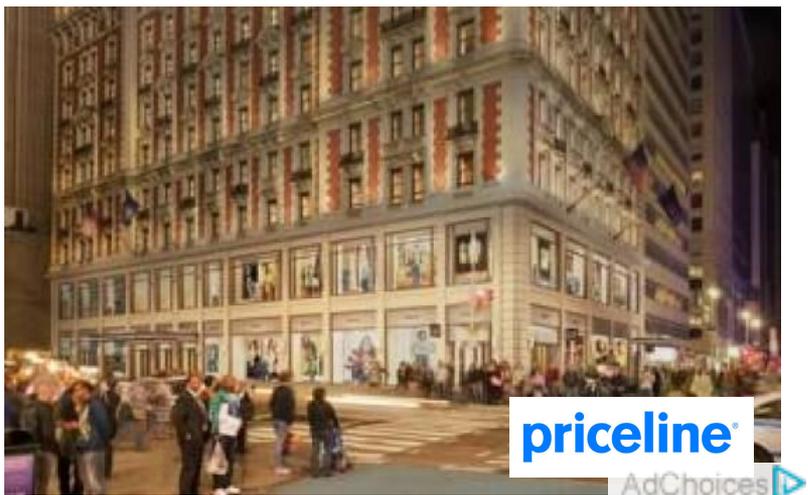
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A few weeks ago on "The Next Revolution" on Fox News Channel, we debated the impact of technology on children. My guest, Dr. Jean Twenge, shared shocking research from her latest book, which has a rather wonderful title: "iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood."

According to Twenge – and her research is backed up by numerous other studies – the use of smartphones is changing childhood in fundamental and deeply negative ways.

I wanted to talk to her about this topic because it's one that I've long been interested in – and where I have views that many consider to be somewhat extreme.

In my own book, "More Human – Designing a World Where People Come First," I looked at the way unsupervised access to the internet is exposing children to dark and dangerous forms of online pornography. This leads to premature sexualization that has a devastating impact on young people's attitudes to sex and relationships.

I wrote that unsupervised internet access is actually setting back the progress our society has made on gender equality. Early access to online porn is leading boys to think of girls as sexual objects, always available for male gratification.

For these and other reasons, I made the case in "More Human" that we should not allow children to access the internet unsupervised. What does that mean in practice? Just as we ban smoking and drinking for under 16, because we want to shield young people from their harmful effects, we should do the same for smartphones.

Most parents don't want their kids to have smartphones in the first place. But parents worry about the social stigma of their child being the only one without a phone. A total ban would help parents do what they want to do anyway.

But just this week, we heard something that made me think: this isn't just about children. It's about adults too.

Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, recently revealed something that is widely known within Silicon Valley. And as the co-founder and CEO of a tech company myself, I hear it all the time. The revelation? The aim of tech firms is to make their products "addictive."

As Tucker Carlson noted on his own Fox News show, the bosses of Big Tobacco knew their product was addictive too. They just weren't as open about it as Sean Parker.

As viewers of "The Next Revolution" know, despite (or perhaps because of) living in Silicon Valley and running a tech firm, I'm a critic of technology's impact on society. I myself don't have a cellphone. But I nevertheless recognize the positive things that technology brings.

Facebook (disclosure: my wife is a senior executive there) has enabled a previously unimaginable flourishing of small businesses – including my own – by making it possible for them to reach

customers in affordable ways.

Google (disclosure: my wife was once a senior executive there) has contributed to the greatest and fastest spread of knowledge in human history.

Uber (disclosure: yes, you've guessed it, my wife worked there too) is creating new ways for people to boost their income, as well as democratizing transportation for millions.

But if a tech skeptic like me can appreciate the positives, I think it's time for the tech evangelists to accept the negatives too.

In any discussion of technology, you hear the same argument: You can't turn the clock back and you can't put the genie back in the bottle.

Maybe not. But there are steps we can take to limit the social harm caused by this industry, just like we do with others. And that brings us back to Big Tobacco and the commercialization of addiction.

Let's start by being precise about the comparison. When it comes to Big Tech, the real transformation in addictive behavior has come about not through the internet itself, or the businesses that have grown to dominate it. It has come through the device that more and more people use to access the internet: the smartphone.

It's the smartphone that has turned adults and children alike into tech-addicted zombies, dumbly swiping and jabbing at their screens, oblivious to the world around them.

It's the smartphone that has trapped people in this constant, miserable hamster-wheel of updates and notifications and self-destructive comparisons with friends and celebrities, and the virtual demolition of any remaining barriers between work and personal life.

It's the smartphone that is responsible for one of the most depressing – and increasingly ubiquitous – sights of the modern age: a family sitting together but totally detached from one another, engaged with their screens rather than the people closest to them.

Of course many companies now make smartphones. But it was the iPhone that first made them so irresistibly addictive. Apple's Steve Jobs, idolized by so many as a hero, probably did more to undermine humanity than any other business leader in history.

If smartphones are the new smoking, here are four practical ways we can learn from the success of anti-smoking efforts and reduce the damage to mental health that smartphones cause:

Ban smartphones for kids. They should never have unsupervised access to the internet. There's no reason that children need smartphones; if parents are concerned about staying in touch with their children, they can still give them feature phones without internet access.

Require all smartphone makers to show regular mental health warnings prominently on screens after a certain amount of usage.

Tax phone usage and direct the proceeds towards mental health programs that educate people about the safe use of technology, and help those who have been hurt by it.

Restrict smartphone use in public spaces. It's absurd that cities around the world now have to introduce safety measures to prevent people from getting hit by cars because pedestrians are walking around buried in their phones.

Of course these measures would not solve all the problems associated with smartphones. But they would help reduce the social harm imposed by technology, while ensuring we still enjoy its many social and economic benefits.

We'll be debating these ideas this Sunday on "The Next Revolution" at 9 p.m. EST on FNC. Hope you can join us!

Steve Hilton is the host of FOX News Channel's "The Next Revolution with Steve Hilton" (Sundays at 9PM/ET). Follow him on Twitter @stevehiltonx.

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