POV
Community Engagement & Education
DISCUSSION GUIDE
Web Junkie
A Film by Shosh Shlam and Hilla Medalia
www.pbs.org/pov
LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKERS

Tel Aviv, June 19, 2015

Technology has become the architect of our intimacy. We communicate in a new language of abbreviation in which letters stand for words and emoticons for feelings. We are increasingly connected to each other but, oddly, more alone. In intimacy, we have found a new solitude. The complexity of the Internet can be difficult to illustrate, as it is a result of culture but simultaneously shapes it.

Similarly, Internet addiction is both a personal and social phenomenon. It is a universal issue that is becoming progressively all encompassing as the boundaries between the real and the virtual become increasingly blurred. Through this process, we could not help but feel that something is lost in the physical, “real,” everyday lives of those living in the Western world. This phenomenon, these feelings are what inspired us to take this journey.

Web Junkie is an emotional voyage that examines the results of Internet addiction and its effects on families and interpersonal relationships, while also examining the cultural and emotional effects of this type of treatment. In addition, the film also deals with the way that Chinese society, with its culture of hyper-competitiveness, seeks to control what are perceived as the extremely negative effects of the Internet.

Web Junkie exposes the virtual world, the ways that it transcends cultural boundaries and influences the evolution of culture. Will these techniques be successful? Is this militaristic treatment effective or advisable? Is it possible to “cure” these young kids? Will they be able to handle life outside the virtual world? And on the topic of human rights, is it enough that the government requires only the parents’ agreement in order to hold these children against their will? These questions were our guide throughout this process and directed us while we were making the film.

Shosh Shlam and Hilla Medalia
Directors, Web Junkie
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Thanks to those who reviewed this guide:
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Directors, Web Junkie
Web Junkie (52 min.) follows the treatment of three Chinese teenagers, obsessive gamers whose preference for the virtual world over the real one is summed up in one jarring statement: “Reality is too fake.” The question is, does the preference for life online, and the behavior that follows from it, signal addiction? Lots of Chinese parents seem to think so, and their government agrees. Internet addiction has been declared a national health crisis in China, making it the first country in the world to classify this controversial diagnosis formally as a clinical disorder.

Israeli filmmakers Shosh Shlam and Hilla Medalia gained extraordinary access to a three-month military-style rehab program in Beijing. The teens sent there are demonstrably defiant, alienated and sometimes depressed or lonely. Whether their behavior is merely “acting out” or actually “addiction” is less clear. Either way, Web Junkie is an illuminating and rare look into an intriguing facet of China’s struggles with modernity.
Web Junkie is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- Your local PBS station
- Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to youth, media, or China, including, High Tech, Low Life; Up the Yangtze; Fallen City; and Last Train Home
- Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the Key Issues section
- High school students, youth groups and clubs
- Faith-based organizations and institutions
- Drug counselors, social workers and medical professionals who deal with addiction
- Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums
- Civic, fraternal and community groups
- Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools
- Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries

Web Junkie is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- addiction
- adolescence
- China
- family
- health
- Internet addiction
- media literacy
- one child policy
- online gaming
- psychology
- rehab
- screen time
- treatment for addiction
- youth

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use Web Junkie to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pov.org/engage
What Is Internet Addiction?

China is the first country in the world to classify Internet addiction as a distinct clinical disorder. While other countries focus on the behavior associated with Internet addiction, Chinese psychologists view dependence on the Internet as a unique addiction with separate criteria for diagnosis—akin to other addictions like those to alcohol or drugs. In China, the evaluation is quantitative—all those who spend more than six hours per day on a computer for purposes not related to school or work are considered “addicted” to the Internet. In the United States, such a patient might be diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder or receive another diagnosis that relates to the behaviors exhibited by the patient rather than the Internet specifically.

Experts subdivide Internet addiction into five areas—chat room relationships, cybersex, net compulsions (such as online shopping or gambling), video and online gaming and information overload. In China, and at the camp in the film, the majority of young people experience an addiction to online gaming—although there is typically a chat function associated with online role-playing games as well.

Most young patients have withdrawn from exterior social environments. For example, they no longer visit with family and friends in person.

However, the writers of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which provides standards for mental illness in the United States, don’t see the Internet as an official separate clinical disorder and instead in the most recent edition marked Internet addiction as a subject requiring further study. Alcohol and drugs are clearly damaging when used in excess, but U.S. psychologists are reluctant to categorize the Internet in this way—especially when the Internet serves as a means of social interaction for many people.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

DISCUSSION GUIDE
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Treatment of Internet Addiction in China

The Daxing Internet addiction treatment center, located in a suburb of Beijing, is one of as many as 250 centers in China providing treatment for teenagers whose parents identify them as being addicted to the Internet. The majority of the teenagers present at the military-style center began their journeys by being drugged by their parents and waking up in a barred dormitory with other teens who share their passion for online gaming.

China is one of the first countries in the world to label Internet addiction a distinct clinical disorder with diagnostic criteria and treatment plans. Careful regulation of schedules, exercise and diet aim at helping reconnect the teens with the world around them. The center’s director, Tao Ran, claims a 70 percent success rate. However, in November 2009 the Chinese government banned physical punishment to “wean” teens from the Internet. This was in response to a child who died inside an Internet addiction center due to prolonged physical activity.

Inside the Internet treatment facility in the film, teenagers experience a treatment regime that includes medication, group therapy (sometimes including parents) and military-style training. Their sleep and diet are carefully regulated. Ran calls Internet addiction China’s most significant public health hazard. This does not necessarily convince the center’s patients, one of whom calls the classes an attempt at “brainwashing.”

Sources:


Treatment of Internet Addiction Outside of China

While treatment for Internet addiction has been rapidly expanding over the past decade in China, the United States has been slower to create specific treatment programs for Internet addiction. Internet addiction has never been included as a specific diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, the reference that collects conclusions of research on specific psychological conditions and is used by psychologists in the United States to guide treatment plans.

The fifth and most recent edition of the *DSM* published in 2013 did not include Internet addiction as a separate condition, but did designate Internet gaming disorder as a phenomenon deserving further study. Treatment of Internet addiction in the U.S. centers on co-occurring conditions, such as social anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder and general addictive personality disorder. However, some researchers argue that as the use of the Internet pervades everyday life, addiction to the Internet deserves specialized study and treatment. In 2006, the Stanford School of Medicine conducted a nationwide study that found one in eight Americans fit at least one criteria for problematic Internet use.

The most commonly used questionnaire for exploring Internet addiction is Young’s Internet Addiction Test (IAT), which has been approved by doctors in the United States, the United Kingdom, Finland and Korea. This questionnaire addresses issues of increased Internet use over time, lying to friends and family members about time spent online and emotional distress and avoidance.
A Chinese study using the IAT found that 10.2 percent of respondents aged 13 to 18 years used the Internet moderately and .6 percent were severely addicted. This is a lower percentage of “addicts” than the figures found using the Chinese quantitative diagnosis of more than six hours spent on the Internet outside of school or work.

Treatment for Internet addiction in the United States is based on interventions and strategies used in the treatment of substance abuse disorders, such as detoxing, individual and group therapy and medication. As there are not many treatment centers in the United States dedicated to Internet addiction treatment (there are only two centers that dedicate themselves to Internet addiction treatment exclusively), those who believe they may be suffering are encouraged to seek out general addiction counseling and treatment.

Sources:


Selected People Featured in Web Junkie

Xi Wang (“Hope”)

Gao Quance (“Hacker”)

Wang Yuchao (“Nicky”)

Tao Ran
Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- What did you learn from this film?
- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- If you could show this film to one person, who would that person be and what do you hope their “takeaway” would be?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?
DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The Symptoms

The film states, “China is the first country to declare Internet addiction as a clinical disorder, claiming it is the number one public health threat to its teenage population.” What do you see or hear in the film that looks or sounds like addiction?

Did you hear anything familiar in the stories the parents told about their sons’ behavior? In what ways are these young people similar to or different from teens you know?

One of the young men says, “I hate going to school. I hate my family.” Others agree with him. Do you see this primarily as a result of time spent gaming or a cause of escaping to the virtual world? What makes you think that?

Consider each of Tao Ran’s conclusions below. What do you see in the film that supports his assessments?

- The social part of your brain has stopped developing.
- You’re afraid to communicate with others.
- They don’t trust people. They’re lonely and introverted.
- The computer connects them to one another.
- They use computers to escape.
- They can’t experience satisfaction and heroism in real life. All of them feel zero degree of emotion. Zero. No emotion. Nothing towards another person. They know inside out about the Internet, but nothing about human feelings.

Ran states that his patients “think that the real world is not as good as the virtual world.” Assuming that he is correct, why might these young men think that? Is this sort of thinking evidence of addiction?

Ran says, “Our research showed that addicts spend more than six hours a day online, not for the purpose of working or studying.” Is this a description of Internet addiction, or a case of youth spending time on activities that adults don’t value? How do you think the adults would react if the young men were spending more than six hours a day online doing schoolwork?

Nicky’s mother says, “There are so many vivid examples on TV and movies. Shouldn’t I be worried?” What role do media stories about teens and screens play in your own views about the health and social impact of computers, phones, video games and/or online time?
The Diagnosis

Ran says, “As a psychiatrist my job is to determine if this is indeed a disease.” Do you see it as a disease? Why or why not?

Parents and staff describe some troubling behavior on the part of the teens (e.g., skipping school, not sleeping or bathing, being disrespectful or defiant). In your view, which behaviors are signs of addiction and which are typical adolescent rebellion? When is it appropriate to pathologize behaviors that, under some circumstances, would qualify as normal?

One of the parents says, “I think kids today feel lonely because they’re the only child in the family.” What role might China’s one child policy play in the teens’ use of the Internet?

Why do you think the classification of “Internet addiction” has taken hold in China but not in Western nations? How does this diagnosis (and the resulting approach to treatment) square with societal values and structures in China?

What are the implications of defining the young people’s behavior as “addiction”? What does it mean for the teens and what does it mean in terms of strategies used to help them?

The Way the Young Men See It

Nicky asserts that Internet addiction is “not a real disease. It’s a social phenomenon, just a social phenomenon.” Do you think he is correct? Why or why not?

When Hacker is asked if he has friends other than those he has online, he says no. When asked why, he responds, “Reality is too fake.” What do you think he means?

One of the young men says, “Parents are brainwashed by psychiatrists. If you check their definition of Internet addiction, 80 percent of all Chinese must have it.” Do you agree that parents are being brainwashed? In terms of values or approaches to time spent online, what role does generational difference play?

Ran compares the teens to heroin addicts, saying, “The teenagers we have here crave and look forward to playing games online every day. That’s why we call it ‘electronic heroin.’” Contrast this with Hope’s explanation of his attraction to online gaming: “It seems you’ll be considered a good kid only if you get good grades. My grades are so-so, but I
can play games better than others. I feel awesome when I win. At least that’s one thing I’m better at than others.” Does Hope’s explanation provide evidence in support of Ran’s “electronic heroin” analogy?

At one point, a group of patients brag about how many days they spent playing online games and how many thousands of dollars they spent. Why would these things be a point of pride? How does this boasting compare to the way drug addicts or alcoholics in recovery typically talk about their experiences?

There are lots of things that teens can do online (e.g., hang out in chat rooms, use social media, look for music or videos), but the patients in the treatment center for using the Internet excessively were nearly all involved in gaming. Why do you think that might be the case?

Hacker’s father admits to stabbing and beating his son. How do you think this violence contributed to his son’s online behavior?

Nicky says to his parents, “At home, I feel I don’t exist. I feel neither of you care about me. On the Internet I have friends who care about me.” Later he says, “I don’t think my friends online are fictitious. They are also human beings.” If you were in the room, how would you respond to him?

When Hacker admits to falling in love with a girl online, one of the young men says, “You’re dumb to fall for somebody online.” Why might doing so be considered dumb? Is saying so an indication that the speaker understands the difference between the virtual and actual worlds?

What messages do you think the young men are trying to send by adopting English nicknames?

**The Treatment**

One of the young men says, “They destroy our old beliefs and make new ones for us. It’s like brainwashing.” In your view, what’s the difference between “treatment” (which might include cognitive therapy) and “brainwashing”?

Ran tells the parents that their children turn to the Internet in part because the parents care only about school per-
formance, saying, “Their stress, their worries, their pain—we can’t see any of it.” What role do parents play in their sons’ recoveries, and why do you think the center sees that role as vital, even when other Chinese treatment facilities do not?

In your experience, are these comments from the teens typical of people in treatment for addiction, or do they indicate a problem with treatment protocols (or both)?

- “I don’t know why I’m here.”
- “I’m wasting my time here. I don’t need any treatment.”
- “Some kids were drugged, others were tricked into coming here.”

After Hope leads an escape, he is put in what doctors term “isolation/self-examination therapy.” The doctors suggest that most of the young men would benefit from similar ten-day stints in isolation. What do you think about this use of solitary confinement? What other strategies could be used to encourage self-reflection?

If the parents and health care providers succeed in getting the teens to kick their Internet habit, what would the teens lose? What would they gain?

Additional media literacy questions are available at: www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php
Taking Action

• Host an intergenerational event where grandparents, parents and grandkids can have a facilitated conversation about the role that computers, phones and the Internet play in their lives.

• Invite teens to conduct demonstrations of online gaming at local senior centers or other adult gatherings. Engage the teens in a discussion about what they like about gaming.

• Have a public debate on whether the DSM (the official mental health diagnostic manual in the United States) should recognize Internet addiction as a disorder.

• Work with your local school district to help integrate lessons on digital and media literacy, including activities that help students gain awareness about the amount of time they spend online and the impact of that time on their lives.
RESOURCES

FILMMAKER WEBSITE
www.webjunkiemovie.com
The film’s official website offers information about the film, including interviews with the filmmakers.

Original Online Content on POV
To enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The Web Junkie website—www.pbs.org/pov/webjunkie — offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with filmmakers; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable discussion guide; a standards-aligned lesson plan; and special features.

Internet Addiction
BRADFORD REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER
This is the website for the first medically-based rehab program for the treatment of Internet addiction in the United States.

THE NEW YORKER:
“IS INTERNET ADDICTION A REAL THING?”
This article by Maria Konnikova provides an overview of the issues related to obsessions with being online and labeling that behavior “addiction.”

China
FRONTLINE: “YOUNG & RESTLESS IN CHINA”
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/youngchina/
This 2008 episode of FRONTLINE follows nine young people coming of age in China. The website includes a wide range of links to background information and resources, as well as a teacher’s guide.

THE WORLD OF CHINESE: “LOG IN, SIGN OUT”
www.theworldofchinese.com/2013/03/log-in-sign-out/
This article by Matthew Dubois about Internet addiction appeared in an English language magazine published by China’s oldest publishing house.

Digital Literacy
CYBERWISE
www.cyberwise.org
The site’s slogan, “No grownup left behind,” summarizes its purpose: to provide adults the information they need to help children use computer technology in healthy ways.

DANAH BOYD
www.danah.org
The website of the author of It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens includes downloadable papers and articles.
Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television’s premier showcase for nonfiction films. The series airs Mondays at 10 p.m. on PBS from June to September, with primetime specials during the year. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world’s boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 32 Emmy® Awards, 18 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®, the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award and the Prix Italia. The POV series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, two IDA Awards for Best Continuing Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Digital www.pbs.org/pov

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department created PBS’s first program website and its first web-based documentary (POV’s Borders) and has won major awards, including a Webby Award (and six nominations) and an Online News Association Award. POV Digital continues to explore the future of independent nonfiction media through its digital productions and the POV Hackathon lab, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms. @povdocs on Twitter.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV’s Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 650 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

American Documentary, Inc.  www.amdoc.org

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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You can follow us on Twitter @POVengage for the latest news from POV Community Engagement & Education.

Front cover: Hope being hooked up for tests. Photo courtesy of Dogwoof Global