Startup Ransomly keeps phone addicts in check

December 16 2016, by Jennifer Van Grove, The San Diego Union-Tribune

Zack Prager, 39, doesn't like to wash the dishes. In fact, to the chagrin of his fiance, the San Diego software developer has been known to choose app time, particularly Facebook and Instagram time, over chores.

Thankfully, the pair have found a digital compromise in Ransomly, a Bluetooth-powered beacon and Android app that work together to help smartphone addicts refocus their attention on offline tasks and human beings.

If the Ransomly app is installed on an Android phone, the device's home screen is locked as soon it becomes in range - up to 230 feet away - of a Ransomly beacon. The beacon, then, is designed to carve out device-free zones in areas where excessive phone time might be detrimental to real-life responsibilities and interactions, say dining rooms and bedrooms.

"There's a lot of research that shows that when people use their phones too much it's causing rifts and drama in their relationships," said Prager, who started working on the idea about a year ago.

Plus, fully 40 percent of 13- to 18-year-olds, sometimes called "iGen," self-identify as digital device addicts, according to a study conducted by market research firm CivicScience. So Prager envisions his invention will help parents keep their kids' digital compulsions in check.

Ransomly is now selling its Android-phone-locking beacons to backers

on Kickstarter, and the campaign has already exceeded Prager's $5,000 goal. The early-stage company, which has also raised a small amount of seed financing from investors, aims to start shipping the devices in late February 2017.

"It's something I'm going to build anyway, and I don't need to raise a lot of money," said Prager.

The Kickstarter campaign, he said, is primarily intended to test the market. Should the concept resonate with consumers, Prager will ramp up production on the Ransomly beacons, and likely sell them for somewhere in the $35 to $40 range.

The Ransomly team, which consists of five part-timers, is also simultaneously working on a separate, albeit equally debilitating, Android app that works independent of the beacon.

Currently in beta, this app, tentatively titled "Ransomly Messenger," lets people connect with close friends or family members to limit or block access to smartphone apps - in effect, holding the apps for ransom for a span of time.

With the app, a mom could, for instance, send a "ransom note" to her teenage son, alerting him that Snapchat has been blocked until his homework done.

It's this functionality that Prager's finance uses to block his Facebook and Instagram apps until he does the dishes. And losing access to those apps has proven to be a pretty powerful motivator to get up and do the dishes, he said.

If there's a downside, it's that Ransomly is only truly functional on Android devices, as Google gives developers more access to elements

within its operating system than Apple does. As such, on iOS devices, the Ransomly beacon can send a push notification to alert the user that they're entering a quiet zone, but that's about it.

Prager, who studied applied psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, hopes that, as device addiction becomes more of a hot topic, Apple will loosen the restrictions that prevent his company from blocking app access.

But if that doesn't happen, he thinks the reminder might be good enough to encourage well-intentioned phone users to modify their screen-based behaviors - even if just for a short period of time.

"Once you recognize the problem, that Facebook and Instagram are not making my life any better after a certain amount of time, then ... you'll be, overall, happier," Prager said.

©2016 The San Diego Union-Tribune
Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Startup Ransomly keeps phone addicts in check (2016, December 16) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2016-12-startup-ransomly-addicts.html