

Warding off the disease of ‘constant partial attention’

By **Jim Cornelius**
News Editor

You’re in the middle of a project, fully absorbed. Your phone beeps with that special tone you chose for text notifications. Without a second’s thought, you drop what you’re doing and reach for that ever-present device, concentration broken, project derailed.

The music’s great at the concert, a band you’ve loved for years. But you can’t just be in the moment and experience the music — you have to Snapchat it to your friends, over and over and over again.

We’ve all seen this; most all of us have done this or something like it. Frequently. We’re in the grip of a compulsion that’s no less powerful than a drug addiction. And, while it’s not anything like as pervasively destructive as drug addiction, it’s not good for us — and we know it.

The Guardian newspaper recently ran an article on the addictive and distractive power of our smart phones and social media. The piece quotes technology writer Nir

Eyal:

“The technologies we use have turned into compulsions, if not full-fledged addictions,” Eyal writes. “It’s the impulse to check a message notification. It’s the pull to visit YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter for just a few minutes, only to find yourself still tapping and scrolling an hour later.” None of this is an accident, he writes. It is all “just as their designers intended.”

Any maker of any product wants to make you crave it. As my co-workers can attest, I can stand in one spot and eat a whole bag of peanut butter cups. Even as I’m enjoying that sublime combination of peanut butter and chocolate, I feel disgusted with myself, knowing full well I’m going to feel slightly sick and loggy for the rest of the afternoon because of it. I feel exactly the same way when I realize that I’ve just lost an hour to mindless scrolling through Facebook.

It’s not that I don’t value social media and the connectivity it provides. As a student of history, it’s helped me discover new information, led to new paths of inquiry, and I

love sharing discoveries with like-minded folks, some of whom I know only through “virtual” interaction. That’s good stuff. I try really hard to stay in that lane. But the pull of the mindless scroll-and-click is strong as a rip current.

When the people who invented this stuff start unplugging, it’s probably a sign that there’s a problem. As *The Guardian* notes, Justin Rosenstein, who invented the Facebook “Like” button, is trying to curtail his own smartphone and social media use.

There is growing concern that as well as addicting users, technology is contributing toward so-called “continuous partial attention,” severely limiting people’s ability to focus, and possibly lowering IQ. One recent study showed that the mere presence of smartphones damages cognitive capacity — even when the device is turned off.

“Everyone is distracted,” Rosenstein says. “All of the time.”

It is revealing that many of these younger technologists

are weaning themselves off their own products, sending their children to elite Silicon Valley schools where iPhones, iPads and even laptops are banned. They appear to be abiding by a Biggie Smalls lyric from their own youth about the perils of dealing crack cocaine: never get high on your own supply.

It was Rosenstein’s colleague, Leah Pearlman, then a product manager at Facebook and on the team that created the Facebook “like,” who announced the feature in a 2009 blogpost. Now 35 and an illustrator, Pearlman confirmed via email that she, too, has grown disaffected with Facebook “likes” and other addictive feedback loops. She has installed a web browser plugin to eradicate her Facebook news feed, and hired a social media manager to monitor her Facebook page so that she doesn’t have to.

Since I’m hardly in a position to hire a social media manager, I guess I’m on my own in trying to master the technology instead of letting it master me.

I try to set the phone aside

entirely when I go home, and resist the impulse to grab it instantaneously, mindlessly, when a text notification or a Facebook message pings. It can bide a while. I turn the thing off when I’m in the woods. I’ve revived an old habit, one that I established in my childhood: I carry a book with me everywhere. That way, when I have a down “waiting for a train” moment, I have something more productive to do than whip out the phone and start scrolling. It’s amazing how much reading I can do in those odd moments I’ve been spending swept up in the social media current. And I’m filling my head and heart with something I actually want there, instead of a lot of useless noise, angst and negativity that I don’t want but can’t seem to avoid.

The thought that I’m living in a state of self-inflicted “continuous partial attention” horrifies me — especially when I can feel it happening. I am assembling an arsenal of techniques to ward it off. If you’ve got a trick or two, I’d love to hear them. Message me.



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