Keywords: The Distraction-Industrial Complex

Mims, Christopher . Wall Street Journal , Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]30 June 2014: B.1.

ABSTRACT

To understand why, we've got to talk about both human psychology and the increasing sophistication of our computing devices -- all of which, being built by companies with powerful financial incentives to capture our attention, are now instruments of what I call the distraction-industrial complex. [...]Apple's forthcoming operating system for iPhone promises to transform these alerts into even more sophisticated interruption machines, allowing us to answer messages and interact with apps right in the alerts themselves, without even unlocking our phones.

FULL TEXT

Of all the potentially embarrassing things I confess to friends and acquaintances, perhaps the one most guaranteed to get a reaction is this: I don't have broadband Internet at home. And here's something I've never said aloud: I don't think you should, either, because it is ruining your productivity, if not your life.

I'd love to tell you my disconnection is deliberate, but it is mostly a consequence of living on the top floor of an extraordinarily old and bohemianly cared-for building, in which, despite my best attempts, both the phone and cable companies simply can't get me connected. (I do keep my phone on.)

Sometimes this is an issue. Getting work done at home requires that I tether my laptop to my cellphone, which results in slow performance and, if I'm not careful, outrageous cellphone bills.

But, as I have discovered, it also means freedom. Barring emergency, work is confined to work hours. This forces me to be more efficient at the office even as it allows me to be more emotionally present when I'm not there.

It also has led me to notice that the times I am most productive while working are when I have no Internet connection at all -- on planes, buses and trains.

To understand why, we've got to talk about both human psychology and the increasing sophistication of our computing devices -- all of which, being built by companies with powerful financial incentives to capture our attention, are now instruments of what I call the distraction-industrial complex.

First, there's the matter of our frail psyches. The best research we have tells us that, given the opportunity, humans tend to interrupt ourselves on average every three minutes. We'll switch from a Web browser to a Word document, for example. These interruptions are fairly harmless as long as they are related to the task at hand.

What's devastating to our productivity: interruptions we didn't invite, especially if they draw our attention to an unrelated task, such as an incoming email, instant message or other alert.

One study from Microsoft indicated that programmers who were interrupted by an incoming email lost 10 minutes every time they switched from their original task, on top of however long it took them to answer the email. Earlier studies suggest that workers lose as much as 40% of their productive time when they are regularly interrupted.

And yet every trend in consumer and enterprise technology is toward more frequent and effective interruptions. It began with the introduction, around 2009, of the "push" notification on smartphones. Before that, only text messages showed up on the screens of our devices. With push, suddenly any app could set our phone buzzing and chiming.

Entire empires have been built on the push notification; they are the only reason messaging apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat work, and they are key to getting people to engage with services such as Facebook and Twitter.

Based on public numbers, Twitter users who visit its site or open its app at least once a month are looking at Twitter seven times a day, on average. That means that a sizable chunk of users are checking Twitter dozens of times a day, to balance out the ones who barely engage with the service. And Facebook, according to comScore, represents 20% of the time the average American spends on their mobile phone. Would the number be so high if our phones weren't alerting us every time someone "liked" our latest update?

And it's only going to get worse. The Android-powered smartwatches Google just unveiled vibrate every time the wearer receives an alert on his or her phone. If your phone is set to show incoming emails, texts, and even one or two messaging apps or social networks, that means the smartwatch might vibrate dozens or even hundreds of times a day.

Google Glass wants to put those alerts where you can't possibly escape them: right in front of your eyes. And Apple's forthcoming operating system for iPhone promises to transform these alerts into even more sophisticated interruption machines, allowing us to answer messages and interact with apps right in the alerts themselves, without even unlocking our phones.

The technologically savvy among you are already saying: "Well, you can turn those alerts off!" But who does? "Fear of missing out" means most people allow some kind of push notification on their phone, and the social expectation that everyone is instantly reachable pressures us to leave open channels for real-time communication.

In general, people underestimate the cost of these distractions, partly because we underestimate the effects of what psychologists call "ego depletion." The idea is that we have only so much willpower. Some neuroscientists believe the brain literally runs out of its fuel, glucose, when we have to perform cognitively demanding tasks. But exercising the self control required to not answer that incoming email is also cognitively demanding.

In other words, in a world full of interruptions, we can't win; engaging and choosing not to engage with a push notification both take their toll, leading to worse performance on the things we're actually supposed to get done.

Which brings me back to my ongoing quest to find places to avoid the Internet. The balance of evidence isn't just that we aren't able to manage distractions on our own, it is that we shouldn't be asked to.

There is nothing wrong with connectivity, apps, alerts and social media, if we engage with them on our own terms. But the limitations of our minds mean we have to be able to reduce our decision to engage with them or not to a straightforward, binary choice we should be asked to make as few times a day as possible: To connect, or not.

Credit: By Christopher Mims

DETAILS

Subject:	Motivation; Broadband; Studies; Consumer electronics; Internet access; Time management; Social networks
Business indexing term:	Subject: Time management Social networks; Industry: 33521 : Small Electrical Appliance Manufacturing
Company / organization:	Name: Microsoft Corp; NAICS: 334614, 511210
Classification:	33521: Small Electrical Appliance Manufacturing
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y.
Pages:	B.1
Publication year:	2014
Publication date:	Jun 30, 2014
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	00999660
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Commentary
ProQuest document ID:	1541330529
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/newspapers/keywords-distraction-industrial-complex/docview/1541330529/se-2?accountid=7098
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Last updated:	2020-12-18
Database:	ABI/INFORM Global

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