

Should This Exist? Episode Transcript: Digital Sequestration

“A world without our devices”: Should This Exist? with Caterina Fake

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SUPREME COURT CHIEF JUSTICE JOHN ROBERTS: Senators, I attend the Senate in conformity with your notice for the purposes of joining with you for the trial of the President of the United States.

CATERINA FAKE: Hi, it's me, Caterina. Current events move so fast that President Trump's impeachment trial in January already feels like it happened ages ago.

MITCH McCONNELL: This is a unique responsibility which the framers of our Constitution knew that the Senate – and only the Senate – could handle.

FAKE: But it was a thoroughly modern affair, the first impeachment trial of the 21st century.

ALAN DERSHOWITZ: I am here today because I love my country and our Constitution.

FAKE: For three weeks, Senators were on Capitol Hill following a strict list of “decorum guidelines.” One of the most prominent was: “No use of phones or electronic devices in the Chamber.”

CHRIS VAN HOLLEN: Well, my first thought is, Oh, my God, here we are. We're going to be totally disconnected from the world, because it's kind of like our umbilical cord to the outside world.

FAKE: Senator [Chris Van Hollen](#) from Maryland was very active during the trial. He talked to us midway through the trial about some of the challenges and the benefits.

VAN HOLLEN: We did invent a system of communication that kind of works, which is we have pages on the floor of the Senate, and they can send in notes. You've got to circle “Yes,” circle “No.” Whoever came up with the rule was very prescient, because it does make you focus on what we should be focused on.

FAKE: Not using a device for weeks seemed unthinkable not only to the senators, but also to their cellular providers.

VAN HOLLEN: I got this notice that said, “Your usage is way down this week.” It was like, it's like they were reaching out and saying, “Are you still alive. Are you still with us? Is everything OK?”

FAKE: This “digital sequestration” for the U.S. Senate is what inspired this episode. It got us thinking about the big question: How should screens exist in our lives?

Since COVID began, we’re spending a crazy amount of time on our screens. By some reports, even 40 percent of waking hours. Pre-COVID, the average American spent more than five hours a day on a smartphone. And this has skyrocketed. We’ll talk with a media theorist, an experimental psychologist, and even a restaurateur who have their own perspectives on the benefits and the drawbacks of digital sequestration and digital saturation.

[THEME MUSIC]

FAKE: Hey, it’s Caterina, and we’re back. Take a journey with me back a few months, to a time when indoor dining in close quarters felt perfectly unremarkable. We’re heading for some Italian food in north central Queens, at [Il Triangolo](#). Its front entrance is at the tip of a wedge at a busy intersection.

Mario Gigliotti is the owner.

MARIO GIGLIOTTI: Hi guys, come on in. Go ahead.

FAKE: Hi, Mario. Nice to meet you. How are you?

GIGLIOTTI: Good.

FAKE: Caterina. Spelled the Italian way. This is your cell phone policy.

GIGLIOTTI: These are my policies that we have for our restaurant.

FAKE: At this restaurant, the food won’t come out unless your cell phone goes away. Mario’s no-phones policy is on a plaque right as you walk in the door.

GIGLIOTTI: Actually somebody made that for me, ’cause I had it like on a piece of cardboard. The guy that has a printing place, he sent it to me via mail. He goes, “This is a gift from me to you. I couldn’t stand seeing that cardboard,” he goes. So it’s: Off the table at all times. Must be on silent, and all phone calls outside. Basically, you know, something simple.

FAKE: Maybe Mario Gigliotti is onto something. Maybe we all need places to go to get off our phones. We’re all craving it. How can we go about changing our relationship with our smartphones?

FAKE: Why did you implement the policy?

GIGLIOTTI: Because when I first opened up the restaurant, I was noticing that people weren't paying attention to themselves, to the restaurant itself, the atmosphere, and the food also. Like we would say the specials, and they were, like, paying no mind to what I was saying. Take longer for them also to order. It was, like, all a combination of everything.

FAKE: Yeah, how do people respond?

GIGLIOTTI: They respond very well to it. There's 99% that really like it.

DINER: I'm a cell phone fanatic. I mean, I work on Wall Street. I work on the floor of the NY Stock Exchange. People are constantly calling me all day long. Everything is a five-alarm fire. And what I like about Mario's policy is that when I come here now, I don't use the cell phone. I enjoy the one-on-one with my girl.

DINER: You can actually have a conversation with the person in front of you. No phone.

DINER: It just enhances all the flavors, enhances the whole experience. Before you know it, what turns out to be a two-hour meal is now four hours later.

DINER: And you're happy. You walk out, you're happy instead of saying, What did I do?

FAKE: For the patrons of Il Triangolo, putting down the phone makes for a better meal. But technology has wormed its way pretty deeply into our lives.

MAN ON THE STREET: What don't I use it for? Work, obviously, pretty much constantly. Morning, noon and night for both work and personal.

FAKE: And if you're the parent of a teenager, you see the impact of smartphones on them ... or do you?

TEENAGER: I would love to minimize it. I just think it's really difficult. I would love to throw my phone in the Hudson River and just not have to deal with it, but I just think I need it for so many different things.

FAKE: Talk of the negative effects abound – sleep problems, behavior problems, education problems, violence, obesity. But our understanding of how exactly our relationship with our phones is affecting us is actually very limited. We've done a lot of research, but can it be trusted?

AMY ORBEN: There's a huge amount of emotion in this space, and I think naturally, if you're the person saying we don't actually know that much yet, you're often kind of going

against what a lot of people believe. My job as a scientist is to evaluate the evidence and to stand up for that evidence. And so, there's just no good evidence.

FAKE: Dr. [Amy Orben](#) is a research fellow at the University of Cambridge, specializing in how technology use affects adolescent mental health. She started having doubts about the validity of research when she was an undergraduate.

ORBEN: It felt like it was written by people who didn't really know very deeply what they were talking about. Just because probably the age difference meant that most of the senior researchers writing about social media didn't actually use it as, for example, as a teenager. And I felt like I could offer a better perspective, and that kind of led me down this path.

TEENAGER: When I first got my iPhone, you know, I was in middle school, my parents were so concerned about the screen time I'm using, saying I'm like addicted and this new thing. And then 10 years later, everybody in my family, my parents included, are using their phone a couple of hours a day. But now everybody has just kind of let themselves get consumed with it.

FAKE: Amy says it's complicated. It's very easy to point out the harms of technology. Especially now, it feels like smartphones became both ubiquitous and indispensable almost overnight. But this isn't the first time humanity's clutched its pearls about a new "danger to society."

ORBEN: This has been going on for centuries. The ancient Greeks were worried about writing. The Victorians were worried about romance novels corrupting brains in, kind of, young women. And, you know, just in the 1940s, people were worried about radio and radio addiction. And we see oftentimes the harms a lot more clearer than maybe the benefits. I think it has a sort of evolutionary benefit, in that we probably are programmed to be cautious when things become popular and to really put our concerns first.

FAKE: Amy Orben says that we're talking about a complex network of factors as we evaluate both harms and benefits. It's satisfying to make sweeping statements about technology, but the reality is that details matter — a lot.

ORBEN: Of all the things we can do, for example, on our phones, 20 minutes on a smartphone could be 20 minutes watching YouTube videos, it could be 20 minutes looking at self-harm images. It could be 20 minutes Skyping your grandmother. It could be 20 minutes doing mindfulness meditation. It could be 20 minutes doing sudokus.

TEENAGER: Texting, communicating with friends, family members.

TEENAGER: Messages, Facetime, calls, email, weather, maps.

TEENAGER: Restaurants, things to do, directions.

TEENAGER: And then I watch a lot of YouTube people, and I watch video game streamers, you know.

ORBEN: So then we need to think about, well, if time spent is not a good measure any more, then what should we be measuring? And we should probably be measuring what people are actually doing. What are the motivations? How regular are they doing these activities? Are they doing them in bursts? Are they doing them with extreme regularity? But to actually collect that sort of data, we as researchers need to have access to tech company data. And at the moment, for technology companies, naturally, data is their pride and joy. Data are their gemstones. They don't want to share those readily with, for example, academic researchers.

FAKE: Until Facebook, Google, and the large gaming companies share more of the data they've already collected, Amy says there's a limit to what we can know.

ORBEN: You know, this is a huge problem. And we need to figure out a way to ethically and collaboratively share, you know, not all the data that technology companies own, but those crucial bits of data that are important for us to assess and evaluate really important societal questions.

But I guess what I just wanted to say is that my opinion isn't that none of technology is harmful, just like my opinion is not that, you know, none of it will be beneficial. My opinion is that once we actually start disentangling the different uses and the different users, we will find, you know, probably specific design features and specific uses of social media that negatively affect specific users, just like we will find specific uses and designs of social media that will positively affect specific users. So I think it's just that nuance is often missing in that conversation.

FAKE: Coming up, we talk with a media theorist who says it's time to get intensely enlightened about not just technology but about human nature. It's time to defend and rebuild our social systems. And the easiest way to understand and change our predicament is to recognize that being human is a team sport.

[BREAK]

FAKE: So here we are. This is Queens College.

FAKE: Hi it's Caterina – back with Should This Exist? Just before the pandemic shut down college campuses around the world, I paid a visit to the Student Center of Queens College. It was lunch hour with hundreds of undergrads in a sprawling space called the Q Cafe.

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF: But yeah, Queens College, it's part of CUNY.

FAKE: [Queens College](#) is part of CUNY, the City University of New York that includes 25 campuses across New York City's five boroughs.

RUSHKOFF: Hey, how are you doing?

FAKE: I'm here to see [Douglas Rushkoff](#), who's a media studies professor, and grew up about three miles from here.

RUSHKOFF: Keep it real. Come back to Queens. So it was a good thing. If I was going to do the university thing, I didn't want to become an ivory tower kind of person – even though those campuses are nice.

FAKE: Doug has been a prolific lecturer around the world, a television documentarian, and author of more than a dozen books on media, technology and culture.

FAKE: I do not see a single person without a screen.

RUSHKOFF: Yeah.

FAKE: Not a single one.

RUSHKOFF: They use those. It's like, instead of books.

FAKE: So they're all doing homework and studying and doing research.

FAKE: His most recent book is called *Team Human* and is based on his podcast of the same name. It's about rehumanizing technology and reconnecting people, especially his students at school.

FAKE: Are you finding them to be super engaged? Are they on their screens all the time?

RUSHKOFF: So the undergraduates, most of them are truly working-class Americans. They are the first person in their family to go to college – ever. And CUNY in Queens, in particular, is known as an institution that has the highest percentage of people to move from, you know, one socioeconomic class to another as a result of coming here. But they are, they're not bookish, but they're smart. And smart in a different way and appreciative in a way.

You know, I taught some classes at some schools that should remain nameless. But I taught adjunct at some elite schools. And we're having a class discussion at one of them. And a kid raises his hand and said, "Well, look, why should we listen to you? You ended up a teacher." Isn't that interesting? Right. And it was like, wow, what a privileged little jackass, right? To think that I'm even here for the money, right? I'm here to share with the next generation. I can make more money writing my books or making TV, doing

something else than adjuncting at a college. And that would never happen somewhere like here.

FAKE: Doug Rushkoff has made a career out of thinking deeply about the impact of technology and new media on culture, business, and the economy. He's coined terms you've probably used such as "viral media," "social currency," and "digital natives." [Team Human](#), his latest book, is practically bursting at the seams with his passion and insight. It reads almost like a manifesto about how humans are social creatures who need to work together.

FAKE: We flew out here actually, in order to see you and sit with you. I thought that was a really important part of actually doing this interview.

RUSHKOFF: It is. It's the great conspiracy. You know, literally conspire, breathe together.

FAKE: In the time of COVID, this is literally true. Breathing together sounds super-dangerous. But the kind of danger Doug is talking about is danger to a powerful establishment when human beings connect face to face.

RUSHKOFF: You know: my eyes see your eyes, I see your pupils getting bigger, your micro-nodding motions and my mirror neurons fly. My oxytocin goes through my bloodstream. We start to have a bonding, and we establish rapport. And then rapport is the precursor then to solidarity and working together and doing everything else.

FAKE: Exactly.

RUSHKOFF: And without rapport, I mean, you know how depressed and sad and lonely and atomized and powerless and reactive we are? All the companies are spending trillions of dollars to just talk to our brainstem to get us to react.

FAKE: Our most primitive emotions – fear, loneliness, anxiety – are lodged in our brainstem. And Doug says tech companies, in the quest for our endless attention, will trigger whatever it takes to get it – and keep it.

FAKE: And you know what, actually this show came out of: We had a conversation with Chris Van Hollen, a senator from Maryland. And he was in the impeachment hearings, and they had removed everybody's devices from them. And so we were very interested in this idea of digital sequestration. When is it appropriate? How is it done? Does it change you when you are, frankly, forced away from your devices?

RUSHKOFF: Yeah, I mean the Israelites figured this out in the desert. Right? When they sat down to make the new rules of the new world. The first thing they came up with was the Sabbath. If you spend all your time engaged in working or production or utility value, you lose the sense that, like Mr. Rogers would say, You're okay just the way you are.

And to have one day of Sabbath to say, I don't have to do anything today. As a matter of fact, I'm not even allowed to do anything today.

FAKE: I'm forbidden from doing anything.

RUSHKOFF: It's the only way you can convince yourself to do it. And everybody else is, too. So no one's gonna get ahead of me today. No one's going to make extra candles or something today, you know?

FAKE: Shear another sheep.

RUSHKOFF: Right. Exactly.

FAKE: Doug Rushkoff says the real impetus for his *Team Human* campaign began when he was on a panel years ago with computer scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil, who is a key figure in the [Singularity](#) movement. Among his many predictions, Kurzweil says that by 2029, computers will have human-level intelligence.

RUSHKOFF: And he was making this case about how humanity has to accept that, you know –

FAKE: It's obsolete.

RUSHKOFF: That we're obsolete. Right. That we've got to migrate into the digital space and pass the torch to our computer successors and just fade into the background. And I made an impassioned case for: No, but human beings are special. We're weird. We can embrace paradoxes. Computers can't do. We can watch a David Lynch movie, you know, not understand what it means and still experience that as pleasurable. I mean, we deserve a place in the digital future.

And he said, "Oh, Rushkoff, you're just saying that because you're human." Right? Like it was hubris. And that's when I said right to him, it was on CNN. I don't think they kept this part. And I said, "Fine. Guilty. I'm on team human," right? And that was where the meme started. That was, you know, 20 years ago.

FAKE: Yeah. So who is the villain in this media environment?

RUSHKOFF: If we had to pick one? So many.

FAKE: Who are they?

RUSHKOFF: I mean, the villains are the venture capitalists, I would say. Because what they do is they'll take a kid who's like a 19-year old kid in college who has a really interesting idea for a platform or a technology or an app, and they'll say, "Hey, kid. Come over here. Here's a hundred million dollars. Now pivot away from what you were thinking, that app you were going to connect all of humanity, but pivot away from that, maybe connect all humanity, but take all their data, you know. Or don't really connect all

humanity on all these levels. But just this one.” And these kids, they're 19, 20 years old. They don't have myelin sheaths on their, on their, the dendrites in their neocortex, yet. They haven't developed impulse control. They're not fully formed.

And you end up, they end up adopting those values, the values of capital. And they haven't been educated. They haven't read Adam Smith. They don't understand that the factors of production are land, labor, and capital. So they ignore land and labor. The only one who has a seat at the table is capital. And we end up destroying neighborhoods, destroying human minds, destroying human society, destroying democracy, destroying the taxicab business, destroying journalism.

And all in a kind of a scorched-earth Clear Channel style, you know, quest for monopoly. And Stewart Brand said it: “We are as gods. We may as well start acting that way.” And I think that's a problem. We are not as gods.

FAKE: We might as well get good at it, is what he said.

RUSHKOFF: Yeah, get good at it. You're never going to be good at it being a god. We're humans. We're humans. If there's something that's God, the closest we're gonna be as the collective human project, you know. But certainly not, you know, that the guy in charge of Google or something.

FAKE: Or the blackbox that's actually writing all of the Google and Facebook algorithms, those engineers.

RUSHKOFF: Right. And we can't see what's in the blackbox because it's proprietary, but we're going to let it run our world.

FAKE: It's private and it's running everything.

RUSHKOFF: But I don't generally believe in evil so much as there's a profound ignorance of human value. You know, that we've adopted the industrial-age value system, that human beings are only valuable insofar as they can provide utility value to the market. And that's a misconception. And once we digitize that, once we empower computers with that logic, to say human beings are only as powerful as so much as they can help, you know, grow the market, then we're teaching computers how to really screw us up.

FAKE: Yeah.

RUSHKOFF: So that's why I'm on my little mission of, you know, my Mr. Rogers mission. You're okay. You're a human.

FAKE: Douglas Rushkoff's “Mr. Rogers mission” filled me with such hope when I first heard it. But since that in-person conversation, the global pandemic has forced human beings away from each other – and often, the digital space is the only place they can come back together. I'm

thinking of the stories of people dying in hospitals, having to say goodbye to their loved ones on Zoom or FaceTime. It feels like such a poor replica of humanity, but it's also the only one we have.

What is this doing to us? And what is the alternative?

Coming up on *Should This Exist?*, a whole town in West Virginia that lives alongside the world's largest telescope. But you can't make a call on your cell phone, and you can't text on it either. It's urban-scale digital sequestration. And it's an experiment that's about to put the town's residents to a whole new test.

[BREAK]

FAKE: Hi, welcome back. We end this episode on digital sequestration in a place known as the quietest town in America – population 143. Green Bank, West Virginia, where cell phones and wireless devices are banned. But it's also a place with some of the most cutting-edge technology anywhere. Dr. Hanna Sizemore is a planetary scientist based there.

HANNA SIZEMORE: Sorry, please call me Hanna, 'cause it makes me feel a little too grown up to be called Dr. Sizemore.

FAKE: In this strikingly rural town, really a trip back in time, Hanna is doing innovative research about ice on Mars.

SIZEMORE: We are smack dab in the middle of the National Radio Quiet Zone, which is a 1,300-square-mile area where radio transmissions of all kinds are restricted.

FAKE: Hanna's an adjunct researcher at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank. Using massive radio telescopes, researchers are listening to galaxies billions of light-years away, searching for clues on how the Milky Way was formed. The emissions from these galaxies are so faint, and the equipment needed to hear them is so sensitive, that cell phones can interfere. So they're banned.

SIZEMORE: So basically fixed transmitters are very limited here. So we don't have television towers that are directed toward the Observatory. Even radio stations are somewhat limited in the directionality and power of their transmissions. Cell towers are extremely limited and placed strategically in the topography. And then there are even restrictions on local WiFi. In the old days, they even limited people having microwaves in their homes and things like that. So, in modern America, we're sort of a special little pocket of radio quiet.

FAKE: Hanna grew up here, and her father was a park superintendent.

SIZEMORE: And so we actually lived on a large state park. You know, fantastic scenery, trees, animals, amazing night skies. It was a fairytale childhood, basically.

FAKE: Infatuated with space and stars and Carl Sagan as a young girl, Hanna left to go to college, got her PhD, and ended up working at NASA in Silicon Valley while her husband, a software engineer, worked at Google. Then they had identical twins and decided to move back. She says you couldn't possibly have lived two greater extremes in their digital lives.

SIZEMORE: Yes, and that is a real difference, in that they are having a very different experience than their peers everywhere else.

FAKE: That was 9 years ago.

SIZEMORE: My children are both 10 years old. And lots of people are dealing with issues of, you know, cell phones and how much social media they are allowing their children to experience and things like that at this age. It's absolutely not an option for my kids. They have iPads at home. But because we live in a place where this stuff, its functionality is limited, they have a really different relationship to it than you would expect. It's like a special treat. They ask, can they use it? It only works when they're at a place that has WiFi, which is very far from the area where we work and they go to school. They have the kind of growing up experience that nobody's had since the '80s, basically.

FAKE: Hanna Sizemore says that she and her husband both still have Silicon Valley-type jobs – using high-speed fiber optic lines to the outside world. But here, they're not just 3,000 miles away. It's a world away.

SIZEMORE: When I moved back here, I thought I was doing a short-term thing to have my children near their grandparents for a while, to have cheaper daycare and free after-hours child care, and that we would do it for a little while, and then we would move back to the world.

You know, we talk about the outside, sort of like the Shakers did. Move back to "the real world." Yet I'm still here nine years later. I do like that turning things off is an option, even though I'm sitting in a world-class research facility. So, you know, it's really quite lovely. It has let me combine two parts of my life that I never thought I could.

So I am living the dream. But I remind myself of that all the time.

FAKE: Hanna and I first talked back in March, and I wondered how the pandemic had changed life in Green Bank. Hanna's house is outside of the ten-mile radius of the observatory, so I knew she had online access at home. But she's been in my thoughts.

FAKE So hi, Hanna. How are things over in Greenbank?

SIZEMORE: Well, my family has been pretty isolated in our home.

FAKE: Our Skype call started with the sad news that she'd been hit with what was likely the virus – only a few weeks after our interview.

SIZEMORE: You know, I was completely incapacitated, struggling to breathe. Night after night, we were debating if we were going to the emergency room. I had to like, sort out how to walk normally again afterward.

FAKE: Wow. Oh my goodness.

FAKE: Although she couldn't get tested for weeks, she Skyped with a researcher friend in Cambridge who was working in an ICU, and said she was a classic case.

SIZEMORE: And then we had the very odd thing happen that we opened things up a little bit and had some contact with some friends and extended family. And then we got sick again.

FAKE: No.

SIZEMORE: We went through the entire progression of it again in July, not as bad for me that time. Worse for the kids.

FAKE: When Hanna first got sick, the schools shut down. And they struggled to organize a crude virtual learning system.

SIZEMORE: It was mostly pen and paper with some limited internet. It was a real problem here, getting students to be able to actually do the online activities.

And with a lot of parents having to travel out of the county to work and having to juggle kids to grandparents or a higher risk for the virus, I mean, it's a little bit of a chaotic communication situation.

FAKE: But Hanna Sizemore still believes it's been far easier to be in lockdown in the Allegheny Mountains of West Virginia than if she and her family lived in an urban area.

SIZEMORE: And so the economic crisis and the lockdown have really reinforced the reasons that we came here.

FAKE: Yeah. So maybe there's, you know, this is a big kind of de-urbanization phenomenon we're seeing the beginning of now.

SIZEMORE: Well, I would certainly invite anybody who's tired of Silicon Valley, L.A., or, you know, the East Coast megalopolis to consider Pocahontas County, West Virginia. It's a lovely place. And we actually, we need people. People are our big export.

FAKE: Hanna, thank you so much for taking the time to catch up with us again.

SIZEMORE: Thank you. It's been nice to talk to other grownups. I think that's the way a lot of parents are feeling these days.

FAKE: Dr. Hanna Sizemore.

We all have different experiences of being offline, or unplugged, or disconnected – whatever you want to call it. Until the pandemic is under control, we can't fully go back to that life. But I want to, desperately.

The digital space as we know it was created with the promise of worldwide interconnection. But that promise is tempered by what it's doing to our psyches.

So we look forward to the day when we can spend more time with friends, more time in nature, and less time connected to the online world. If we can do that, we might just come out more human on the other side.

Look, I don't get to decide Should This Exist? And neither does this show. Our goal is to inspire you to ask that question and the intriguing questions that grow from it.

LISTENER: I think with digital sequestration, the real question is like: Is it possible? You know, I have a smartphone, but I also walk by roughly a thousand screens every time I leave the house.

LISTENER: I want to throw my phone out the window multiple times a day. So this sounds like a dream to me.

LISTENER: Just the automatic reaching for it. You can find yourself on your phone before you realize it. That's, that's the thing.

LISTENER: You lose your brains, and you can miss things that are important, more important than being on your smartphone.

LISTENER: We've become used to having all these answers, and we have lost our sense of amazement about that.

LISTENER: You know, if you're in prison, if you're working at Starbucks, if you're on a factory line, you are digitally sequestered. And it is not a luxury. It's not a treat.

LISTENER: Like, the younger members of our family who grew up with a different sense of what it meant to have their phone with them, it would be similar to asking us to not have like a pad and a pencil.

FAKE: Agree? Disagree? You might have perspectives that are completely different from what we've shared so far. We want to hear them.

To tell us the questions you're asking go to "shouldthisexist.com" where you can record a message for us. And join the Should This Exist newsletter at shouldthisexist.com.

I'm Caterina Fake.