

September 12, 2012

## Who killed the family room? We all did

By WENCY LEUNG



Rachel Myers, left, Aaron Myers, Seth Myers and their mother Randi Chapnik Myers, who co-owns Momfaze.com, a tell-all site for parents of teens and tweens, photographed while using their mobile devices at their Toronto home, Sept. 11, 2012.  
(Fernando Morales/The Globe and Mail)

*With each member of the average family increasingly plugged into their own electronic gadgets, there's less time for shared activities and experiences*

When Randi Chapnik Myers of Toronto wants her three kids, 10 to 16, to come for dinner, she resorts to sending texts or Facebook messages. Often, they are no farther than their own bedrooms, logged onto their laptops.

"What's happening is they're having 40 conversations at once on Facebook, they're posting things on Tumblr, they're listening to music and they're watching a movie at the same time," says Chapnik Myers, who keeps a website, Momfaze.com, about raising teens. Each of her children has multiple personal devices; the older ones have laptops and BlackBerries and the youngest has a desktop, an Xbox and a portable Nintendo 3DS game console. "Pretty much all of their communication is on screens."

Personal communication and entertainment devices may be keeping us connected, but they are also driving us apart, sending us to separate rooms of the house and cutting into family time. This behavioural shift – each of us in our space watching our own thing – has profound implications beyond the latest cat meme. As the living room gathers dust, it will affect family dynamics and how we use our homes.

The use of personal electronic tablets for watching television and video content more than doubled in 2012 from a year ago in regional markets around the world. That trend is unlikely to slow, as retailers and manufacturers target younger and younger users. LeapPad and the soon-to-be-released Tabeo tablets are designed for preschool- and elementary-school-aged children.

The average U.S. home now has 24 different consumer media and communication devices, including multiple televisions, computers and smartphones, according to the Arlington, Va.-based Consumer Electronics Association. There is no equivalent market data for Canada, but since Canadians spend more time online than anyone else on Earth, our homes are likely filled with the same gadgets. Interior designers are responding to demand from homeowners for separate screens in various rooms, installing television sets and touch-screen monitors in bathrooms, kitchens and even laundry rooms.

As media companies increasingly tailor their content to individual consumers (you would be hard-pressed to find a television service provider that does not use the words "on demand," "any time" and "anywhere"), there is even less incentive to watch television in a fixed time and place with the rest of the family.

On the plus side, this cuts down on fights over the remote control. The downside: It offers us fewer shared experiences as we tune into our own digital worlds.

"I do notice that sometimes I look around my living room and everyone is staring into individual screens, not talking. At least when you're watching TV together, there's some common pop culture, a frame of reference to share, snuggles on the couch, and a bit of talking to each other. Not perfect, but better than the individual pods we seem to escape into," says Susan Sperling of Vaughan, Ont.

Ideally, of course, families would spend less time glued to their tablets and televisions and more time bonding in other ways, like eating meals together, playing board games or going to the park. In reality, we cannot seem to tear ourselves away from our screens.

Darby Saxbe, a postdoctoral fellow in the department of psychology at the University of Southern California, found further evidence of the fragmentation of media consumption in a study published in the journal *Communication Research Reports* last year. She and her fellow researchers noted that only 1 per cent of American households do not own a television, and more than half owned three.

In more than 8,000 observations of 30 families, they recorded instances when family members watched television as a primary activity (that is, when television was the main focus of their attention). In only 17 per cent of such instances did the entire family watch television together. In 36 per cent of observations, individuals were watching alone.

In a report released last year, based on 2010 survey results, Statistics Canada found the percentage of Canadians who watched television on any given day was down slightly to 73 per cent, from 77 per cent in 1998, but those who did were spending nearly three hours a day in front of the tube. Time online in front of a computer was up.

According to research from CAMH, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, about 10 per cent of Ontario students, Grades 7 to 12, spend at least seven hours a day in front of a computer or television.

All of this affects how families experience and understand cultural and social events, and it changes how they interact in their homes. Those who grew up in the 1980s may remember gathering to watch the fallout of the Chernobyl disaster, the destruction of the Berlin Wall, or even *The Cosby Show*, with their parents and siblings. There were, after all, limited channels, which offered common points of reference.

Homeowners these days have not abandoned the idea of watching television and movies as a group; some are creating increasingly elaborate home theatres. But Markham, Ont.-based interior designer Jennifer Brouwer found her clients rarely have time to actually sit down together and use them, preferring to tune in separately via portable devices, televisions and PVRs (personal video recorders) set up throughout the home.

"I'd venture to guess that more than 90 per cent don't watch TV, they listen to TV," Brouwer says. "Gone are the days when you're really sitting there watching."

For some, the proliferation of gadgets means parents and children are able to stay in touch throughout the day when they are not at home. But within the home, Saxbe says, "Not only does it change the way the family converses, it also might change the amount of time the family is able to converse. If everybody's off in a different room engaged in different media, then the family isn't spending that time together catching up on each others' days."

Jenni Tipper, publications editor at the Vanier Institute of the Family in Ottawa, adds that it is impossible for parents to ignore how pervasive portable devices have become. "There's no question that technology is a prominent, arguably permanent feature of family life," she says.

To stay in tune with what her three sons are interested in, she occasionally sits down to watch movies with them.

"I can tell you, it's not usually my choice" of film, she says, noting that the last movie they watched together was probably an Adam Sandler flick. But she believes it gives her a better understanding of their world. "I often say to them, 'Okay, I'm pretty sure I need to watch this movie with you because I'd better know ...what are young people doing these days,'" she says. "It gives me insight into the little jokes they're making."