

LESS FOR LENT

GIVE UP CAPITALISM FOR 40 DAYS



2. STIMULATION: BREAKING THE ADDICTION?

“This irresistible attraction to screens is leading people to feel as though they’re ceding more and more of their autonomy when it comes to deciding how they direct their attention. No one, of course, signed up for this loss of control. They downloaded the apps and set up accounts for good reasons, only to discover, with grim irony, that these services were beginning to undermine the very values that made them appealing in the first place: they joined Facebook to stay in touch with friends across the country, and then ended up unable to maintain an uninterrupted conversation with their friend across the table.” Cal Newport

Friends, thank you for taking part in LESS for LENT. You have chosen to participate in one of the most countercultural acts possible in our times: a refusal of the near-constant pressure to conform to the demands of capitalism.

The ways in which we use technology, and the impact it has on our daily lives, has changed drastically in recent years. Your attention has become a commodity, your data an asset to be extracted. Many of us notice this, are unhappy with it, and want to do something about it. This week, we’ll explore some ways to understand how this has happened, and suggest a few possible actions.

EVOLUTION & ATTENTION

Our bodyminds evolved in relationship with our ecology – gathering food, avoiding predators and threats, learning and adapting. Our brains, including the mesolimbic system responsible for ‘reward’ processing, became a finely tuned mechanism. Surviving the challenges of nature required us to be fully-integrated with our senses. Capitalism has always sought to tap into this well-balanced system in order to turn us from creators into consumers – first with advertising and ideology, and now also with an advanced set of techniques in order to ‘biohack’ us: to tap into our senses, neural responses and unconscious drives in order to get us hooked and reliant on a system of exponential growth and ever-increasing novelty. Our distraction behaviours are degrading our mental processes in ways that are leading to more depression and anxiety – and a loss of our sense of real connection to other people and our environment.

To look more closely at what's happening, we need to understand a little about brain chemistry. This is not to reduce human consciousness in all its complexity and mystery to just matter: rather, it's to empower us to understand the ways in which we are vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation – and find ways to resist this agenda.

Let's look at a key neurotransmitter that is involved in this. Dopamine sends us a 'reward message'. When we do something that feels good to us, dopamine sends a signal in our brain to keep seeking that reward, enabling the behaviour to become a habit. It's easy to see the important role this has played in our evolution: it helps us to make decisions necessary for our survival, such as seeking out food, sex and social acceptance. However, the rewards encouraged by dopamine are short-term. This can deprive the cortex – the 'thinking brain' – of the ability to make good long-term decisions in line with our values, as it primes us to seek out temporary rewards. This is why dopamine is known as the 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' molecule, the power of which is very familiar to addicts.

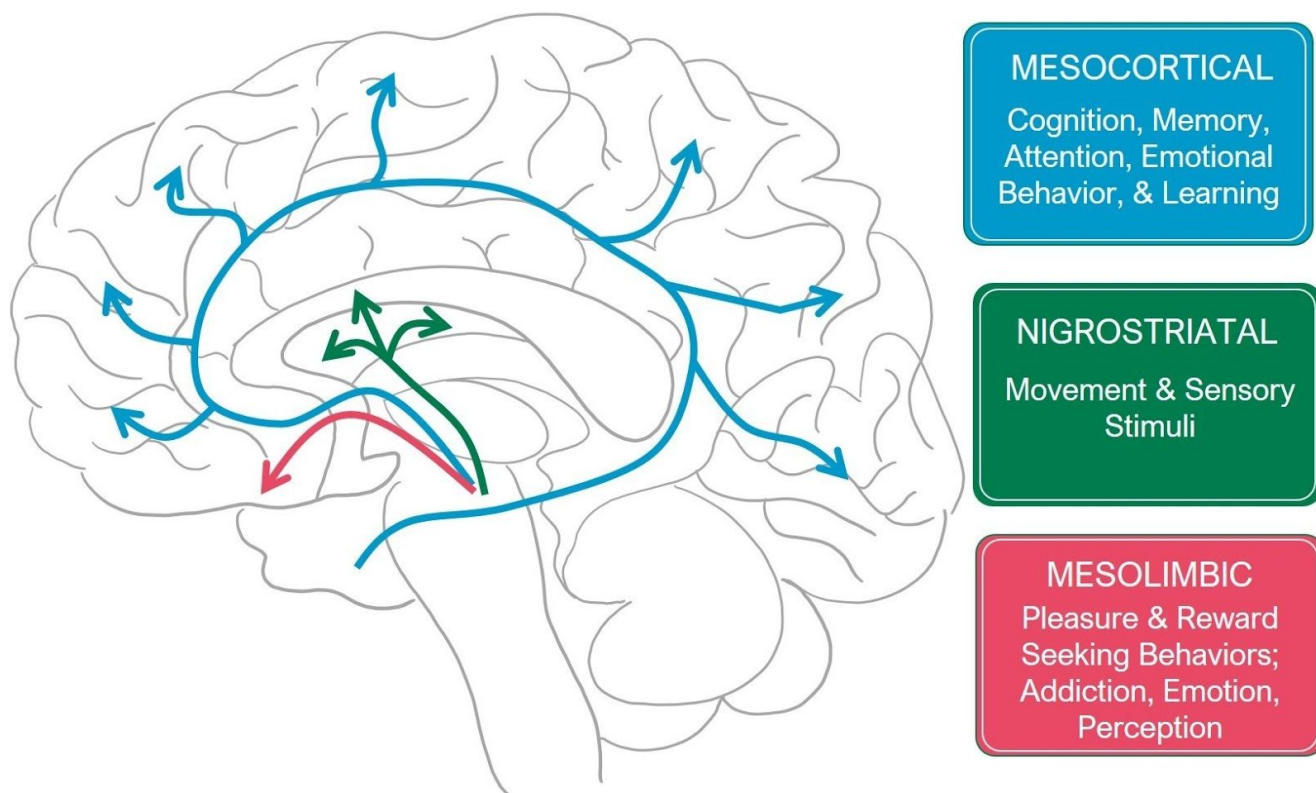


Image credit: Rebecca Clements.

Three dopamine pathways and their related cognitive processes. Most of your dopamine is generated deep in the midbrain, and it is released in many different areas across the brain. These areas are largely responsible for behaviors associated with learning, habit formation, and addiction.

Source: <http://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2018/dopamine-smartphones-battle-time/>

Capitalist technologists understand enough about how neurotransmitters affect us to design persuasive technology to hijack our awareness into 'compulsion loops'. This is done in several ways:

- **Encouraging constant attention to check what social validation you receive in the form of 'likes', notifications and responses**
- **Irregularly timed rewards that require constant checking of your device**
- **'Endlessly' scrolling newsfeeds that discourage disengagement**
- **Algorithms based on tracking your online behaviour that presents you with content and advertisements designed to most likely capture your attention and influence your consumer behaviour (including politically)**

We know this is happening, and that it is deliberate. Whistleblowers from the tech industry have come forward and said so – just as whistleblowers came forward from the tobacco industry a generation earlier. Tristan Harris, a former Google engineer, put it this way in his appearance on a current affairs TV show:

"Every time I check my phone, I'm playing the slot machine to see "What did I get?" There's a whole playbook of techniques that get used by [technology companies] to get you using the technology for as long as possible... It's not neutral. They want you to use it in particular ways and for long periods of time. Because that's how they make their money".

Theologian René Girard spoke of 'mimetic desire': we desire what others want, *because* they desire it. He wrote, "all desire is a desire for being". Capitalist technology captures this desire and monetises it. When we are scrolling on our social media feed, seeing the carefully curated and flattering photographs of the lives of others, we both desire to connect with them, desire what they have, and negatively compare our own circumstance to theirs. They, of course, are doing the same when they look at our carefully curated profile. We attend events and buy products because the algorithm brought them to our attention, through data analysis of what we, and others in our network have 'liked'. Social media has made us all into advertisers.



SLOW COMMUNICATION

Activity 1: Write a Letter

Sending or receiving a handwritten letter has become so rare as to be exceptional. There is a surprising joy in this form of communication – the intimacy of the marks made by the direct connection of the mind and body, the different quality of attention brought to both the writer and receiver, the unmistakable uniqueness of each person’s handwriting. We handle and keep these with the care we don’t take towards emails or comment threads. People have communicated in this way at least since cuneiform tablets were inscribed five thousand years ago. Who will bear witness to our social media activity in the future?

Handwrite a letter to someone and send it in the post.

Activity 2: Join the Attention Resistance

You should already be abstaining from non-essential use of digital devices if you’re taking part in LESS for LENT, but this can be challenging. Discover ways to rethink your relationship with your digital devices and your social media use. Work out how you can avoid the manipulations of your attention we identified earlier. You can create your own, but some initial suggestions could be:

- **Leave your phone at home regularly**
- **Turn off notifications**
- **Remove social media apps from your phone**
- **Spend time regularly in solitude**
- **Install apps that limit ‘compulsion loops’ and addictive behaviour (suggestions in the Center for Human Technology link below)**

Inevitably, technology is an important part of our lives. Using it in ways that serve the common good is challenging, and requires us to develop an understanding of what it actually is. Next week, we’ll look at how we can better use the tools available to us in ways that give life and increase our connection and humanity – and our ability to build alternatives to capitalism.

Optional resources for Week 2 of LESS for LENT

[I Used to Be a Human Being - Andrew Sullivan](#)

[Thinking Outside the Black Box - What the algorithms can’t see may be the most human thing about us - Douglas Rushkoff](#)

[Dopamine, Smartphones and You: A battle for your time - Trevor Haynes](#)

[Center for Humane Technology - tools to take control of your phone](#)