

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

# I Killed Color on My Phone. The Result Shocked Me.

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Brea Souders for The New York Times

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**By Julia Angwin**  
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I have long been skeptical of the current hysteria about how our phones are addictive machines destroying our previously pristine analog world. But a few months ago, even I began to be vaguely worried that I was devoting too many hours to an embarrassing medley of political commentary and makeup application TikTok videos. So when I spied an article about the benefits of switching one's phone to a black-and-white color scheme, I figured I'd give it a whirl.

The result was shocking. The moment I switched, I no longer felt an urgent need to look at my iPhone — an urge that I hadn't known was so strong until it was gone. I experienced a full-bodied sense of relief when the colors faded to gray.

An invisible cord had been severed. I would leave my phone in my room when I walked from my home office to the kitchen. I would forget to check it for hours instead of minutes. When I did check it, I put it down quickly as soon as the task was done. The number of hours I spent per day on the phone plummeted 40 percent, to an average of four hours and 40 minutes per day — still embarrassingly high, but not the vertiginous eight-plus hours I was averaging.

I am still not a subscriber to the current moral panic about phone dependency, an over-the-top overreaction that has led to ill-conceived laws [banning phones in school](#), [banning kids from social media](#), [requiring website visitors to prove their age](#) before accessing certain sites and even [requiring scanning of text messages for illegal content](#). I believe those laws are largely just dangerous restrictions on our freedom of speech and freedom of association clad in child-safety garb. But my adventures in greyscale have led me to the unfortunate conclusion that my own phone usage was a bit more compulsive than I had realized — and that we could all use a little help fighting our compulsions.

Scientists are increasingly embracing the concept called “[problematic smartphone use](#),” which is defined as “the recurrent craving to use a smartphone in a way that is difficult to control and leads to impaired daily functioning,” in a [2020 analysis of hundreds](#) of papers on the topic.

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And within this rubric, some describe problematic smartphone use as less an addiction and more like an obsessive compulsive behavior. Addicts are initially chasing pleasure; obsessive compulsives are chasing relief, [researchers say](#).

That resonated. For me, checking my phone is often a way to relieve my anxiety that perhaps there was a crisis I needed to jump on.

There are some small downsides to my black-and-white online life. Because the answer and decline buttons on my phone are both gray, I'll sometimes hang up on a call I want to answer. Fortunately, these days, nobody minds if you just call them back. Games weren't as fun, so I started playing them on my iPad and discovered that I liked the separation between work and play that it enforced: iPhone for boring stuff; iPad for fun. TikTok is weird on the iPad, so I still try to watch it on my phone occasionally, but in black and white it's just not as compelling.

The hardest adjustment was photos. My husband sent me gray pictures of a beautiful sunset. My daughter texted me a selfie in her Halloween outfit dressed as a ladybug. She just looked odd and slightly goth until I checked on my computer and saw her decked out in red. Eventually, I figured out a [shortcut](#) that allows me to briefly switch to color by clicking the side button three times.

But I've found that whenever I return to color, even briefly, I am desperate to turn it off again as quickly as possible. With my eyes no longer accustomed to the brightness, I now find the phone's colors to be too vivid, too blinding — kind of like I'm staring into a Times Square LED billboard.

Two and half months into this journey, my phone usage remains about four hours per day. And I'm pretty sure I'll never go back to color on my phone.

It may sound cheesy, but to be honest, I feel like turning off color on my phone made me more aware and more appreciative of the color and beauty in real life. Now that I am no longer turning to my phone for fun, I find myself seeking it out in other ways — reading more books, watching more movies, planning more gatherings with friends, hanging out with my kids. And that's something I do want to be addicted to.

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## Julia Angwin

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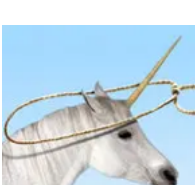
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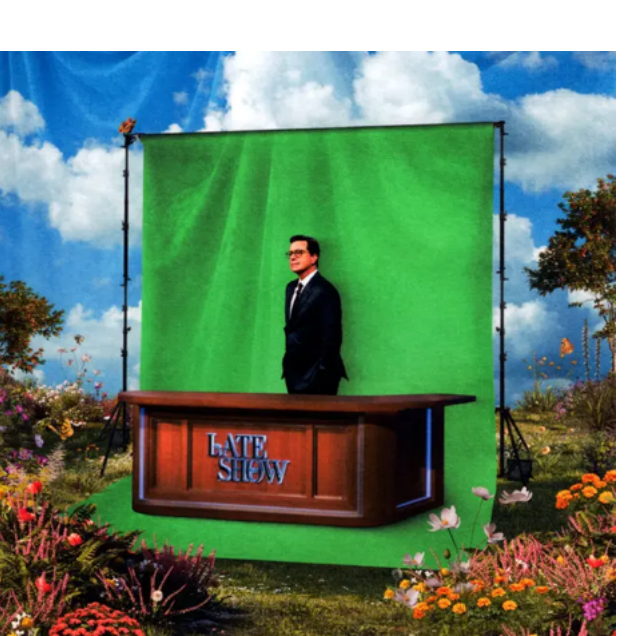
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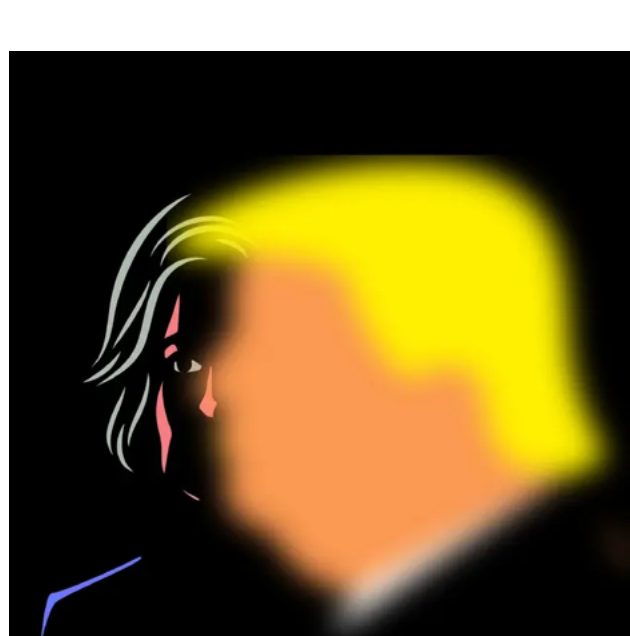
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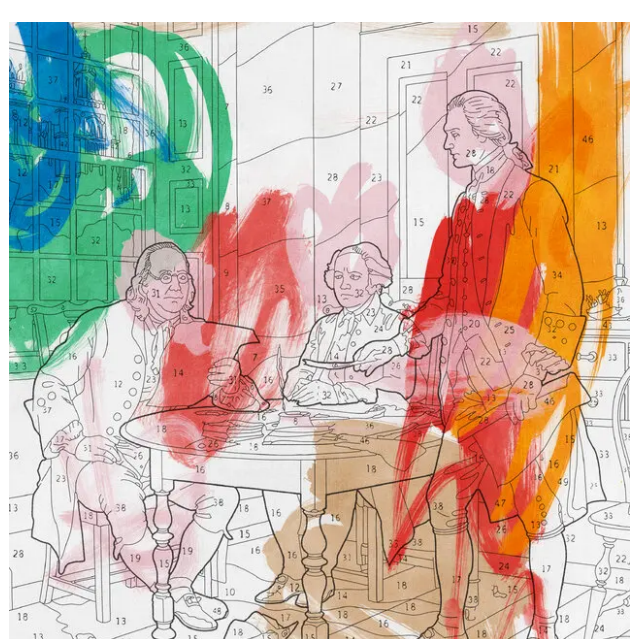
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