

# No focus, no fights, and a bad back – 16 ways technology has ruined my life

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Let's be fair: technology has improved my life in ways that still surprise and delight me on a daily basis. My phone is also a torch! My TV remembers how far I got in last night's episode, even if I don't! The bus stop knows when the bus is coming, and I can watch my pizza's entire journey from the restaurant to my house! These are, frankly, miracles. But there have been corresponding sacrifices. Over 20 years, I have turned over whole areas of competence, memory, authority and independence to the machines in my life. Along the way, I have become anxious about problems that didn't used to exist, indecisive over choices I never used to have to make, and angry about things I would once have been wholly unaware of. There are probably hundreds of ways in which technology has ruined my life. But let's start with 16 of them. 1. It's destroying my concentration It's not just me: a 2022 survey conducted by the Centre for Attention Studies found that 49% of adults believe their attention span has shrunk, a consequence of all the competing distractions available on our phones and computers. My every idle thought now occasions 20 minutes of half-assed research, dragging me down online rabbit holes, even while I'm besieged by pinging notifications heralding the arrival of an email, or announcing the death of some elderly actor, as if I were the next of kin or something. Duolingo in particular pursues me with the persistence of bailiffs – sometimes it interrupts my Italian lessons to remind me to take an Italian lesson, which is why I still can't order a coffee in Rome after five years. 2. It's destroying my posture I could feel the harm sitting in front of a screen all day was doing, so I bought a stand to raise my computer, hoping it would make me sit up straighter. Then I got varifocals, which meant I had to crane my neck and stick out my chin to read the screen through the bottom half of my glasses. Eventually, I switched to a laptop. Then I had to put that on a stand. Even after all that, I still have the posture of a question mark. I tried setting an alarm to remind me to leave my computer at intervals, but it kept waking me up. 3. Life sometimes feels like an unending struggle to prove I'm not a robot Obviously, this includes every failed attempt to click on all the pictures with traffic lights in them in order to qualify as a legitimate human inquirer in search of spare dishwasher wheels. But it also means resisting the temptation to click on one of those automated reply buttons in my email that says something like, "OK, thanks!" and compose my own response. Every day is a Turing test, and I don't always pass. 4. It has rendered meetings inescapable You used to be able to say: "Friday? Sorry, I'll be in Antarctica on Friday." But thanks to Zoom, Google and FaceTime, there is simply no reasonable excuse for not making an appearance at a meeting. You also get to look at the picture of your face the whole time, so you can see exactly how bored you are. 5. I'm no longer able to have arguments in pubs I can remember a time when it was considered ungentlemanly to check the factual accuracy of a statement made by a drinking companion. You were just meant to

counter their argument by presenting specious facts of your own. But when everyone has the GDP of every Brics country at their fingertips, there doesn't seem to be much point in spirited debate. You end up spending the whole evening looking things up and saying, "Huh." These days, if you want to get into a petty squabble over obscure facts in an environment where phone use is banned, you have to go to prison. Or do the pub quiz. Either way, it's no life. 6. I find it increasingly hard to turn things on. You may have experienced the feeling of getting behind the wheel of a hire car in a foreign airport, staring at the dashboard and thinking: how do I make it go? Or you may have faced a similar reckoning in an unfamiliar shower, or standing before a seemingly ordinary hob. The relentless development of new ways to turn things on has led us steadily away from the intuitive and toward the wilfully enigmatic. The other week, I found myself alone in a freezing bedroom with an electric radiator I couldn't work. In the end, I had to turn it upside down to find the model number so I could locate a pdf of the manual online. I just wanted it to get hot. Weirdly, the virtual world is full of old-fashioned mechanical emulators – animated buttons that make a clicking sound; knobs and sliders you can manipulate with your cursor – while in the realm of actual stuff the controls have been reduced to flat black panels covered with inscrutable symbols: a crescent moon; a lightning bolt; a circle with an M inside, where M stands for Mode. I know how old this makes me sound, but I can't believe the young people of today are clamouring for wifi-enabled kettles. 7. It's given me unfiltered access to the opinions of stupid people. Technology doesn't just make it possible for me to find out what stupid people are thinking; it now curates their thoughts and serves them up to me daily, as if I were some kind of connoisseur of idiocy. I honestly do not remember asking for this. 8. It's given stupid people unfiltered access to each other's opinions. Once upon a time, the so-called gatekeepers of traditional media restricted the flow of information through narrow, one-way channels. Now stupid people have their own media, where they are free to discuss and mutually reaffirm their dumb ideas. Sadly, this has not been the unmitigated force for good we hoped it would be. 9. I am demonstrably worse at typing than I was 10 years ago. I was never a good typist, but ever since word processing programs started correcting my mistakes as I went, I have developed a misplaced confidence in my abilities. On occasions when this facility is for some reason unavailable, I type like someone who's having a stroke. 10. I feel a strange obligation to monitor bad news in real time. Doomscrolling, they call it. Everyone does it to some extent – bad news is just more compelling than good news – but for me it's gone from mild compulsion to full-time job. 11. I live in fear of being scammed. When it comes to delivery notifications for things I can't remember ordering, communications from my mobile service provider, QR codes, and anything that asks me to click on a link, I err on the side of profound suspicion. I assume that texts from my bank about fraudulent activity are themselves fraudulent. I once ignored a genuine email from my son saying he'd lost his phone, and requesting I text a foreign number. He was alone in Vietnam at the time and I thought: "Nice try, scumbag." 12. I'm forced to live in silent, shameful defiance of all the accepted wisdom regarding passwords. I don't know about you, but when I'm given advice about not writing passwords down, not using the same password over and over, and changing passwords regularly, I nod and say, "Of course", but I think: "What, are you kidding?" I write all my passwords down, use as few as I can get away with and change them only when I'm forced to. To me, all the accepted wisdom about passwords ignores one major point: a password is of no use to me if I don't know it. I may as well click on "Forgot your password?" every time, set a new one, then forget it again instantly. I also do this, by the way. 13. It's created a requirement to go everywhere forewarned and forearmed. It used to be considered creepy to Google someone just before you met. Now it seems rude to show up not knowing anything about them. You're also meant to be informed about things you're going to see and do, the places you might eat, and the likely transport routes. Don't get me wrong: I like being prepared; I just don't want to read the restaurant menu before I leave home. 14. I have consistently risen to the level of disorganisation that any new technology allows. At the time of writing, I have 77 tabs open on my browser. Somewhere behind it there is a whole other browser. Every morning, I sift through sedimentary layers of open documents to find the one I want. You might think all this virtual disorganisation – neatly confined to a slim laptop – is still preferable to a messy desk, but my desk is also messy, and the walls surrounding it are covered in Post-it notes. 15. As much as I resent technology, I am helpless without it. One sometimes hears of inventions that seem designed to foster slavish dependency – self-tuning guitars, programmable cocktail-making machines – but we're only really reminded of how much territory we've ceded to technology when it breaks down. It's not just that I've lost the skills required; it's that I can't even recall the process. How did I used to find my way around, or figure out what to watch on TV, or pay for a takeaway? There must have been systems in place. 16. The rest of the world is also helpless without it. In the service of journalism, I have occasionally subjected myself to specific technological deprivations: a week without a smartphone; a month without Google, that sort of thing. And I'm here to tell you that when you forsake modern technology the world generally refuses to take part in the experiment. You find this out the first time someone behind a ticket window looks you in the eye and tells you to just download the app. You can't win, and you can't quit.