Can I get your attention!

By Jared Molko
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It's been six months since I left my comfy job at a giant tech company and I've had a decent amount of time to reflect. It was an experience for which I will always be grateful, however there are some telling truths about what matters most to a tech giant that I've needed to reconcile.

Jared Molko. Image by Gregor Rohrig

I had various roles at this company but my longest serving and most challenging role was to drive mobile monetisation for YouTube across the EMEA region.

I was based in Paris, which would have been a far more pleasant experience bar the Parisians to negotiate!

The primary metric - to maximise 'user watch time'. It wasn't about growing our user base. That we believed would take care of itself.

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The emphasis was on how we could optimise the experience on YouTube to take up more and more of *your* time. I didn't see a problem. It was just a metric and I was just doing my job.

But at some stage in your career, reflection kicks in and it dawned on me that Tristan Harris, former Google design ethicist, might just be right when he called out tech giants for knowingly manipulating human psychological vulnerabilities.

The only non-replenishable resource

It's hard to realise you are part of a much broader endemic sweeping across the globe, consuming the only non-replenishable resource we have at our disposal, our time.

It's harder to leave that familiar and comfy job to push back.

When I dissected my own screen time, it was blatant that at least half of that time was wasted scrolling down a rabbit hole. While traversing this digital 'la la land', my state of being started to resemble what I can only describe as a mildly induced coma.

I was distracted, sometimes absent.

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The evidence is unanimous, those that spend more time in front of screens are less happy. This could be for a variety of reasons; external validations, self- comparisons, lack of human connection or information overload.

But let's not throw the baby out with the recycled grey water just yet (#livingincapetown, #newnormal). Shame on you - that water is precious!

> *Taking time to "tune out" is necessary. Escapism allows us to cope with the demands and stresses of everyday life, and that's how it has been for centuries.*

But it's a strange kind of Stockholm Syndrome now. We carry a little "frenemy" in our pockets all the time. This frenemy can be our closest ally helping us navigate through the dangers and pitfalls of everyday life and at other times our most vehement temptress leading us into a swirl of self-doubt and discontent.

Oh you naughty little cell phone, how I love to loathe thee.

Calling for a digital purge isn't the solution here. The tech solutions, opportunities and services that come with connected devices have changed the way we experience and understand the world for the better, but there has to be a balance.

Maintaining balance allows us to lead a full life, this we know. To achieve this we need to assign importance and dedicate the proportionate amount of time and attention to the things we value most.

> *Time diminishes, which means our attention is precious. Tech companies understand this, but we as individuals so readily hand over this most rare commodity, often to our own detriment.*

So why am I writing about this now?

Firstly; for people to become more aware that these tech companies to which we give so much of our free time, don't necessarily have our best interest at heart.

Secondly, to start to value your attention and your time more.

Maybe on reflection right now you realise you're missing out on so many other opportunities.

I've started enjoying the sounds of city streets when I walk to work. I'm paying more attention to the people around me and enjoying just watching people interact with each other. In quiet moments I'm finding comfort in just being with my thoughts, how novel.

All these kind of activities are proven to bring about a greater sense of wellbeing, the opposite of which is true for screen-time and in particular social media.

As much as tech companies have a responsibility for the wellbeing of society, which they absolutely do, we as individuals have a responsibility to ourselves and to those around us. In doing so I'm trying to reduce my screen-time by switching off all notifications, removing addictive apps from my phone, putting my phone on aeroplane mode during "non-distraction" times of the day, I now have a bedside alarm so that my phone is no longer needed in the bedroom, what a difference that's made!

To end off, I'd love to hear more ideas on how people have safe guarded their most precious of commodities, I'm always looking out for nifty new tricks.

You only live once - #YOLO, so make it time well spent!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jared Molko is a digital marketer by trade, a psychologist by passion and delving into the intersection of both fields to bring about deeper more meaningful experiences online.

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