

The economics of attention

The modern mind is overstimulated and the modern body is under-stimulated.

There's something that's been on my mind that I want to talk to you about. I am stepping back from a lot of the internet right now, and I think maybe you should too. Part of the reason is because I am concerned you might not making to the end of this speech without you checking your phone or your mind wandering off. Not because you don't want to, but because you find that it is hard to pay attention. This speech is slow, and long and you find that your focus isn't what it used to be. It's hard to pay attention. And I don't think it's our fault. I think the difficulty we might have paying attention is something that's been done to us, that's been done to all of us.

I used to read a lot, but, by word count, the vast majority of my reading lately is comment threads on the internet. When I try to read a book now, my mind's eye is dim, and my brain just slides off the page. <Sigh> And I end up right back on the internet, reading comment threads that are just the same as a hundred comment threads before them. Scrolling, scrolling, endlessly. But this isn't about books versus the internet. It's just that to me, the inability to read books is the most obvious symptom of the problem. And, for you that may be something else. The internet isn't the reason that your mind may be wondering off this path, but rather the problem is some systems that have come from the internet.

Brains, are fickle and lazy. They have always preferred something that is easy for them over something good for them. Human brains have done this for as long as brains have been human. I would argue that engaging in the battle of you versus your lazy, distractable, animal brain is what makes you human. We don't have time to discuss it all now, but tools and tricks that casinos, and psychologists and others have used for decades have been sharpened, and personalized, and put in your pocket. Leashes around your brain, to tug at you. I know how dramatic is sounds, but nonetheless it is the explicit goal of many of these systems. Who among us have opened an app, looked around, seen everything new, closed it, then immediately reopened to check again. That's not an accident or a silly moment of forgetfulness. That is the result of intentional engineering to get your brain to pull you back from whatever else you might do. I worry that this is creating an attentionally deficit society. That to constantly have your brain tugged at, and pulled at, is to end up with a brain so used to having its time and attention captured and consumed that even if to step away briefly, you're left with a mind unable to be on its own. To be idle, to reflect, to introspect and to retrospect.

For me, an uncomfortable example of never wanting a brain to be idle, and maybe it's the same for you, is podcasts. Previously good companions for mindless chores or traveling or waiting in line. Podcasts slowly slowly came to fill up all of the previous space in my life. After phones became waterproof I've had friends confess they listen to podcasts now in the shower as well. The shower! No where has been responsible for more good ideas than the shower because it's the place where the mind is forced to reflect. Why? To what gain? Only the good ideas to lose.

A good rule of thumb to know what deserves your attention is to use the rule of tens. Will this matter in ten minutes? How will you feel about it in ten months? What about ten years? If the answer to all the three is yes, then, it deserves my attention. Else, it is inconsequential.

If your mind is forever filled with the voices of others, how do you know what you think about anything? Pulling attention apart is akin to pulling a mind apart, and I see people too attention shattered to notice the shards. I'm not there yet, but I'm worried I could be. And if you've made it with me this far, maybe you feel the same. So I'm

stepping back for a while, leaving behind the endless reading of comments and posts, putting down the podcasts. Maybe you should join me. Maybe this is worth thinking about for a moment.