**China’s Web Junkies**[Op-Docs](https://www.nytimes.com/column/op-docs)
By SHOSH SHLAM and HILLA MEDALIA
JAN. 19, 2014



Compulsive Internet use has been categorized as a mental health issue in many countries, including the United States, but China was among the first to label “Internet addiction” a clinical disorder.

In this Op-Doc video, we show the inner workings of a rehabilitation center where Chinese teenagers are “deprogrammed.” The Internet Addiction Treatment Center, in Daxing, a suburb of Beijing, was established in 2004. It was one of the first of its kind – and there are now hundreds of treatment programs throughout China and [South Korea](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/18/technology/18rehab.html?pagewanted=all%5D). (The first inpatient Internet addiction program in the United States recently [opened in Pennsylvania](http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/07/health/internet-addiction-treatment-center/).)

The program featured in this video admits teenagers, usually male, whose parents typically take them there against their will. Once inside, the children are kept behind bars and guarded by soldiers. Treatment, which often lasts three to four months, includes medication and therapy, and sometimes includes parents. Patients undergo military-inspired physical training, and their sleep and diet are carefully regulated. These techniques (some of which are also used in China to treat other behavioral disorders) are intended to help the patients reconnect with reality.

Yet after four months of filming in this center (for our documentary “Web Junkie”), some vital questions remained: Are the children being accurately evaluated? And is the treatment effective? In many cases, it seemed parents were blaming the Internet for complex social and behavioral issues that may defy such interventions. (For example, we noticed that some patients experienced difficult family relationships, social introversion and a lack of friends in the physical world.) Tao Ran, the center’s director, claims a 70 percent success rate. If that’s true, perhaps China’s treatment model is something other nations should embrace, however disturbing it may seem to outsiders. There is still no real global consensus among experts about what constitutes addiction to the Internet, and whether the concept even exists, particularly in a strict medical sense.

What is clear is that this issue is not confined to China. With millions (if not billions) glued to screens and electronic devices, the overuse of technology is becoming a universal, transnational concern. While treatment methods may vary, one way or another, we will need to find effective ways to moderate our use of technology and provide help to those who need it.

This video is part of a series produced by independent filmmakers who have received support from the nonprofit Sundance Institute.

Shosh Shlam and Hilla Medalia are the directors of the forthcoming documentary [*“Web Junkie,”*](http://dogwoof.com/films/web-junkie) which will have its premiere at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. Ms. Medalia’s most recent documentary, “Dancing in Jaffa,” will be released in 2014. Ms. Shlam’s previous films include “Last Journey into Silence,” “Be Fruitful and Multiply” and “Good Garbage.”