

THE MEDIA

EFFECT



BY MICHELLE LEWIS

## Are media making us observe our lives instead of living them? David Zweig thinks so. Read on to learn more about his theory, **FICTION DEPERSONALIZATION SYNDROME.**

**L**OG INTO your Facebook account. There's a wealth of information there. Status updates about what you're doing today. Pictures of what you did last weekend. Wall posts from your friends — conversations that would have potentially been forgotten and forever lost had they happened in person are now permanently enshrined online. You can view them again and again at your leisure. Scroll down through your timeline, and you can see your important events, like anniversaries, trips, moves to new cities, displayed with accompanying pictures for you to view. There's even a map that shows you where you've traveled and where you've been most recently. Your interests. Your favorite quotes. Where you live. It's all on Facebook.

Click back to your News Feed. Posts from your friends intermingle with your own updates, spinning a web of online content that displays your life. And you can watch it all happen in real time.

This experience is mirrored on other social networking sites like Myspace or Twitter, even Pinterest. Through media, you become an observer of your own life. It's almost as if you're in a movie, and the scenes are displayed for you to watch.

Could viewing media lead to the ultimate state of observation: depersonalization? Depersonalization is a mental disorder in which a person feels detached from his or her own body, a distant observer unable to actually participate in his or her own life. David Zweig, a New York-based author and lecturer, thinks so. Zweig's theory, Fiction Depersonalization Syndrome, or FDS, states that being surrounded by media is increasing our self-consciousness and training our brains to become observers instead of participants in our own lives. We're not living in the moment anymore, he said — we're watching it.

"We live in a highly mediated

environment today,” he told *Zeitgeist*. “The more we are immersed in this mediated environment, the more we become observers, because this environment is like a visual environment. Even [with] interactive media such as the Web and social media, you’re still in a sort of observational mode.

“What I argue is that when you spend so much time in this observational mode ... ultimately you begin to view yourself from

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afar as an observer,” he said.

Zweig said that the effects of fiction depersonalization syndrome range in a continuum, starting with just being more self-aware and feeling self-conscious. “The extreme end of that is depersonalization,” he said.

Depersonalization is described by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* as a dissociative disorder. Little is known about the exact cause of depersonalization, but it is thought to be triggered by stressful or traumatic experiences. The difference between the idea of depersonalization and Zweig’s idea is that he believes there is a correlation between media usage and a heightened sense of self-awareness, which can eventually lead to depersonalization.

## BY THE NUMBERS

11

hours the average U.S. adult spent with media per day in 2011

22

percentage of Americans who use social networking sites several times per day

Source: eMarketer, Edison Research

THE AVERAGE  
U.S. INTERNET  
USER SPENDS  
**32 HOURS**  
ONLINE PER  
MONTH

*Source: GO-Gulf.com*



The word “fiction” in fiction depersonalization syndrome doesn’t always mean things that are untrue. Zweig defines fiction as an umbrella term for all media, such as the Internet, social media, television, movies, smartphones, video games, advertising and the news. The idea of fiction comes from the manner in which people take in the content.

“Even something like the news is still fiction,” Zweig said. “It’s not that it’s not true, but that there’s a filter when you watch news on TV or you’re reading something online — you’re still being told about an event rather than experiencing that event itself. This filtered reality is a mediated experience of reality rather than

a first-person experience of reality.”

Look back to your Facebook news feed. Your friend just posted pictures of the party she hosted last night that you couldn’t make it to. You can look at what the attendees were wearing, what they were drinking, whom they were talking to. But that’s not the same as attending the party. Knowing that your friend wore a black dress isn’t the same as seeing the dress in person. You didn’t drink those drinks; you just saw them on your computer. And you didn’t talk to anyone at the party. You’re just seeing them talk to each other, days, hours, minutes later.

But it’s not just Facebook that

lets us see a filtered version of reality. Watching a TV newscast about a fire in your neighborhood isn't the same as being there to see the fire. Thousands of people "live tweeted" the presidential and vice presidential debates in October 2012, which they watched on television. But how many were actually there, watching the candidates bandy back and forth without a screen as a filter?

It's no secret that people spend a lot of time immersed in media in today's world. A study by eMarketer said that the average U.S. adult spent more than 11 hours with media (including magazines, newspapers, mobile, radio, Internet, TV and video) per day in 2011. That's one hour shy of being half an entire day. And with the ever-growing popularity of smartphones and social media, we can only expect that number to increase in 2013.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF FDS

Zweig has a vivid memory from when he was in college before social media existed. He was at a party, talking to his friends and enjoying himself. It was late at night.

Suddenly, he had a strange sen-

sation. It was as if he had been taken outside of his body to watch the scene from afar, as if he and his friends were characters in a movie or people interacting in a dream he was having.

This sense of depersonalization eventually inspired him to write the book *Swimming Inside the Sun*, which was published in 2009. The novel tells the story of a fictional musician named Dan Green, whose self-consciousness eventually develops into neurosis and depersonalization, specifically caused by an overexposure to the "fiction" described above.

Zweig wrote the book intending it to just be a book. But when a member of the Media Ecology Association, an organization that promotes the study of media and how media affect human lives and perception, reviewed *Swimming Inside the Sun*, he saw something more there. "This is new. You've really got something here," the reviewer told Zweig, referring to the idea of FDS.

"It's a really interesting story, I think, that this idea that kind of started out in the fictional realm as part of a novel made the transition from that into being a real-

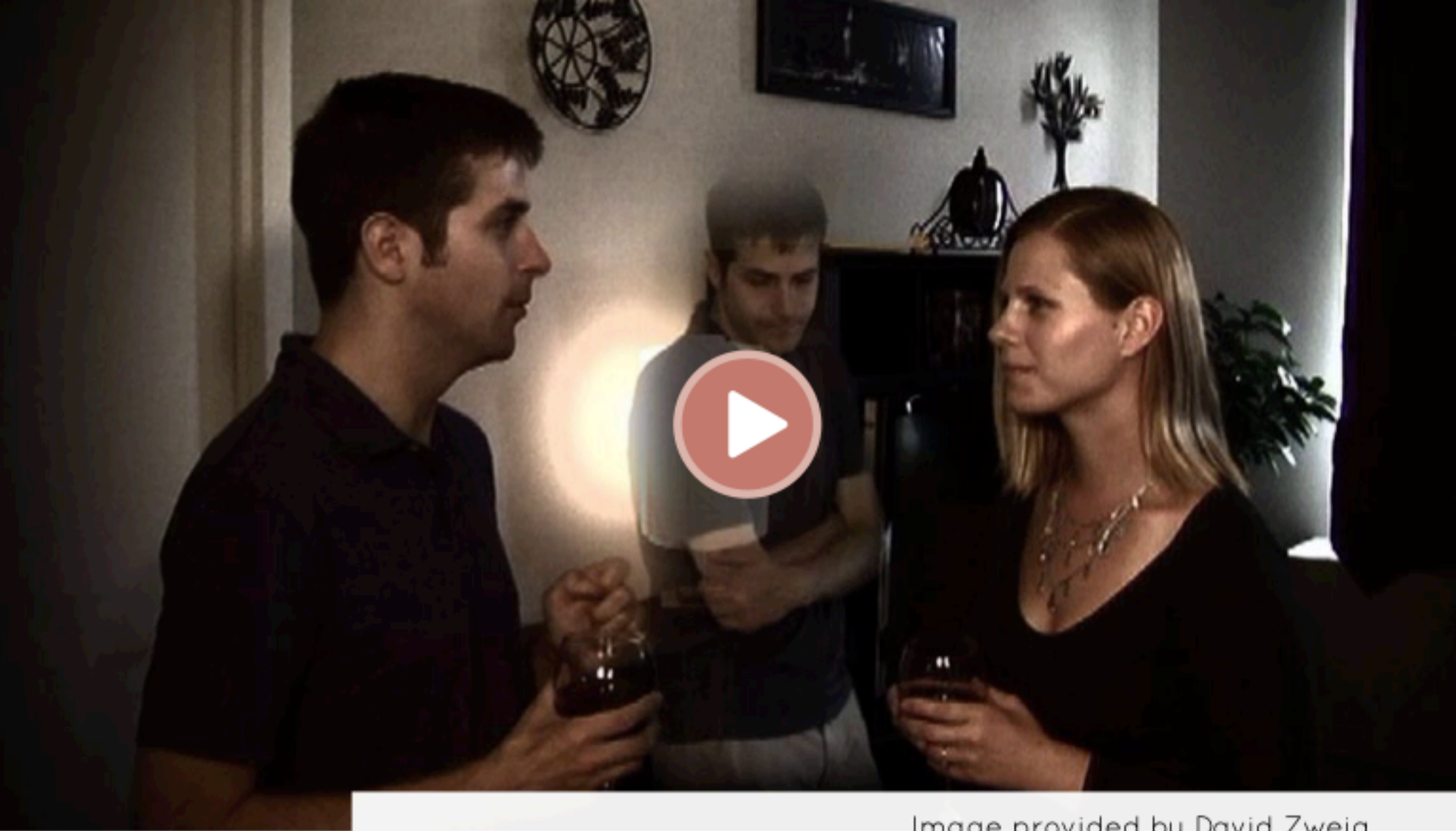


Image provided by David Zweig

*This photo is from Zweig's video "Fiction Depersonalization Syndrome."*

world, viable idea," Zweig said.

From there, Zweig began looking more into his hypothesis. While he hasn't performed experiments to prove his theory yet — "Communications studies tend to lack that kind of hard science studies," he said — he has found research and studies that back up the idea.

"There's been no research specifically about my idea, but there is a lot of research that correlates with it to help support the idea," he said. "When they've done MRI scans on people's brains, your brain looks different ... when you are communicating directly

with someone versus communicating through a filter, a mediated device. Your brain functions differently when you are in this observational mode versus an experiential mode."

In addition to past research that supports his idea, Zweig has also had support from scholars who conduct similar research into how media affect our brains, he said.

"I've communicated with a lot of scholars in a variety of different fields from neuroscientists to psychologists, people in communications theory, anthropologists," he said.

As the idea of FDS began to spread, Zweig began being contacted to present his theory at conferences and university classes across the country. He has talked about FDS at events such as the International Biennial Conference of the Society for Philosophy and Technology, the Media Ecology Association Annual Convention and the Annual Symposium of the Institute of General Semantics. He has also traveled to Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium to present his idea. Zweig's FDS theory was referenced in the academic book *Drugs & Media: New Perspectives on Communication, Consumption, and Consciousness*, edited by Robert C. MacDougall and published in 2011.

## FDS'S EFFECTS ON REAL PEOPLE

But what Zweig says is most exciting about his theory is that regular people from all over the world have read about FDS and contacted him, saying that FDS describes how they feel. They say the more they're online, the more they feel self-conscious. One high school student emailed Zweig, saying that he suffered from depersonaliza-

## DEPERSONALIZATION DISORDER CRITERIA

- Persistent or recurrent experiences of feeling detached from one's mental processes or body.
- During the depersonalization experience, reality testing remains intact.
- Depersonalization causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other areas of functioning.
- Depersonalization experience does not occur exclusively during the course of another mental disorder.

*Source: American Psychiatric Association*

tion and noticed that it happened more often after he was online for long periods of time.

“[People] have been contacting me saying things like, ‘What you’re talking about really speaks to me. I’m incredibly lonely. I spend hours and hours at night sitting alone in front of the computer, and I’ve found that once I step away from the computer after many hours I actually feel worse than I did before,’” Zweig said in a video on his website.

But Zweig isn’t proposing that media, or even FDS itself, make people feel lonely. It’s simply a correlation, he said.

“The main thing that I’m arguing is that there is a sort of distancing from one’s self when that occurs,” he said. “I think that generally if you connect the dots, when you’re distanced from yourself that’s a form of alienation, and basically people who feel alienated tend to feel lonely.”

Zweig said he isn’t anti-media. He has an iPhone, he has a Twitter account, and he blogs at MeMyselfAndHim.com.

“A lot of this stuff is great and

wonderful,” he said. “But these are very real effects that people need to think about and be aware of.”

Go back to your computer or smartphone. You may have several hundred friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter or Pinterest. Your news feed and Twitter feed are bubbling over with words, pictures and videos from them. And you may even be chatting with a few friends on Facebook.

But you’re not speaking. You’re typing. And your friend isn’t there with you.

You’re alone with your screen, watching life as it’s happening. Zweig’s words in the video on his website ring eerily true for us as people in the 21st century, the observers that we have become. Many have thousands of photos online chronicling their lives, but how many are actually living them?

“There’s this inherent sort of irony in that the more technologically connected we are with each other today, in many ways, the more disconnected we feel,” Zweig said.