

# The Effects of Social Media on Attention

*Why businesses are are fighting a losing battle with staff attention and productivity*

*The need for constant connectivity and connection, produces increasingly short attention spans, a compromised ability to empathise, resulting in a shaky sense of real-world identity. Social media is creating an 'infantilizing' of the human mind. **Baroness Susan Greenfield***

## How you think is as important as what you think

In his 2011 book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman suggests the brain has two modes of thought:

**Fast Thinking:** responses are quick, impulsive and automatic. They help the brain save time and energy, while helping us to live life in the moment – this is called heuristic thought. It makes up most of our decisions on a day-to-day basis. Examples include logging on to your laptop, opening a Word document, acknowledging an email, re-ordering supplies or that reflexive “good thanks!” when someone asks you how you are.

**Slow Thinking:** thoughts are more measured and responses are considered, thoughtful and deliberate. They take more time and energy but benefit from detailed evaluation by the mind, so are more reliable. Our minds consider the bigger picture with potential consequences and so may overrule the temptation to give a fast response. Examples include managing conflict, negotiating a deal, choosing a new course of action and focussed reading.

Modern workplaces have a very modern problem that is beginning to impact on attention and productivity. The proportion of people accessing the internet on their mobile has increased from 20% almost a decade ago, to 72% in 2018.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, 97% of UK adults aged 16–54 owned a smartphone<sup>2</sup>. And in the UK, 71% of all measured time spent online was on smartphones<sup>3</sup>. People are reading an awful lot on their screens.

If we read anything on a screen, we tend to skim the content. If we have something long and important to read the best outcome would be to read it on paper, but more and more people have unfortunately been trained by their smartphones to rush and move on to the next job. But why?

Professor Maryanne Wolf is Director of the Centre for Dyslexia and Diverse Learners, at the University of California. Back in August 2018, she authored an article entitled, “Skim reading is the new normal. The effect on society is profound”. In it she explains that neuroscience indicates how our present, advanced reading brain became so by growing a new circuit over 6000 years. This circuit: enables the development of some of our most important intellectual and affective processes: internalized knowledge, analogical reasoning, and inference; perspective-taking and empathy; critical analysis and the generation of insight<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ofcom, A decade of digital dependency 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2018

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.finder.com/uk/mobile-internet-statistics>

<sup>3</sup> Ofcom, Online Nation, 2020 Report [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0027/196407/online-nation-2020-report.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0027/196407/online-nation-2020-report.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Maryanne Wolf Director of the Centre for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at the University of California, Los Angeles | [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/25/skim-reading-new-normal-maryanne-wolf](https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/25/skim-reading-new-normal-maryanne-wolf)

Professor Wolf reports that, research surfacing in many parts of the world now cautions that each of these essential “deep reading” processes may be under threat as we move into digital-based modes of reading... in this hinge moment between print and digital cultures, society needs to confront what is diminishing in the expert reading circuit <sup>5</sup>.

Professor Ziming Liu of San Jose State University has also conducted a series of studies and confirms that the “new norm” in reading is indeed skimming, with word-spotting and browsing through the text. Many readers now use an F or Z pattern when reading, in which they sample the first line and then word-spot through the rest of the text. The result is that people don’t have time to grasp complexity, understand another’s feelings, perceive beauty or create thoughts of their own <sup>6</sup>.

Meanwhile, Baroness Susan Greenfield, Professor of Synaptic Pharmacology at Oxford University, agrees that the need for constant connectivity and connection, produces increasingly short attention spans, a compromised ability to empathise, resulting in a shaky sense of real-world identity. She suggests that social media, is creating what she terms an ‘infantilizing’ of the human mind <sup>7</sup>.

Then, two French scientists Sylvain Charron and Etienne Koelich have discovered our brains struggle to process attention across more than two tasks at any given time. So, when you happily think you might be multitasking, what your brain is really doing is rapidly skipping from task to task, not focusing on anything for any significant time <sup>8</sup>.

And this is the root of problem. Social media platforms deliberately encourage us to make simple and impulsive decisions at speed, relying solely on immediate Fast Brain responses. Responding quickly, we can like or ignore; support or reject, share or skip. But the real and business worlds are full of complexity that require serious thought and multi-faceted skills. And of course, you hardly want important people in your business having their attention side-lined through powerful habits they are learning in their private lives.

The challenge for employers is that thinking styles are being shaped automatically through online activity and all your employees will have a degree of neuroplasticity that is changing the way their brains work<sup>9</sup>. This can affect concentration, empathy, and critical thought.

According to the Association of Psychological Science, paying attention doesn’t mean you’ll remember what you saw. “It’s commonly believed that you will remember specific details about the things you’re attending to, but our experiments show that this is not necessarily true.” <sup>10</sup>

Distraction is like an evolutionary default setting for humans, from the days when our environment posed many dangers and we had to constantly be alert in order to survive. As it is, our brains find prolonged concentration hard as we must not only decide what we are going to give our attention

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Professor Ziming Liu | Digital Reading: An Overview; Chinese Journal of Library and Information Science Vol. 5 No. 1, 2012, National Science Library, Chinese Academy of Sciences

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.susangreenfield.com/science/detail/screen-technologies>

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Shadbolt, Senior Director of Product Management at CNBC <https://matthewshadbolt.com>

<sup>9</sup> The Brain That Changes Itself – Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science by Psychiatrist Norman Doidge FRCPC

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/releases/paying-attention-doesnt-mean-youll-remember-what-you-saw.html>

to, but also prevent ourselves from our natural proclivity to daydream. Some psychologists believe we daydream for as much as 50% of the time. One of the first places daydreaming minds wander to is our smartphones and social media accounts. I can safely predict this because at the start of 2021, 4.33 billion people had social media accounts and levels of addiction are growing rapidly

## **The Lost Art of Concentration – How distraction affects IQ**

According to research by the UK communications regulator Ofcom in August 2018, the average British adult now checks their phones every 12 minutes during the waking day. As reported by Dr Glenn Wilson at London's Institute of Psychiatry, persistent interruptions and distractions at work have a profound effect. For example, those distracted by emails, phone calls (and social media) saw a 10-point fall in their IQ, twice that found in studies on the impact of smoking marijuana. Constant interruptions can have the same effect as the loss of a night's sleep. <sup>11</sup>

Linda Stone is a writer and consultant who coined the phrase "[continuous partial attention](#)". By adopting an always-on, anywhere, anytime, anyplace behaviour, we exist in a constant state of alertness that scans the world but never really gives our full attention to anything. In the short term, we adapt well to these demands, but in the long term the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol create a physiological hyper-alert state that is always scanning for stimuli, provoking a sense of addiction temporarily assuaged by checking in. <sup>12</sup>

Social Media Apps are selling your attention to their advertisers, and they use all kinds of tactics to keep people engaged. These tricks are borrowed straight from casinos where slot machines are widely considered to be some of the most addictive devices ever invented <sup>13</sup>.

In fact, the 'pull-to-refresh' feature of dragging the screen downwards on social media platforms is remarkably like pulling the lever on a slot machine and takes advantage of our fascination with unpredictability and our attraction to intermittent rewards. Sometimes there's something exciting and dopamine inducing waiting for us, sometimes there's not. But the unpredictability keeps us coming back.

In the same way casinos have no windows and no clocks, the feeds on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are bottomless, with no natural end points that might cause us to move on. If you're a business, do you know how much time your people are spending on social media instead of focussing on their work? And even if you knew, what could you do about it?

Fortunately, I've not only thoroughly researched the problem, but also the solution. There's a lot you can do to help your people and to protect them and your business from attention-stealing social media.

These are all solvable problems. To find out more I'd be delighted to arrange a Zoom call. I can be reached at [info@commcrunch.com](mailto:info@commcrunch.com)

---

<sup>11</sup> The lost art of concentration: being distracted in a digital world | Article: The Guardian October 2018 by Harriet Griffey, author of *The Art of Concentration*, published by Pan Macmillan

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> BBC Science Focus | Trapped - the secret ways social media is built to be addictive (and what you can do to fight back)