

How To Sever Big Tech's Strings

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Andrew McDiarmid:

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

Andrew McDiarmid:

Today, I'm continuing my conversation about this with 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. He's informed by over two decades of web programming experience. And he is still doing it, so he knows what he is talking about. Doug, welcome back to the show.

Doug Smith:

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

Andrew McDiarmid:

Absolutely. Well, in part one of our chat, you explained how our screens are secretly shaping our desires and who is behind it. In the first part of your book, you're helping people awaken to this understanding. Then you show readers how to examine their lives and then overcome this intentionality imbalance, as you call it, to live out their potential.

Andrew McDiarmid:

So for those who haven't heard that episode yet, let's just briefly summarize the problem and then move into some of the solutions you present. So what are some of the ways that our screens are secretly shaping our desires?

Doug Smith:

Well, the list is really long Andrew, but the long and the short of it is, it's ultimately they use the most powerful technologies the world has ever seen to manipulate us into spending more time than a typical full-time job looking at our screens. They hire top behavioral psychologists and neuroscientists to exploit weaknesses and apply massive algorithms to learn what makes us keep doing what they want us to do. And they're super good at it. And we know that by looking around at our society today.

Andrew McDiarmid:

And who is behind this desire shaping? Do they know what they're doing, and why are they doing it?

Doug Smith:

So, yeah. It's all the big tech companies we know. We can list them all, the social media, the video game companies, the streaming media platforms. All these companies have become these giant entities because they know exactly what they're doing. They're some of the most intentional companies in the world. They didn't become super successful by accident. They've built some of the biggest platforms in the world by making these things automated. They're doing it ultimately for the growth imperative of the stock market. To conquer their space, whatever that space is, and just win big financially, but also powerfully. In every way that companies want to win, they are doing it by, really total domination of the technologies that they've invented.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Now, one thing I do like about your book is that you do actually go beyond the typical things that would make a tech company desire this information and desire this control. You talk about the stock market and how growth is just the main thing that's driving these companies. And it is, it's the bottom line of money. Power can play into it. Certainly, growth. But as you say in the book, there's ultimately an unseen, pervasive, yet often forgotten evil at work that seeks to distract, to deceive, and ultimately destroy. Can you speak about that just a little bit?

Doug Smith:

Absolutely. Yeah. I'm a Christian and I wrote my book from that Christian perspective because the solutions that I offer are all based on my own ... what has really helped me. And what's helped those that I've helped and people I've mentored and the places that I've spoken. It's really been this idea of that this biblical worldview has really informed how to respond to our screen saturated world. And one of those aspects really is a recognition that there are unseen spiritual forces, which is not a real comfortable subject to most Western people. We've made our world more materialistic. We don't really think about spiritual forces or anything like that, but that isn't the way most of the world has been or, or was. And certainly if you read the Bible, you can see that Jesus really did believe in evil spiritual forces.

Doug Smith:

There's one verse in particular that drives it home for me in the Book of Ephesians, Chapter Two. It talks about, "The prince of the power of the air, the spirit that works in children of disobedience." And given that we're being manipulated by things that happen over the air, so to speak ... thinking of wifi and data and all the rest. I wonder if some of those spiritual forces understand the irony of today's moment.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. the battle is not against flesh and blood, as the Bible does say. And it's really key to look at this from that perspective, whether you're a Christian or not a Christian, just understanding the reasons people are doing things. We're not calling big tech evil and just leaving it at that. These are human beings that are making decisions, trying to get a paycheck, but there's more to it than that. And if we can unpack some of that, then I think we get a richer look at what's happening and a more powerful way to rise above it. So I'm really glad that your book addresses that.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Now, you and I have quite a lot in common. We certainly have a shared interest in helping people live authentically, as I like to put it, with the technology in their lives. Once we awaken to the problems that are facing us with screens, you say the next step is to evaluate your life. You relay some positive postures of evaluation that would help us with this. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Doug Smith:

Absolutely. Yeah. Thank you. Most of the book, the vast majority of the book is what I've been told is really a grace filled introduction to live the life you're called to live. It's not all about look at how bad everything is. Look at how bad you're being with your screens. It's not this shaming. It's way more about, there's so much hope. You can do this. It is quite counter-cultural and not super popular, but it is doable. But We have to approach it as we evaluate our lives and look at, am I really one of those people that spends eight hours a day on average, consuming digital media? And we don't really want to ask those questions about ourselves.

Doug Smith:

But this particular thing about the postures of evaluation, I really feel like was something ... I was inspired by God. It was better than what I could have come up with on my own. Because it's six ideas that when you think about yourself and, do I really need to make a change, is this me? I often ask people, did you think you'd be farther along in your life than you are right now? You thought, man, by the time I was 30 or 40 or 50, I thought I'd be here or there. Or have this much money or have these relationships, and you don't. And you ask, why? Well, our screens may be part of that. And so I encourage people to approach those question with grace, for yourself. With understanding. You didn't know. It's the companies that are intentional, not us. With patience for yourself. We don't have to solve everything today. We have to give it time. It's a big ship to turn.

Doug Smith:

One of the things that's really important is to have objectivity. Which is the idea that you look at your life, almost like a scientist. Like what's that guy doing, and is it working for him? That idea that you look at it more objectively, not with shame, not with guilt, but just like, hey, man, I do spend a lot of time on this platform or on this streaming video. Maybe I ... is that working for him? That's an objectivity question. And we look at it with openness. A willingness to see things we may not want to see, but being okay with learning. Just as with curiosity.

Doug Smith:

We look at it with optimism. The idea that, you know what? This isn't bad. It's good to learn this now because I can then become the person I was made to be. And then the one last thing I talk about is the idea of restraint. Which means, we might list 10 things that we're like, man, I really am doing too much. But we want to restrain from the idea of trying to change it because ... or change it all today. Like, okay, I'm going cold turkey on everything today. If you do that, unfortunately you'll probably fail, because there's a lot more at play. Habits and addictions and things that have formed. And so rather than trying to change everything today, all we're trying to do is evaluate and learn, like a scientist would. Then we can take actions over time, as I lead people through in the rest of the book.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Right. And I've been seeing a lot of signage and messages about self-care recently, for obvious reasons. But I think it's a really modern thing to say, oh, well, let's take care of ourselves. And I think this fits right

in with that. And also, we see that tech companies themselves are giving us the tools to check on this. If you know that your smartphone maker is giving you a screentime app, well, that pretty much assures you that it is something worth paying attention to. This isn't just all in your head. So yeah, those are great methods to help evaluate ourselves.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, you bring out a really important point in the book about halfway through. Which is that our desires aren't the most important part of who we are, and they don't form our identity. This I think is so key. And it's so great that you've brought this out, because realizing that you are not your desires, can give you the power to change the desires that you see as harmful. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Doug Smith:

Yeah. Thank you for bringing that out, Andrew. Like you say, it's so important. It points back to something I mentioned earlier in the book, which is what I call the double bind that the industry puts us in. We hear these messages, two messages that play against each other. The idea that we should do whatever we feel like doing. Just do it, right? Whatever you feel is what you should do. Be your authentic self, which always means whatever you're feeling right at the moment. But then on the other side, they shape what we feel like doing. They make us feel like doing what they want us to do. So there's this double bind. Hey, do whatever you feel like, but do what we want you to feel like.

Doug Smith:

So that's a real bind, but the key out of it is to realize that what we want isn't who we are. Our identity is way more built upon eternal things. We're people made by God for a purpose. So we shape our thinking around that concept that our desires can change. We all know that our feelings change from day to day, but it turns out that our feelings can change on purpose. Not only by the intentionality of big tech companies, but by our own intentionality. We can actually renew our minds to a place where we end up desiring things that are better for us instead of the things that are leading us off track.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. So good. Well, what is the relationship between vision and purpose? You come to a point in your book where you ask people if they're ready to take on a vision. What is the relationship there?

Doug Smith:

Yeah, that's a great question. We talk a lot in the early part of the book about what you shouldn't do, or maybe what's happening to us that's negative. But we don't really make changes based on negative things. We make changes ... or at least better changes. Based on positive motivations. We want carrots not sticks, right? So what I encourage people to do is cast a vision. And I call a vision this idea of a hopeful anticipation of participating in a certain positive future. It's this broad idea of, wow, there's something great out there, and I could participate in that. In fact, I was made for that. And so you cast this vision.

Doug Smith:

The purpose then is your specific role in the process of fulfilling that vision. So it's the nuts and bolts on the ground. In order to get to that vision, the thing that I would love to be able to do, that God given

purpose, the thing I was made for, well, I'm going to have to take some steps. And so that's the purpose. And that's where the rubber meets the road.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Right. Well, how can we develop a life of valuable output instead of self-focused input? I've thought a lot about this in the past, and there's different words for it. How can we be a producer rather than a consumer? How can we give, rather than just use? What are your thoughts on that?

Doug Smith:

Yeah, it's such an important distinction. Because the vast majority of the reasons that people are spending so much time on screens is we're spending it as consumers, not as producers. But we are here for a purpose. And that purpose is to do what only we can do to make the world a better place. And that's really the goal of my book. It's the reason I wrote it. Not just to call out what was happening to us and make us aware of it, but to really change things. Because it's just heartbreaking to think about, what if the person who is supposed to cure cancer is on Fortnite too much to realize their gift? Or the next C.S. Lewis is too concerned with her Instagram profile to study, right?

Doug Smith:

That's the kind of input ... that kind of input that's hurting us is really robbing us of what could be such a huge potential. So we have to flip that around. And so catching that vision and reorienting our lives around our purpose helps us to understand that we're here to make a difference. To do something outward instead of focusing on what the industry wants us to desire. And our world desperately needs us to find that.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, without going into too much ... because I want people to go get a copy of your book. Can you help us with the five practices you come up with for living life intentionally? Can you preview those? I know you came up with five different practices that will help with that.

Doug Smith:

Absolutely. Right. Yeah. There's a lot of details. The book has 179 footnotes. So there's a lot of research and details into this that I know can be really helpful. But yeah, really quickly, the five ... I call them five biblical practices. They're really classic spiritual disciplines, but they're applied to our tech focused world. And the number one thing ... and these are all things that worked. These are all proven ideas that have worked for me and for people that I've coached and mentored over the years. But the foundation of it all is this idea of surrendering to Christ. Again, as a Christian, I'm surrendering to Christ, who is ... in the scriptures and the New Testament, he is the savior and he is Lord. And as the king, we live surrendered, like we would in allegiance to a good king.

Doug Smith:

And so in that posture of surrender, we then go to the second step, which is to find and remove the things that are entangling us. And we really trust God to help us see that. And again, it's with the postures of evaluation in mind, it's not with changing everything at once. It's this idea of surrender. Lord, what do I need to change next? And then listening, and then doing those things. In fact, these five

practices are really iterative. They're not one and done, they're a lifestyle. And we go through them almost every day.

Doug Smith:

The next one is huge, the idea of renewing our mind. The classic Romans 12:2, which is, "Don't be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our mind." Which again, the industry knows renewing our mind works so well. What the Bible knew 2000 years ago, right? They're just replaying it. So renewing our mind is really where it's at. And just changing our thoughts and learning new ideas. And especially, I encourage people into learning the scriptures, and you really are surprised. It's so surprising as we learn the scriptures, how relevant they are to today's world.

Doug Smith:

The next thing is to replace harmful habits with helpful ones. We don't stop habits that are hurting us by just stopping them, because it leaves a vacuum, it leaves a void. We have to replace them with things that are good instead. And so I walk people through that process, again, with research and other helpful books. And then the last thing, which is really important, is to use all this freedom that we built up in the first four steps to pursue your calling. Which again, we talked about earlier. Pursuing your God-given purpose is what motivates you to keep going and keep doing and keep fighting against what's ultimately an uphill battle.

Doug Smith:

We're against the wind in this world. Against all the new stuff that's being invented, VR and the metaverse and all these things that are coming out, right? All these things are going to take us off track. If we're pursuing our calling though, then we don't have time for that because we're all in on our positive reason for being here. And we don't then get off track, because we are putting these five practices into our lives day-by-day.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. It's like, once you have a positive vision, you yourself will decide, no, there's just no room for that in this vision. It's not going to help me fulfill my purpose. I have to leave it out.

Doug Smith:

Exactly.

Andrew McDiarmid:

When you get to that point, you're in good shape. And I was just thinking of the slogan, fear of missing out, FOMO. We know what that means from a tech standpoint, but it can also mean something totally different. And that is fear of missing out on a positive vision and a purpose that you could have if you were intentional about it. So that's a different way to look at it, but it's a good FOMO.

Doug Smith:

Yes.

Andrew McDiarmid:

A healthy FOMO, if you will.

Doug Smith:

Very good.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Well, towards the end of your book, you relay the touching story of a young boy and his mom who you noticed in the library one day when you were working on your book. They sit down at a table, the mom gives the son a notebook, a pencil, an eraser, and a workbook. And then she sits next to him, reading a book. And you noticed that there was no phones, no screens, no kid whining for video games. And then you saw the boy's eyes wander from the workbook to the beautiful landscape outside. And something filled him with wonder, to the point where he got his mother's attention and pointed it out to her. What did this little scene remind you of?

Doug Smith:

Oh, yeah. I'm so glad you brought that out, Andrew. Because it really did bring me to tears when I saw that, because it was such a stark difference to what we normally see. We see ... there's car seats with tablets built in. With a place to put your tablet in for your infant. There's just this push, and the classic thing is to see kids everywhere on their screens. So that was so different. And I saw this boy ... this library is a beautiful library in a really nice part of Nashville. And there was this forest and trees. And his mouth was wide open, and something in there just caused him to think, this is wonderful. It really put him in a state of wonder. Mom, look at this. And what it caused me to realize, is how much we miss when we don't make time to build in that wonder and to be able to experience it. Because we miss it.

Doug Smith:

So this idea that creativity comes from boredom, it comes from space. It comes from quiet. I mean, even the classic spiritual disciplines include things like solitude and silence. Even the idea of Sabbath is really vital. It's like our intelligent designer knew what was best, right? It's this idea that those times of quiet, those times of real reflection, or even ... we don't know what's going to happen. But something wonderful might. And we don't want to get to the end of our lives and think, wow. I really, I wasted it all. Missing these opportunities of this world around me or the things that I could have seen.

Doug Smith:

How much potential we have to improve our lives and our relationships and the things ... the ways that only we can make our world better. Only by making our lives ... or becoming more intentional with our lives than anyone else.

Andrew McDiarmid:

It makes you think, what would we miss if we didn't give ourselves the gift of device-free time? Or the chance to doodle or daydream or brainstorm and reflect> and what would the world miss? Not just us, but what would the world miss if we miss those things?

Doug Smith:

So true.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Well, Doug, I'm afraid we're out of time. But I've really enjoyed unpacking the lessons of your book in these two episodes. So thank you so much for joining us.

Doug Smith:

Oh, it's such an honor, Andrew. I'm a huge fan of Mind Matters and all things, Discovery Institutes. So it's super, super exciting for me to be here with you today.

Andrew McDiarmid:

Yeah. Thank you very much. Well, folks, as I said before, this book is coming at a really opportune time. As we reflect on the last few years of craziness, the global pandemic, and what life is going to look like from here on out, I encourage you to begin your own journey toward intentional living. Learn more and get your own copy of [Un}Intentional at unintentionalbook.com. That's www.unintentionalbook.com. For Mind Matters News, I'm Andrew McDiarmid. Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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