

Podcast: "Your Digital Life During Lockdown"

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UL: And I'm Ulrik Lyngs, from the Department of Computer Science.

MF: For the last couple of years, we've been thinking together about how Oxford students and others can get the best from their digital devices—phones and laptops—without getting endlessly distracted by them: surfing, scrolling, losing focus, and losing time. The 'Reducing Digital Distraction' workshops we piloted in a number of Oxford colleges last year, have helped lots of students to take control of their digital lives, and we'd love to welcome you to one of these in the coming academic year.

UL: Meanwhile, we're offering this podcast to help you think about your relationship with your digital devices during lockdown. We think this is important, because the pandemic has led to dramatic changes in *how* we use digital devices, as well as a massive increase in the total *time* we spend engaging with them.

MF: In response to the pandemic, many of us abandoned any effort to manage time spent on-line. From the beginning, we needed news to help us orient and respond to the crisis, and our digital devices supplied us with this through news sites and on social media. Then during lockdown, we needed to connect with each other and experimented with a whole variety of new ways to do this on-line. We were flooded with helpful suggestions to replace real activities that were now off-limits, with digital substitutes: going on virtual hikes and virtual museum visits, attending virtual gigs. We didn't have to worry that time spent on-line would displace other, more valuable, activities because—let's be honest-- in the initial weeks of lockdown we weren't getting much done anyway. We were just pleased to have help getting through the day. Some of us used devices to get through the night, too.

UL: To begin with, this wasn't a problem. Our devices played a crucial role helping us get through a chaotic and challenging time. (It's hard to imagine what this time would be like without our digital devices!) But now, as we try to put new routines in place and get back to something like our pre-pandemic productivity levels, we may be due for a re-think.

In this podcast, we'll talk about 3 reasons why we might need this re-think, and then suggest a 3-step approach you can take to solve these problems and re-establish a healthy, positive relationship to your digital devices.

Reason number 1 to re-think is that time spent on digital devices can drive up our anxiety levels. It's essential to be informed, but spending more time than we need to on news sites and social media leads to hearing unsettling messages again and again through the day. This is a problem even if we're getting sober, accurate information, but is an even bigger problem if the information is alarmist.

What's more, the very act of repeatedly *checking* for new information can create anxiety. This hypervigilant behaviour maintains us in crisis mode, making it hard to relax and give our attention to anything else.

Reason number 2 is that digital devices can make it too easy to escape from uncomfortable emotional states. Often the ‘trigger’ that gets us to pick up the phone or flip open the laptop is a feeling. There isn’t anything we really want to DO with the phone or laptop, we just want to get away from the feeling. Let’s say you’re bored. You open Instagram, you scroll. You close it. Two seconds later, you open Instagram again, because you’re bored. This isn’t a new thing: long before coronavirus, most of us used devices this way now and then. But at the moment, there are a lot of difficult feelings around: not just boredom, but loneliness, anxiety, fear, and sadness. As a result, the temptation to use devices to numb out and to ‘park’ ourselves someplace that feels safer, becomes even greater.

This is a problem because if we check out in response to boredom, we’re less likely to find meaningful, nourishing projects to alleviate the boredom. If we check out in response to anxiety about academic work, we’re less likely to settle down and do the work, even though doing the work is the only thing that will really bring work-related anxiety down.

We can also feel quite empty, and lose substantial stretches of time.

That brings us to the third reason for rethinking how we use our digital devices, which is that they can be fatal to our capacity to ‘time-box’ and sustain focus on academic work. Sustaining focus is a particular challenge now, as so many of us are working, socialising and relaxing all in the same physical space and with much less structure. Even when we do sit down intending to work, we can struggle to get and keep ourselves in the right mental place for work, and can drift instead onto Facebook or Instagram. The billion-dollar tech companies behind these and other services we use have designed them to hijack our attention at every opportunity and keep it for as long as possible. Think of psychological tricks like clickbait articles, infinitely scrolling newsfeeds, or the semi-random ping of bright red notifications, all designed to lure you in.

This is why so many people find that they have long stretches of ‘gray time’: not working productively but not relaxing enjoyably either.

UL: So, how can you get back in control? We suggest 3 steps: First, reconnect with your real-world needs and priorities; second, implement low-tech, common-sense strategies; and third, target any remaining areas of difficulty with more sophisticated technology-enabled solutions for blocking or removing distractions. These technology-enabled solutions have been an important focus of my academic research, and I’m personally excited to share them with you in a moment.

MF: Let’s look closer at each of these steps. Step 1, **reconnecting with your real-world needs and priorities**, might be best done with old-fashioned paper and a pen in your hand. Ask yourself: what are the aspects of life that I am not sufficiently on top of right now? What could I, or should I be doing to keep myself feeling and functioning well, and to maintain my progress with academic and other life projects that are important to me? Getting in touch with your feelings is an important part of this process, because feelings are often the most reliable guide to what we need.

You may find that just re-connecting with your needs and priorities in this way is enough to reduce the pull of your digital devices and allow you to get on with things. But if picking up devices has become an entrenched habit, you should proceed to step two, which is to implement some low-tech, common sense strategies. Here's a list of 6 for you to consider. Listen, and perhaps take note of the ones that feel relevant to you:

- One. Make sure you have other things you can do with your hands: knitting, origami, a Rubik's cube, a jigsaw puzzle. This makes it less likely that you will reach automatically for your phone or laptop in response to boredom or discomfort.
- Two. Create some digital-free zones in your living space—perhaps, wherever you sit to eat. If you get those you live with to agree to this, you may notice a surprising improvement in the quality of your interactions.
- Three. Turn off as many notifications as possible—not just the audible ones, but the visible ones too.
- Four. Put your phone to bed at night. Make a sleeping bag for your phone, with an opening at the bottom for the charging cable. If you have the luxury of more than one room, put your phone in a different room when you sleep. If you use your phone as an alarm, buy an alarm clock.
- Five. Delete the apps you may have had some fun with in recent weeks, but know deep down aren't good for you.
- Six. Consider whether there are any simple rules or principles you would like to adopt—e.g., limiting the maximum number of hours you will play video games, deciding at the outset how many episodes of a series you will watch, and so on. If you do make new rules, write them down and stick them someplace prominent.

UL: Interventions like these can be helpful, but they take willpower, and how good we are at exerting willpower depends a lot on how we are feeling – it's much more difficult when we are tired. Also, these interventions are somewhat crude as they mostly involve getting you *away* from devices, or specific apps, altogether. They aren't as helpful if your goal is to keep using them, but to use them only when, and how, you want to.

For a tailored solution that doesn't rely so heavily on willpower, try step 3: hack your smartphone and laptop. Or in other words, customise them so they support you to do what YOU want, without seducing you into doing what the tech companies want.

At the Reducing Digital Distraction Workshop, we introduce participants to 17 ways to customise their devices—all carefully curated based on their likely relevance for students. Here are the top 3. As you listen, please don't worry about remembering the detail. You'll find it all in the note accompanying this podcast.

Number 1: Reclaim your time by removing the newsfeed from Facebook, removing recommended videos from YouTube, or both

You may have to use Facebook to create events or get information from your colleges' common room groups, but find that you get distracted by the newsfeed.

An easy fix for this is to use an extension for your internet browser to simply remove the newsfeed.

Similarly, maybe you find YouTube really useful but often get sucked in by video recommendations and spend more time on there than you'd like. Again, a simple fix is to use a browser extension to remove recommended videos.

These are just two examples of how you can use browser extensions to keep just the parts of the web you need and get rid of the distracting bits.

To try this, search the web for the Chrome Web store or Firefox add-ons if you use Chrome or Firefox, or go to the Apple App Store if you use Safari. Then search for 'Facebook remove news feed' or 'YouTube remove recommended videos' and choose one of the options that come up.

Number 2: Use focus or blocking tools to support time-boxing for academic work

When you sit down with your laptop to do work, try thinking about what tools you need to complete your tasks. Then reduce your laptop's functionality to just what you need, so you don't have to waste energy trying to suppress the temptation to do other things.

You can do this either in a single block of time, or by planning ahead and setting up a schedule.

For example, imagine you sit down to prepare a presentation. For this task, you need Powerpoint, Wikipedia, and your note-taking program. For the next two hours, you decide to transform your laptop into a tool where only this functionality is available. You use a blocking app to do this, and it makes it easy for you to stay focused.

Or, imagine you plan further ahead and sit down to reflect on what a typical work week looks like. You think carefully about what you want to do at which times. Maybe you decide you only want to go to news sites between 5 and 8pm, and Twitter you only want to use one day a week, perhaps Wednesdays. Then you set up a schedule in your blocking app so that news sites and Twitter just isn't available to you at other times than these.

To do this, on laptop we recommend the programs 'Micromanager' and 'Cold Turkey Blocker' – you can find these by searching the web.

On iPhones, you could use the 'Downtime' feature, which you can find under 'Screen Time' in the settings menu.

On Android phones, try the app 'AppBlock' which you can find on the Play Store.

Number 3: Protect your beginning and end of day

What you do in the morning is important to get you off in a good direction. Similarly, what you do in the evening is important to getting the rest you need.

So take a moment to think about how you use devices at these times and whether it's aligned with what you want.

Maybe you'd like to read books or write a diary in the evening but find that other things on your laptop always seem to be more tempting. How about simply blocking most functionality on your laptop after 9pm, so you don't have to rely on willpower?

Maybe you like using Instagram, just not as the first thing in the morning. How about making it unavailable from 11pm to 8am?

To do this, on your laptop try the program Cold Turkey Blocker we mentioned earlier. On Android phones, try the 'Wind Down' feature, which you can find by going to Settings and scrolling to Digital Wellbeing. This lets you set an evening schedule where your phone automatically goes to grayscale and toggles on Do Not Disturb. On iPhones, try using the Downtime feature we mentioned above to block Instagram in the mornings. Or try going to the Clock app and set a Bedtime schedule.

MF: We hope you will try at least one of these things. You may find it whets your appetite for more of these easy but surprisingly empowering tricks. If so, you can learn more at one of our upcoming workshops. Or if you don't want to wait for a workshop, watch out for the Reducing Digital Distraction website which is coming later this summer!

We hope this podcast has given you some useful food for thought. We wish you well as you navigate the digital and other challenges of the pandemic.

For links and tips to implement what we've discussed, see the note accompanying this podcast. From both of us, thanks for listening!