

The Arms Race for Your Attention

And what to do about it.

It is worth remembering how ordinary the beginning was. Facebook launched as an online directory for college undergraduates, and for years it was a novelty. The iPhone was introduced, at length, as an iPod that also makes phone calls, and a great deal of the launch was spent explaining that it handled voicemail nicely.

Nobody set out to build the most effective attention-capture system in history. It was assembled one reasonable product decision at a time, and it works.

Why you are outgunned

- Understand the trade first. You are not the customer. Your attention is the product, and it is sold by the unit to people who want something from you. That is not a conspiracy theory, it is the published business model.
- Sean Parker, Facebook's founding president, described the design brief plainly: the thought process was how do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible. He called the result a social-validation feedback loop, and said it was exactly the sort of thing a hacker would come up with, because it exploits a vulnerability in human psychology.
- The machine knows you better than you expect. Researchers found that a model using only Facebook likes could judge personality more accurately than a person's friends, and past a few hundred likes, more accurately than their spouse. (Youyou, Kosinski and Stillwell, 2015.)
- And knowing you is the point. A former Cambridge Analytica employee described the goal as working out what messaging you are susceptible to, the framing, the topic, the tone, whether it should be frightening, where you will consume it, and how many times you have to be touched with it in order to change how you think.
- Set against that: your willpower, at the end of a long day, on a small screen.

The figures on this page are dated deliberately. They come from 2015 to 2021, which is when this material was assembled, and I have left the years attached rather than pretending to a fresh count. Every one of these trends has since gone further in the same direction.

What it costs

- In 2018, Deloitte found Americans looked at their phones about 80 times a day, once every twelve minutes of waking life, and that four in ten would rather lose their voice for a day than their phone.
- Total media consumption has climbed for a century, with one step up for television around 1960 and a larger one for the internet around 2000, arriving near 90 hours a week. That is not a typo and it includes overlap, which is its own problem.
- The documented effects are not subtle: addiction, reduced autonomy through manipulation, lower reported happiness, distraction, exhaustion, and a reliable pull toward the darker end of your instincts, because outrage travels further than agreement.
- And underneath it, the oldest mechanism in the book. Comparison is the thief of joy, a line usually given to Theodore Roosevelt, and the feed is a comparison engine running continuously against other people's edited highlights.

The new entrant

- Everything above was built with recommendation systems that were, by current standards, crude. The engine got much better, and conversational AI added a category that did not exist when this argument was first made.
- The difference worth naming: a feed competes for your attention, while a conversational system competes for your **engagement**, which is a deeper hook. It answers, it adapts to you, it is agreeable, and a system optimized to continue the conversation is not the same thing as one optimized to end it usefully. Both can be true of a tool that is also genuinely useful.
- The tell is the same as ever. Ask what the thing is for, ask who pays for it, and notice when something that was supposed to save you time is quietly spending it. A tool you reach for without deciding to has stopped being a tool.
- The defense does not change either, which is the good news on this page. Every practice below was designed against a weaker opponent and still works, because it operates on your side of the screen.

Two symptoms worth watching for in yourself

- **You cannot have the moment without documenting it.** A view, a meal, a child doing something ordinary, and the reflex is to capture it for an audience who is not there. The experience gets thinner in exchange for the record, and the record

is mostly never looked at again. It is also occasionally dangerous: people have died getting the photograph.

- **You are exhausted by connection.** Not by work, by availability. The hyper-connected week leaves people tired in a way that a demanding but uninterrupted week does not, and the difference is that one of them let you finish a thought.

You need a philosophy, not a rule

Most people pick one of three losing options: pretend there is no problem, rely on willpower, or quit dramatically and come back within a fortnight. Cal Newport describes the fourth: a full-fledged philosophy of technology use, rooted in your deep values, that answers what you should use and how, and that lets you confidently ignore everything else.

Three principles hold it up.

- **Clutter is costly.** Each app offers a small benefit in isolation. Enough small benefits, added together, swamp themselves. The right accounting is Thoreau's: measure the profit against the cost, and the cost is measured in your life.
- **Optimization matters.** Deciding a technology serves something you value is only the first step. Then you have to work out how to use it, which almost nobody does deliberately.
- **Intentionality is satisfying.** Not the abstinence. The being in charge. That turns out to be most of the reported benefit.

The digital declutter

Three phases, and the middle one is the part people skip.

- **Stop optional online activities for thirty days.** List the technologies first: social platforms, messaging, games, streaming, news sites. Anything delivered through a screen that is meant to entertain, inform or connect you. Your microwave and your toothbrush are not on the list. Then define optional: treat it as optional unless removing it for a month would genuinely disrupt your work or your personal life. Decide your exceptions in advance and write them down.
- **Explore and rediscover what you actually like.** This is the essential phase. For most people, compulsive phone use is papering over a void left by an undeveloped leisure life, and if you do not fill the space with something you value, you will refill it with what you removed. Pascal, three and a half centuries early: all of humanity's problems stem from a person's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.
- **Reintroduce only what earns it.** A technology comes back only if it serves something you deeply value, is the best available way to serve it, and comes with a standing rule about when and how you use it. Offering some benefit is not enough. Almost everything offers some benefit.

Rituals that rebuild the day

Morning, 60 to 90 minutes

Meditate, pray or ponder, and plan. Uplifting music. Exercise. Read and write. Then your most important task, before you look at the phone at all. The order is the whole trick.

Evening, 30 minutes

Reflect and review. Write the done list. Note what you are grateful for. Music. Read something on paper. No screen, which is the only hard rule in the box.

Working smarter

- **Go analog** more than feels necessary. Paper does not notify you.
- **The three Bs of creativity are bed, bath and bus,** which is to say the mind solves things while walking, washing and travelling, and never while scrolling. Einstein had the insight for general relativity in a daydream. Archimedes had his in a bath. Rowling had Harry Potter on a delayed train. Darwin built a gravel path at his house, walked it daily, and called it his thinking path; he stacked stones at the entrance and knocked one away each circuit, so a hard question was a three-flint problem.
- **Turn off notifications from machines and keep the ones from people.** They are red because red is a trigger colour, they arrive on by default, and most of them are generated by software that wants you back.
- **Reorganize the home screen** so the first page holds only tools you use deliberately: maps, camera, calendar, notes. Everything mindless moves off the first page and into a folder. Airplane mode is a legitimate work tool.
- **If you must follow news, pull it rather than let it push.** A set time, once a day, and an aggregator that shows a story across several outlets.

high-quality work = time spent × intensity of focus

TRY THIS

- Turn off every notification that was not generated by a human being.
- Move everything mindless off your first home screen tonight.
- Pick the thirty days and put the start date in the calendar.
- Decide now what you will do with the reclaimed hours, before you have them.
- Find a walking route and use it as a thinking path this week.

You see how few things you have to do to live a satisfying and reverent life? (Marcus Aurelius.) Or Thoreau, more briefly: simplicity, simplicity, simplicity.

Resources

The whole course, on one card

- **Why.** Define your mission and write it down. It is the compass.
- **What.** First things first, decided in a weekly review.
- **How.** A simple system and four tools: tasks, calendar, notes, files.
- **Defense.** A personal code of conduct for technology, so the other three survive contact with a phone.

Referenced in this session

- Sean Parker, on the social-validation feedback loop.
- Youyou, Kosinski and Stillwell, 2015, on computer-based personality judgment.
- Christopher Wylie, formerly of Cambridge Analytica.
- Deloitte Global Mobile Consumer Survey, 2018.
- Blaise Pascal, on sitting quietly in a room alone.
- Marcus Aurelius and Henry David Thoreau, on simplicity.
- Charles Darwin's sandwalk, and the three-flint problem.
- The Center for Humane Technology, for the notification and home-screen practices.

Reading and watching

- *Digital Minimalism*, Cal Newport. The declutter, the three principles, and the philosophy this session is built on.
- *The Attention Merchants*, Tim Wu. How attention became something to sell, going back a great deal further than you would guess.
- *Irresistible*, Adam Alter. The engineering of behavioral addiction.
- *Reclaiming Conversation*, Sherry Turkle. What the trade actually costs in relationships.
- *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt. The case on children and adolescents, and the most argued-over book on this list.
- *The Social Dilemma*, if you want the version with faces attached.

Theme: thinking well. From my course *Getting Stuff Done*. The companion sessions are on priorities, building a system, and choosing tools.