

The Winter of Our Disconnect

How three **totally wired** teenagers (and a mother who **slept with her iPhone**) **pulled the plug on their technology** and **lived to tell the tale**



Susan Maushart

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Chapter One

Who We Are, and Why We Pressed 'Pause'

I love technology
But not as much as you, you see.
But I still love technology,
Always and forever

Kip's Wedding Song, *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004)

WHEN I FIRST announced my intention to pull the plug on our family's entire armoury of electronic weaponry – from the ittiest bittiest iPod shuffle to my son's seriously souped-up gaming PC (the computing equivalent of a Dodge Ram) – my three kids didn't blink an eye. Looking back, I can understand why. They didn't hear me.

Well, they *are* teenagers. And they were busy. Uploading photos from last night's gathering, stalking a potential boyfriend's ex-girlfriend's Facebook friends, watching Odie the Talking Pug on YouTube ('I ruuuv ooooo,' he howls to David Letterman). 'Guys, are you listening?' I persisted.

'Can't you see we're doing homework, Mum?' my son replied irritably.

To be fair, it was the kind of thing I say a lot. Such as, 'That's it – you're grounded for life!' or 'Wait till your father gets home, young lady' (and I've been divorced for fourteen years). It probably sounded to them like just another in a long line of empty threats. It even sounded that way to me, to be honest. The urge to do a full-scale digital detox had been building for years. But it was more in the nature of a wistful but essentially ridiculous fantasy – like having a torrid affair with the Dalai Lama, or learning to tie a scarf four ways.

And then I reread *Walden*. (Note to self: friends don't let friends reread Thoreau during an oestrogen low.)

Walden – the story of the most famous stint in rehab in literary history – is my favourite book in the whole world, and I try to read it at least as often as I have a pap smear. I love *Walden* for lots of reasons, but mostly for its economy – the way it distils life and language to its most intoxicating essentials. You probably already know that it was written by transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, who left his hometown of Concord, Massachusetts in 1844 to conduct 'an experiment in living' in the woods near Walden Pond. He lived there for two years in a wooden hut he built with his own hands, subsisting mainly on a monkish diet of wheaten cakes and pond fish. No neighbours. No running water. And, needless to say, no kids.

To be honest, I'd been thinking about running away to the woods myself a lot towards the end of 2008. It wasn't just the three teenagers I was wrangling: Anni, who'd just turned eighteen (terrifyingly, the legal drinking age in Western Australia, where we live); Bill, fifteen, the man of the house (in his own mind, at least); and Sussy, the baby, fourteen ('Juliet's age when she got married, Mum,' as she constantly reminded me).

They were at tricky ages, to be sure. But then, at age fifty,

so was I. A career journalist, I was now part of the brand-new podcasting platform for ABC Radio. I loved the challenge of spitting out a weekly program, and I especially loved mastering the digital technology that modern broadcasting entails. What I didn't love was the huge time pressure. I was away from home more than I'd ever been since I'd started having babies, and the sense that I was losing control of my house and its contents – i.e. my kids – was ominous.

At the same time, our media habits had reached a scary kind of crescendo. It wasn't just the way the girls were becoming mere accessories of their own social-networking profiles, as if real life were simply a dress rehearsal (or, more accurately, a photo op) for the next status update; or the fact that my son's domestic default mode was set to 'illegal download', and his homework, which he'd insisted he needed a quadcore gaming computer and high-speed broadband to complete, was getting lost in transmission – although that was all part of it.

Thinking back, I realise there was no one breaking point, no single epiphany or *a ha!* moment, but rather a series of such moments: scenes and stills I can scroll through in no particular order of importance, like a digital slideshow set to shuffle.

The abiding image of the back of Bill's head, for example, as he sat, enthroned before his PC in the region formerly known as the family room. Or the soundtrack of the conversations we'd been having for the last year or so, the ones that began with me saying anything at all ('Have you done your homework?' 'Are you still enrolled in high school?' 'Can you please put down your weapon and press "pause" now? It's dinnertime') and ended with him replying, 'Yeah. What?'

Maybe it was the evening the videoclip playing on the

corner of Sussy's desktop unexpectedly waved and called out gaily, 'Hi, Susan!' It turned out to be a school friend streaming herself live on webcam via Skype. When my vital signs restabilised, I moved swiftly from simple fear to profound panic. What other visitors were logging onto her bedroom, in real time, full colour and stereo sound, while I slept?

Anni generally hit the trends first and most furiously. Always precocious, she'd been the first in her school to launch into MySpace way back in Year 10. (Not content with her own profile, she'd speedily created one for Jesus Christ [Relationship Status: It's Complicated] and another for Rupert, our pug [Favourite Movie: *Men in Black*].) At eighteen, she was still bingeing on social networking – Facebook being her drug of choice – and was also prone to sudden-onset gaming benders. Most recently, it was the online multiplayer word game called TextTwist. I'd watch her shoulders tense as she stabbed the keys with a viciousness normally reserved for conversations about curfews. And when she started gaining on her goal to become the world's number-one player, her jubilation had (for me) a disturbing edge. Watching her rapt, LCD-lit eyes, I couldn't help but think of Nero updating his status while Rome burned.

My own patterns were getting a little weird too. I never thought I'd be the kind of single mother who'd openly sleep with her iPhone, but . . . yeah. (I told myself it was no different from reading a book in bed – which, if I hadn't been watching feature-length movies and shopping for underwear, may well have been true.) In fact, if I didn't drag my laptop, a pair of speakers, my digital recorder and a camera in too, I sometimes felt a little lonely. I told myself I was just doing my job. But there were times I looked less like a journalist than some demented IT technician in a nightie. Good times, good times.

However, it wasn't until I started surfing the net, replying to text messages, listening to podcasts and, on one memorable occasion, doing a live radio interview – all the while 'otherwise engaged' in the loo – that I admitted I had a problem. I was using media to (sob) self-medicate. I was the Amy Winehouse of Windows Live Messenger. Was it time to check myself in to rehab?

There was other stuff that was bothering me too. We were eating meals as a family less and less often. Never, if you want to get technical about it. The girls were either splurge-snacking or experimenting with weird diets. For days on end I swear Sussy ate nothing but condiments. Bill – a.k.a. the Cereal Killer – seemed to survive largely on Weet-Bix and instant noodles, foods that shared a common, disturbing resemblance to roof insulation.

They were still having friends over, but more and more of their socialising took the form of little knots of spectators gathered around the cheery glow of YouTube – or, worse, dispersed into separate corners, each to his own device. Their sleep patterns were heading south too – hardly surprising given the alerts from their three cellphones were intermittently audible through the night, chirping like a cadre of evil crickets.

And there were other things they'd hit the pause button on. Music – either playing it or listening to it as anything other than the background buzz to an instant messaging exchange. Books. Exercise. Conversation. And that other thing. Whaddaya call it? Oh, yeah. Life.

Although my own media habits were hardly immaculate, I could at least remember a time when things had been different. Simpler. More direct. Less tangled up with freaking USB cables. I found myself fantasising about what life would be like in our house if I pulled the plug once

and for all, hurtling us cold turkey into wi-fi withdrawal – myself and my omnipresent information IV included.

And at that stage, it *was* a fantasy. As a journalist and author, my livelihood depends on technology. People who wax nostalgic about a golden age of any kind, whether technological or political or cultural, have always seriously annoyed me. It's like listening to my mother talking about going to the movies for a quarter and having change left over to buy a hamburger and a Coke and, for all I know, stock options in MGM. The way I see it, it's hard enough to live in the present moment without somebody trying to drag you back to some sepia-tinged, hyper-idealised pseudotopia that is usually three parts 'La Vie en Rose' to one part irritable bowel syndrome. Every mythical 'golden age', I have always believed, was exactly that. Mythical.

I grew up in the sixties and seventies, and although I have fond memories of *I Love Lucy*, instant mashed potatoes and the Latin mass (in no particular order of importance), I do NOT believe my own childhood was superior to that of my own children. Parents and kids lived in two separate worlds in those days. That had its plusses, sure – like when you jumped on your bike and went to play at your friend's house till puberty, and nobody panicked. But it also had its minuses. Like most everybody else in my generation, I watched way too much dumb black-and-white TV, ate ridiculous snackfood – come on, aerosol cheese? – and wouldn't have dreamed of confiding what I really felt and thought to a grown-up.

So nostalgia for 'the way we were' isn't one of my weaknesses. I don't believe in avoiding your own reality, and I don't believe in the healing power of deprivation. The temptation to fix our family's discontents by ripping the modem from its socket smacked of both these fallacies.

Plus, I was menopausal. Sweet reason was not exactly what you'd call my strong suit.

If it hadn't been for Thoreau – or, more accurately, Sherman Paul, who wrote the introduction to my well-thumbed Riverside edition – I would probably have put away the idea with the rest of my hare-brained maternal schemes.* It was Paul's succinct explanation of why Thoreau took to the woods in the first place that was the tipping point. 'He had reduced the means of life,' Paul had written, 'not because he wanted to prove he could go without them, or to disclaim their value in enriching life, but because they were usually factitious – they robbed one of life itself.'

Thoreau's inspired mania for simplifying life, in other words, was just like Michaelangelo's gift for 'simplifying' a chunk of stone: 'I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.' It was an act of creation and courage – not destruction, not fear. By isolating himself at Walden Pond, Thoreau hadn't run away from life. He'd run towards it. Why couldn't we leave our lives of quiet, digital desperation and do the same?

Now that I'd done the reframe – it wasn't something I'd be doing *to* my family, it was something I'd be doing *for* them! – I couldn't wait to begin. There was only one thing stopping me.

Oh, all right. Three things.



Anni, Bill and Sussy, like most teenagers, live in a pre-Copernican universe. They are convinced the sun revolves around them. As their mother, I have done little

* A family uniform involving brown felt and Velcro; eating breakfast for dinner and dinner for breakfast, etc.

to challenge this view. So when I finally worked up the courage to spring The Experiment on them for real, I chose my moment carefully. The stakeholders would need to be in a good mood. There would need to be lots of distractions: lights, music, refined sugar, whatever it took. And there would need to be witnesses.

Gracetown, Western Australia – go on, Google it – is a remote and ridiculously tiny coastal community on the southwest coast of Australia. It is renowned for its jaw-dropping Indian Ocean beaches, fearsome surfbreaks and curious lack of normal utilities. Gracetown is 'electrified', but has no municipal water or gas supply – each house has its own rainwater tank and gas bottles – and no cellphone or internet coverage. A persistent teenager climbing to the cliffside community's highest peak might get reception for a minute or two – and of course they're *all* persistent – but, that aside, we're talking Walden Pond with an Aussie accent.

So choosing to spend Christmas at Gracetown with our BFF (Best Friend Family) the Revells wasn't exactly a coincidence.

We'd arrived a few days early to settle into the rhythm. I'd insisted that everybody pack light, even the girls. It was one roll-on trunk of hair products each, I told them sternly, and no exceptions. And when Bill asked me if I'd seen his Nintendo DS, I thought, okay, this is my moment. I took a deep breath, looked him in the eye . . . and lied. I said I had no idea where it was. I had, in fact, hidden it at the bottom of a box of disused printer drivers the previous night, may the Good Lord have mercy upon my soul. 'Let's read books in the car, honey,' I suggested brightly. He muttered something under his breath. It was either 'good' or 'gay', and I was pretty sure I knew which. In the end, I hauled out the iTrip, and we listened to podcasts on the three-hour car journey south – public radio WBEZ

Chicago's 'This American Life' (my favourite radio show on any hemisphere), 'The Hamish and Andy Show', 'The Moth'. Just being in a small space, listening to the same medium, made it feel like an old-fashioned family holiday already. But in a good way, in a good way.

Maybe I'd choked on the Nintendo thing, but the car trip had renewed my courage. Gracetown was the perfect setting in which to do the deed, even down to its name, with its faintly fundamentalist-slash-Elvis-impersonator overtones. It was just a case of choosing my moment. Christmas Day was only a few days hence, I reflected Grinchishly. Why not lower the boom then?

My dark thoughts about going off the grid dated as far back as Anni's four-year-old fixation with a certain 'Lady Lovely Locks' video, featuring characters with names such as 'Shining Glory' and 'Furball', and fiercely hair-driven plotlines. At the same time, like every other parent of toddlers, I was grateful for the thirty-minute break. (Bill's first sentence, which he bellowed solemnly at 5.15 every morning, was 'Watch *White!*' – as in, 'The name's White. *Snow* White.') But, as the years – and the technology – flew by, I rarely got beyond the grumbling stage. Occasionally I'd announce dramatically that I was 'pulling the plug' so that everybody could read a book, or play a game, or just bicker with one another the old-fashioned way: face to face. Sometimes I'd even make good on it. 'But I was doing my homework!' they'd wail, as the anime or the YouTube video or the MSN conversation froze mid-frame, exactly as if an evil fairy had waved her wand of doom. It felt good to pretend I still had some power in my own home. But, deep down, even I – a woman so out of touch I still referred to 'taping' shows on TV, as if they were packing boxes, or sprained ankles – was aware that ripping the modem out of the wall once every three or four weeks was a case of spitting into the *Zeitgeist*.

Who can ever say for certain what makes a person finally take that crucial leap into a life-changing decision? In my own case, I suspect *The Experiment* had roots as long and tangled as my fourteen-year-old's hair extensions. They probably went back to my graduate work in Media Ecology at NYU, my fascination with transcendentalist thinkers like Thoreau and Emerson; and my move to Australia in the late eighties.

There were more proximate causes too. One was an interview I did for one of my podcasts with a family of six kids, ranging in age from two to twelve, who were growing up entirely screen-free. Naturally I'd expected cult involvement, or at the very least a full-time parent-at-home. But, no. Both parents worked as real-estate agents. There was no evidence of an extra-terrestrial link. And the kids were amazing – full of excitement and ideas and *trouv  * collections and craft projects. Not fussy, adult-designed ones made from kits, but the kind you make from dead leaves and macaroni and toilet-paper rolls. They had a fort in the woods, and a tree swing, and a big dress-up box full of old clothes. 'Don't you guys ever get bored?' I asked towards the end of the interview, almost desperate to find an edge to the story. But I already knew what the answer would be: a resounding 'Nup.' These kids knew they were a bit unusual, but they didn't feel deprived, if they thought about it at all – which, until the arrival of a woman with a microphone, I'm not sure they had. After all, their compensation for living without media was, to borrow Sherman Paul's phrase, nothing less than 'life itself'.

When I think it through, I realise there was all this backstory to my own decision. But reduce it to a soundbite and it was simply this: I was worried about my kids. About how they were using their time, and their space, and their minds. That's the centre of gravity that pulled the whole

thing together . . . and it's also, maybe, where my somewhat offbeat and bizarre life story crosses your own.

So, when I lowered the boom amidst the happy detritus of a normal Australian Christmas morning – for chestnuts roasting on an open fire, substitute bacon and eggs on the barbie and the intoxicating whiff of 30+ sunscreen – there was nothing impulsive about it. Why I was making this decision was pretty clear in my mind. How I was going to obtain buy-in was a total blur. Granted, I do have kind of a gift for the pitch. In another, more lucrative life I would have made a bang-up used-car salesman. My enthusiasms – of which I have many – are as infectious as swine flu. My kids could tell you stories. Like the time I came home, flung open the door and announced gleefully, 'Hey, kids! Guess what?! I've lost my licence for three whole months! Isn't it great? Because we are going to have *such* fun learning all about public transportation!' (It was just a few speeding fines. And not big ones either, until you added them all together. 'Where I learned to drive – on the Long Island Expressway – anybody who *doesn't* go 10 mph over the speed limit is a pussy,' I tried explaining to the constable. LOL he did not.)

I did such a consummate smoke-and-mirrors number when my marriage broke up that my eldest, who was four, literally didn't notice. 'Where's Dada, anyway?' she finally inquired several weeks later. 'Oh, didn't I tell you? He's got a cool new house and lucky you will get to stay there sometimes, just like Karen Brewer!' (Oh, for the days when a well-placed allusion to *The Babysitter's Club* was all it took to save one's sorry maternal ass!)

I don't lie, ever. Hardly. I sell. ('That's not a "vegetable", Bill. Why, that's a mouthwatering side-dish of tender, buttery baby beans!') But, let's face it: spinning slightly over-ripe

bananas to your toddlers is one thing – yes, I've been known to sing the Chiquita Banana Song, and fake tap-dance too, if that's what it took. Selling your teenagers on the concept of giving up their information and entertainment lifelines for six months is quite another. To be honest, it kind of made giving birth in a manger in Bethlehem look like level one Tetris.

Part of my strategy revolved around the presence of friendly witnesses: Mary and Grant and their teenaged daughters, Ches and Torrie. Our fellow holiday-makers and oldest family friends would support me, and their presence would prevent any attempted worm-outs. It was Mary who unexpectedly fed me my cue that morning, as she watched the girls unwrap their main presents – obscenely overpriced appliances hyped as 'the Rolls-Royce of hair straighteners' (Lady Lovely Locks, may you rot in hell).

'But, Suse,' Mary blurted out. 'Will they be able to use those when The Experiment starts?'

I shot her a look that could depilate, but it was too late. Everyone had heard her.

'Kids, I have an announcement to make,' I began. All rustling of wrapping paper and gnawing of candy canes ceased. The girls put down their straighteners. Bill popped the lid back on his Sex Wax (a hair product, essentially, for surfboards). Even Rupert looked up with a mixture of anxiety and apprehension. But then he's a pug. He always looks like that. I took a deep breath and I hit them with it.

I didn't talk about being worried about their wellbeing, or their school performance, or their sleeping habits, or my fears for the arrested development of their social, intellectual or spiritual skills. That would have been too much like nagging. It would have put them on the defensive. It would

have started a conversation, and a conversation, frankly, was the last thing I wanted. The important thing was to announce, not to 'suggest' or, heaven forbid, 'discuss'.

I concluded my announcement, eyes ablaze with missionary zeal (also fear), 'It's an experiment in living. We are all going to do it together, as a family. And it's going to change our lives.' There was a frozen pause. If life was a Macbook, this was our spinning colour wheel of death.

Sussy broke the silence.

'You mean ... like *Wife Swap*?' she asked.

'YES!' I roared. Bless the baby for throwing me a life raft. 'Exactly like reality TV! Exactly! Except, of course, we won't have a TV ...' I trailed off. I could see Bill and Anni exchange glances.

'What about homework?' Bill asked cannily.

'You can do it at the library, or at a friend's house, or at home using ...'

'What? A stone tablet and a chisel?' Anni snapped.

'If you like,' I replied evenly. (Pretending I don't get it is kind of my genius as a parent.) 'But the point is, I can't control the universe. Alas. So it's only our *home* that's going to be screen-free.'

I'd thought about this one a lot. In a perfect world – i.e. in which I did control the universe – The Experiment would be a *total* disconnect: no electronic media, at all, full stop, anywhere. It pained me to accept the reality that not even I could orchestrate such a thing. Short of moving to Djibouti, or imprisoning everybody in a backyard bomb shelter, there was no way I could pull it off. Like every other parent in the universe, I'd just have to find the serenity to accept the things I couldn't change, the courage to change the things I could, and sufficient download speed to tell the difference.

While they were still digesting the shred of good news

I'd thrown at them, I added I'd be writing a book about our adventure. 'Wait a minute, wait a minute,' Anni interrupted. 'A book? Like for money?'

'Maybe. Eventually,' I allowed.

'Well, what do *we* get out of it?'

I winced. It was ugly, but I was ready. I knew that sooner or later we'd get around to talking turkey. As the eldest, and most practised plea-bargainer, Anni'd had plenty of experience in brokering damages claims on behalf of her plaintiffs. I could have quoted Thoreau. I could have explained the thing about Michelangelo, or produced a recommended reading list in media, cognition and learning. Instead, Reader, I cash-incentivised them.

'Play along and play fair,' I muttered, 'and, yes, there'll be something in it for everybody.' I sounded like a mafia boss. But, *madre di dio*, I have three teenagers. What else am I supposed to sound like?



The proof of the pudding is in the eating, they say. And if there's one thing I've learned in my fourteen years of being a single parent, it's that a surprise attack – a pudding in the face, as it were – can be your best offensive strategy. I know that makes it sound as though you and your children are on opposing armies or something, but . . . well, aren't you? Boundary-setting can be so hard, especially if, like me, you are secretly just a little intimidated by people who are more powerful, better looking and wealthier than you are. Sure, they're your kids and you love them. But they can still be pretty scary.

That may be stating the case a little strongly. But as far as I can see, most parents of my generation – from the tail end

of the Baby Boomers to the tender tip of Gen X – don't really rule the roost. We sort of scratch around it apologetically, seeking consensus.

We are bad at giving orders. But we are wonderful at giving options, and it's a habit that starts right from the git-go. 'Milk, sweetheart?' we wheedle like some obsequious sommelier. 'Our specials today are cow's, sow, breast or goat's.' We ask our children to cooperate. We don't tell them to. And when there is an objection, we negotiate. I have one girlfriend who for many years paid her kids a weekly fee for brushing their teeth. I myself once slipped my seven-year-old a twenty for agreeing to a haircut. I think of that today and cringe. I'm sure I could have gotten it for ten.

So it's no wonder children today have a lively sense of entitlement. And that, metaphorically and otherwise, they take up more space. When I was growing up, back in 'the black and white days', family life – and the distribution of family space – was very different. My sister and I shared a bedroom until we were teenagers, and so did most other kids we knew. We had a spare room, which my mother called the 'sewing room'. It housed a daybed that I never saw anybody use, and a Singer that dated from the Eisenhower administration. The last garment my mother had actually sewn was probably the petticoat for her poodleskirt, but that wasn't the point. The point was, unclaimed space belonged to the grown-ups, as if by divine right of mortgagee.

Today, most middle-class educated parents have reversed those priorities. Children are no longer the fringe-dwellers of family life, but stake their claim to sit at the VIP table, even if they have to do it in a booster seat. They see resources in the home – furniture, appliances, food, adults or any other standard utility – as *their* resources. I have a theory that this is particularly true in a single-parent home, where life tends

to be more egalitarian, less structured and hierarchical. Okay, chaotic.

Let's consider the bedroom thing in more detail. Not only do our kids assume they are entitled to one. They also assume the right to maintain it according to a standard of their own choosing. My own kids were lisping, 'But it's *my* bedwoom!' from the time they were able to toss Talking Elmo over the side of the crib. Today, every wall and surface of my son's private lair features sprayed-on graffiti – including, and this is no joke, a large corner cobweb – and his room is referred to affectionately as 'the crack den'. I've given my permission for all this largely because I'm insane, but also because I've internalised the mantra. It is, after all, his room.

By contrast, I didn't grow up with the sense that 'my' bedroom was 'mine' in the same way at all, and not just because it was shared. In the old days – and I'm talking waaay back, before parenting was even a gerund – 'your' room belonged to your parents and everybody knew it. They controlled access. They chose the furniture and decorations. (My sister and I had white Queen Anne-style dressers, Martha Washington bedspreads, and a fake oil painting of Marie Antoinette – just to cover all the political bases. No wonder getting sent to our room was an effective punishment.) Parents also told you when and how to clean your room. We vacuumed and dusted and changed the bed linen every week. Once a month – and this messes with my mind even now – we *washed the woodwork*. When I told my own kids about this recently, their eyes grew as wide as laser discs. 'Wow,' Sussy mused. 'What's woodwork?' Patiently, I pointed out the painted moulding between the floor and wall in her bedroom. 'Cool,' she said politely. 'I never noticed that before.' I'd lay odds she'll never notice it again either.

Partly, I blame myself. When they were younger I had cleaners, like many other working parents. The beauty of that

was not having to freak out so much about the housework. The tragedy was that it encouraged an ‘Elves and the Shoemaker’ mentality: that cleaning and tidying were done magically in the dark of night by kind fairies. My own ironclad habits of making my bed perfectly, complete with hospital corners and calculatedly ‘casual’ pillow placement, are a source of genuine wonderment to my children. They used to bring in their friends sometimes for a peek, as if my bedroom were some exotic animal enclosure.

I know plenty of other parents who don’t maintain *any* adult spaces – and who imply it’s a form of fascism to try. Like the neighbours of mine whose double-storey heritage home for many years bore a hand-painted wooden sign that announced: ‘Campbell’s House’, Campbell being their four-year-old son. (Campbell’s mum and dad, you may not be surprised to learn, have since divided up Campbell’s assets and gone their separate ways.) The way I see it, there are degrees of lunacy, and I like to think our own family inhabits a kind of happy medium between Campbell’s House on one hand and *Brat Camp* on the other.

Kids don’t just invade adult space, of course. They also invade adult time. And this is a commodity less easily cordoned off with bi-fold doors. Take ‘bedtime’, for example. When I was a child it was nothing ‘to have to go to bed and see/the birds still hopping on the tree’, as Robert Louis Stevenson somewhat sourly observed. Daylight savings or no daylight savings, you were tucked in at 6.30 pm. And if you needed sunglasses and a UV-blocker, so be it.

Today, ‘adult time’ has become something that must be chiselled painfully from the bedrock of family life – or, more accurately, dug at its shoreline in haste, before the next high tide. I was strict about bedtimes when my children were little. (Sleep is to single mothers what helium is to a hot-air

balloon.) But over the years, I bowed to the pressure to lighten up, from both their peers and my own. No woman wants to be seen as a control freak, least of all those of us who make our beds with a protractor and a spirit level.

Like so many other parents of my generation, I have grudgingly come to accept the prevailing view that 'me time' is an indulgence – the temporal equivalent of a slab of mudcake or forbidden cigarette, the guilty exception to the rule that says to parents, and to mothers especially, and to single mothers most of all: 'Your time is not your own.' In the age of helicopter parenting, we are not supposed to want things any other way. Hovering, chopper-like, over our children's every move, as if they were escaped criminals or traffic accidents, is normal. In fact, we are supposed to be spinning our propellers with glee at the privilege. Being on call 24/7 is what having children is all about now – even children who are taller and more sexually active than you are (not that that's saying much in my case).

Opinions vary on whether the trend towards on-demand parenting is a healthy change. In a report on parenting college-age children, *New York Times* journalist Tamar Lewin spoke to one sophomore who uses more than 3000 cellphone minutes a month, most of it on calls to her parents, aunt and grandparents. 'I might call my dad and say, "What's going on with the Kurds?" It's a lot easier than looking it up,' she points out. Her father is good with this. 'Whether you're wondering about a sweater or a class, it's great to have someone to bounce questions off. And why not a parent?' he asks genially.¹

Um, maybe because the whole point of becoming an adult is to achieve self-reliance? Because maturity is largely about acquiring the confidence and the competence to make your own decisions? 'Before the Industrial

Revolution, there wasn't this concept that children should grow up, move away and become autonomous,' the father objects. That's very true. But this man's daughter doesn't live in an agrarian society. She lives in a dorm at Georgetown.

Whatever you think of its merits as a caregiving philosophy, there is no disputing that the helicopter parent is the bastard child of the information age. Without complex flight-control gear and a sophisticated communication network on constant alert, the level of surveillance we now regard as normal, even necessary, would be unthinkable. (More on that when we look in detail at the relationship messages we are sending with our cellphones – and I don't mean the SMSs – in Chapter Four.)

For now, suffice it to observe that children of all ages cross boundaries into adult territory like never before, and they do so because their parents have invited them to, whether consciously or not. I say that not in censure but in self-awareness. As a mother who once taught a graduate seminar while breastfeeding a five-month-old – and I mean literally *while* breastfeeding – I am a fully paid-up member of this parenting generation myself.

But more subversive than any of their incursions into adult time or space, I would argue, is our children's heightened sense of entitlement to *information* – promoted and protected by a Digital Bill of Rights under whose binding authority family life is being radically rewired.



'It's so unfair. I mean, what about their friends? Will they have any left at the end of it?'

'Surely they'll be bored.'

'Forget about boredom. How will they do their schoolwork?'

'Those poor children!'

It's not often you get to eavesdrop on a conversation that's all about your own bad decision-making. In fact, barring my weekly phone call to my mother in the US, I can't say I'd ever experienced it. I'm still not exactly sure how it happened. One minute I was saying goodbye to the father of one of Sussy's friends – we'd been confirming plans for an upcoming social event – and the next I was listening to a private conversation streaming live from his lounge room. After we'd hung up, his phone had somehow or other automatically redialled and . . . well, all I know is that I could hear Philip's voice plainly, only he wasn't talking to me. (Sometimes technology really *is* our friend.) Naturally, I responded the way any other intelligent, responsible adult would do in such a situation. I covered my right ear and jammed the phone to my left as hard as I could.

I could make out Philip explaining the outlines of our experiment to some unknown visitors, and something that sounded a lot like derisive snorting. No one actually came right out and said I was unhinged (although the phrase 'a lot of pressure at work' got major air-time.) Nonetheless, the gist was clear: The Experiment was harsh and unworkable. The children would suffer. And I, as the crazed mastermind of it all, was borderline abusive, a cross between Supernanny and a guard at Abu Ghraib.

I wasn't surprised. I'd got this kind of reaction a lot since I'd started to 'out' us. Even my agent Susan sounded a little worried when I first approached her with the idea for this book. 'I love the idea,' she wrote to me in an email. 'But are you sure you want to do this to your kids?' As if a child's right to internet access and a cellphone plan were akin to

her right to food and clothing and shelter and anti-frizz serum. Information-starvation, the prevailing attitude suggested, was a form of child abuse – exactly as my kids had been trying to tell me all along!

There were others who cheered me on straightaway, including my stepdaughter, thirty-seven-year-old Naomi, who at that point was attempting to make a living renting virtual real estate on Second Life. But even among the yay-sayers, there was a widespread view that we were ‘going back to the seventies’, or even going back to the nineteenth century.

What was *that* about?

In fact, most of the technologies that today rule our lives, just like the children that today rule our lives, emerged in the 1990s and early noughties. That means a lot of our media are teenagers too. Some of the most mesmerising of them all – the iPod, the Nintendo Wii, Facebook – are barely toddlers. No wonder they’re so damn attention-seeking.



Early on in *The Experiment*, we are in the car on the way to school when my fourteen-year-old reminds me to contact the school secretary, urgently, about my change of phone numbers. ‘I told her you didn’t have a cellphone anymore and she got really mad,’ Sussy tells me. ‘She said, “What if there’s an emergency?”’

A stab of guilt goes through me like an over-amped ringtone. ‘What did parents do ten years ago in an emergency?’ I ask, feigning calm.

‘Ten years ago,’ she replies coldly, ‘mothers stayed at home.’

When I spoke to the school secretary later, she laughed. 'I don't have a cellphone either,' she admitted.

'Wow. Well, what do you do in an emergency?' I couldn't resist asking.

'What everybody used to do ten years ago. If there's a real emergency, don't worry, we'll find you.'

The assumption that uninterrupted access to electronic information and entertainment is every child's right – and every parent's responsibility – has taken hold at a very deep level. Yet it has happened in the proverbial heartbeat.

Our own family's first dial-up account went online in 1996 – although admittedly we were early adopters. Today, according to the latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 7.2 million Australian households have an active internet connection.² In 1996, families were just discovering email, and the more adventurous kids were test-driving the new search engines and stumbling upon free game sites. Today, the average Australian teen aged sixteen to seventeen spends 23.5 hours a week on the internet.

Although the first IBM PC hit the market in 1981 – think 'Bette Davis Eyes' and Charles and Diana's wedding – most families didn't buy their first home computers until the late eighties. They were massive clunky things, with spooky green screens and less memory than an advanced Alzheimer's victim. The first 'kids' computer' we acquired ran on Windows 98, and, as every grown-up knows, 1998 was, like, five minutes ago. When my eight-year-old daughter's friend customised the desktop and font colours for us, we stood around, wonderstruck. 'She's a genius!' we agreed.

I bought our first cellphone in 2001 – for my then-ten-year-old daughter, Anni. I didn't get my own phone for a year or so, and when I sent my first text message, I considered

it a technological triumph second only to opening an email attachment. iTunes was launched in 2001 too – although it took our family five long years to discover it – and the BlackBerry smartphone, albeit featuring a pretty dumb monochrome display, followed in 2002. By 2008, when the iPhone made its Australian debut, I had evolved from mild technophobe to a fully fledged geek. I had one within twenty-four hours.

Remember Game Boy? It may not have changed the world, but it sure revolutionised the family fly-drive vacation. It was first released in 1989. Nintendo 64, somewhat confusingly, came out in 1996, ten years before the release of the Wii. GameCube, Xbox, PlayStation and their multitudinous handheld spawn – along with the other big names that have given joystick to the world – are children of the present millennium too.

The first MMOs – ‘massively multiplayer online’ games such as World of Warcraft or Second Life, which generally involve simulation and role-playing – started appearing around the time my stretchmarks did, in the early nineties. High-speed internet – the fast and furious kind that has made it possible to *live* in cyberspace – has been available to domestic users for little more than a decade, and much less than that in Australia. In September 2008, the number of broadband subscribers in Australia was 5.7 million, having grown by 90 per cent over the previous six months.³

TiVo (2000-ish) and even DVDs (1995-ish) – initials, its founders insist, that stand for nothing at all – seem like old technology already, though they’re far from obsolete. But tracking down a VCR to watch your old home movies on is like trying to find a Bakelite phone at Dick Smith’s.

Okay, what about email? We can’t talk indispensable, omnipresent and omnivorous without talking email.

I remember vividly the first email message I ever received. It was from my girlfriend Pat who worked at Princeton and it was hand-delivered to me as hard copy (ironic, I know) by the IT technician at the university department where I was then employed. The year was 1994. Up until that day, I had only the fuzziest idea what email *was*; I certainly didn't know I'd been allocated an account. I was thrilled. Deeply confused, but thrilled.

In fact, although email was first demonstrated at MIT in 1961, it wasn't really until the late nineties that the ranks of business- and then home-users began banking up – particularly after the launch of Hotmail in 1996. And I know all this thanks to Wikipedia, of course (formally launched in 2001, in case you're offline and want to know).

Speaking of monoliths, internet search site (and so much more) Google, which as I write employs a full-time global workforce of 20,222 and is regarded as the most powerful brand in the world, was registered as a domain in 1997. The ubiquitous verb 'to google' was added to both the Merriam Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary in 2006. (For 85,300 other sources of information on this topic, just google 'history of Google'.)

As if these statistics aren't startling enough, consider that Facebook, which today has 175 million active users – half of whom, I swear, are 'friends' with my eighteen-year-old – was launched in 2004. *2004, people!* If Facebook were your child, it would still be in kindergarten. Today, Australians spend an average of one quarter of their entire online time budget Facebooking. And it is estimated that 10.1 million of us access some social networking or online community regularly.⁴

So new, and yet so far, eh? And if 1996 seems like the Stone Age even to someone like me – who can remember

when the transistor frigging radio was cutting edge – is it any wonder that our kids can't imagine life without media? Or that on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (teenage edition), access to internet browsing, an email account, Facebook, iTunes, Nintendo and a cellphone sits somewhere between 'Safety' and 'Love/Belonging'?

And yet, if the Digital Bill of Rights increasingly governs family life, and I would argue that it does, it's important to recognise who ratified it in the first place. Actually . . . and this is kind of embarrassing . . . we did. Especially those of us for whom the information age has coincided with our coming of age as parents, producing excitement, confusion and a weird eclipse of attention. We've been caught up in a monsoon of technological change as mind-blowing in its intensity as . . . well, having kids in the first place. And I say that not to inspire guilt – if you're parents, you don't need my help with that one – but to raise consciousness.

Public debate around the media ecology of family life has had a helpless quality, positioning parents, not entirely inaccurately, as the little Dutch boy with his finger in the digital dyke. After six months of trying to keep a single household screen-free, trust me, I have much sympathy with that view. It is true, we don't have a prayer of holding back the flood entirely, even if we wanted to. But why would we want to? Information, like water, is a good thing . . . in its place.

The old saw reminds us that, to a man with a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail. Does it follow that to a girl with a Photobucket account, the whole world looks like a fashion shoot? Or that to a boy with a joystick and a graphics card, the whole world looks like a psychotic dwarf with an axe? To an important extent – definitely more than we have been comfortable admitting – yes, it sort of does. Ultimately, the answer is not to take away the hammer, but

to see that it is used for more than bashing away at things. To ensure our children free their hands – and their heads – to take up other tools too.

We don't know who discovered water, but it wasn't a fish, someone wise once observed. Whatever else it might accomplish, or fail to, our Experiment was about to propel us, stunned and gasping, out of our fishbowl for good.