Digital Overload – doesn't have to make us Unhappy, Unhealthy OR Unwise…

Fifty five years ago, America reached a hazardous milestone: "peak tobacco." Men and women that year smoked more cigarettes than ever before recorded—523 billion of them. Only after four decades of slow decline – and millions of smoking-related deaths – did American culture reluctantly jettison tobacco as a symbol of social status.

Today we see another precipice on the horizon, with potentially catastrophic effects on human health. Historians and clinicians may someday call this moment "peak content." American adults now spend over 11 hours per day listening to, watching, reading or generally interacting with media—sometimes longer. That's more time than we spend eating and sleeping. From YouTube videos to viral tweets, we are ingesting a huge volume of media, and it has consequences.

Out of this cloud of mood-altering material emerges a new set of health challenges. One in five Americans have a mental health condition. Tens of millions suffer from mild to moderate anxiety and other mood disorders. But current research doesn't yet support a clear and causal link. More work is required to understand the complex relationship between media diets and depression–mood disorders are not a new phenomenon, even if suicide rates appear to be increasing. The technologies fueling our media consumption are outpacing the rate of scientific inquiry, making real or verifiable effects hard to understand and perhaps harder study appropriately.

But not all apps are created equal. Products like Instagram and Calm aren't identical—they're nearly antithetical, and shouldn't be summarily bucketed as "bad," just because they're digital products. Studies suggest that certain digital tools and assets have the potential not just to avoid harm, as we might hope, but to heal—to actually improve, rather than impair, behavioral health.

Now is the moment to pursue a three-pronged approach to all digital encounters: literacy, hygiene, and labeling. We have the opportunity of a lifetime to re-shape our still primitive and often unruly digital culture into a safer, healthier, more rewarding domain.

First, we need a greater effort at the national level to increase digital literacy—to cultivate and inculcate a basic understanding of different content types; to reveal their impacts on the brain; and to emphasize their benefits to emotional well-being. The public deserves a simpler, stronger understanding of digital nutrition, much like actual nutrition's famous food pyramid. People need to know not just what content is, but what content does. This kind of foundation is essential to an ongoing national conversation, which should continue at home, at school and in workplaces across the country.

At stake, and under discussion, should be more than just the known (and real) risks of indiscriminate phone use or screen time. We already know enough to worry, but it's now time to address the potential benefits of digital content, for people of every age.

Second, in parallel, it's important to formulate and circulate simple principles governing digital hygiene—when to use and when to resist digital content to protect sleep, enhance interpersonal relationships, combat loneliness or dislocation, and improve other biological imperatives, like breathing.

Literacy and hygiene aren't just valuable—they're the only realistic approach to countering simplistic calls for eliminating screen time altogether. "Abstention" may be attractive, but we know from prior experience that this approach, unaided by alternatives, will not work. It cannot work. Compulsions are too strong. Force of habit is too powerful. Just saying no is barely an option—it's certainly not an answer.

We believe that the same principles of measured skepticism and critical support apply to digital life and consumption of digital materials. Tech behemoths like Apple are already aiding the effort at reform by introducing screen-tracking tools, to monitor personal use. Google has even introduced Filters, and a new Downtime tool to schedule breaks from connected devices. Both are positive steps. So far, Facebook and Twitter have only taken initial, and wholly inadequate, measures to address toxic content. We deserve stronger tools to improve well-being and transform lives. Baby steps rarely leave footprints.

What else can be done? There is a broad consensus from decision makers in the tech sector, leaders in entertainment, policymakers, and academics that it's time for a transparent labeling system. Although the conversation is still in its earliest stages, there is optimism around the initiative to start categorizing various types of digital material.

Recent advances in neuroscience and psychology have increased our understanding of how neurotransmitters like dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin and GABA, strongly correlated with specific feelings, can be triggered by specific types of digital material. What that means is, we can begin to identify, list, reveal, and teach people what's actually in their videos and digital assets. We firmly believe that people deserve to know the possible effects of the content they consume, not just their theme, temperature, or portion size. If we desire and endeavor to achieve better behavioral health outcomes, people everywhere need a greater degree of transparency. And there's plenty of reason to believe in the promise of proper labeling, based on prior success in similar categories—from food labeling to TV ratings.

Throughout the past half century, a collision of private sector demand (or sensitivity) and public sector interest have encouraged the adoption of labeling systems across many categories of enterprise and consumption. Ratings, standards, and labels, tend to emerge only slowly at first, but quickly spread to the point of ubiquity. We know that people often do not want what's best for themselves. And so far, tech companies have proven disappointingly unwilling to do what's best for people. But government intervention should only ever prove the last resort for issues richly and urgently warranting resolution by, and for, the private sector.

Drawing from at least three prior examples of success at scale—in tobacco education, food literacy, and letter-based ratings for movies and television—we believe that the prospects for improving behavioral health through a combination of greater literacy, improved labeling, and public awareness aided by certifications, are promising. They provide hope, but not a panacea. History shows that strong systems should be driven to the center of common practice by citizens demanding and deserving of better outcomes for themselves, for their children, for their peers, and for their aging parents. We all deserve to lead healthier, happier lives—and need a class of content that accelerates our path toward that future.

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Our Digital Lives don't need to Make us Unhappy, Unhealthy and Unwise

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