The smartphone has changed the landscape of the human experience in little more than a decade. From what we carry on our person, to how we meet new people, to what businesses we engage based on our location, these tiny, sleek computers have become all encompassing for many Americans.

Technology is neither good, nor evil, and what you put into your personal technology is what you’ll get out. While Silicon Valley executives like to see themselves as neutral agents of technological innovation, they are businessmen like any hedge fund manager and money is the name of the game. When a tech company can become more lucrative than an oil company based solely on the hours an individual spends on the app or platform, the designers will inevitably shift from a stance of neutrality to one of manipulation.

Social media* has stolen our time while we weren’t paying attention. What was once supposed to be a networking tool to bring people together is now a multi-billion dollar advertising colossus specifically designed to keep you locked in its time-wasting grasp. Because of the perceived convenience of these tools - a map that tells us what restaurants are close by in real-time, a commodity service that promises next-day delivery, a social network that provides a rush of endorphins each time we see a like or comment - we have accepted the roles they play in our lives without question.

This paper intends to explain why it is time to begin questioning the role of technology in your life, provide suggestions on how you can adjust your dependence on network tools, and engage you in a larger conversation about the role we all can play in changing how Silicon Valley uses our time as their currency.

*Please note: Throughout this paper I have chosen to use the terms “social media” and “network tools” interchangeably.
The Problem

The rise of personal technology in the form of smartphones has made us increasingly uncivilized, anxious, and unhappy.

Our brains have been hi-jacked by tech companies that make billions of dollars keeping us ensnared in their services. **Specifically engineered to create an addiction response** within the brain, smartphones are keeping users in a constant state of anxiety from which the only antidote is continued use of the device. We consume and spread misinformation that fits neatly into a worldview dictated by algorithms that decide what we are interested in. We promote a culture of constant connectivity which serves only to distract us from doing our best work and relating to one another on a deep, personal level.

We are being manipulated into believing that having the power to access the full history of human existence, finding ourselves on a map in real time, and ordering sushi for delivery all in the palm of our hands, is an acceptable trade off for the hundreds of hours we waste and the billions of dollars we make for companies with our attention. At best we are allowing something possibly detrimental to continue out of convenience, at worst, we’re hopelessly addicted to the technology on a biological level.
In 2005, researchers working for Keio University and Intel Corporation’s People and Practices Group set out to document the things people carried on their person to get through the day. Conducted in London, Tokyo, and Los Angeles, the research found that the wallets and purses of their study subjects were remarkably similar including photos and mementos of loved ones, keys, ID cards, transit passes, address books, a mobile phone, and money. In 2020, most, if not all of these items can now exist within the sleek, pocket-sized case of a smartphone.

The Rise of the Attention Economy*

While the smartphone has replaced our need for the physical trappings of the day to day, it has also replaced our quiet moments: sitting at a stop light, waiting in line at the bank, even using the restroom. There is rarely a minute of downtime that we are not reaching for our smartphones to fill the void. We can no longer tolerate boredom in any form. Once social media giants like Twitter and Facebook realized they could harness our attention anytime, anywhere, content developers began figuring out how to exploit psychological vulnerabilities to trick users into spending more time on their services than they had intended.

*Attention Economy: The business sector that makes money gathering consumers’ attention and then selling it to advertisers (Newport, 2019).
Social media, which has been marketed as a foundational technology (Newport, 2019) – something as basic as electricity or telephony – has become so ubiquitous that surveys in Indonesia and Nigeria have found between 9-11% of smartphone users say they use Facebook but not the internet. While network tools have connected people around the world; provided footholds for new ideas and movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and #OccupyWallStreet; and given voices to historically disenfranchised communities; they have also created a very real threat to our ability to exchange ideas through civil discourse through the rise of moral grandstanding.

The Dark Psychology of Social Networks describes two 2017 studies which support the hypothesis that “outrage can boost your status.” One study states that “each moral or emotional word used in a tweet increased the virality by 20%, on average” while the other, a Pew Research Center study of Facebook content shows that “posts exhibiting ‘indignant disagreement’ received nearly twice as much engagement…as other types of content.” Every day, members of our social networks are screaming into the void, and we are being asked to agree using our likes and shares, or risk the possibility of very real ramifications if we disagree or even remain silent.
The Solution
A world in which we think critically about how we consume technology

Critical use is...

Accepting that network tools are not inherently evil, and that some of them might be quite vital to your success and happiness, while also accepting that the threshold for allowing a site regular access to your time and attention should be more stringent.

Cal Newport
Deep Work

Take a moment to consider how many times you’ve thought about reaching for your phone while reading this report. Five? Ten? Did you take a break and peek at Instagram to see if your new post got any likes, or check the news on Twitter?

That’s ok. Your lack of concentration is not a fundamental weakness of habit (Newport, 2016). App developers have rigged the game, creating content that signals your brain to produce the fight or flight hormone Cortisol when you’ve been away from your phone for too long (Cooper, 2017). The solution is not to try and give up on all network tools, but to investigate how much time you’re actually losing to social media, breaking news, and addicting apps, and then to adjust your technological consumption accordingly.

Checking the Screen Time function on iOS and Wellbeing on Android is a good place to start your journey of understanding your current usage trends. Once you understand your problem areas – such as picking up the phone 276 times in a 24-hour period, spending upwards of five hours a day on social media applications, or checking your email in the middle of the night – it is easier to fight the urges to perform those actions.
The Solution
A world in which we think critically about how we consume technology

Understanding your usage habits is a great place to start taking control of your digital life, but arguably the most important step will be taking stock of what you truly want to accomplish both personally and professionally. Are you not doing certain activities or pursuing goals because you feel like you don’t have enough time? Or are you not focusing on some aspects of your life because you feel too stressed, depressed, or pulled in too many directions? You’re not alone and you’re probably spreading attention residue all over every aspect of your life. Attention residue is described as the attention or focus that remains on a previous task when you’re asked or forced to switch to a new task – it is especially detrimental when the previous task is left incomplete.

USE OF A DISTRACTING SERVICE DOES NOT, BY ITSELF, REDUCE YOUR BRAIN’S ABILITY TO FOCUS. IT’S INSTEAD THE CONSTANT SWITCHING FROM LOW-STIMULI/HIGH-VALUE ACTIVITIES TO HIGH-STIMULI/LOW VALUE ACTIVITIES, AT THE SLIGHTEST HINT OF BOREDOM OR COGNITIVE CHALLENGE, THAT TEACHES YOUR MIND TO NEVER TOLERATE THE ABSENCE OF NOVELTY.

CAL NEWPORT
DEEP WORK

LOW-STIMULI/HIGH-VALUE ACTIVITIES:
Activities that require intense concentration but create disproportionally high results or impact.

HIGH-STIMULI/LOW-VALUE ACTIVITIES:
Any task that can be performed in a distracted or semi-distracted state which creates low results or impact, including checking and immediately responding to email, browsing the web, or social media.
While some people are employed in professions in which their value is directly correlated to what they create or produce, many fall into the category of “knowledge worker” or a person whose job involves handling or using information. Skilled and unskilled workers can often demonstrate their worth in concrete ways – for example, a shipping clerk can demonstrate how many packages they have moved off the line. Knowledge workers don’t have as many concrete and immediate outcomes to signal productivity and therefore tend to show their value through increasing demonstrations of busyness which Cal Newport has titled “Busyness as a Proxy for Productivity” (Newport, 2016).

Often this type of behavior inhibits the knowledge worker’s ability to dig into projects and produce their best possible work because they are expected to be ever connected and responsive to requests for their time and concentration. This style of work tends to leave attention residue on everything they touch and can leave them feeling exhausted and unfulfilled at the end of the workday.

By taking stock of what you want to accomplish in your life, and pursuing those goals openly and with passion, you may be able to avoid the pitfalls of using busyness as a proxy for productivity, or feeling too worn out and dispassionate to work toward those goals outside of your work hours.
The final step in taking stock of what you want to accomplish in life is understanding if you are present in your experiences. Often, we allow the documenting of our experiences on social media to get in the way of being present. Though it would make sense that documenting every moment of our lives for viewing on social media would allow us to relive our memories over and over, the photo-taking-impairment effect has shown that people are less likely to remember objects they photograph than those they simply observe.

Only by choosing to stay present in our experiences, rather than to document them for the world to see, can we hope to activate the amygdala - the part of the brain responsible for our emotions, survival instinct, and memory creation. Social media can sometimes be helpful to stir memories, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to retain anything with the 24-hour story feature that has risen to popularity on most platforms. While a photo of your friends at the beach in 2012 may remind you of that day when you see it now, a quick video on your stories will be gone tomorrow and with it, the opportunity to retain that memory for a lifetime.
The Solution
A world in which we think critically about how we consume technology

Our personal technology is rigged to steal our time and our ability to concentrate. Fortunately, we can take back control over our time, experiences, and even how our brains function by avoiding, when possible, shallow work and instead practicing deep work.

DEEP WORK
Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.

SHALLOW WORK
Non-cognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tend to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.

In *Deep Work*, Cal Newport argues his deep work hypothesis: “The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and make it the core of their working life, will thrive.” (Newport, 2016). While the basis of the deep work hypothesis centers around creating career-based success in an information economy, many of his theories relate to mindful use of technology.

According to Newport, connectivity seems easiest in the moment because it eases the burden of having to plan your work ahead of time. This “culture of connectivity” (Newport, 2016) in which you check emails constantly, respond immediately to any request for information or time, and remain connected to your work after working hours, often extends to your personal life if you sleep with your phone by your bed, waking to check emails or social media in the middle of the night. Newport’s suggestion of retraining your brain to be able to withstand intense, extended concentration in order to take your productivity to new levels begins with establishing the ability to control your impulsivity in regard to personal technology. Newport makes sure to remind the reader that while new technology is neither inherently good nor evil, “we no longer see internet tools as products released by for-profit companies, funded by investors hoping to make a return, and run by twenty somethings who are often making things up as they go along” (Newport, 2016).
Knowing something is bad or harmful, especially when it hits certain pleasure centers in the brain, is rarely enough to get a person to change their habits. One must instill routines and rituals around changing those habits in order to bolster their willpower. Discussing a study on smoking cessation and dieting, Psychology Today notes “while trying to overhaul your lifestyle all at once may sound appealing, it isn’t sustainable, especially in the early stages when cravings are at their worst.” Newport agrees with this theory.

Newport dedicated entire chapters to quitting social media in both Digital Minimalism and Deep Work, but instead of suggesting that you try to quit everything cold-turkey, he recommends that you take a hard look at network tools and how they benefit or detract from your goals, and then adjust your use accordingly. Furthermore, he asserts that you must learn how to resist engaging in the distracting stimuli (of social media, breaking news, surfing the web, etc.) at the slightest hint of boredom rather than completely eliminating the distracting behaviors (Newport, 2019).

YOU DON’T NEED TO QUIT SOCIAL MEDIA...
YOU JUST NEED TO QUIT TURNING TO IT EVERY TIME YOUR BRAIN TELLS YOU TO.
The Benefits

In the previous section I discussed some of the issues that may arise from being constantly connected via personal technology including feeling like you don’t have enough time for work, hobbies, friends or family, and feeling stressed, depressed, anxious, overwrought, or pulled in too many directions. The study of how social media and digital communications affect our brain is very new and therefore there is not a lot of definitive proof that they either do or do not cause a suite of depressive issues. New technologies, from the written word to cable TV have all been blamed, in their time, for their potential to destroy community and culture as we know it. The difference with personal technology is that it is changing, expanding, and all-consuming faster than we can study its full effects on the human brain.

However, what has been thoroughly studied is how engaging deeply in activities that stretch your mind and concentration improve your mood, while engaging in shallow activities detract from it. One such study took place at the University of Chicago in the early 1980s (Newport, 2016). Psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson studied the psychological impact of everyday behaviors by asking their subjects to stop and record what they were doing and how they felt at random intervals when paged by the researchers. One outcome of this ground-breaking study was the validation Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow which states “the best moments usually occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile.” This mental state, or “flow state” as it was coined by Csikszentmihalyi, is why you may feel great after spending an hour reading a book, painting, or even taking a thoughtful walk in nature, but horrible after spending an hour scrolling on Facebook. Humans are actually happiest and most fulfilled when we have spent our time doing deep, mind expanding activities.

It has been scientifically established many times over that humans are at their best when their brain is engaged through activities such as deep concentration, learning, enjoying time with friends, or taking in nature. Also, the developers of network technologies such as Twitter, Facebook, and Google have admitted that the products they created were intended to suck you into their web for as long as possible to turn the greatest profit in the attention economy. Finally, we have established that because of attention residue and the fact that willpower is a finite resource, it is very difficult for the brain to successfully switch between high-stimuli/low-value activities to low-stimuli/high-value activities. Given these three facts, it could be supposed that to avoid such attention-wasting, shallow activities would create more time and space for the work, hobbies, calm, and happiness that we may currently lack in our lives.
The 19th Century French Poet Charles Baudelaire wrote “La plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu’il n’existe pas” which was famously adapted to the line in The Unusual Suspects, “The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” Following that line of thought, I’d suggest that the greatest trick Silicon Valley ever pulled was convincing people that any benefit that personal technology and social media could provide was enough benefit. Through murky marketing as part fun tool to bring people together and part path to fame and fortune, we have come to rely on social media to fill our every moment of quiet and sell us the promise of something better if we just learn that dance, buy that item, try that diet, or catch the attention of that celebrity.

Fortunately, we are beginning to see the toll that unfettered use of attention draining technology has on our health and habits. The men and women who created these technologies are speaking out about their manipulative and potentially harmful properties. While the executives who run the Silicon Valley giants may continue to downplay the effects of their products, individuals are beginning to think critically about how they engage with them. In Digital Minimalism, Cal Newport states that “if everyone started thinking about their use in similarly utilitarian terms…the amount of eyeball minutes Facebook has available to sell to advertisers would drop by more than an order of magnitude, creating a massive hit to their bottom line. Investors would revolt, and the company would likely not survive with anything near its current form. Critical use is a critical problem for the digital attention economy” (Newport, 2019). The truth is money talks, and these monoliths like Facebook and Twitter, who have led us to believe that they are as much a part of our lives as breathing, will not be able to continue to function if individuals put even a bit of forethought into what purpose they actually serve.

CRITICAL USE IS A CRITICAL PROBLEM FOR THE DIGITAL ATTENTION ECONOMY.

CAL NEWPORT
DIGITAL MINIMALISM
The first and most important step that you can make in changing how you interface with social media is by removing it from your phone. If you do nothing else, delete your apps. Because our phones are ever present, social media companies pour most of their resources into making their mobile apps as addicting as possible. If you remove the apps from your smartphone, your use of social media would immediately decrease and, by only accessing the networks from your computer, you are likely to be more cognizant of the time you’re spending on the services.

If you have deleted social media from your smartphone and are ready to take critical engagement to the next step, follow Cal Newport’s Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection.

To adopt this approach to selecting which network tools you’ll engage with, Newport suggests you chose two or three high-level goals in both your personal and professional life. Next, list two or three of the most important activities in which you’ll need to engage to satisfy each goal. Finally, compare your network tools to the identified activities and see if they impact your success positively, negatively or very little. If the tool does not overwhelmingly positively affect your work toward your goals, Newport suggests that you quit that tool. "The question is not whether the network tool offers some benefit, but instead whether it offers enough benefit to offset the drag on your time and attention" (Newport, 2016).

BY REMOVING YOUR ABILITY TO ACCESS SOCIAL MEDIA AT ANY MOMENT, YOU REDUCE ITS ABILITY TO BECOME A CRUTCH DEPLOYED TO DISTRACT YOU FROM BIGGER Voids IN YOUR LIFE.

IDENTIFY THE CORE FACTORS THAT DETERMINE SUCCESS AND HAPPINESS IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIFE. ADOPT A TOOL ONLY IF ITS POSITIVE IMPACT ON THESE FACTORS SUBSTANTIALLY OUTWEIGH ITS NEGATIVE IMPACTS.
The constant and pervasive use of personal technology and social network tools are making us slaves to mediocrity and the Silicon Valley executives are cashing in on time we don’t realize that we’re losing. In his book Radical Technologies, Adam Greenfield notes that “for many of us [our smartphones] are the last thing we look at before sleep each night, and the first thing we reach for upon waking…” They have altered the texture of everyday life just about everywhere, digesting many longstanding spaces and rituals in their entirety, and transforming others beyond recognition.” I don’t believe that you need to throw away your iPhone. But I do caution against the cult of the internet and the blind worship at the altar of its gods – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google, and Amazon.

I fall into that last generation of kids who grew up without the internet. Video phones were a thing of the distant future – like flying cars and robot maids. But that distant future came very quickly, and I am joining the chorus of my contemporaries who have watched the unimpeded growth of personal technology run roughshod on our concentration, our coping mechanisms, and even our abilities to discern fact from fiction. Historically, ideas have gone through a system of filtration as they are passed down through generations. “We mostly learn of ideas that a succession of generations thought were worth passing on. That doesn’t mean these ideas are always right, but it does mean that they are more likely to be valuable, in the long run, than most content generated within the past month” (Haidt & Rose-Stockwell, 2019). We live in a moment of informational overload and we no longer have the slow churn of time to help us distinguish what is important to take in.
In the Washington Post article *How Silicon Valley is erasing your individuality*, Franklin Foer writes “Once upon a time, elites proudly viewed themselves as gatekeepers. They could be sycophantic to power and snobbish, but they also felt duty-bound to elevate the standards of society and readers. Executives of Silicon Valley regard gatekeeping as the stodgy enemy of innovation – they see themselves as more neutral, scientific and responsive to the market than the elites they replaced – a perspective that obscures their own power and responsibilities. So instead of shaping public opinion, they exploit the public’s worst tendencies, its tribalism and paranoia.”

I want to see a new generation of gatekeepers – Gen Z, Millennials, X-ers, Boomers, all coming together to reclaim our time from the attention economy, and to spread the word that we, too, can learn again how to read, how to sit quietly, how to have a conversation. Through exercising mindful and critical use practices we can limit the number of hours we pay into the attention economy, exerting our power to pressure companies to create safer, more worthwhile products.
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