



ART OF HAPPINESS

IS SOCIAL MEDIA CRUSHING YOU?

Maybe it's time to **UNFOLLOW** Facebook and Twitter for a while *By Steven Leckart*

I drank the Kool-Aid, then chugged it—ad nauseam. I rocked Myspace after dabbling in Friendster. I posted pixelated selfies on Flickr, polished my résumé on LinkedIn, and joined Facebook when only college students were allowed. I had a blog, then a Tumblr. I once Yelped about my dentist. I joined Twitter in 2007, four years before the term *tweet* would be recognized by Merriam-Webster.

When I first embraced social media, I had a hunch that these digital platforms would change the world for the better—“bring the world closer together,” as

Facebook's mission statement boasts. The widespread sharing of information and political organizing powered the Arab Spring, fueled Obama's 2008 campaign, and birthed the Numa Numa Guy.

But there's a considerable trade-off when the majority of us are consuming this stuff on a personal super-computer that beeps and buzzes relentlessly, always refreshing and ready to auto-display more and more. I've experienced the vicious circle of mindlessly staring at my phone at all hours of the day, toggling between Twitter and Facebook, checking statuses, clicking links, and scrolling endless content. What once brought me joy was making me miserable.

My compulsion was merciless—and Silicon Valley actually wants it that way. Last year, many former employees from tech behemoths like Facebook and Google confessed that these products are architected to "hijack" our brains. Companies intentionally manipulate weaknesses in human psychology, sucking us in with "likes" and heart emojis, luring us back with frequent updates and reminders because they want us to spend as much time on their sites as possible. And we're complying in droves. A Bank of America study found that 71 percent of adults with a cell phone sleep with it by their bed. According to research firm Verto Analytics, the average teenager checks his or her phone 95 times a day, for a total of about nine hours—and that doesn't even count talking. (Nine hours is nearly enough time to watch the last two seasons of *Black Mirror*.) And a recent Nielsen study revealed that Americans between the ages of 35 and 49 spend almost seven hours a week on social media. Unless we pull the dopamine drip and remember that great creativity happens when you have time to have a sustained thought, we're all doomed.

"God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains," lamented Facebook's founding president, Sean Parker, late last year. The money-hungry dude played by Justin Timberlake in *The Social Network* has decided to call himself a "conscientious objector" of unscrupulous tech but is now worth \$2.6 billion—all because at one point he and his buddies couldn't have cared less about what they were doing to anyone's brain. Monopolizing our

Eskpertise



Three things you can always count on:

- 1) Death.
- 2) Taxes.
- 3) Clichés about death and taxes.

attention has made them all mountains of money. Remember last fall when Facebook admitted to posting more than 3,000 Russian-linked political ads? Not only did it spread fake news intended to mislead voters, but the \$500 billion company got paid for it.

I nuked my social accounts last year because I want to refocus my time and attention. But committing social seppuku isn't just about improving my own life. It's also about extending a figurative middle finger to every techie who is exploiting us for profit. Although I'm done checking my feeds, I haven't checked out. I subscribe to a few daily newspapers, which I read on my phone during the week and in print on Sundays. I stream podcasts and peruse monthly magazines. I've subscribed to a handful of email newsletters from those magazines. And you know what? I'm no less informed than when I was all up on Twitter and Facebook. I'm just not habitually refreshing for the latest news—or looking to a wide network of "friends" to point me to the good stuff. I let it come to my in-box and mailbox, where I decide to open everything at my leisure. ■

Kick the SMARTPHONE Habit

Don't want to quit social media completely? Here's how to unplug gently.

GO GRAY

Turn your phone's screen black and white in settings and it becomes a lot less interesting.

DOWNLOAD MOMENT

It's an iOS app (inthemoment.io) that monitors your screen time. You can even set limits.

KILL THE NOTIFICATIONS

Especially those for live videos, which induce FOMO.

PUT IT AWAY

Research shows that even the presence of a phone can make you less engaged.

Roll with it: Not-Another-Bill's handsome **backgammon set** is one you can keep rolled up in your weekender bag without thinking twice about it. Constructed from canvas, the board is screen-printed with a midcentury motif suggestive of classic sunburst clocks, and it comes complete with resin counters and dice. Bust it out when needed and you'll be the one who saved the delayed flight. \$56; store.moma.org