

We're creating a culture of distraction

Joe Kraus/May 25, 2012

From: <http://joekraus.com/were-creating-a-culture-of-distraction>

A few weeks ago I gave this rough presentation on a topic called "SlowTech". I wanted to cover three things

- 1 We are creating and encouraging a culture of distraction where we are increasingly disconnected from the people and events around us and increasingly unable to engage in long-form thinking. People now feel anxious when their brains are unstimulated.
- 2 We are losing some very important things by doing this. We threaten the key ingredients behind creativity and insight by filling up all our "gap" time with stimulation. And we inhibit real human connection when we prioritize our phones over our the people right in front of us.

What can we do about it? Is this path inevitable or can balance be restored?

I want to talk three things tonight

1. As a culture, we've got a crisis of attention. We're becoming a distracted culture... one that is disconnected from one another. And I want to talk about what's causing it.
2. What are we losing - of ourselves, of our relationships to one another, of what in many ways, I would say, our humanity.
3. What can we do about it. If we all feel it, is there anything we can do to stop it. Or, is it out of our control.

Part 1. A crisis of attention

I want to ask people a simple question: are you happy with your relationship with your phone. Do you think it's a healthy one?

I don't think I have a healthy relationship with mine. I feel a constant need to pull it out - to check email, to text, to see if there is something interesting happening RIGHT NOW. It's constantly pulling on my

attention. Do you do this? I do.

If I let it, it easily fills up those gaps in my day—some gaps of boredom, some of solitude.

Look at how internet access has changed since smart phones came into being (and this data is a year old, so I'm certain it's even more in this direction). In the pre-smartphone era we accessed the internet roughly five times per day, in longer chunks. Today, with smartphones, we're accessing it 27 times a day.

The effect of all of this is that we're increasingly distracted. Less and less able to pay attention to anything for what used to be reasonable length of times.

The funny part about distraction is that it's a worsening condition. The more distracted we are, the more likely we are to get distracted.

Some people call switching our attention between things that vie for it "multi-tasking". Like were a computer with dual cores running two simultaneous processes.

Except that we're not. Numerous brain imaging studies have shown that what we call "multi-tasking" in humans, is not multi-tasking at all. Your brain is merely trying to rapidly switch it's attention between two tasks. Back and forth, as quickly as it can.

It's shown not only that we're dumber when we do this (an average of 10 IQ points dumber - that's the same as pulling an all-nighter.), but that we're also 40% less efficient at whatever it is we're doing.

But, my favorite part about multi-tasking is that it's proven that the more you do it, the worse you are at it. Check that out. It's one of the only things where the more you practice it, the worse you get at it.

The reason why that's the case is that when you practice distraction (which is what multi-tasking really is - paying attention to something that distracted you from what you were originally paying attention to), you're training your brain. You're training your brain to pay attention to

distracting things. The more you train your brain to pay attention to distractions, the more you get distracted and the less able you are to even focus for brief periods of time on the two or three things you were trying to get done in your 'multi-tasking' in the first place.

How's that for self-defeating.

So, what have I said so far?

1 all of us have a device in our pockets that is a very potent, addictive distractor

2 the more we train our brain to pay attention to this distractor, the more distracted we become.

So, why can't we look away? Why do most all of us seem to fall prey to these devices even as we know they're causing a real problem for us? Two reasons, I think.

The first is that we're perfectly mal-adapted, biologically speaking, to these devices. When our ancestors, the Geico guys, were sitting out on the savanna and the tree next to them rustled. The ones that didn't look over and see the lion coming to eat them are NOT our ancestors. The ones that did look, only to see it was a harmless bird, are. We're wired to pay attention to new stimulation.

The second reason is something casinos have known for a long time. To illustrate, let me ask you if you know what the most profitable part of a casino gaming floor is? Slot machines. Slot machines are extremely powerful earners because they employ a principle called "random payout". Turns out if you pull a handle and it pays out predictably, you very quickly figure it out and stop pulling. But, make the reward random and people have a very hard time stopping. Some pulls are nothing, some pulls give you a little, and occasionally, you get a jackpot.

Think about text messages or email alerts from your phone in this context. Some aren't important. Some are. And occasionally, something very urgent comes in. its random payout in your pocket.

The amazing part to me is that we all look around at each other and see ourselves, as adults, failing and then we give these devices to kids and

expect them to do better. Well, they don't. In fact, as parents of teenagers know, they fare far worse...

Do you know what the average # of text messages a 13-17 year old teenage girl sends and receives every month? The Average? 4000. That's one every six minutes that she's awake. Boys aren't much better at 3000. Think about that. You're interrupted once every 7 minutes.

What kind of culture is that creating? What kind of mind training is that doing?

I'd argue that what's happening is that we're becoming like the mal-formed weight lifter who trains only their upper body and has tiny little legs. **We're radically over-developing the parts of quick thinking, distractable brain and letting the long-form-thinking, creative, contemplative, solitude-seeking, thought-consolidating pieces of our brain atrophy by not using them.** And, to me, that's both sad and dangerous.

Part II – What are we losing as a result of our short attention span and easy distractability?

My favorite summary line on this whole topic comes from Sherry Turkle, an MIT professor who studies technology and society. "We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We expect more from technology and less from each other".

At the most basic level, we're losing manners. At the heart of manners is a consideration of others. An acknowledgement of each other.

How many times, guys, have you been barked at by your wife because instead of giving full attention to what she was saying, you were looking at your phone. What's the message that's getting sent? "There is something more important than you and it's not here in this room."

The second thing I think we're losing is creativity and insight. Think about your own examples when you felt at your most creative or your best performance. Maybe it was your best round of golf, maybe it was solving a

tricky computer science problem. Whatever it was, likely, you were LOST IN THE MOMENT, completely absorbed in what you were doing. It was long-form, not quick twitch. You were in the zone. Your attention was fixed, calm, present.

Once people experience the zone, most of us want to get back there. It's a feeling of peak performance, peak creativity, peak aliveness.

Where's the #1 reported place where people get insight? The shower. Why the shower? In the shower, there's not much else to do. We're relaxed. Our mind wanders but it's not constantly being bombarded with new information (at least until we can take our phones in the shower which I'm sure is being worked on...). The shower time is GAP time. Time for our minds to make subtle connections and insights. Creativity REQUIRES gap time.

Gaps used to happen all the time. Now they're disappearing. You're eating lunch with a friend and they excuse themselves to the restroom. A gap. Now, you pull out your phone **because being unstimulated makes you feel anxious**. Waiting time in a line at the bank? Used to be a gap. Now it's an opportunity to send an email or a text.

We didn't think gap time and "boredom" were valuable. Now that we're losing it, we get a sense of just how valuable it was.

Simply put, at the heart of **creativity, insight, imagination and humaneness is an ability to pay attention to ANYTHING - our ideas, our line of thinking, each other**. And that is what's most threatened.

So, hopefully, by this point I've convinced you of a few things

- 1 we've got a crisis of attention, mostly caused by these devices which are with us everywhere and it's going to get worse unless we become conscious about it.

- 2 there are real costs to allowing our attention and consciousness to be constantly fragmented - costs to our relationships and costs to society and creativity.

Part III – what can we do.

It would be so nice if I could just say that the solution is to stop using your devices. But that's got two problems.

- 1 these devices do have real value – they put information at our fingertips that no one could have ever dreamed of even 30 years ago
- 2 it would be like telling that over-developed upper-body bodybuilder to stop working out. Make your chest and back scrawny so that it's in balance with your legs...

No, I think the solution is to balance the **DISTRACTING** brain training you're doing every single day with training that strengthens long-form **ATTENTION**. We want to **OVERCOME OUR FEAR OF BOREDOM, OUR ANXIETY OF BEING UNSTIMULATED** recognize the value of gap time and not have anxiety about it.

In the workout analogy, we don't want to stop working out our upper body, we want to start working out our legs.
So how might we do those things?

One step, I think, is to take a weekly holiday from your devices. Take a break from distraction. I've started it. From sunup Sunday to when I put the kids to bed I do no phone, no email, no TV, no radio. Books are fine, but not on my kindle. I want to be open the possibility of gap time.
Here's what I've noticed.

- 1 it's hard. It's actually hard. Your mind craves constant information flow given what you've been feeding it. When you deny it, it feels a bit desperate for it.
- 2 **BUT** more interesting than my withdrawal symptoms, was the fact that when I did get back on line to do work, I could actually and notably pay attention better to what I was doing. I could concentrate better.

Besides taking a break from distraction, another step is to **ACTIVELY TRAIN** your long-form attention and mindfulness. For some that means

leaving the phone and going for a 15 minute walk. For others it means meditating. For others it means attending church or temple. Whatever form it takes, make it a DAILY practice of slowing down. Train that part of your brain.

Perhaps the most interesting or provocative approach to solving it, harkens back to that line at the end of the Microsoft commercial – ‘we need a phone to save us from our phones’. But, not in the way Microsoft is pitching it.

There is a small academic movement called SlowTech. The primary insight of the SlowTech folks is quite interesting. They note that the primary way we’ve used technology over the last 50 years has been in the workplace. And, as a result, its whole focus has been on creating productivity, efficiency and speed.

But, with smartphones, we aren’t looking at a work device, we’re looking at a lifestyle device. A device that is always with us, in our pockets. But, all the hardware, all the software, all the UI it has, carries with it 50 years of underlying assumptions – that the purpose of it’s existence is to make us more productive and more efficient.

The SlowTech folks ask the question – can we alter the purpose of lifestyle technologies to focus on alternative aims? Perhaps aims that are about making real connections with the people around us, fostering real understanding and deepening relationships with one another. Can our technology actually help us slow down and see each other as opposed to only transporting us and our attention away from each other?

I hope so.

Conclusion

Imagine the world 10 years from now. My third grader will be graduating high school. What does that world look like? I’d guess that it’s going to be more fast paced than ever. That people are going to be even more distracted, even more unable to pay attention to things for any length of time. Even less able to tolerate boredom. Even less able to pay attention to one another.

Now imagine your own child in stark contrast to that culture of distraction. Technically literate, but also balanced. A calmer presence. Not distracted. Not constantly seeking out mindless stimulation. An ability to make real human connection by not signaling that there might be something better on his smartphone to look at. An ability to pay attention to a problem for a long time.

I believe that the biggest gift we can impart on our kids is the ability to be mindful – to pay attention to the things and to the people that are actually around them. In 10 years, that's going to feel VERY VERY different than the norm.