

# In shadows of hype, dialogue of 'too much' at SXSW

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(AP) -- At South By Southwest's 2012 interactive conference, there was, as usual, no shortage of eagerness for new developments and excitement for gadgetry.

What's the future of online scrapbook Pinterest? Will the location technology of apps like Glancee and Highlight upend [social networking](#)? What's next? And is it on Android yet?

But in the shadows of the relentless push toward new digital frontiers, there was also an undercurrent of more skeptical dialogue. This year, it seemed, there was increased debate about the possible downside to mounting technologies and the effects they may be having on our lives.

"Too much" was a phrase often uttered not just about the rising crowds of some 20,000 SXSW interactive attendees, but of tech advances into daily life.

"People are starting to make these questions out loud," says Avi Zev Weider, whose documentary "Welcome to the Machine" screened at the SXSW film festival. "I think we all make these value judgments. It's something we're going to need to think about more and more because it affects our inter-human relationships as well."

Weider's film doesn't [paint technology](#) as evil, but something innately human. Without technology, he notes, he couldn't have made his documentary and he and his wife couldn't have given birth to triplets

through in vitro fertilization.

"Many of the technologies we use every day are so powerful that they do in some ways hijack our attention," says Weider. "Even though we might have a good intention, you might still find yourself at the dinner table checking your cell phone instead of talking to your kids."

Similar distraction wasn't hard to find at SXSW, where maneuvering Austin's downtown sidewalks can become fraught with peril in a tide of downcast pedestrians focused on their [smart phones](#).

Finding the right balance could mean better management of technology or refining it.

"Our stomachs can tell us when we're full, but our brains can't tell us when we've consumed too much information," says Amber Case, a keynote speaker at SXSW and author of the upcoming book "A Dictionary of Cyborg Anthropology."

As a self-proclaimed "cyborg anthropologist," Case studies the way humans interact with technology (she did her thesis on cell phone use). While she laments the obsessive trap of "compulsive loop systems" like email and Twitter, Case believes technology should be improved to more seamlessly fit into our lives. She's a co-founder of Geoloqi, a location-based platform that doesn't require constant checking, but gives users information on what's around them.

"The best technology should get out of your way and let you live your life and let you be more human, versus trying to obscure your vision and cause you to click buttons all day," says Case.

Certainly, there were a great many proclamations of tech's potential to solve problems. In a talk Monday, former Vice President Al Gore,

alongside Napster co-founder Sean Parker, put it to the Internet not only to fix democracy, but also to revolutionize elections and wean people off of television.

Andrew Keen has been one of the more strident voices against the rise of social media and he has similarly dim views of the new social discovery apps. Keen, the author of the upcoming "Digital Vertigo," has twice appeared at SXSW before and often encountered a backlash for his views. But he thinks the tech community is becoming more open to criticism.

"This year I felt a very big change," says Keen. "The first two years, there was a lot more hostility."

Keen rails against the "cult of the social" and worries that we're jeopardizing privacy and liberty in the "march toward ubiquitous publicness." But he grants that Facebook and Twitter have become part of the "socio-economic infrastructure of 21st century life," and so reconciling them is not a simple task.

"They're not just for narcissistic reasons," says Keen. "If it was just narcissism, it would be an easy thing to clean up."

Even "The Cabin in the Woods," the new horror film from Joss Whedon and Drew Goddard that opened the SXSW film festival, inverted the normal fears of the genre. Normally, you would expect a film about five college kids who travel to a remote country cabin far from cell service to summon fright from being disconnected, stuck in a rural backwater.

Instead, the cabin is quickly revealed to be exceptionally high-tech and therein lies the horror to come. Escaping the network is futile.

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