

# TUNNELVISION

## The Death of the Internet (And Our Autonomous Cognition)

Leanne Scorcia | October 2021



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**The web you are looking  
for cannot be found.**

## An Autopsy Report, If You Will

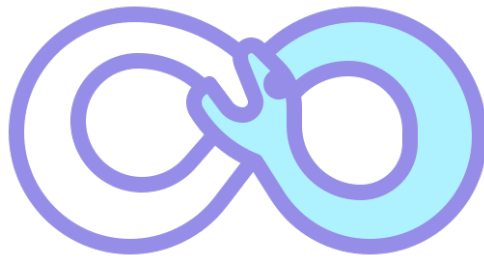
The internet you used to know is gone. “new number, who dis” would be an appropriate metaphoric phrase. Recall with me a time not too far in human history’s past. Thoughtful blogs, celebrity gossip, and cat pictures used to reign king within the abstract netscape of the web. GeoCities, the first web creation service available to the general public, walked and died so websites and services like WordPress could run. AOL’s AIM was a revolutionary, mind-blowing means of instant messaging (but, believe it or not, was not the first at the time). MySpace was the original Facebook, but with more personalization—and less intrusion.

All of these things (and so much more) have either been left to rot in the new era’s wake, or have been adulterated by the need to be “hot” and relevant. MySpace may have been one of the earlier forms of social media, but it’s almost juvenile in comparison to its modern-day descendants. Social media came along and infected both us and its Internet host and has since mutated into a thing of dependency. By [harnessing the power of neurology](#), programmers and developers have begun coding applications in a manner that elicits specific responses from our brains. As such, our interactions with these applications has begun to slowly, but surely, rewire our brains. We have become addicted to the “now”; obsessed with concepts like shareability; cynical in our engagement with information. We devour content as ceaselessly as the Internet and technology devour themselves, having become nothing more than a mindless garbage disposal that, on occasion, will spit something back out.

Gone are the days of perusing eBaum’s World, GeoCities, and LiveJournal and hop-skipping across the World Wide Web. We now live our lives in the neatly packaged universes of our social media apps, in the control of the “Big Viral” companies who crafted them. Amongst the neatly packaged multiverse of social media sits our autonomy, our cognition. Dichotomously complacent and insatiable, our minds devour the contents of this new wave as we’re swept up in all things shiny and new. The development of the smartphone defined an era but has since marked a downturn in our independence. We’ve become attached — dependent, reliant — to these sophisticated slabs of wire and glass, so much so that we can barely imagine our lives without them. We’ve developed a sort of blissful, absentminded tunnel vision, focusing intently on what’s presented to us — and little else. The Matrix was revolutionary when it released in 1999. Now, it’s not too foreign a concept.

## The Internet Ate Itself...

The spirit of the Internet is a wily beast — forever changing, adapting, and consuming itself to then molt into its newest iteration. Technology, much like the people who develop it, must be adaptable and flexible if it is to survive in this cutthroat world. Subsequently, the tools and technology that we use to peruse the Internet, too, embody this model of fluidity. Browsers and apps alike come out with “soft” updates and patches about every month or so. Windows and iOS operating systems continue to iterate each year into standards that abide by the notion of “bigger and better” (although “bigger” has become synonymous with “less is more”). It’s safe to say that unless you have an artifact of some sort from years past, each new revolution around the sun has brought tidings of updated technology — and nothing remains the same.



As such, this iterative cycle has influenced the journey of the Internet since its initial prototype, ARPANET, in the 1960s. Node-to-node communication gave rise to Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol (TCP/IP), which went on to become the foundation of the World Wide Web. GeoCities’ free and easily accessible creation of static HTML pages marked a revolutionary milestone of the public Internet in the 1990s. And yet, swiftly and surely, these static pages blossomed and died as newfangled concepts such as blogs and wikis became the new “hot” item. Catalogs became digitized and paved the way for ecommerce and online retail. “Microblogging” became the new fad with Twitter’s release in 2006. By the end of the year prior, Facebook (which supplanted MySpace) hit 6 million users. And thus came the dawn of social media.

### Virality & Content as Necessities

With the rise of social media came the explosion of the concept of “virality”. Noted as the tendency of a piece of media to become widely circulated, [2013](#) marked the beginning of what has since come next — a “clickbait wave”, of sorts. As sites like [Upworthy](#) began implementing forms of A/B testing in order to exploit this concept (after the formula to producing viral content and stories had been solidified in the same year), they began mass-publishing articles with provocative, yet carefully identified, click-inducing headlines. Without clicks and views, articles and webpages mean nothing. They exist in the void, forever waiting to be seen, be acknowledged. Given its definition, the cornerstone of virality’s power is content sharing. The concept of “sharing” something with friends and family — a formerly passionate, meaningful gesture which evoked feelings of closeness and camaraderie — has become reduced to two taps or clicks as a means to spread hot takes (read: irrelevant information) far and wide. Without a single afterthought, we like and share content and notions we agree with, allowing us to hop on the proverbial bandwagon. We push said content onto everyone we know as a means of proclaiming ownership over it — an “I found it first” mentality, which eventually led to the godforsaken concept of reposting. Imagery, visuals, and information have since been duplicated out of this desperate necessity to be recognized, which now comes in the form of mindless likes, retweets, and clicks, along with the occasional shallow comment — if we’re so inclined to actively leave one. Virality, by the way, isn’t necessarily a new concept, as it was first implemented by the *New York Sun*, the first “penny press” newspaper. Its intention was to present and sell more “mass interest” features for a fraction of the cost, which would amass large readership. Sound familiar?

Our perpetual engagement with this “mass interest” content has fostered an environment in which we’ve allowed a dependency upon these social media platforms to grow and thrive. Humans are social creatures, so a need to be recognized and validated is in our nature. Unfortunately, social media and “infotainment” sites have since been carefully re-engineered to feed this primal desire in as addictive a means possible — *and we eat it right up.*

We eagerly allow the perusing of the Internet and social media to eat all our time, and we in turn train ourselves to be dependent on it — looking desperately towards it as a means to stave off boredom of any kind.



Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the like have all employed a “**reverse chronological**” timeline in order to push us the latest “news” as soon as it happens.



Sites like BuzzFeed and Reddit offer **wild headlines** and **endless scrolling** through content, where minutes of browsing can (and usually does, very quickly) turn into hours.



YouTube **recommendations** and **autoplay** can lead us on a long journey into the most bizarre corners of the platform.

Virality’s explosion in 2013 and the implementation of “reverse chron” have caused us not only to become obsessed with our phones and notifications, but with the present, as well. Our brainwashed fear of missing out (commonly known as FOMO) and the need to be in the know drive us to check our devices constantly — an action which has become so habitual and deeply rooted into our identities that tending to your device and responding to the call of your own name are on [similarly equal levels of importance](#). We are so helplessly concerned with our phones that just hearing them go off is enough to make us anxious, which is the result of a learned response that now causes our brains to release cortisol. Only tending to our devices can calm this anxiety — a cycle of problem-resolution that’s simultaneously caused and remedied by our smartphones.

Similarly, the apps we use to stave off FOMO have a similar effect on us. Associate professor and social media professional Jennifer Grygiel describes the relatively new implementation of stories on Instagram as “reality TV starring your friends” (Newport, 2019, p.232). As if we didn’t already have our fingers on the pulse of current events with these individuals, we now have to watch their Stories to keep up with the absolute, in-the-moment latest. This is a ploy for “Big Social” (I feel this is appropriate, no?) to get users to generate *even more* content; content which we will, like clockwork, consume. Stories also provide yet another stage to perform on, allowing us to paint perfect pictures of our pseudo-perfect lives — or perform a myriad of other shallow, meaningless actions. Content generated is content consumed, regardless of quality. With this consumption comes a void that can only be filled with *more content*. While we spend hours upon hours perusing through this informative (note: not necessarily meaningful) content, watching and/or participating in these tiny, innumerable performances, programmers and devs have [designed social apps](#) to generate notifications in bursts, which are crafted in a manner that causes our brains to generate dopamine. We’re “persuaded” by this neurological response to then use these apps for longer (or come back to them more and more often) as a result. Our need to be validated is acknowledged via bursts of likes and views, which in turn gets us to interact more to gain further recognition. Are you sensing a pattern here? Tech insiders call it “brain hacking”, and it’s very, *very* real.



### Working

7hr 30min [ 31.25% ]



### Sleeping

7hr 00min [ 29.17% ]



### Using the Internet

6hr 54min [ 28.75% ]



### Using Social Media

2hr 25min [ 10.07% ]



### Other

0hr 11min [ 0.76% ]

“Using the Internet” and “Using Social Media” hour/minute source: Digital 2021: Global Overview Report  
<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report>

As I mentioned earlier, “reverse chron” has caused us to develop a fixation with the present. This timeline notification methodology keeps us in the know by pushing us the latest “news” and updates from anyone and everyone. What’s viral, what’s hot, what’s current — these are the factors that social media has deemed important, and this has warped our perception considerably. New supersedes old as anything from five minutes ago quickly falls off the confines of your 6-inch screen. Immediacy and up-to-the-second are the new criteria for relevancy and credibility, further enforced by the dismissal of old content from your immediate view. Shareability has come to denote importance ever since the need to be viral or engaged with became the end-all, be-all. Content is only important if it generates revenue and engagement, and said content needs to be as up to date as possible — fact-checking, credibility, and validity be damned. This obsession with the immediate has caused us to become complacent with the mentality of “present-mindedness”, damning anything “old” to the confines of our forgotten memory. This is the reality of the “attention economy” we now find ourselves in.

Shareability and relevancy are now defined on the basis of relatability and outrage, and both act as functions of engagement — effectively splitting the digital population into two hiveminds. Actual relevance, credibility, and even truth itself have been tossed to the wind in favor of virality, engagement, clicks, rankings, and revenue. Sharing a common border with outrage, cynicism has crept its way to the forefronts of our minds as we engage with these fleeting, volatile trends. We thumb through content, skimming over it for its *relevance, relatability, and shareability*. We scrounge through characters, strings, words, sentences for the one useful or relevant morsel of information. We exhale through our noses when something pleases us for a brief moment, and we home in on the “Like” or “Retweet” button before swiftly moving on. We become dismayed at the slightest inconvenience, or if something takes longer than three seconds to load. We are never satisfied, forever scrolling and swiping and tapping as we continue feeding the Great Content Machine that so thoughtfully spits out uniquely curated content.

“

*Human beings evolved to gossip,  
preen, manipulate, and ostracize.*

— Jonathan Haidt & Tobias Rose-Stockwell, 2019

”

## Social Media Killed the Blog (and the External Web Along With It)

The Internet used to be a collection of information sources (i.e., blogs, catalogs, search engines). Now, it's turned into a form of entertainment. We've become so dependent on the output of the Great Content Machine that, like I mentioned earlier, we can't even be bothered to wait three seconds for a webpage to load. If that's not bad enough, allow me to offer insight into a post that offers [guidelines on social media post length](#) for Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and more. Scattered about this guideline are description words like "punchy", "entice", "lure", and "short". The character counts (yes, spaces are included!) supplied for each platform share a similar notion, as the recommendations sit neatly with the range of 80 – 150 characters amongst all platforms.

So, clearly, we can't even be bothered to read through the content of pages (or posts!) if it takes too much of our time. Video lengths mimic those same notions of being short and punchy, as the recommended standard for Facebook is two minutes and 60 seconds for Twitter. Keep it short, or kiss those sweet, sweet engagement metrics goodbye.

Keeping content short and often times frequently posted is a standard of microblogging, which has since supplanted actual blogging. Gone are the days where individuals like Hossein Derakhshan carefully crafted engaging and insightful blog posts, which received thoughtful comments from his dedicated fans — and even views from those who may not have necessarily agreed with him. He mentions in a [post on Medium](#) that in 2008 blogs were "the best place to find alternative thoughts, news and analysis". Twitter and Facebook are the new kings in this era, and the filter bubbles they tend to create only root us deeper in the stances we've taken. When was the last time you actively sought out content from an individual you disagreed with? Acknowledged a view or standpoint that differed from your own? I'll gander not recently. (If not, good — I'm proud of you for proving me wrong!) Brief, short, and often utterly mindless, posts on Twitter don't necessarily aim to create an environment of thoughtful analysis or insightful purviews. This environment is further degraded by the debilitating need to be first in reporting news, Twitter included. News that's served rapidly can be incorrect, making it nearly impossible to keep your finger on the pulse of current events if you're looking for value and validity (and, at that point, what makes this information other than perhaps hot gossip?). What I'm getting at here is that social media (microblogging) has become a form of mindless entertainment deeply rooted in principles like novelty and popularity — and has killed its long-form counterpart that relied on thoughtfulness and ingenuity (blogging).

With this decrease in post and content length has come the increase of visuals. Virtual text is now aided by icons, images, GIFs, and/or animations — anything and everything flashy and appealing to the eye in order to make the written word more appealing. We've gone from a text-based model filled with blogs and magazines to something more akin to picture and coloring books. *Look at these images! Color in the lines!* It's almost insulting if you boil it down to that — being commanded and pulled like valueless cattle. We've shifted from active engagement to passive engagement, which can now be performed neatly within a single application. Sort of *exactly* like coloring within the lines. Our attention is herded into singular envelopes, and we've become restricted to the outlines of these platforms. Videos and links can all be viewed from within any social media app, forcing any engagement with the external Internet to become nativized. Taking this nativizing even further, companies and corporations have begun focusing heavily on "native ads", which are ads that are stylized to appear as if they were content within a site or app. Everything is about visuals and "aesthetics", and at the heart of this lies companies' need for you to engage with their app — *and their app, only*. Your usage of a specific app is how these companies generate their revenue. You know how time equals money? Well, it's *your* time that's generating *their* money. Ponder than the next time you double-tap some flashy, eye-catching image on Instagram.



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This is what an 80-character snippet looks like, if you'd like visual reference.

9:00 AM - Oct 17, 2021



22



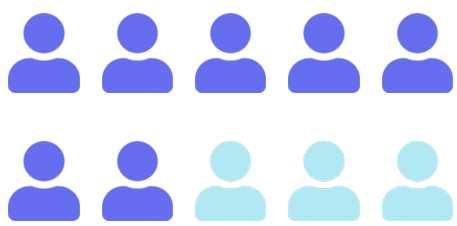
See Leanne Scorgia's other ...



Sitting obediently within the confines of Twitter posts and Instagram photos has also impacted the greater web. So has this obsession with present-mindedness and the need to perform. As we sift through content generated by friends, family, acquaintances, and influencers, barely anything leads us astray from the platforms on which they stand. This is by design, as I mentioned. App developers and corporations want you to remain within their app only, so link sharing has been restricted to one per post. The Internet is a vast, sprawling landscape, filled with content outside of Facebook, LinkedIn, and the like. But you wouldn't truly know it nowadays. Most of the links included in content posts serve to publicize some article, some achievement, some something or other that's intended to get you to engage with whoever posted it. It's essentially a bridge to continue your journey through the same content tunnel. No longer do we peruse the infinitude of knowledge the Internet has to offer — especially not with the godforsaken SEO algorithms serving us *only* the content with the highest rankings. Individuals such as myself with external portfolios or websites have to scrounge and beg for someone — *anyone* — to pay attention to them. But if no one's reading them, if no one's clicking the link in my Instagram bio or my tweet, then what good are they? In essence, these pages external to the clique of social media and its influence are left to die.

### “Amen Corners”, Civil Outrage, and the Loss of Rights

What else has been left to die is the notion of civil discourse. Relatability and outrage are the two warring forces in the digitalscape, and there is often little room left for respectful debate. Recent years have shown that there are indeed two hiveminds inhabiting the Internet, both of which follow the “with us or against us” mentality. Oftentimes this “against us” mentality leads to the disrespect of opposing individuals, which includes alienation and ostracization — or, more radically, [racism and xenophobia](#). Filter bubbles expand as social media feeds us ideas that we already agree with, and the false sense of confidence that online anonymity provides can lead us to vehemently attack anyone who thinks otherwise. Unfortunate as it was (and still is), this was a huge issue during the 2016 election, as well as during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Another result of these two incidents was (is; it's still happening...) the spread of dis- and misinformation.



“ Today around seven-in-ten Americans use social media to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information and entertain themselves. ”

“Social Media Fact Sheet”. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 7, 2021)  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>

The difference between disinformation and misinformation, it's important to note, is that *disinformation* is the spread of false information with the ill intent of misleading an audience. *Misinformation* is false information that's spread *regardless* of the intent to mislead. Nevertheless, both were utilized, and both occurred. The 2016 election and Russia's meddling in “fake news” on Facebook are not the first instances of misinformation, and they certainly haven't been the last. Clickbait is a terrific example of misinformation and misleading content, exemplified by [an article previously published by Upworthy](#) who's headline made it sound as though doctors were injecting HIV into a cancer patient in an attempt to treat her. Outrageous, emotion-provoking headlines seem to be part of the solidified formula for viral content, which is why things like this get spread around so quickly. Further to this point, misinformation can and is quickly spread around the Internet as a result of confirmation bias and filter bubbles, allowing for the concentration and thriving of tendencies like racism and xenophobia — exemplified by the early response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its racist labeling as the “China virus” (amongst other outcomes).

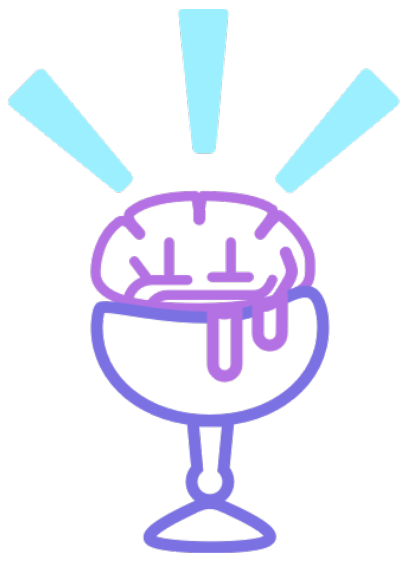
With all this clickbait, misinformation, and “news” that circulates around social media and the Internet, the decrease in content length and increase in visuals doesn’t mean that we’re necessarily reading less. If anything, it can be argued that we’re reading *more*, given how much content we consume on the regular. However, we’re no longer engaging with it on a deep and meaningful level. We may be reading, but we’re not reading *well* — and we’re not reading to understand. We’re reading to be informed; to be entertained — and that’s about it. If you think you’re “engaging” with the mind-numbing #LOL Tweet of the day, allow me to counter that mindset with a simple concept: [“Anything easily digested is reading for information”](#) (Farnam Street). What’s worse is that we *can’t* even engage with anything we read anymore due to the misinformation and general lack of truth and credibility in incentivized media today. Fact-checking and validity have been cast aside as media stations and/or individuals attempt to be the first to report breaking news. Luke O’Neil has admitted in his article [“The Year We Broke the Internet”](#) that he himself has also made contributions to the collection of clickbait articles that haven’t been fact-checked, stating that the “ubiquity of suspect stories provides cover for us all”. I keep harping about how rampant misinformation is nowadays, and there’s a reason. Is it not our right, as human beings, to be told the truth? To hold others accountable? Or are we truly just inhabitants of a cave, blissfully ignorant of our own subjugation to the lies and falsehoods the shadows teach us? What a pitiful existence, if I do say so myself.

What has resulted from this vice-versa relationship of invalidity, misinformation, and lack of fact-checking can most accurately be summed up by the apropos Silicon Valley saying: “Garbage in, garbage out”. Individuals who engage in “online life” ingest garbage content, and spew garbage content in response. We allow the digital serpent to complete its figure eight over and over, coaxing it along as we repeat this garbage in, garbage out cycle. As such, it’s as though we’ve also *lost our right to read*. We’ve lost our right to the truth, to credibility, to valid information. Our attention is so fragmented amongst the plethora of stimuli lurking at the tips of our fingers and the corners of our eyes that we are no longer allowed to focus for extended periods of time on any given thing — even if we were committed to searching for the truth. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram display a banner at the top of your screen to let you know when new things are posted. Apps like Outlook, Slack, Wrike, and Messages all have badge notifications that tally the items you have pending review. We are constantly forced to pay attention to this, that, and the other thing, that uninterrupted stretches of reading seem more like a lofty dreamscape than a concrete reality. Our ability to read — and I mean *really* read; understand; analyze — is at stake, sure, but the less often we read, the more our ability weakens. Imagine needing to *actually* read through a Terms & Conditions agreement? Most, if not all, of our brains would explode. It’s all jargon and legalese, but, better yet... *who reads the fine print, anyway?*





## ...And Our Autonomy Has Become Dessert



Speaking of fine print, I'm sure you'd be pretty mad to find out what the unwritten terms and conditions are for joining sites like Twitter and Facebook. (TikTok is a silent nightmare in and of itself, but that's cause for a separate dissertation entirely.) These companies have a blatant disregard for privacy, as they actively sell our data to interested parties. The concept of author/ownership is laughable as people repost things from memes, to news and articles, to copyrighted artwork, all without punishment or acknowledgment. They peddle monopoly on the grounds that competition will only interfere with the greater good: the goal of connecting anyone and everyone around the globe. Big Viral and Big Social push their agendas on us one talking point at a time, and we nod "yes" to death as we silently plead to just be left alone with our content.

There's also fine print associated with the community and culture surrounding the digitalscape:



FOMO and its conditioning of our brains to release cortisol in response to the need to check notifications are part of the unwritten contract signed when you purchase a smartphone.



The burst of dopamine associated with an influx of notifications also doubles as a shot of egomania, which further feeds our obsession with these social media apps — and with our own content and engagement metrics.



We must adhere to the addictive, yet generic layout of the "reverse chron" timeline and dashboard, which pushes us further into a state of "present-mindedness" while numbing us to the concepts of conformity and uniformity.

In our procurement of connection and the ability to "live in the moment" (*remember when "YOLO" was popular?*), we have simultaneously traded in traditions such as conversation and genuine connection. Twitter, Snapchat, and WhatsApp have become the new forms of communication — quick, fragmented strings of messages are now sent in rapid succession in place of the verbal exchange of ideas. We maintain surface-level conversations in favor of entertainment and the sentiment of "OMG LOL" instead of developing deep, meaningful relationships that allow us to connect to others on a personal level. We exchange acknowledgement and entertainment with a meaningless gesture denoted by the concept of "follow for follow" — *I'll follow your account if you follow mine.*

This exchange of conversation for connection has also caused cultural and traditional artifacts to become obsolete as they have become digitized, abstracted, and have since [dematerialized](#). Physical items like badges, keys, photographs, to address books, maps, and tickets (and so, so much more) have been lost to time as apps have now replaced just about each and every one. Need to hail a cab? Just order an Uber or a Lyft with the tap of a finger. Need to ask directions? Don't even think about asking a living, breathing *stranger* in the vicinity— just consult your applicable Maps app. Even the act of watching television or a sports game with friends cannot be enjoyed purely for what it is — you know at least *one* person is going to have their smartphone out as they claim to multitask, splitting their attention needlessly between their current social activity and an isolating, self-fulfilling act of checking the likes on a recent post or perusing through a Reddit thread. Our sacrifice for connection resulted in us signing our rights to independence, freedom, and — in some cases — mental presence away.

“

*To live is the rarest thing in the world.  
Most people exist, that is all.*

— Oscar Wilde, 1891

”

The initial goal of social media may have been to connect people, but there was always an emphasis on curating your profile to suit you as an individual. You can no longer customize the HTML and CSS code which bring to life your profile to make it uniquely yours (god speed, Myspace; you served us well), but people were encouraged to post curated content of their lives. That's the whole point — to share some insider “sneak peek” into your own little world for all to see. And yet, we're simultaneously stripped of this individuality as we're forced to abide by the uniform layouts of our profiles. Circular avatar, bolded name, subsequent handle. All on a clean, sleek, minimalistic (bland) slate. You can make the argument that everyone's timeline or dashboard is unique to them, but I raise you this point: the algorithm is the same for all of us and serves us all with the same end result: curated content that *it* has determined we would like to see. We no longer need to actively search for enticing things a la sites like StumbleUpon and Bored Panda — it's served right to us automatically. And in this exchange for efficiency, we've lost part of our identities amongst the conformity. We've gained so much with this explosion of technology, and yet, lost so much.

## Breaking the Vicious Habitual Cycle (Vengeance!)

Well, vengeance is a bit extreme. I berated you with how we as a society have allowed the Internet and social media — as well as the tech companies behind them — to take the reins on our autonomy and individuality. I did this in the hopes of rallying you towards seeking a solution. Come, for now we are on the same page. Just because the great, wily serpent of the Internet we once knew has since eaten itself and has begun to feast on our attention, that doesn't mean we need to exact revenge upon it. No; to fight fire with fire is insensible and only leads to greater destruction. Allow me to instead offer some suggestions that undermine the authority of the alluring Internet and its social media cohorts. (I've even marked them as checkboxes so you can check them off mentally, if you'd like.)

### Starter Tips & Resources

- Data Detox Kit:** Berlin-based Tactical Tech has compiled a list of tips, tricks, and steps you can take and implement in order to regain control of your online life.
- Center for Humane Technology:** Founded by former Google product manager Tristan Harris, this venture provides toolkits and resources for individuals who are looking to educate themselves, improve their wellbeing, and remedy their relationship with technology.
- “Quit Social Media”:** An informative chapter of Cal Newport's *Deep Work* (2016) that deals with methodologies for maximizing the benefits provided by social media and the Internet and choosing your resources (mainly social media apps) effectively— while not fully eliminating either entity from your life.
- “Join the Attention Resistance”:** A guide-like chapter in Cal Newport's *Digital Minimalism* (2019) that offers advice for regaining your autonomy over the Internet and social media via the implementation of minimalistic practices.
- Time Keeping & Project Management Apps:** Being mindful of the time you allot to personal and professional tasks — and tracking those tasks via project management apps like Trello, Asana, Wrike, etc. — can help keep you organized and on track for completing goals.

While Cal Newport's suggestion to “quit” social media (without necessarily quitting it completely, although that is his ultimate suggestion and intention) seems like a cure-all, it's necessary to acknowledge social media's beneficial impacts on society. I've done a lot of negating and berating of social media, but I am aware of the beneficial side of the same coin. While predominantly used to entertain, social media can be a place to organize, collectivize, and collaborate, and also to create safe, welcoming spaces for those who might otherwise not have such an environment. The “Indivisible” movement in 2017 that essentially saved the Affordable Care Act (ACA, Obamacare) was organized through online tools, Facebook being amongst the arsenal. The Black Lives Matter movement gained national awareness via Twitter hashtags and a viral photo posted by the Miami Heat basketball team. An egalitarian platform, social media allows for all to have a voice — not just the likes of professional reporters, journalists, or even “verified” celebrities — and this is especially important for things like advocacy and activism. Social media [provides many benefits... if utilized correctly](#).

Even on a less intense scale, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram can provide exposure for freelancers who are looking for commission work, or for individuals and small brands who are looking to expand their audience. Social media is just another digital tool in our online arsenal, and we need to start treating it as such.

...And if you're looking to do so, Cal Newport has quite a lot of tips on how to go about it. "Quit Social Media" is a chapter dedicated to the implementation and application of strict parameters on whether or not you should continue to use social media (or the Internet), divided into three parts:

01 | Apply the Law of the Vital Few to Your Internet Habits

02 | Apply the Law of the Vital Few to Your Internet Habits

03 | Apply the Law of the Vital Few to Your Internet Habits

These concepts ask you to reevaluate usage of social media based on whether or not it provides overwhelming positive benefits, improves or impacts your life after quitting for 30 days, or whether or not it's used to purely entertain yourself. Newport equates the method of choosing a social media tool to the choosing of a trade tool, notably a hay baler. The takeaway here is that you should be as picky, scrutinous, and attentive in your selection of a social media app as a tool as someone who selects trade tools (like a farmer). Make complex decisions that carefully evaluate not only every aspect of the tool, but its impact on your time and resources (or even finances), and come to a conclusion on whether or not the positives/pros outweigh the negatives/cons. One of the most important notions from this chapter is something I find important enough to quote [almost] in its entirety, and it has to do with accepting the fact that social media (and the Internet) embodies duality and dichotomy.

“ [Accept] that these tools are not inherently evil, and that some of them might be quite vital to your success and happiness, *but at the same time* also [accept] that the threshold for allowing a site regular access to your time and attention (not to mention personal data) should be much more stringent, and that most people should therefore be using many fewer such tools. ”

— Cal Newport, 2016

A supplement to these practices comes in Newport's later novel, *Digital Minimalism*, which provides the following five practices for reassessing social media's importance in your life.

01

Delete Social Media From Your Phone

02

Turn Your Devices Into Single-Purpose Computers

03

Use Social Media Like a Professional

04

Embrace Slow Media

05

Dumb Down Your Smartphone

It's important to note that the ultimate goal between these two chapters is to evaluate whether or not *you personally* should disengage with or delete a social media app from your phone (and your life). While Newport notes in his own way that deleting social media and refraining from the Internet is best, I'm not asking you to quit and never go back. I don't want you to stop using your phone, or the Internet for that matter. *I want you to stop letting it use you.* Newport's suggestion of "deleting social media from your phone" is just as "*misguiding*" as his "Quit Social Media" chapter in his prior book (while intentional, I'm sure!); all this practice is asking you to do is remove social media from your phone. *Not from your life.* The key here is that by removing it from your phone, you'll be less inclined to check your feeds, especially while on the go (and during the down time associated with it). Similarly, turning your device into a single-purpose machine achieves the same end — it eliminates distraction by actively and intentionally blocking it.

Using social media like a professional entails a similar principle, as it relies on the usage of external tools that will allow you to filter the "noise" from your social feeds (such as TweetDeck to employ what's known as "thresholding" — or the practice of setting up strict parameters to filter out unwanted information and posts). Aforementioned social media professional Jennifer Grygiel uses TweetDeck to employ thresholding on their social media accounts, but also only follows accounts that are geared towards their interests. This keeps their timeline brief and easily digestible, while cutting down on the time spent scrolling through posts. The Center for Humane Technology takes this concept one step further and encourages you to follow individuals who may have a differing perspective, so that we may relearn the human art of civil debate and engagement. To this I say follow people who "inspire" you, for better or for worse — and not people who persuade you. (Remember those freelancers I mentioned? Show them — and their art — some love!)

The act of embracing slow media asks that you stop perusing your daily routine of websites from which you receive your "immediate" news, and asks that you instead dedicate time during the week to read quality content from trusted and respected sources. Dumbing down your smartphone is, incidentally, the highest request that Newport makes, which relies on either trading in your smartphone for a "dumb" phone (remember those old dinosaur flip phones? The good ol' "Nokia Brick™"? ) or pledging to the [Light Phone Kickstarter](#) in hopes of acquiring a "phone away from phone".

“

*I was less stressed about not knowing new things;  
I felt that I still existed despite not having shared  
documentary evidence of said existence on the Internet.*

— Thurston, 2013, as cited in Newport, 2016, p. 181

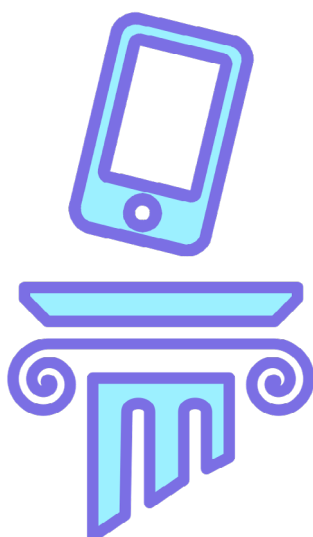
”

Amongst all these ideas is the notion of respecting your time. Keeping track of the activities you perform throughout the day (or allowing Apple and Android to do it for you on your mobile device via [Screen Time](#) and [Digital Wellbeing](#), amongst other apps. Hey, Apple and Google are already tracking your data, right? May as well ask them to share your own with you, at this point.) can bring insight to time spent or time wasted and allows you to gain a better understanding of your daily routine. Shifts can also be employed in your daily routine via time management apps, or even programs primarily used for project management (who ever said project management had to be for professional use, only?). Nothing beats pen and paper, but visual apps like Trello and intensive apps like Asana and Wrike can help you get a handle on both personal and professional goals, tasks, and activities. Cal Newport suggests managing your time by setting up scheduled internet blocks, or times where you *allow* yourself throughout the day to use the Internet — work usage included. “Shower thoughts” aren’t just for Internet shareability, as Newport also suggests employing productive meditation — the concept of thinking critically on anything you select whilst physically occupied.

## From One Addict to Another

While I can’t speak as a seasoned researcher with data to back the following tips up, I can at least offer some insight into things that I’ve employed in my own life that I feel have served me well — even if it’s to create some peace of mind.

- Be mindful of personal information (and stop being so willing to give it away via sign-ups and such)
- Mute accounts that litter your Twitter timeline with ads or garbage content, and use apps or add-ons that either disallow, lower, or completely block ads (such as Apollo for Reddit or browser plugins like uBlock and AdGuard)
- Create folders and set up inbox rules to filter out spam, automated messages, and the like so you can focus on important communications
- Allow space for catharsis to occur, then allow yourself to move on (i.e., allowing yourself access to a dedicated “echo chamber” to potentially tweet into the void, then let the thought go)
- “Ask App Not to Track” on your Apple devices
- Pay the extra money to have your service provider filter and silence spam calls (if feasible)



## THE INCREDIBLE DIGITAL APPARATUS

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## Picking Up (and Unplugging) the Pieces

Our attention has become fragmented, our cognition shattered, and the Internet devoured. I'm keen on driving home these points because it's always darkest before the dawn. I've presented a plethora of options for us as a whole to utilize in order to regain our control over the Internet, social media, and ourselves. But I'm sure you're still skeptical — and rightfully so. Will deleting social media completely make you inherently happier? Not necessarily. Will rebelling against the Great Content Machine make you a better person? Again, not necessarily. But there's no denying that by loosening the tethers the Internet has to our brains, we will slowly (but surely) regain control of our lives, our autonomy, and our cognition, and improve our wellbeing.

Detoxing yourself through app purges and notification dismissal will allow you to shift your focus to things *you* deem important as opposed to what's presented as current, perceived as “urgent”, and otherwise distracting. I mentioned that completely deleting social media won't necessarily make for an inherently happier you. Removing these apps, however, can certainly improve your mental wellbeing if you determine that they are having a negative impact on your life. Being [constantly connected](#) to your professional life can lead to burnout, turnover, and even personal conflicts, and “[collaborative overload](#)” is no better for your mental health and productivity. Being able to set up boundaries by muting or snoozing notifications during downtime can decrease anxiety and will allow you to make that much needed distinction between “work time” and “me time”. If feasible, muting notifications during scheduled chunks in the work day can also lead to increased productivity. Distractions come in all colors, shapes, and forms (even if they may be well-intentioned); being able to block them out when it counts can allow you to focus for longer periods and accomplish more than you normally would in an environment peppered with Slack messages, email notifications, and project updates.

During your “me time”, allow yourself to be bored. Take time to unplug from both technology and social media in order to recharge your own batteries. Work hard while you're working, but otherwise leave “work” for the “workday”. Retraining your brain to stop seeking distractions in the form of social media feeds, YouTube videos, and infotainment sites will allow your mental performance and concentration to flourish. The brain is as much an organ as it is a “mental muscle” — and like any other muscle, it needs to be worked, trained, and strengthened. By engaging in fleeting, fast-paced entertainment, we weaken our capacity for concentration and what Cal Newport refers to as “deep work” (in his book by the same title that I've referenced heavily).

An overarching benefit of unplugging from the Internet and filtering out social media is an increase in our ability to perform the aforementioned “deep work”. What deep work is, essentially, is the ability to perform concentrated work without distraction. An alternate form of tunnel vision, this is the visual of someone locking themselves in a room to do work. Deep work requires you to focus intensively on the task(s) at hand for extended periods of time, and nothing else. If we rewire and nurture our brains to perform deep work and minimize our dependence on distraction, we’ll find that our productivity and ability to focus will increase. Working effectively will no longer appear as lofty a goal. The more we deliberately practice the art of focusing, the easier focusing will become. Furthermore, by dissolving the bonds distraction has on our minds, we’ll regain our own autonomy and independence.

Mitigating distractions, curbing mindless entertainment, and developing the capacity to perform deep, intensive work for long sprints are the essential pillars in rebuilding our cognition. Shifting your focus away from being present-minded and easily distracted will allow you (will allow *all of us*) to take back control of your life and energy. Instead of entertaining yourself with fads, trends, and that which is fleeting, you’ll regain the mental fortitude to focus on what matters to you. By fighting back against the Great Content Machine and the wily beast of the Internet, you’ll regain the ability to enjoy a rich, fulfilled life unadulterated by the shallow mindset instantiated by these forces.

## Your Autonomy is Calling You; Will You Answer?

The Internet has you (has me, has *us all*) comfortably constricted in its grip. We scroll through our phones, absentminded and cynical as we scrounge through clickbait and trash takes in order to find something briefly amusing. Social media entraps us within its borders, acting as omnipotent, inward-gazing wardens that coax us back inside with the promise of incessant content and the warning implications of FOMO. We’ve traded our independence and individuality for the sake of convenience and shallow connection, all while generating data into a feedback loop that aims to further diminish our cognition. Content is algorithmically selected for us. Shareability denotes importance. “Currentness” equates to relevance. Very little of our day-to-day technological interactions require active thinking on our parts, and this has led us down a road of complacency, distractibility, and absentmindedness. With every like, comment, and subscribe, we enable this downward spiral to continue — and we silently allow the corporations behind our favorite social media apps to become wealthier, more influential, and better at ensnaring our attention.

*It’s time to stop.* It’s time to stop letting social media, the Internet, and Big Viral use us. These tools, these things, were developed *by us for us*. Isn’t it about time we started recognizing them for what they are? *Tools.* Nothing more, nothing less.

So hear me. Turn your notifications off. Put your phone down. Shut down the desktop. *Breathe. Relax.* Now, do you hear that? Yeah, *that*: the little voice in your head that’s begging you to “please god, *do something with yourself*”. *Listen to it. That’s your cognition* — our *cognition*, our *autonomy* — *calling*. What are we going to do about it? Will we answer?

## Widen Your Tunnel Vision

The Internet may have devoured itself, creating a breeding ground for the parasitic network of social media to thrive in, but this doesn’t need to be the end of the story. For every tunnel there is a beginning and an end, both marked by the loss and return of the light. Let our resolution — our light at the end of this tunnel [vision] — be that we’ll no longer allow the Internet and social media to ruin what we have, to ruin all that we are and all we’ve become. Let’s recraft these forces into their original forms: tools. An outlet. Not a space to waste away in a la some deranged, lifeless Margaritaville.

Let’s not allow ourselves to rot in these spaces of present-mindedness and mindless brainwashing. *Let’s stop existing. Let’s start living.*

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