

9 Ways the Culture of Watching Is Changing Us by Barry Chudakov

Our constant use of cameras, TVs, computers, and smart devices is affecting our thoughts and behavior to a degree we may not even realize

Watching and being watched are no longer confined to how newborns bond with their mothers or apprentice chefs learn from sushi masters. Watching now changes how we identify ourselves and how others understand us. “Selfies” are not an anomaly; they are personal reflections of a wholesale adoption of the new culture of watching. We are watching so many—and so many are watching us in so many different places and ways—that watching and being watched fundamentally alter how we think and behave.

While 50% of our neural tissue is directly or indirectly related to vision, it is only in the last 100 years that image-delivery technologies (cameras, TVs, computers, smart devices) arrived. Here is a list of some ways all this watching is changing us.

1. The more we watch, the more we believe watching is necessary—and the more we invent reasons to watch.

Today the average person will have spent nine years of their life doing something that is not an essential human endeavor: watching other people, often people they don’t know. I’m talking, of course, about watching TV.

When asked to choose between watching TV and spending time with their fathers, 54% of 4- to 6-year-olds in the U.S. preferred television. The average American youth spends 900 hours a year in school and 1,200 hours a year watching TV.

In Korea today there are eating broadcasts, called muk-bang: online channels streaming live feeds of people eating large quantities of food while chatting with viewers who pay to watch them.

A survey of first-time plastic surgery patients found that 78% were influenced by reality television and 57% of all first-time patients were “high-intensity” viewers of cosmetic-surgery reality TV.

We watch housewives and Kardashians, TED talks and LOL cats. We watch people next to us (via the Android I-Am app) and people in 10-second “snaps” anywhere an IP address finds them (via Snapchat). The more we watch, the less we notice how much we’re watching. It seems it’s not only what we’re watching but the act of watching itself that beguiles us. The more devices and screens we watch, the more we rationalize our watching, give it precedence in our lives, tell ourselves it has meaning and purpose. We are redefining—and rewiring—ourselves in the process. This is the new (and very

seductive) culture of watching.

In Japan's Osaka train station—where an average of 413,000 passengers board trains every day—an independent research agency will soon deploy 90 cameras and 50 servers to watch and track faces as they move around the station. The purpose: to validate the safety of emergency exits in the event of a disaster. The technology can identify faces with a 99.99% accuracy rate.

2. Watching builds and transmits culture.

We watch to learn. Evolutionary eons have taught us to watch to learn where we are, what is around us, what we need to pay attention to, where danger and excitement lurk. "Watching others is a favorite activity of young primates," says Frans de Waal, one of the world's leading primate behavior experts. This is how we build and transmit culture, he explains.

What are we learning from all this watching?

Thanks to wifi built into almost anything with a lens, we are learning to share what we watch. Jonah Berger, Wharton Associate Professor of Marketing at the University of Pennsylvania, looked at video sharing and created an "arousal index," explaining that "physiological arousal is characterized by activation of the autonomic nervous system, and the mobilization caused by this excitatory state may boost sharing." Google Think Insights calls the YouTube generation Generation C for connection, community, creation, curation: 50% of Gen C talk to friends after watching a video, and 38% share videos on an additional social network after watching them on YouTube. As we watch emotionally charged content, our bodies—specifically, our autonomic nervous system—are compelled to share.

3. Watching takes us into relationships and actions where we are not physically present—and this fundamentally alters what experience means.

The experience of playing baseball, launching a missile attack, getting trapped in a mudslide, or chasing Maria Menounos is far different from watching those things. Yet now that we can watch almost anything—often while it happens—we must consider the neuroscience of "mirroring" that occurs when we watch others.

When our eyes are open, vision accounts for two-thirds of the electrical activity of the brain. But it is our mirror neurons—which V. S. Ramachandran, distinguished professor of neuroscience at the University of California, San Diego, calls "the basis of civilization"—that transport watching into the strange territory of being in an action where we're not physically present.

As Le Anne Schreiber wrote in *This Is Your Brain on Sports*:

"[A]bout one-fifth of the neurons that fire in the premotor cortex when we perform an action (say, kicking a ball) also fire at the sight of somebody else performing that action. A smaller percentage fire even when we only hear a sound associated with an action (say, the crack of a bat). This subset of motor neurons that respond to others' actions as if they were our own are called 'mirror neurons,' and they seem to encode a complete archive of all the muscle movements we learn to execute over the course of our lives, from the first smile and finger wag to a flawless triple toe loop."

When we watch, we feel we're there.

4. Watching replaces human friends and companions—we now have many significant others we do not know.

It appears that the idea of having some sense of a relationship with people who are not physically present, whom you do not know (in the conventional sense of having met them or being friends with them), arrived with the widespread adoption of television around 1950. Since then, these so-called parasocial relationships have become so common that we take them for granted. Television, virtual worlds, and gaming have created replacements for friends: people who occupy space in our media rooms and minds on an occasional basis.

Researchers now believe that loneliness motivates individuals to seek out these relationships, defying the obvious fact that the relationships are not real. The Real Housewives of Atlanta has 2,345,625 Facebook fans, who in some measure take real housewives into their own real lives.

People who watched a favorite TV show when they were feeling lonely reported feeling less lonely while watching. Further, while many of us experience lower self-esteem and a negative mood following a fight or social rejection, researchers found that those participants who experienced a relationship threat and then watched their favorite TV show were actually buffered against the blow to self-esteem, negative mood, and feelings of rejection.

It pays to have friends on TV.

5. Watching blurs the lines between self and other, merging the watcher and the watched.

From micro video security cameras ("less than one inch square") to The Rich Kids of Beverly Hills, watching is now someone's business plan. Eyeball-hungry producers especially want to blur the boundaries between the game of reality TV and the illusion of living real lives.

The result: Watch culture alters not only our sense of privacy in public; there is always someone in the vanity mirror looking back at us. (Author Jarod Kintz quipped: "A mirror is like my own personal reality TV show—where I'm both the star and only viewer. I've got to get my ratings up.") As cameras obsessively follow other lives, our identity adjusts. Rather than acknowledge the artifice of lives deliberately programmed for storylines and conflicts—the lifeblood of so-called reality TV— we fuse our emotions and concerns with others' professions, houses, cars, friends, husbands, and wives.

When watching assumes greater importance, the people we watch become personal replacements; they stand in our places and we in theirs. Models, stars, and athletes are the body doubles of watch culture. These doubles become our bodies: according to WebMD, reality television is contributing to eating disorders in girls. Since the boom of reality television in 2000, eating disorders in teenage girls (ages 13-19) have nearly tripled.

New technologies make us all paparazzi. 20 Day Stranger, an app developed by the MIT Media Lab Playful Systems research group and MIT's Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values, makes it possible to swap lives with—and watch—a stranger for 20 days:

“As you and your distant partner get up and go to work or school or wherever else the world takes you, the app tracks your path, pulling related photos from Foursquare or Google Maps along the way. If you stop in a certain coffee shop, the app will find a picture someone took there, and send it to your partner.”

Ostensibly designed to “build empathy and awareness,” 20 Day Stranger delivers snackable images via smartphone, which strokes your inner voyeur while enabling yet another person to watch you and “slowly get an impression of [your] life.”

When Shain Gandee, star of MTV’s *Buckwild*, died, his vehicle stuck deep in a mud pit, Huffington Post’s Jesse Washington asked, “Was Gandee living for the cameras that night or for himself?”

This watcher-watched merger is growing uneasy. Many a real housewife—from Atlanta to Orange County—may begin to wonder: Whose life is it, anyway?

6. Watching redefines intimacy.

Professor Simon Louis Lajeunesse of the University of Montreal wanted to compare the behavior of men who viewed sexually explicit material with those who had never seen it. He had to drastically rethink his study after failing to find any male volunteers who had never watched porn.

The hallmark of watch culture is the remove. In the snug blind of the Internet or from the private places we take our devices, we are hidden, removed from interaction while watching action. Because we can now watch anonymously, we have opened a Pandora’s box of previously hidden urges. In such interactions, we are seeing a new kind of affinity: what researchers call “intimacy at a distance.”

In this faux intimacy, watching easily turns to spying. As our lenses take us to parts and pores we could have barely imagined only a generation ago, the urge to watch is so compelling that we adopt its logic—as we do with all our tools—and we easily move from watching what we can see to watching what we could see. With a camera in the baby’s room I could watch the nanny; with a camera on the third floor I could watch the clones in Accounting to see if they’re up to any funny business. Economic or security intentions ensure that this slope hardly feels slippery; we move down it easily, seamlessly slipping from watching to spying to invading and then to destroying—what others thought were their personal moments and what many of us consider as—privacy.

7. Watching alters and often eliminates boundaries.

When we don’t know, we watch.

After the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, commentator Michael Smerconish and others argued that video should be fed in real time out of every airline cockpit to help investigators. Of course, pilots are in a professional class that is unique. But today there are many businesses where security and confidentiality are paramount. How long before we apply the “learn by watching” logic to software engineers or doctors? We have already applied it to all our public and commercial spaces.

With the array of gadgetry available to us all, it is virtually impossible not to want to see anything. The new culture of watching overcomes time and space and takes precedence

over moral and ethical boundaries.

8. Watching reality changes it.

Watching not only changes our narratives—what we say about the world; it changes what we know and how we know it. Pew recently reported that we get more of our information now from watching news (via TV and mobile devices) than from any other method. But “information” in this sense is now affected by—even mixed up with—the other watching we do. Writing on CNN Opinion, Carol Costello asked, “Why are we still debating climate change?” In 2013, 10,883 out of 10,885 scientific articles agreed: Global warming is happening, and humans are to blame. Citing lack of public confidence in these scientists, Costello wrote:

“Most Americans can’t even name a living scientist. I suspect the closest many Americans get to a living, breathing scientist is the fictional Dr. Sheldon Cooper from CBS’s sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Sheldon is brilliant, condescending, and narcissistic. Whose trust would he inspire?”

There is a logic here that is difficult to understand rationally but is operative nonetheless: What we know is not what we experience but what we watch.

9. The more we watch, the more watchers watch us.

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So it is not surprising that watching boomerangs—creating watchers who watch us back from hidden or out-of-sightline cameras. Watchers monitor our faces and bodies coming and going in convenience stores, gas stations, banks, department stores, and schools. Newly formed companies have created thriving businesses watching people “passing through doorways, passageways or in open areas” to count them, track them, and analyze what can be seen from an “unlimited number of cameras.”

Even driving to the store you’re being watched, via your license plate.

Ironically, the culture of watching will compel us—sooner or later—to keep watch: to be mindful of how much we watch and how much all this watching changes us. That may be the best way to detect and positively affect what is happening right before our eyes.