

Taking a digital Sabbath

“Technology is hijacking our minds and society” — this is the [official introduction of the Centre for Humane Technology](#) (CHT), an initiative of “former tech insiders and CEOs” who have now realised there are grave problems with what they helped create. Tristan Harris, Google’s former Design Ethicist, Roger McNamee, who advised Mark Zuckerberg in the early days of Facebook, and Aza Raskin, who was formerly head of user experience at Mozilla, are among the drivers of this recent initiative.

Today, we have virtually fallen under the spell of the digital universe, and have been lured to “like,” “share,” and “follow” more, read and watch much more than we can digest, and provoke and outrage much more than we can handle, all the while believing these actions are perfectly natural. In that context, the CHT makes the important point that the most popular digital platforms — the Facebooks, Twitters, Instagrams, and Googles — are in a “zero-sum race for our finite attention.”

Social media and the slow extinction of rationality

That’s bad news for all of us, and here’s why: “Snapchat turns conversations into streaks, redefining how our children measure friendship.” Likewise, “Facebook segregates us into echo chambers, fragmenting our communities.” Also, “Instagram glorifies the picture-perfect life, eroding our self-worth.” Thus, it turns out, we might be trapped by a system that is being run with the help of “massive supercomputers”. They can do what it takes to keep us at it, relentless in the pursuit of their goals, delivering a personalised experience like never before, and giving us a high when others agree with us, notwithstanding the trolls.

How did it come to this? Maybe this is what happens when smart, ambitious people, backed by the wealth of the richest investors on earth, zero in on psychosocial problems that technology can apparently solve. Then they unleash their solution, for free, throughout the world.

No doubt, these technologies, including social media platforms, are beneficial in some respects. As a user, you have a smooth ride all the way. There are hardly any entry barriers to this magical world. The devices and the Apps are so beautifully designed that a preschooler could learn to handle them in no time. There are billions of applications and most are free. You can be anonymous. You can be yourself. You can say anything.

Until that fine day when you realise nothing in this world can be free, and that it has cost you something. Writer Douglas Rushkoff has been making this point for a while now, often succinctly, like when he said: “On Facebook we’re not the customers. We are the product.”

How do you deal with this? On its website, the CHT lists a slew of ideas to help us live the digital life more “intentionally” — like turning off notifications, except from people, and going grayscale, so as to not get lured by the shiny icons. Abstaining from this world may not be realistic for many, but how about a weekly break, a digital Sabbath of sorts? After all, it’s free.

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