

The Secret Scheme of Screens

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Andrew McDiarmid:

Greetings. I'm Andrew McDiarmid, your host today on Mind Matters News. Our obsession today with screens is often unintentionally taking us to places we regret. We use these windows into the world for hours every day, often unaware how intentional content creators and app designers are in shaping our decisions and forming harmful habits. Thankfully, we can begin anytime to go from unintentional with our screen use to intentional, flipping that imbalance back into our favor, reclaiming our thought lives, and living out our potential to positively impact people and the world around us.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Here to talk about that with us today is Doug Smith, a popular speaker, mentor, and author of the book [Un]Intentional: How Screens Secretly Shape Your Desires and How You Can Break Free. Doug offers an insider's perspective on the impact of technology, informed by over two decades of web programming experience. Doug, welcome.

Doug Smith:

Thank you so much, Andrew. It's so great to be with you today.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, it's great to speak with you. Well, your book [Un]Intentional was first published in late 2018, and you put out an updated edition last year, in 2021. So it's coming right as we're going through the COVID-19 pandemic, hopefully the endemic stages of it. Lives are being upended and tech trends are changing, as we've seen. A lot of us are doing some soul searching these last few years, thinking about different ways to live our lives. So it's a great time to release a book that helps us reverse some of these harmful screen habits we may have gotten lulled into. Can you tell us, first of all, how you decided to write [Un]Intentional and what the writing journey was like?

Doug Smith:

Yeah. Thank you. It's so true, Andrew, all of that that you said. We are living in a very unusual time, and the pandemic didn't bring out the best of us with our technology, as I think we've seen. But yeah, just a quick background. I'm a Christian, a husband, a dad to four grown daughters, and a lifelong software engineer. I've been, it's bumping up against 30 years now.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Wow.

Doug Smith:

So wearing all those hats, I've experienced a lot of changes in technology over that time, both as a consumer and behind the scenes as a developer. So it's hard to remember a time that there was before the internet or smartphones, but for those of us watching ourselves and others, we've seen these

changes, these habits that have been forming, these obsessions, or even some might say clinically addictions.

Doug Smith:

I mean, it's the families at the restaurant, all looking at their screens instead of looking at each other. It's the near misses on the interstate because somebody was on their phone. I saw a photo recently of people in Ukraine that were waiting for their train to escape the trials there, and they're all on their phone, right? I have a friend that's a missionary in Papua, New Guinea, and they have trouble with YouTube over there. So it's a worldwide phenomenon, and it wasn't always this way.

Doug Smith:

So anyway, I've been taking notes, gathering research, seeing the impact on me and my family and my friends. And finally in 2016, I felt the call to really change some of my scheduling, change my job so that I could invest what ended up being, I thought it was going to be a year, but it ended up being a two and a half year research project into this book so that I could make the case that I felt needed to be made in this time.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, you've done a great job bringing these things together. It packs a powerful punch. In the introduction to the book, you tell us it can be divided into three sections, awaken, examine, and overcome. So let's start with awakening. I like how you talk about Truman Burbank in chapter one. And actually, you weave this throughout the whole book.

Andrew McDiarmid:

He's the main character in a movie called The Truman Show. As the story goes, he's the first baby ever adopted by a corporation, and they turn his life into a reality show. He's got fake parents, a manufactured childhood. He's married to an actress who's only pretending to be his wife. Everyone in town is acting on cue for the cameras. And Truman is entirely unaware of all this. Tell us what happens next in the story and how that relates to our immersion in screens and content today.

Doug Smith:

Yeah, that's a really great question. Thank you. Yeah, The Truman Show really does capture what I believe is happening today in ways that I don't think most people realize. In the movie, what starts happening is that he's been living in this virtual environment, essentially, for what's bumping up against 30 years, and things are starting to fall apart. Things like a light falls from the sky and they try to cover it up. And he goes into the wrong place at the wrong time and a door opens that shouldn't. And an elevator reveals a hidden room.

Doug Smith:

So he's starting to wonder what's going on here. And it turns out that Truman is a truth seeker. He won't give up trying to figure out what's going on. We see him even risk his life to find out what's going on. The real world, his world that he thought was real, was really a virtual world created for him. And what I believe is that many of us are really in a similar boat today. We're all on our screens all the time. And as you look around, we think it's always been this way, but the problem is, it's falling apart. The real world is suffering as a result. We're seeing epidemics of anxiety and depression and suicidality, even, on

people that are ... And as you watch the trendlines, a lot of those trendlines come from the adoption of some of these technologies.

Doug Smith:

But everyone else is doing it, so we accept it, just like Truman accepted his world until it started falling apart. But there are some of us that are finding out there is a better way, and trying to put our lives back on a path more along the lines of what we were made to live.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. So true, and Truman makes the perfect name for that character.

Doug Smith:

It does.

Andrew McDiarmid:

You share some really sobering statistics in the first part of your book. One of them is a 2021 study from eMarketer that found that the average US adult had increased their time on digital media in 2020 to nearly eight hours a day on average. Is that right? How did they match that?

Doug Smith:

It's a shocking statistic, really, and that's consuming digital media. We're talking about social media, video games, streaming video. That's more than a full-time job each week. Now, some of that time does happen because of multitasking. So think about bingeing Netflix while you're scrolling Instagram.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah.

Doug Smith:

But it's the real, that is the average. So you think, you know, some are even more, some are less, but that ends up being the average. So the thing that really is poignant to me is that nobody really signed up to do that. We didn't as a kid go, man, I just wish I could spend my life, the better part of a full time job, giving all my time and attention and precious data to the most powerful corporations in the world. That wasn't what we really signed up for. So that's why I called my book [Un]Intentional, because we didn't mean to sign up for that. But it is the true average, the stats show.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, great name. Well, this increase in screen time can be linked to 2007, a year for me that lives in infamy. It's the year that Steve Jobs and Apple unleashed their iPhone, the world's first smartphone. And as of 2021, they'd sold a hundred, sorry, 1.65 billion units, which makes it one of the most successful products ever made. So how did having a screen right in our pockets and hands change us?

Doug Smith:

Oh my, isn't that amazing? You know, we think 2007 is the date, which is 14, 15 years ago now. So again, some of the kids that came of age in that time don't know a world without it, but we can remember. It turns out that 2007 was also the year that Facebook launched. So we had this perfect storm of the

invention of social media and the internet connected device on every person. So yeah, there's obviously tons of changes. I call out just a few and I'll just mention a few here, but yeah, obviously we're distracted, constantly distracted.

Doug Smith:

But not only are we distracted, we almost have to be distracted, and by design, by a design, these apps are designed to cause us, if we have five seconds to wait in line, the first thing we think about is to pull out our phone and see what happened on Twitter. And that's by design.

Doug Smith:

Other things we know, that online discourse is notoriously uncivil. We all know people with what we would call maybe digital courage. They say stuff online they'd never say in person. The idea, we know that, especially among the younger, the mocking, the bullying, it's epidemic there, especially among the kids and young people there. As a dad of four daughters, another aspect that's really tragic is how sexualized everything has become, young girls thinking by what's online, that's what women are made to be. What's on TikTok is what kind of defines the visual of what we're supposed to be, instead of so much more.

Doug Smith:

So with all of that, I recognize that our lack of focus is really ruining our ability to think clearly at all. And if we can't think clearly, then who are we at the end of the day? And that's what really pushed me to want to try to help people with this.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah, yeah. And you actually talk about the dopamine pleasure cycles that these screens can induce in us, similar to those who are taking serious drugs. I mean, it's really a trick in the brain into this cycle of pleasure. Now, there's a section in chapter two of your book called Do What You Want, Or What They Want You to Want. So this tech doesn't really form desires or create addictions in us by accident. What do the builders of apps and tech gadgets and streaming platforms know about us that we often don't even realize?

Doug Smith:

Oh yeah, that's such a great question. I first have to say that, as I mentioned in this book, I'm a huge believer in the concept of free will. And in fact, if Dr. Egnor has a fan club, I'd want to join it because he does such a fantastic job in all that he does, defeating materialism and especially the lie that free will is an illusion and so on. And I've studied on that, I blogged a little bit, but nothing like what Dr. Egnor does. So shout out to Dr. Egnor.

Doug Smith:

But how we use our free will can be exploited. So that's why these companies that are making the devices we all see and the software we all use hire the top behavioral psychologists, neuroscientists, and apply this technology in what Adam Alter in his book Irresistible talks about, weaponizing these ideas to manipulate us.

Doug Smith:

And so what do they do? Well, they do all kinds of things, but among them is they run thousands of experiments on us individually, with all the buzzwords of the day, the big data, the AI, the machine learning algorithms we hear about. So they're doing whatever they can to keep us engaged. And that's the keyword, engagement, is to keep us on their platforms as long as possible. If we didn't click the button, why didn't we? Try a different experiment until they literally weaponize the experience so that we'll do what they want us to do. And what I say is that's shaping our desires. And so our desires end up forming how we make our decisions, and we apply our free will to the desires that they have created in us.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. And where else do we see this, the kind of behavior that these apps and games are trying to continue in us? We see it in casinos, and these apps and game development companies, they take some cues from casinos, don't they?

Doug Smith:

They sure do. Yeah. They know that casinos know how to make people keep on playing. They know that, oh, man, I might just win the next time, if I put in just one more dollar, one more whatever. How do they do that? They employ a system of variable rewards because it's not a predictable reward that really works. It's the maybe that'll happen. So they vary not only the frequency of rewards, but also the intensity of the rewards.

Doug Smith:

And so the tech companies know exactly the same thing. They know that, okay, if I'm going to show a certain post at a certain time on social media, or if the video game is going to show a certain loot box or a certain maybe a power up feature at the right time, it never happens in exactly a predictable way because they know that if it's unpredictable, we'll keep on trying to find out what happens next. And again, casinos have been doing that for a long time, and big tech is just applying it on a much more massive scale.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Now, these developers and tech companies know that we are impatient these days. We have self gratifying as the order of the day, we want instant, and we're getting it a lot. So how does this impatience in us lead to compliance?

Doug Smith:

Right. That's such a good question. I mean, it used to be years ago, as a software developer, we'd talk about making things user friendly, which used to mean let's make things easy to use, make it so we don't have to type in cryptic commands to make computers do what they want. But today the idea is that it's biased, the easy thing to do is biased towards what they want us to do.

Doug Smith:

So we're talking about it's the shopping sites with countdown timers. You'll miss out. Or it's the three choices, but the big one in the middle with the higher price is what they want us to want, so that's what we do. It's the buy now button. It's like click that. Or it's the streaming video platforms that have autoplay. We don't have to make a decision, so we just binge watch, and all of a sudden, we're up all

night watching whatever, because we didn't have to make a decision. We're even just too impatient to make that decision to change or to adapt. And so-

Andrew McDiarmid:

Don't even get me started. Don't even get me started on those autoplay features. I think Netflix was the first to put that in, and oh, it just makes me so mad, that they take away people's right to have a little bit, just a few seconds of time to think, okay, is it wise to watch another episode?

Doug Smith:

It is tragic, and Netflix-

Andrew McDiarmid:

And you can't turn it off.

Doug Smith:

You can't turn it off. No, you can't. And not only that, they also recently added, I think, a play something feature, like not only are we binge watching, but we don't have to want to choose what to watch tonight. So just let Netflix not only choose how long we watch their platform, but choose what we watch to begin with. So again, shaping our desires masterfully.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Wow. Yeah, I knew there was a reason we came off of Netflix a couple years back. I just didn't like the way it was going, you know?

Doug Smith:

Me too.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Not to mention 90% of the product is unwatchable.

Doug Smith:

Yep.

Andrew McDiarmid:

So in a second episode, we'll look at some of the solutions that you've come up with, where we can go from unintentional to intentional with our screen use. But before we close this episode out, I just wanted to get some clarity on who is shaping these desires of ours and why.

Andrew McDiarmid:

As we live our lives online, our digital footprint becomes what you would call, and what you did call in the book, an epic digital biography, an instruction book for anyone or anything to learn what works on us and what doesn't. So all that past history is leveraged towards our future decisions, and big tech is making full use of it. So tell us a little bit about who big tech is. Who are these people? Why are they doing it?

Doug Smith:

Yeah, that's such a good question. It's, well, big tech is certainly our, I call it our household and our handheld names. But I was really surprised as I looked at the, it's hard to remember 20 years ago, but 20 years ago, the top companies on the market were more diverse. We're thinking about GE and Microsoft and Exxon and Citigroup and Walmart, kind of a smattering of different industries. But today it's Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, Google, and Tesla. But in 2021, it was Facebook. Facebook's had a bit of a hard year.

Doug Smith:

But all that to say, it's the big tech companies, and why are they winning? And they're winning by optimizing their growth on our willingness to completely reorient our lives and whole societies around what's happening next on their platforms. And this drive of growth, this growth imperative, I call a conquest. Let's just call it what it is. Amazon has conquered by dominating and exploiting the size of their platform to just take out whole other industries. So it's truly a conquest model, and we've been overrun by it.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Well in your book, you discuss the ideas of Edward Bernays, nephew to Sigmund Freud, and considered the father of public relations. I just want to share a quick story that you include in your book because it's just so indicative of what's been happening. He combined ideas he learned from his uncle on psychoanalysis with new insights on crowd psychology, and he pioneered methods of influencing the public. In your book, you describe one of his notorious public relations achievements of influencing women in the late 1920s to buy more cigarettes from his client, American Tobacco Company. Tell us how he did it.

Doug Smith:

I'm so glad you asked about that because as I say, Edward Bernays is like the most influential person in the 20th century that nobody's probably ever heard of before, because he was so successful behind the scenes. But yeah, this thing with the influencing women to smoke, first of all, in the 1920s, it was a social taboo for women to smoke. Women didn't smoke. If they did, they didn't smoke in public.

Doug Smith:

So what did he do? He didn't create an ad campaign that was like, hey women, you should smoke more. What did he do? He made it news instead. He made a newsworthy event. In this giant parade, I think it was the Macy's Parade, downtown parade in New York, he hired fashion models, and contacted news outlets who were informed at a certain time, there's going to be some newsworthy event.

Doug Smith:

And what was the newsworthy event? These fashion models would take out not cigarettes, but torches of freedom. He rebranded them or relabeled them to indicate, to just really exploit the spirit of the age, which was more women's liberation, more women's rights, which is all good, all good for equality, but pointing it towards an intentionally addictive and deadly product like cigarettes, that's manipulation and exploitation. And that's exactly what he did. And the companies today, big tech companies today, are using the same strategies.

Andrew McDiarmid:

We've taken a lot of cues from him, as well. He once said, "In almost every act of our daily lives, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind." And that is very much going on today, as we're seeing and as you've laid out in this book.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, in part two of this interview, we'll look at the power we have as individuals to stop our screens from shaping our desires and forming harmful habits. You'll learn how to go from unintentional to intentional, unprepared to prepared, compliant to transformed. You won't want to miss part two of this important conversation. Doug, thanks so much for joining us today.

Doug Smith:

Thank you so much, Andrew. It's a joy to be here.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, to learn more about Doug Smith's book [Un]Intentional, visit unintentionalbook.com. That's unintentionalbook.com. Until next time, I'm Andrew McDiarmid for Mind Matters News. Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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