

THE

How to Be Human
in a Digital World

EXTINCTION

Christine
Rosen

'Razor-sharp'
The Times

'Extremely important'
Jonathan Haidt

'Engaging... Radical'
Telegraph



OF

EXPERIENCE

Praise for *The Extinction of Experience*

‘Illuminating . . . A well-evidenced and well-principled defence of human experience . . . Where Rosen succeeds emphatically is in explaining the serious issues without simply blaming anyone – a radical act in these matters’

Telegraph, Best Books of 2025

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‘Urges us to reclaim the real-world experiences that make life worth living’ *Guardian*

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‘A useful prod to conscience [and] a thoughtful and timely reminder that it’s not too late to retrieve what we miss’

Wall Street Journal

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Kirkus Reviews

‘One of the pleasures of this book is learning what an engagingly intrepid researcher Rosen is . . . *The Extinction of Experience* is an essential book for our time’

Commentary Magazine

‘A beautifully expressed ode to the vanishing components of life that remain unplanned, unresearched and unrecorded. Rosen is an excellent guide, explaining why there’s no substitute for seeing, feeling and touching the world directly’ Adam Alter, author of *Irresistible*

‘A passionate anatomy of what we lose when we relinquish real life to machine-mediated activity . . . It is an urgent reminder to value and defend real life, with all its riskiness and rough edges’ Timandra Harkness, author of

Technology is Not the Problem

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The Extinction of Experience

How to Be Human in a Digital World

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For Hugo and Sebastian

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We had the experience but missed the meaning.

—T. S. ELIOT, *FOUR QUARTETS*

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Introduction



Technology . . . the knack of so arranging the world so that we need not experience it.

MAX FRISCH, *HOMO FABER* (1957)

This is a book about the disappearance of experience.

Not every experience, of course. Every day we accumulate new experiences that confirm or challenge our sense of self while also transforming our working knowledge of the world.

Experiences, broadly considered, are the ways we become acquainted with the world. Direct experience is our first teacher. As we learn to navigate the world around us, we attach meaning to what we encounter. These experiences and meanings differ across times and cultures but share common threads. Different people speak different languages and have different social customs, but the fact that we all have languages and customs is a marker of our shared humanity.

Certain types of experience—some rooted deeply in our evolutionary history, such as face-to-face interaction and various forms of pleasure-seeking; others more recent and reflective of cultural norms, such as patience and our sense of public space and place—are fading from our lives. Many of these experiences are what, historically, have helped us form and nurture a shared reality as human beings.

Mediating technologies have been a significant force behind these

changes. By “technology” I mean the devices such as computers, smartphones, smart speakers, wearable sensors, and, in our likely future, implantable objects, as well as the software, algorithms, and Internet platforms we rely on to translate the data these devices assemble about us. Technology also includes the virtual realities and augmented realities we experience through our use of these tools. Our integration of these tools into our daily lives has blurred the boundary between “virtual” things—things not grounded in physical reality that we encounter while online or via mediating technologies—and “real” things embedded in physical space.

These technologies mediate between us and our world. For now, we still have some choice in how much mediation we allow. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people lived lives of near-constant mediation out of necessity, as work, education, and social life migrated online. Culturally we were prepared for this shift, given how much time we were already spending using screens large and small to mediate our daily lives, and our evolving preference for such forms of interaction.

That preference encourages the embrace of new forms of mediated experience that do not necessarily improve our interactions as human beings, even as they also bring greater convenience. Our understanding of experience has become disordered, in ways large and small. More and more people mistrust their own experiences. More and more people create their own realities rather than live in the world around them. We can no longer assume that reality is a matter of consensus.

We are beginning to see hints of how these new ways of experiencing the world—more mediated, more personalized, more immediate yet less bounded by the realities of the physical world—have altered our understanding of reality.

In 2018, Matthew Wright of Henderson, Nevada, drove a black armored truck to the Hoover Dam, blocked traffic, and held up a sign demanding investigation of the “deep state.” He had become convinced during his reading of websites and online chatrooms related to the con-

spiracy theory QAnon that he needed to take action to prevent injustice. Likewise, Doug Jensen, one of the hundreds of people prosecuted for storming the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, and also an avid QAnon conspiracy theorist who spent a great deal of time online, told the FBI that everything that had happened to him in real life “has been like I watched a movie. Everything that’s happening now, I know it all because it’s all old news to me.” In the weeks and months leading up to his participation in the January 6th attack, Mike Sparks struggled with what his social media use was doing to his health and temperament. “I’ve noticed that my phone has been in my hand more than my Bible,” he wrote. “I’ve been locked in on my Facebook watching all this stuff play out and I get angrier and angrier.” He thought about quitting social media altogether.

Although they are extreme examples, these stories demonstrate a profound confusion and mistrust about everyday experience. Having turned to online communities for help in understanding how the “real” world works, an increasing number of people are eager to reshape that real world based on the tenets of what they’ve learned in virtual realms—and not always for the better. QAnon is an outlier, but the principle holds for much of our regular social media interactions that bleed into real-world behavior. One family physician writes about the disconnect he sees in many of his patients who are “less sure of the distinction between virtual and actual,” particularly after pandemic-era immersion in digital worlds. “I hear more and more patients complain that they emerge from sessions online feeling tense, anxious, low mood, or with a pervasive feeling of unreality,” he notes.

Our personal technologies grant us the ability to spend most of our waking hours crafting and living in a “personal reality.” In the twentieth century, historian Daniel Boorstin, in his book *The Image*, coined the term “pseudo-event” to describe the manufactured media landscape that was meant to appear authentic despite its being “not spontaneous but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it.”

Today, many of us choose to live in a form of *pseudo-reality* governed by algorithmically-enabled individual experiences. Much of what passes for authentic experience today is vicarious and virtual.

There was no deliberate effort to incentivize this way of living, although many individuals and companies have profited from our growing enthusiasm for ever more mediated experiences. It is one of the unintended consequences of the bargain we struck in embracing the Internet, a consequence few wanted to contend with at the beginning because it seemed unduly pessimistic. Besides, the new online world was fun. It still is.

But what began as a slow bleed of reality on the edges has now become a culture-wide destabilizing force. Reality has competition, from both augmented and alternative forms. The charm of Second Life, an early alternative online world, has given way to the vastly more ambitious, live-your-life-entirely-online ambitions of the Metaverse or the implant-the-Internet-in-your-brain proposals of Elon Musk's Neuralink.

In these new worlds, we are Users, not individuals. We are meant to prefer these engineered User Experiences to human reality. This book argues that we arrived here by allowing valuable human experiences to wither or die, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. Our continued unwillingness to account for what has been lost won't lead to a world of technology-enabled progress; rather, this inability to grapple with the extinction of fundamental human experiences creates a world where our sense of shared reality and purpose is further frayed, and where a growing distrust of human judgment will further polarize our culture and politics. Technological change of the sort we have experienced in the last twenty years has not ushered in either greater social stability or moral evolution. In fact, many of our sophisticated technological inventions and platforms have been engineered to bring out the worst of human nature. The guiding spirit of Instagram isn't Rumi. It's Hobbes.

What kind of person is formed in an increasingly digitized, mediated, hyperconnected, surveilled, and algorithmically governed world? What do we gain and what do we lose when we no longer talk about the Human Condition, but rather the User Experience?

The human condition is embodied, recognizes its fragility, frequently toggles between the mediated and unmediated, requires private spaces, and is finite. By contrast, the User Experience is disembodied and digital, it is trackable and databased and usually always mediated. It lacks privacy and promises no limits—even after death, when, as several new technologies promise, our digital remnants can be gathered and engineered into posthumous chatbots to comfort our grieving family members.

Concerns about technology eroding our sense of reality are nothing new. The philosopher Theodor Adorno decried the “false realism” created by television in 1954. He argued that we do not simply watch TV. TV also influences how we understand the world if we regularly watch it—our expectations and our common cultural concerns.

Digital technology shapes expectations on a greater scale and with more power than TV ever could. While broadcast television commercials were bound to a predetermined schedule, social media platforms feed users carefully tailored streams of information meant to nudge their behavior in real time. This makes digital technology a far more aggressive tool to shape decision-making. Features that make digital technology appealing—responsiveness and precision—can impact our sense of agency.

Even our more mundane digital tools chip away at our human skills. For example, GPS is more precise than tools such as paper maps or sextants, but it also places users in the role of spectators rather than navigators during the journey. We are placed at the center of the GPS map, but we do not know how to orient ourselves. Once, in a remote location in California, when our GPS went out, my sons and I were forced to find our

way by cobbling together remembered signposts and following an outdated map. The experience was both mildly terrifying (I was not sure we would find our way back) but also rewarding when, after many false starts, we figured out which back country road would lead us to the highway we sought.

Technology also shapes our understanding of what is possible. Our new tools increasingly encourage us to see things as problems to be solved: waiting in line, writing by hand, remote learning, navigation, boredom.

Many of our current technologies seem to view people as the problem to which devices and platforms and algorithms provide a necessary solution. If earlier technologies were an extension of our senses, today's technologies train us to mistrust our own senses and rely instead on technology. This technological approach to humanity even co-opts the words we use to describe human experiences. Consider "sensorium," a word that describes both the physiological process whereby we interpret the sensory information and stimuli we receive, and the cultural process wherein we derive understanding from our senses.

Today, Sensorium is the name of a digital entertainment company that promises to move your "real-life experiences" to the virtual world via "revolutionizing digital communications through a sense of presence." The company promises you will "feel closer than ever to the people you love and the things you enjoy" not by being in their actual presence, but by transporting those interactions to a "next-generation social VR platform" that will allow you to become your "true self" and "free yourself from earthly limitations." That "true self" can even become "digitally immortal," according to the company.

Technology interposes itself between us and the world. It translates reality "for" us but also to its designers' ends and extraordinary profit. It has transformed many human experiences not by banning them, but by making certain kinds of embodied experiences, such as face-to-face communication and other unmediated pleasures, less and less relevant to daily life.

This book is a modest effort to encourage us to cultivate and, in some cases, recover ways of thinking, knowing, and being in the world that we are losing or have lost through our embrace of mediating technologies. It grew out of my own experiences as a child of the pre-digital era (I'm a member of Gen X) who encountered this new world as an adult and is still navigating its promises and perils. My generation, known for its cynicism, has with time become more outspokenly nostalgic for that pre-digital moment when the greatest distraction from childhood play was network television or, if your family had enough money, an Atari gaming system. But the nostalgia is grounded in a concrete sense of the loss of important things. Raising my sons, who are now nearly adults themselves, in a world saturated with digital technology has rendered those losses even more starkly visible. I am trained as a historian and have written about the impact of technology on culture for decades, but, like many people, I struggle with how to strike the correct balance between mediated and unmediated experiences and reckon daily with how much time I spend staring at screens rather than into the eyes of other human beings.

And so this effort is not driven by perverse Luddism, but by the recognition that technology has altered and continues to re-form our understanding of many of the things we have in common as human beings. We don't have to accept the replacement or end of these non-technological values and ways of knowing.

Extinction is not inevitable. It is a choice.

Author's Note

I have chosen to use the collective "we" throughout this book to signal that, given how ubiquitous and widespread is our use of technology, even people who choose not to embrace every tool described in this book are nevertheless impacted by its use by others. The use of "we" is not meant to assume that everyone has a similar experience with technology, or

that they bring the same set of assumptions or values to their use of it. It is intended as a shorthand for signaling membership in a community of human beings, which, until the Singularity or other such outsourced forms of consciousness is reached, or artificial general intelligence supplants us all, includes every embodied person.

CHAPTER 1



You Had to Be There

Imagine the following: The restaurant is dimly lit and a little grimy. People are eating and talking; you are given a table; it's crowded but the smells coming from the kitchen are promising. The menu's contents are foreign to you and you're forced to ask your waiter, what is a Jerusalem artichoke? Is it like a regular artichoke? What does it taste like? You order and consume a deliciously weird meal. You pay with cash and leave satisfied.

Or, over drinks, you and a friend disagree about which movie qualifies as Keanu Reeves's breakout performance and end up placing a bet (you might be a little tipsy when this occurs). You don't go to IMDb.com on your phone to review Keanu's filmography or avail yourself of apps such as YouBetMe. You simply agree that when you meet again, you will decide who has won and the loser will owe the winner another drink.

Or you hand the pedicab driver a twenty-dollar bill and beg him to get you to 34th Street in Manhattan as quickly as possible, your roller bag suitcase occupying the seat beside you. The subway is a disaster, you can't find a taxi in the middle of rush hour, and you're about to miss your train home.

You don't post to X or Instagram or Snapchat about any of this.

These are all undatabased experiences and they all happened to me on a trip to New York. At the time I didn't recognize how rare they had become. If I had used my credit card or consulted Yelp before choosing the restaurant, or summoned Google to settle the bet, I would have had a different experience, a databased experience.

Behind the power we wield with our technologies is a timidity and aversion to risk. It's much easier to go with what Yelp or Google or Amazon suggest "other customers like you" might like than to squander your time and money on a guess. But does this timidity lead to a "withering of experience," as Theodor Adorno suggested in his analysis of the modern person's mechanized and homogenized approach to culture and leisure? In a world of digital experiences, do we any longer recognize any of them as ersatz?

Experience has a history, which marks our physical bodies. The bull-fighter's scar from being gored stands in for a kind of knowledge; the stretch marks left behind after the birth of child are a reminder of the miraculous things the human body can do. Our physical bodies also form the basis for metaphors: I lost my head; he broke my heart; give me a hand with that; it cost an arm and a leg; stop being so nosy. The phrase "in the flesh" is used to signal one's identity, trustworthiness, and physical presence: "Is that you?" "In the flesh!"

If the worry during the Enlightenment, as mathematician Isaac Milner wrote in 1794, was that "the great and high" have "forgotten that they have souls," then today the worry is that many of us have forgotten that we have bodies. The opportunities to play out our sense of self at a remove from our physical limitations—online and through social media—and the many new ways we can track and quantify ourselves (I walked x number of steps today!) has given us the impression that we can somehow either ignore or control our bodies, or at least escape some of their quirks.

Transhumanists such as Ray Kurzweil think we can overcome our natural expiration date. They would have us jettison what is weak, inefficient, or frustrating about our physical bodies and upload our minds to achieve the “singularity.” This rejection of the direct experience of our own bodies is a hallmark of our technopositive times—and a hubristic fiction that philosophers have warned for millennia against believing.

Writing about how the clock trained people to question their own experience of hunger in order to meet its dictates, for example, computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum noted how timepieces created a new physical reality for their users. “The feeling of hunger was rejected as stimulus for eating,” he wrote, “instead, one ate when an abstract model had achieved a certain state, i.e., when the hands of a clock pointed to certain marks on the clock’s face,” such as noon.

With the place- and time-shifting available to us through mobile technology, what we tend to reject today aren’t the signals of our own hunger; those can now be satisfied instantly with an app that delivers groceries, or, like DoorDash, a buffet of delivery food options. What we reject, as we will see, are the inconveniences and small hazards of face-to-face communication, the laborious but necessary practice of doing things with our own hands, and the non-quantifiable experience of unmediated pleasure.

When one of my sons was in second grade, I went to his classroom to watch him give a presentation about Benjamin Banneker, the freeborn African American who published a series of almanacs in the eighteenth century. After he described some features of Banneker’s almanac, including its predictions of weather for each planting season, and the usefulness of written almanacs, one of his classmates asked, “Why would you get the weather from a book?”

“Where do you hear about the weather?” the teacher asked. “Television!” several of the kids answered. “My mom listens to the radio,”

another said. “You get the weather on your phone,” one boy said definitively, as if the rest of us were being obtuse. Most of the class nodded their approval.

How many of us check the weather forecast on our phones or computers before we walk outside every day? I do. I have a minor weather fetish and am an avid reader of the Capital Weather Gang here in Washington, DC, a group of meteorologists whose site boasts an actively engaged community of fellow weather nerds. The site’s daily forecast is made by human meteorologists, which until recently was something I took for granted. I assumed the weather app on my iPhone was the same thing.

But as one of the Weather Gang meteorologists noted, “The forecast on many of your favorite smartphone weather apps is not created by a human being. Instead, it is generated by a computer. It does not harness the expertise of a local forecaster who understands a region’s weather peculiarities, has a wealth of historical knowledge, and can correct for obvious computer errors.” As a result, weather apps like the popular DarkSky will often show clear skies when it’s raining buckets.

Like my favorite meteorologist’s comment about weather apps, this book is a warning about the perils of some of our technological choices. It is a plea to pause and consider what we are losing, as well as gaining, when we allow new technologies into our lives, and to question the motives of the companies so eager to have us “share” ourselves with them. As the head of Facebook’s data team, Cameron Marlow, told *Technology Review* a few years ago, “As Facebook becomes a more integral part of people’s communication, it becomes difficult to disentangle what ‘real-world social behavior’ means independent of Facebook.”

I maintain we need to know what the real world looks like independent of Facebook (now Meta). And we need to be able to defend that world from technology when it threatens things that are better left alone. We need to defend the sensory world and remind ourselves of the crucial importance of the physical body, the integrity of physical space, and the need for people to cultivate inner lives. From these flow things that

can't be made by machines: serendipity, intuition, community, spontaneity, and empathy. As the Trappist monk and theologian Thomas Merton observed, "It does us no good to make fantastic progress if we do not know how to live with it."

The problem isn't that technological change is happening; technological change is always happening. If X was going to destroy civilization, it would have happened long ago when Justin Bieber gained his millionth follower. The problem is our collective complacency in assuming that change brings improvement. The dating app Tinder chose as its slogan, "Tinder is how people meet. It's like real life, but better." But is it better?

It used to be that an experience was something—like a vacation—which you enjoyed (or not) in your own physical body, in a particular physical space at a particular time. You might re-experience it later by looking at pictures or by sharing stories about it with others. But your sensibility about an experience, particularly if it was dramatic or memorable and you were attempting to convey what it felt like to others, might be summed up by saying, "You had to be there." The phrase rose steadily in popularity from the 1960s until the year 2012, when its use dropped precipitously, according to Google Ngram, which measures language use over time in a broad range of published material. The year 2012 also saw the fastest year-over-year increase in Americans' smartphone use, which rose from 31 percent to 44 percent in just twelve months.

Thanks to the now ubiquitous smartphone, we feel as if we can be anywhere. We can vicariously witness countless things and experience, not merely imagine, the lives of others. We immerse ourselves in sophisticated simulations and even engage in lengthy relationships with avatars. We can see street views of homes thousands of miles away and zoom in on the world's greatest artistic masterpieces. How are these mediated ways of "being there" changing our understanding of experience?

For one thing, we now spend as much time consuming the experiences of others as we do having experiences of our own. One popular genre of YouTube videos known as reaction videos shows people reacting to . . . just

about anything. A video that has received more than three million views shows a boy reacting to the scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* where (spoiler alert!) Darth Vader reveals he is Luke's father. Other related genres include gaming videos, mukbang, and unboxing videos. We love these videos because they give us something we crave: a brief glimpse of an authentic experience. "Watching a reaction video is a way of vicariously recapturing primary experience," one critic noted. It also offers a form of experience plagiarism, wherein people feel as if they, too, are "there" in the moment with the people on the screen.

Instead of "you had to be there," our current moment seems best suited to "véjà du," or, as it is described by scientists in the Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford University, "the ability to see ourselves doing something [virtually] we have not done physically." Using virtual reality (VR) headsets, researchers like Jeremy Bailenson hope to use véjà du techniques to model the aging process (look how scary old you'll be in ten years if you keep smoking!). Others will likely enlist VR to create a new world of manufactured experiences, such as advertisements which, in a triumph of narcissistic marketing, use a virtual avatar that looks exactly like you to sell you products.

Technology even promises to render the school field trip extinct. Google now offers a "field-trip simulation system" called Expeditions to schools. "Imagine exploring coral reefs or the surface of Mars in an afternoon," the program's website enthuses. These once-in-lifetime experiences are free—if you don't count the data Google will Hoover up while beta-testing Expeditions on children, that is.

Virtual experiences are not all uplifting narratives of seventh graders in Iowa "visiting" the Burj Khalifa on Google Expeditions. Some have less feel-good consequences. In 2010, in South Korea, a couple allowed their infant to starve to death while they raised a virtual child online in a popular game called Prius. When Spike Jonze's movie *Her* was released in 2013, it depicted a near-future Los Angeles resident, Theodore Twombly, who fell in love with his computer's alluring operating system. Yet