

Case 2a. Who Will Save You from Your Phone and Internet Addiction?

Synopsis: Case #2a focuses on the issue of tech business assistance in controlling the amount of time spent on your mobile phone and other electronic devices, part of the rise of the new “attention economy.” It asks you to assess the balance between your role and that of the platforms and devices.

A version of the article excerpted below appears in print on Aug. 15, 2018, on Page D1 of the New York edition with the headline: Save Us From Our Phones! written by Casey Schwartz

It was the big tech equivalent of “drink responsibly” or the gambling industry’s “safer play”; the latest milestone in Silicon Valley’s year of apology. Earlier this month, Facebook and Instagram announced new tools for users to set time limits on their platforms, and a dashboard to monitor one’s daily use, following Google’s introduction of Digital Well Being features. (<https://wellbeing.google/>)

In doing so the companies seemed to suggest that spending time on the internet is not a desirable, healthy habit, but a pleasurable vice: one that if left uncontrolled may slip into unappealing addiction.

Having secured our attention more completely than ever dreamed, they now are carefully admitting it’s time to give some of that attention back; go see a movie in a theater; go exercise, read a book, talk to someone.

“The liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time,” writes James Williams, a technologist turned philosopher and the author of a new book, “Stand Out of Our Light.”

Mr. Williams, 36, should know. During a decade-long tenure at Google, he worked on search advertising, helping perfect a powerful, data-driven advertising model. Gradually, he began to feel that his life story as he knew it was coming unglued, “as though the floor was crumbling under my feet,” he writes.

Mr. Williams compares the current design of our technology to “an entire army of jets and tanks” aimed at capturing and keeping our attention. And the army is winning. We spend the day transfixed by our screens, thumb twitching in the subways and elevators, glancing at traffic lights.

We flaunt and then regret the habit of so-called second screening, when just one at a time isn’t enough, scrolling through our phones’ latest dispatches while watching TV, say.

One study, commissioned by Nokia, found that, as of 2013, we were checking our phones on average 150 times a day. But we *touch* our phones about 2,617 times, according to a separate 2016 study, conducted by Dscout, a research firm.

Apple has confirmed that users unlock their iPhones an average of 80 times per day.

Mr. Williams is now concerned with over-wired individuals losing their life purpose.

“In the same way that you pull out a phone to do something and you get distracted, and 30 minutes later you find that you’ve done 10 other things except the thing that you pulled out the phone to do — there’s fragmentation and distraction at that level,” he said. “But I felt like there’s something on a longer-term level that’s harder to keep in view: that longitudinal sense of what you’re about.”

He knew that among that his colleagues, he wasn’t the only one feeling this way. Speaking at a technology conference in Amsterdam last year, Mr. Williams asked the designers in the room, some 250 of them, “How many of you guys want to live in the world that you’re creating? In a world where technology is competing for our attention?”

“Not a single hand went up,” he said.

Mr. Williams is also far from the only example of a former soldier of big tech (to continue the army metaphor) now working to expose its cultural dangers.

In late June, Tristan Harris, a former design ethicist for Google, took the stage at the Aspen Ideas Festival to warn the crowd that what we are facing is no less than an “existential threat” from our very own gadgets. Mr. Harris, 34, has been playing the role of whistle-blower since he quit Google five years ago. He started the Center for Humane Technology in San Francisco and travels the country, appearing on influential shows and podcasts as well as at glamorous conferences like Aspen, to describe how technology is designed to be irresistible.

Since working together at Google in 2013, both men’s messages have grown in scope and urgency. The constant pull on our attention from technology is no longer just about losing too many hours of our so-called real lives to the diversions of the web. Now, they are telling us, we are at risk of fundamentally losing our moral purpose.

“It’s changing our ability to make sense of what’s true, so we have less and less idea of a shared fabric of truth, of a shared narrative that we all subscribe to,” Mr. Harris said, the day after his Aspen talk. “Without shared truth or shared facts, you get chaos — and people can take control.”

Researchers have known for years that there’s a difference between “top-down” attention (the voluntary, effortful decisions we make to pay attention to something of our choice) and “bottom-up” attention, which is when our attention is involuntarily captured by whatever is going on around us: a thunderclap, gunshot or merely the inviting bleep that announces another Twitter notification.

But many of the biggest questions remain unanswered. At the top of that list, no smaller a mystery remains than “the relationship between attention and our conscious experience of the world,” said Jesse Rissman, a neuroscientist whose lab at U.C.L.A. studies attention and memory.

Also unclear: the consequence of all that screen time on our tired neurons. “We don’t understand how modern technology and changes in our culture impact our ability to sustain our attention on our goals,” Dr. Rissman said.

Katherine Hayles, an English professor at U.C.L.A., has written about the change she sees in students as one from “deep attention,” a state of single-minded absorption that can last for hours, to one of “hyper attention,” which jumps from target to target, preferring to skim the surface of lots of different things than to probe the depths of just one.

In the 1990s, 3 to 5 percent of American school-aged children were thought to have what is now called *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder*. By 2013, that number was 11 percent, and rising, according to data from the National Survey of Children’s Health.

GRADED ASSIGNMENT #2:

1. Does this “attention” issue apply to you? (50 word maximum)
2. Note the list below of “actors” who play a role in the case. Address the relative capabilities, orientation and (in your view) responsibility of the 4 actors identified for solving the Excessive attention problem. (100 words maximum)

-the tech people who design the phones and platforms

-the device companies, e.g., Apple or Samsung

-the platforms, e.g., Google, Facebook or Instagram

-you

3. Review and then provide your comments on the effectiveness of Google’s Digital Wellbeing website. (100 words maximum)

Send your answers to Professor Molander (emolander@yahoo.com)