I t has changed. Digital technol- ogy has become an intricate part of our lives, woven into the very fabric of what we do, how we think and – perhaps most impor- tantly – how we communicate with others. Ac- cording to Dr Yair Amichai-Hamburger, if we don’t take a conscious decision to put limits on our use of technology, the ramifications could be dire, both for us and the next generation.

I catch up with Yair Amichai-Hamburger one afternoon, ironically while he is on his black- phone, traveling from one meeting to another. Dr. Amichai-Hamburger is the director of IDC Herzliya's Center for Internet Psychology, located within the Sammy Ofer School of Communi- cations. He is Israel’s representative to the World Internet Project (WIP), an international collabora- tion of over 30 countries that is explore- ing the influence and importance of technology on people’s lives. I ask Amichai-Hamburger how he sees the effects of digital technology and new media on our lives today, and his response is chilling to say the least.

“Obviously there is real danger happening to the quality of family life.”

“One thing that can help us to understand how damaging this is,” continues Amichai-Hamburger, “is the ‘Flow Theory,’ suggested by Mi- halý Csíkszentmihályi, a psychologist who did pioneering work in the field of positive psychol- ogy. He says that the peak experiences we have in life are where we dive into an experience and are totally there. In such an event, we forget about time and pressure, and are completely focused on the activity at hand. It happens when we watch a good movie, when we are with some- one we love very much, or when we are doing something that we love to do. However nowa- days, whatever we are doing, we are accompa- nied by constant beeps and bleeps and other interference. You go to a movie and the person sitting next to you is constantly checking their phone, and this way of flow is actually un- obtainable for many people.”

So are we all doomed to a life in which we are slaves to our technological devices, never again to experience the energizing power of ‘flow’? No, says Amichai-Hamburger. We can choose to take a stance and win some control back over our lives. And it begins with creating borders.

“We have to realize that to maintain our au- tonomy and be able to control our lives, we have to choose responsibility – or our ‘ability to respond’. When it comes to family life, there is a very important method that I call ‘Island of Love’. This is something we create, by first blocking out everything else: for one day a week, turn off the smartphones and comput- ers. The world will wait. We want to be with our loved ones – we can’t wait for tomorrow. If we don’t take a conscious decision to put limits on our use of technology, the ramifications could be dire, both for us and the next generation.”

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Amichai-Hamburger agrees that this is more challenging, but says that in fact he really does practice what he preaches. “We do not answer the phone during meals,” he explains, and expect our kids to do the same. Frequently we turn off our tech- nological devices, make popcorn and sit down as a family to watch a movie together, and once in a while we block a day or half a day to go out together, as a family or just as a couple. During these ‘islands of love’, where you invest in your families, they will open up and you will be able to build powerful relationships that will give you real happiness in life.”

“Who are we all doomed to a life in which we are slaves to our technological devices, never again to experience the energizing power of ‘flow’?”

“The dangers of digital technology

How much is too much? IDC’s Dr. Yair Amichai-Hamburger on the importance of putting limits on our use of technology.

“The borders that existed once upon a time between work, family and leisure simply don’t exist anymore.”

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In the digital world we live in, we are sur- rounded by mobile phones, Smartphones, port- table computers and an Internet that is avail- able everywhere, all the time. We find ourselves having to answer phones, check emails and get messages on a constant basis, all of which creates an environment in which mentally and physically we are in separate places. In other words, we are everywhere and we are nowhere.

Once upon a time, in the not so distant past, life and business moved at a slower pace and borders naturally existed between the different parts of our lives. Who remembers what it was like to go out to dinner with a companion and be unreachable for an hour or two? Or when the fastest way of sending a document was by fax? Or when someone could close their office door and find it impossible to disconnect, even for short periods of time. This, according to Amichai-  

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“Vacation is one thing – but what about managing the demands of daily life? So Amichai- Hamburger agrees that this is more challenging, but shows that in fact he really does practice what he preaches. “We do not answer the phone during meals,” he explains, and expect our kids to do the same. Frequently we turn off our tech- nological devices, make popcorn and sit down as a family to watch a movie together, and once in a while we block a day or half a day to go out together, as a family or just as a couple. These are the islands of love, where you invest in your families, they will open up and you will be able to build powerful relationships that will give you real happiness in life.”

Malcolm Parnes