

Vanan Phan

English 382

Professor David Toomey

May 12, 2021

The Hustle Hurts

Is it time to unplug from technology? Probably, but the chances of most people willingly abandoning their electronic devices are highly unlikely. In modern day America, a large majority of individuals have access to technology that allows them to communicate with people across the world in a matter of seconds. Everything from purchasing plane tickets to making dinner reservations to securing job interviews to finding the answers to trivia questions, and much more can be accomplished with a few swipes on a phone. The seemingly unlimited and effortless access that technology offers its users creates an infinite number of possibilities to improve human life, but too much of anything can be a bad thing. As technology continues to expand and digitalize various aspects of a person's life, including what they have access to, the influx of content can negatively impact a person's ability to wellbeing. One significant change that has occurred due to the rise of technology is the increased pressure to be productive in the workforce. The combination of how accessible work is and the pressure to professionally perform can result in employees overworking themselves which often results in poor mental and physical health. Some companies have developed focus and productivity apps that claim to help users manage their time better, which would prevent people from overworking themselves, however these apps might do more harm than help. In a technology filled era, the pressure to maximize an individual's productivity can result in negative health consequences, and while productivity apps claim to help prevent user's from overworking themselves, the technology and

design of these programs often manipulate and feed into the user's mentality to continue working.

Productivity can be defined and applied in an infinite number of situations. The U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is a unit of the U. S. Department of Labor, states that "Productivity is a measure of economic efficiency which shows how effectively economic inputs are converted into output" (bls.gov). The Bureau then goes on to state that productivity is measured "by comparing the amount of goods and services produced with the inputs which were used in production. Labor productivity is the ratio of the outputs of goods and services to the labor hours devoted to the production of that output" (bls.gov). In essence, productivity generally refers to the ability of an individual or a group of individuals to work efficiently within a given amount of time in order to maximize the desired result. A benefit of productivity is that it allows the worker or workers to increase their output without having to increase the amount of physical and mental labor required (bls.gov). Aside from designated an amount of time and manpower, there are several factors that must be considered when measuring productivity. Internal and external motivation play a key role in an individual's productivity, in addition to the level of personal investment and interest a person has towards a project or a job (psychologytoday.com). In order to fully understand how productivity has impacted workers in America today, it is important to view productivity through a historical lens.

It would come as no surprise to anyone that phones and computers didn't magically appear one day and completely transform how people communicate and work with one another. Like with most things, the rise of technology happened gradually but a key component that led to the digitalization of the workplace in America is due to the Industrial Revolution. In an article titled "Industrial Revolution" written by history.com editors, states that the Industrial Revolution

began in Britain and later spread to the rest of the world by the 1830s and the 1840s.

Technology, which is defined as “the application of scientific knowledge to the practical aims of human life or, as it is sometimes phrased, to the change and manipulation of the human environment” (Britannica.com), played a large role in the shift away from rural, agrarian societies and the beginning of the urban and industrialized era. Inventions such as the first prototype for the modern steam engine which was called the “atmospheric steam engine” designed by Thomas Newcomen in the early 1700s, was used to power the machines used to pump water out of mine shafts. Later, Scottish engineer James Watt would eventually team up with Matthew Boulton in the 1760s to “invent a steam engine with a rotary motion, a key innovation that would allow steam power to spread across British industries, including flour, paper, and cotton mills, iron works, distilleries, waterworks and canals” (history.com). These innovations greatly allowed Britain to mass produce goods that were once painstakingly crafted by hand at a faster rate. As the need for human labor decreased, the usage of machines in the production of goods allowed the demand for items to increase. The Industrial Revolution greatly benefited Britain, and it would have a similar result in the United States.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, the United States was primarily an agricultural country, but it wasn't long after the Industrial Revolution began that time would quickly be considered more valuable than money. In a piece published by the *Smithsonian Institution* titled “What Makes Time Tick, or Has the Industrial Revolution Really Made Clocks Go Faster?” describes how the American workday shifted from being relatively unstructured and laidback to a society where every event is scheduled by the seconds in hopes of maximizing productivity. Before the Industrial Revolution, most Americans had control over their workday and because the country mainly profited off agriculture, farmers mainly scheduled their tasks depending on the needs of

the animals and relied on nature as their clock: “when the rooster crows, you get up; when the sun is at its zenith, you eat your mid-day meal; when dusk falls, you bring the animals into the barn” (April 1991). Farmers weren’t the only ones who relied on nature to be their clock, craftsmen, who mostly created their products by hand, were able to work whenever they chose to as long as they were able to produce enough to earn a living. However, time and scheduling became crucial parts of a worker’s day once the Industrial Revolution gained traction in America around the end of the 1890s.

The bigger anything gets, the harder it becomes to manage. The *Smithsonian Institution* reports that the increased cost required to keep factories and machines working meant that factories had to feel a larger amount of goods. In order to maximize productivity and minimize any potential loss in profit producers, buyers, shippers, and sellers began to do business and depend on each other. The establishment of standard time zones which began in 1883, made coordination easier between shippers and producers. As businesses and the economy continued to grow, the need to remain organized and up to date with orders contributed to inventions such as the telegraph, the telephone, the typewriter, carbon paper, and the calculating machine. With new innovations and the standardization of time, American workers gradually shifted away from agriculture and began working for others in factories for designated amounts of time. Soon, time became a crucial factor in America as a large majority of jobs demanded scheduling and speed: “A bus driver has to arrive on time; a waiter's customers won't leave good tips if he doesn't bring their food quickly; a scientist times her experiments down to fractions of a second; a one-hour dry-cleaner won't stay in business long if his service really takes a day” (April 1991). These are just a few examples of how the Industrial Revolution transformed America from a rural, agrarian society that allowed workers to set their own schedules and hand craft their products to an urban

and industrial country that requires workers to adhere to strict schedules in order to maintain a functioning and profitable society.

The Industrial Revolution in America placed an emphasis on the cruciality of time in the workplace as owners and workers aimed to maximize productivity as much as possible, however, as technology continues to develop and infiltrate almost every aspect of daily life, a focus must be placed on the importance of an individual's attention during the digital era. According to a chart released by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2019, full-time employees average 8.50 hours of work on a weekday (bls.gov). A major contributing factor of productivity in the work force is the individual's ability to focus their attention on their task, but with the rise of technology, the ability to pay attention might be more challenging than expected. In an essay published by *Wired* titled "Attention Shoppers!" Michael H. Goldhaber claims that no one would put anything on the internet without expecting something in return, and what people hope to gain is attention. Goldhaber states that "the economy of attention – not information – is that natural economy of cyberspace" (December 1997) and then goes on to say that some form of attention is essential for most people. However, attention is scarce because when someone is focusing their attention on one thing, they can't be focusing on much else regardless of how capable they claim to be at multitasking. This means that real attention is limited to the amount of people there are, the more people there are, the more attention there is, but that also creates the possibility that those people could want attention as well.

Michael H. Goldhaber's argument that attention can only be successfully given to a singular thing or person at a given time was proven correct in a study conducted by Eyal Ophir that was included in the *New York Times* article "Attached to Technology and Paying the Price" written by Matt Richtel. Eyal Ophir, who was a student turned researcher at Stanford, originally

believed that multitaskers were able to rewire their brains to handle a heavy workload, but the results surprised him. The test subjects were divided into two groups: those who were classified as heavy multitaskers based on their answers to questions about how they used technology, and those who were not. On a computer, the subjects were briefly presented with an image of red rectangle and then presented with a similar image before being asked if any of the rectangles had moved. Then the subjects were told to ignore the blue rectangles were added to the test. Ophir and his colleagues found that the multitaskers did a significantly worse job than the non-multitaskers at recognizing whether the red rectangles had changed position. This meant that the multitaskers had difficulty removing irrelevant information, which were the blue rectangles. In addition, the study also showed that “the multitaskers took longer than non-multitaskers to switch among tasks, like differentiating vowels from consonants and then odd from even numbers. The multitaskers were shown to be less efficient at juggling problems” (Richtel 2010). The study done by Eyal Ophir and his colleagues enforces Goldhaber’s claim that attention can truly only be focused on a singular task, person, or item at a time. While Ophir’s study debunks the concept of multitasking, the results show that the rise and improvements in technology have convinced workers that they are able to accomplish more without having to work overtime or hire additional staff.

While Goldhaber claims that a large majority of people crave and consider attention to be essential in order to live, he also emphasizes that the attention economy can pose harm to those on the internet. Attention is not something that is distributed to everyone equally, which often causes people to work harder to receive attention and is one of the key reasons why people are easily drawn to technology. The internet provides a plethora of opportunities for users to get the attention that they might not otherwise be able to receive from the largest possible audience and

the attention of their peers. However, Goldhaber warns that “the Net also ups the ante, increasing the relentless pressure to get some fraction of this limited resource. At the same time, it generates ever greater demands on each of us to pay what scarce attention we can to others” (December 1997). There are plenty of positives to technology and the internet, but users on the cyberspace also face the potential of overexerting and/or overwhelming themselves as they are faced with the pressure to consumer and/or produce information in the hopes of receiving attention from their peers and strangers. At the end of his piece, Goldhaber writes that while the attention economy can positively impact people, it has its shortcomings such as “The possibility that increasing demand for our limited attention will keep us from reflecting, or thinking deeply (let alone enjoying leisure);” (December 1997). The scarcity of attention combined with the seemingly limitless potential the internet provides for users raises concern over how far someone is willing to go in order to receive attention and what the consequences will include when someone does overwork themselves.

While handmade products are still valued in America, the Industrial Revolution along with the rise of technology has greatly changed the way people work. While computers have allowed work to become more accessible than ever, the increased ease of accomplishing projects and tasks can present problems for individuals. A concerning trend that has emerged in recent years due to the popularity of technology is known as *hustle culture*. *Hustle Culture* revolves around the belief that an individual can succeed and accomplish anything they want as long as they work hard enough. This mentality of overworking oneself often dismisses and neglects the importance of sleep, exercise, food, leisure time, and mental health, and instead only focuses on accomplishing as much work as possible (Lorelie 2020). As workers are encouraged to overwork themselves, it should come as no surprise that those who advocate

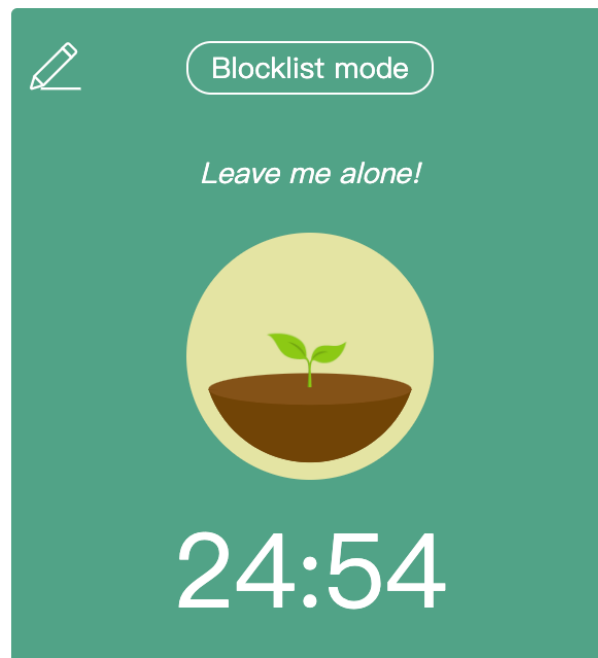
hustle culture are those at or near the top of the corporate hierarchy. In a *New York Times* article titled “Why Are Young People Pretending to Love Work?” written by Erin Griffith, Griffith cites David Heinemeier Hansson, who is the co-founder of Basecamp, a software company. Heinemeier Hansson states that “The vast majority of people beating the drums of hustle-mania are not the people doing the actual work. They’re the managers, financiers and owners” before going on to say that even though data shows that long hours don’t improve productivity or creativity, the belief that overworking oneself is the key to success is due to the wealth that a small group of “elite techies” have created. He also states that encouraging workers to overwork themselves is “grim and exploitative” (Griffith 2019). While technology has greatly improved how people are able to work, the desire for attention and success has created a dangerous and harmful belief, which is perpetuated by those at the top of the corporate hierarchy, that to be successful, one must completely dedicate themselves to working. The intense pursuit for success can often negatively impact an individual’s health and wellbeing.

The need for attention and the desire for success both play a role in hustle culture, but the satisfaction of accomplishing work also contributes to unhealthy work habits. In an article published by *WebMD* titled “Working Yourself to Death: Long Hours Bring Risks,” Bryan Robinson, who is a psychologist in Ashville, North Carolina, explains how the body of someone who is addicted to work reacts: “A true workaholic gets high from the adrenaline and cortisol, and [without work,] they go through withdrawal” and continues to say that overworking can cause relationship and health issues (Doheny 2018). Studies have found that women who have worked 45 hours or more a week had a 63% higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes over a 12-year period compared to women who worked between 35-40 hours. Another study discovered that people who worked 55 or more hours a week had a 1.4x greater chance

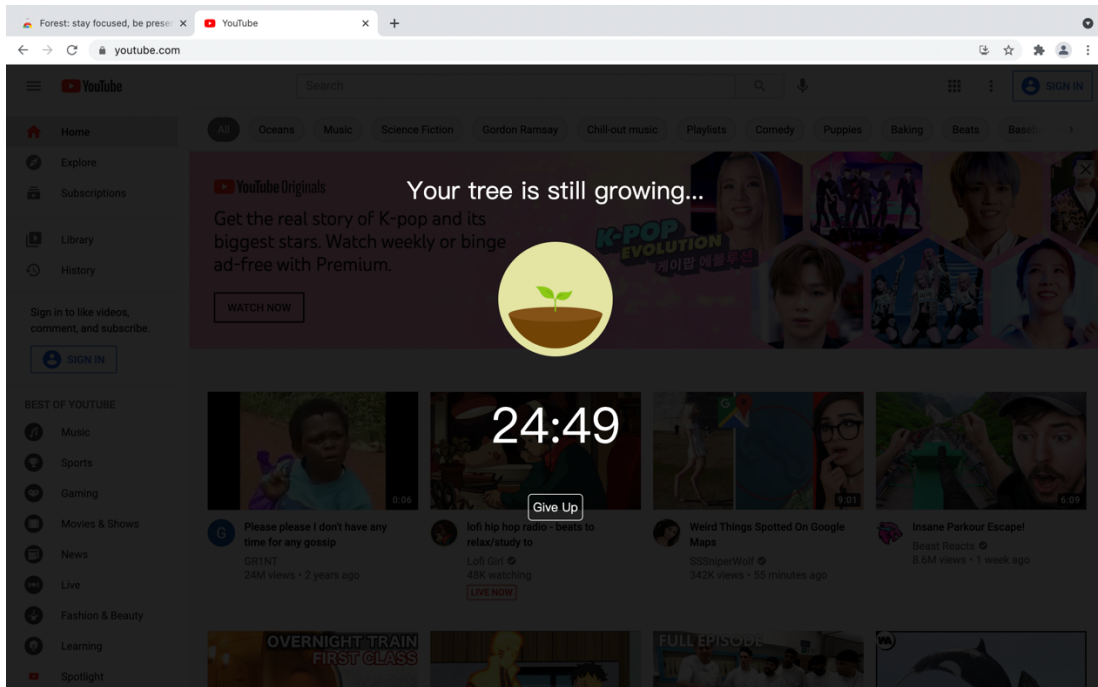
of having an abnormal heart rhythm. Other health risks that have been connected to overworking include heart disease, strokes, and psychiatric disorders (Doheny 2018). People overworking isn't a new phenomenon that emerged with the rise of technology and the increased accessibility of work, but with the changes in the workplace, the dangers of developing health issues are more concerning than ever.

Technology has irreversibly changed the way people work and interact with one another and has transformed time and attention into currency that holds more value than money. As a result, engineers have changed the style and type of technology they design to match the needs of their consumers, which includes apps that improve a user's productivity and focus. One example of an app that helps its user remain focused while working on the internet is *Forest*. *Forest* can be downloaded from the Apple store, Google play, or as a Google Chrome extension. The main idea of *Forest* is that it restricts users from going on to other websites that might prove to distract them from their work. Users can type in which websites they want access to while using *Forest* and which websites they want to be restricted from accessing while they are using *Forest*. From there, users can set the amount of time they want to abstain from certain websites. During the designated time, users only have access to the websites they permitted, and the app plants a tree during that time. If the user tried to access one of the websites they had blocked, *Forest* will only allow the user to access the website if the user agrees to abandon the time they set earlier. In that case, the tree that was growing is killed. While this may seem like a strange way to convince users to stay focused and productive, the design of the *Forest* app successfully captures the attention of the user and to varying degrees, is able to convince the user to behave in a way that benefits the program. In this case, that involves the user continuously relying on the app to complete their work. While

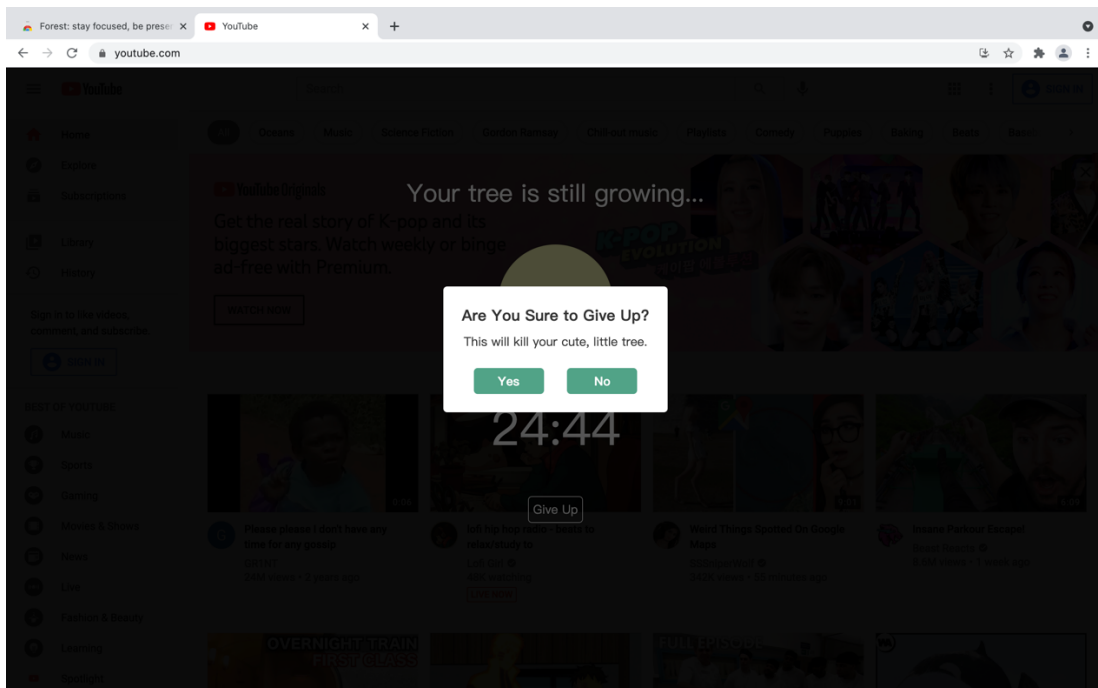
that might benefit workers, it shows how technology is able to capture and maintain the attention of users in a covert way that can prove to be harmful to the user. In an article published by *Nielsen Norman Group*, “The Attention Economy” written by Lexie Kane, Kane states that “the dynamics of the attention economy incentivize companies to draw users in to spend more and more time on apps and sites. Designers who create sites and apps understand that their products vie for the limited resource of users’ attention in a highly competitive market” (Kane 2019) and then she goes on to state that creating eye-catching animations to draw attention to a piece of content is a growing design trend as designers hope to attract attention to their products (Kane 2019). The images below were taken while using *Forest* as a Google Chrome extension. The images show how *Forest* uses eye-catching animation and graphic to attract users.



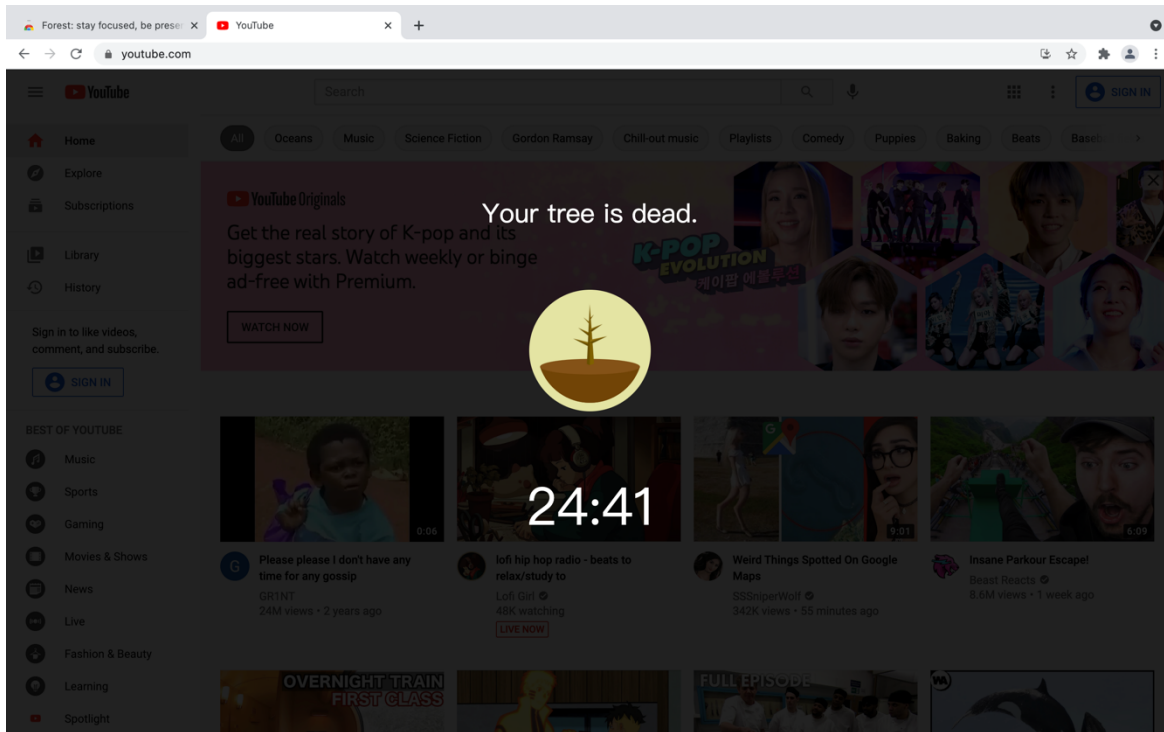
This is an image shows the time remaining in the Forest app and the digital tree that will grow during the designated amount of time.
(Image courtesy of Vanan Phan)



This image shows what will appear on the screen when the user tries to access a website that was added to the blocked list.
(Image courtesy of Vanan Phan)



This image shows the prompt that appears when a user tries to exit the Forest app before the designated amount of time is over.
(Image courtesy of Vanan Phan)



This image shows what the user is presented with when they terminate the remaining amount of designated time left in the app.
(Image courtesy of Vanan Phan)

As technology and work become more and more reliant on one another in a technological era where information is abundant and attention is scarce, apps like Forest allow users to remain focused and productive. Just like how people are changing the way they live and work, technology has rapidly evolved in a variety of ways to suit the needs of the user. However, the growing reliance on technology to accomplish work can be concerning because as the world becomes more digitalized, the possibility that people can freely unplug from technology grows slim. In a paper published by the *Internet Policy Review*, titled “Technology, autonomy, and manipulation” written by Daniel Susser, Beate Roessler, and Helen Nissenbaum, the authors discuss how the relationship between online manipulation and technology effects the choices users make. The authors define online manipulation as: “The use of information technology to covertly influence another person’s decision-making, by

targeting and exploiting decision-making vulnerabilities” (6). They go on to state that people can encounter online manipulation beyond computer screens as traditional offline spaces “are increasingly digitally mediated (because the people occupying them carry smartphones, the spaces themselves are embedded with internet-connected sensors, and so on)” (6). As online free spaces dwindle, and individuals are increasingly constantly bombarded with technology, concerning trends that seek to negatively influence users are growing. The paper notes that “dark patterns” which are “design strategies that exploit users’ decision-making vulnerabilities to nudge them into acting against their interests” are gaining traction in the realm of user interface and experience (7). Examples of this can include automatically renewing a paid subscription after the free trial or making it difficult for a user to exit a program by prompting them numerous times in hopes of the user deciding to remain on the program. These patterns and trends show how technology is effectively manipulating its users to behave in unhealthy ways, which can come in the form of overspending money or overworking oneself.

In addition to manipulative trends in technology that negatively impact how users make decisions, Daniel Susser, Beate Roessler, and Helen Nissenbaum also point out that online manipulation is violates the user’s autonomy. In their paper, autonomy “points to an individual’s capacity to make meaningfully independent decisions” (8). In essence, the individual is consciously aware of their thoughts, form their intentions and then, ultimately act and make decisions based on their motivations. However, online manipulation can undermine someone’s autonomy by leading them to pursue a result they didn’t chose, and it can also cause someone to act for reasons that aren’t truly theirs (9). As offline spaces continue to dwindle, the potential to remove oneself from the influences of technology rapidly decrease. However, a case can be made that not all online manipulation is harmful. For example, the Forest app is

designed to help users focus on tasks by preventing them from accessing other websites. In this case, someone can argue that the user's autonomy isn't being harmed because the user is actively aware of how Forest works, they are making the decision to use Forest on their own will, and the app will ultimately create a positive result for the user. While that may be true "it is harmful to manipulate someone even in an effort to lead them more effectively toward their own self-chosen ends. That is because the fundamental harm of manipulation is to the process of decision-making, not its outcome" (10-11). By luring the user to download and use the app, the individual is already being manipulated. In both subtle and apparent ways, technology threatens the autonomy of the user and poses harm to their wellbeing.

For most people in America, technology plays a huge role in how we interact and work with our peers and colleagues. Like with most things in life, the rise of technology has positively and negatively impacted many people. From allowing goods to be mass produced and transported around the country with inventions during the Industrial Revolution to the establishment of the eight-hour workday and the unfortunate rise of *hustle culture*, technology has been at the center of many historical changes that have occurred. While advancements in technology have allowed individuals to communicate and work with others across the country and the world, it's hard to deny that technology has the potential to harm the wellbeing of an individual. Trends such as *hustle culture*, which encourages people to completely devote every hour of the day to their work, have caused significant mental and physical harm to people, are being promoted by those at the top of the corporate hierarchy, and the abundance of technology makes work extremely accessible to anyone anywhere. In addition to contributing to unhealthy work habits, technology have effectively and subtly been able to manipulate people's decision-making abilities, which often led to users behaving in harmful ways. Let's face it, technology

does and will continue to play a prevalent, often intrusive, role in society. While there are plenty of positive results that have come with the rise of technology, one can't help but consider the infinite ways technology has and continues to negatively impact its users.

Work Cited:

- “Average hours employed people spent working on days worked by day of week.” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. <https://www.bls.gov/charts/american-time-use/emp-by-ftpt-job-edu-h.htm>. Web, Accessed 12 Mar 2021.
- Doheny, Kathleen. “Working Yourself to Death: Long Hours Bring Risks.” *WebMD*. 16 Jul 2018. <https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/news/20180716/working-yourself-to-death-long-hours-bring-risks>. Web, Accessed 20 Apr 2021.
- “Forest.” *Forest App*. <https://www.forestapp.cc>. Web, Accessed 12 Feb 2021.
- Goldhaber, H Michael. “Attention Shoppers!” *Wired*. 1 Dec 1997. <https://www.wired.com/1997/12/es-attention/>. Web, Accessed 15 Feb 2021.
- Griffith, Erin. “Why Are Young People Pretending to Love Work?” *The New York Times*. 26 Jan 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/business/against-hustle-culture-rise-and-grind-tgim.html>. Web, Accessed 12 Mar 2021.
- History.com Editors. “Industrial Revolution.” *History*. A&E Television Networks. 9 Sep 2019. <https://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution/industrial-revolution>. Web, Accessed 12 Mar 2021.
- Kane, Lexie. “The Attention Economy.” *Nielsen Norman Group*. 30 Jun 2019. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/attention-economy/>. Web, Accessed 20 Apr 2021.
- “Labor Productivity and Costs.” *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. 6 Aug 2012. <https://www.bls.gov/lpc/faqs.htm#P03>. Web, Accessed 12 Mar 2021.
- Lorelie, Christine. “Hustle Culture: Why Is Everyone Working Too Hard?” *Medium*. 22 Dec 2020. <https://medium.com/the-post-grad-survival-guide/hustle-culture-why-is-everyone-working-too-hard-69f9f5331ab5>. Web, Accessed 20 Mar 2021.

Richtel, Matt. "Attached to Technology and Paying a Price." *The New York Times*. 6 Jun 2010.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/technology/07brain.html>. Web, Accessed 10 Feb 2021.

Susser, D. & Roessler, B. & Nissenbaum, H. "Technology, autonomy, and manipulation.

Internet Policy Review. Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 1-22. 30 Jun 2019.

<https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/technology-autonomy-and-manipulation>. Web, Accessed 15 Apr 2021.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Technology." *Britannica*. 15 Apr 2021. [https://www.](https://www.britannica.com/technology/technology)

[britannica.com/technology/technology](https://www.britannica.com/technology/technology). Web, Accessed 19 Mar 2021.

"What Is Productivity?" *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/productivity>. Web, Accessed 12 Mar 2021.

"What Makes Time Tick, or Has The Industrial Revolution Really Made Clocks Go Faster?"

Art to Zoo. Smithsonian. Apr 1991. [http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/](http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/lesson_plans/time/ATZ_Time_Apr1991.pdf)

[educators/lesson_plans/time/ATZ_Time_Apr1991.pdf](http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators/lesson_plans/time/ATZ_Time_Apr1991.pdf). Web, Accessed 10 Feb 2021.

"Why Is Productivity Important?" *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. [https://www.bls.gov/k12/](https://www.bls.gov/k12/productivity-101/content/why-is-productivity-important/home.htm)

[productivity-101/content/why-is-productivity-important/home.htm](https://www.bls.gov/k12/productivity-101/content/why-is-productivity-important/home.htm). Web, Accessed 12 Mar 2021.