

7 The Spotlight

At Netflix, we are competing for our customers' time, so our competitors include Snapchat, YouTube, sleep, etc.

Reed Hastings, CEO, Netflix

Bob Dylan said, "A man is a success if he gets up in the morning and gets to bed at night, and in between he does what he wants to do."¹ Sometimes our technologies help us do what we want to do. Other times they don't. When our technologies fail us in this regard, they undermine the "spotlight" of our attention. This produces *functional* distractions that direct us away from information or actions relevant to our immediate tasks or goals.

Functional distraction is what's commonly meant by the word "distraction" in day-to-day use. This is the sort of distraction that Huxley called the "mere casual waste products of psychophysiological activity."² Like when you sit down at a computer to fulfill all the plans you've made, to do all those very responsible and adult things you know at the back of your mind you absolutely *must* do, and yet you don't: instead, your unconscious mind outruns your conscious mind, and you find yourself, forty-five minutes later, having read articles about the global economic meltdown, having watched auto-playing YouTube videos about dogs who were running while sleeping, and having voyeured the life achievements of some astonishing percentage of people who are willing to publicly admit that they know you, however little it may actually be the case.

Functional distractions commonly come from notifications. Each day, the Android mobile operating system alone sends over *11 billion* notifications to its more than 1 billion users. We widely encounter notifications from systems such as email services, social networks, and mobile applications. For instance, "I was going to turn

on the kettle so I could make some tea, but then Candy Crush reminded me I haven't played in a few days." Another major source of notifications is person-to-person communication, as in instant messaging applications. Often, as in Google's Gmail system, notifications are colored red and placed in the upper-right corner of the user's vision in order to better grab their attention and maximize the persuasive effect. This effect relies on the human reaction to the color red,³ as well as the cleaning/grooming instinct,⁴ which often makes it hard to resist clicking on the notifications.

The effects of interruptions aren't limited to the amount of time we lose engaging with them directly. When a person is in a focus state and gets interrupted, it takes on average twenty-three minutes for them to regain their focus. In addition, experiencing a functional distraction in your environment can make it harder to return your attention to that same place in your environment later if something task-salient appears there.⁵ Also, functional distractions may direct your attention away not merely from perceptual information, but also from reflective information. For example, when an app notification or instant message from another person interrupts your focus or "flow," it may introduce information that crowds out other task-relevant information in your working memory.⁶ In other words, the persuasive designs of the attention economy compete not only against one another for your attention, but also against things in your inner environment as well. Furthermore, exposure to repeated notifications can create mental habits that train users to interrupt themselves, even in the absence of the technologies themselves.⁷ We tend to overlook the harms of functional distraction due to the bite-size nature of its influence. However, as the philosopher Matthew Crawford writes, "Distractibility might be regarded as the mental equivalent of obesity." From this perspective, individual functional distractions can be viewed as akin to individual potato chips.

Undermining the spotlight of attention can frustrate our political lives in several ways. One is by distracting us away from political

information and toward some nonpolitical type of information. This effect doesn't necessarily have to be consciously engineered. For instance, a news website might give me the option of viewing the latest update on my government's effort to reform tax policy, but it may place it on the page next to another article with a headline that's teasing some juicy piece of celebrity gossip – and whose photo is undoubtedly better at speaking to my automatic self and getting me to click.

At the same time, distraction away from political information *could* occur by design, for instance via the propagandizing efforts of a political party or some other interested actor. For example, the Chinese government has been known to censor information online that they deem objectionable by suppressing or removing it. However, their propaganda organization, commonly known as the “50 Cent Party,” has recently begun using a technique called “reverse censorship,” or “strategic distraction,” to drown out the offending information with a torrent of other social media content that directs people's attention away from the objectionable material. The Harvard researchers who carried out a study analyzing these efforts estimate that the Chinese government creates 448 million posts on social media per year as part of this strategic distraction.⁸ As researcher Margaret Roberts said in an interview, “the point isn't to get people to believe or care about the propaganda; it's to get them to pay less attention to stories the government wants to suppress.”⁹

A “strategic distraction” may also be used to change the focus of a political debate. Here it is hard to avoid discussion of US President Donald J. Trump's use of the Twitter microblogging platform. A major function of his Twitter use has been to deflect attention away from scandalous or embarrassing news stories that may reflect poorly on him. Similarly, in the 2016 US presidential election, he used his so-called “tweetstorms” to “take all of the air out of the room,” in other words, to gain the attention of television and radio news broadcasters and thereby capture as much of their finite airtime as possible, leaving little airtime for other candidates to capture. One study estimated

that eight months before the 2016 election, he had already captured almost \$2 billion worth of free or “earned” media coverage.¹⁰ In addition to this bulk approach, he also deployed highly targeted functional distraction. For example, consider his campaign’s voter suppression efforts, which used Facebook to send highly targeted messages to African Americans (techniques which, while outrageous, used fairly standard digital advertising methods).¹¹

Functional distraction can certainly be politically consequential, but it’s unlikely that an isolated instance of a compromised “spotlight” would pose the sort of fundamental risk to individual and collective will that we’re ultimately concerned with addressing here. To identify those deeper risks, it’s necessary to move quickly to the deeper types of distraction.

NOTES

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