

The Spiritual Effects of Distraction

BY: TIM CASTEEL

“The wealth of information means a dearth of something else . . . a poverty of attention.”

1971 - Herbert A. Simon

“To be a follower of Christ in the early twenty-first century requires a way of being in the world that resists being sucked into the numbing glare of [our phones].”

Alan Noble - Disruptive Witness

We are creatures of habit. We are what we repeatedly do. But our habits become so common that they are essentially invisible. They're mostly subconscious and automatic. They're really hard to see.

At a college commencement speech in 2005, author David Foster Wallace tells a story:

There are two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?”

And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”

We need to make visible what our phones are doing to us.

This is water



Nir Eyal wrote the book on how to make apps that suck up all your time. Literally, Eyal wrote the book used by Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat: *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*.

Eyal wrote the book *Indistractable* to help us fight back against the distraction of our phones, a superpower Eyal calls the “the most important skill for the twenty-first century.”

The fact is, in this day and age, if you are not equipped to manage distraction, your brain will be manipulated by time-wasting diversions. For years you’ve been conditioned to expect instant gratification.

In the future, there will be two kinds of people in the world: those who let their attention and lives be controlled and coerced by others and those who proudly call themselves ‘indistractable.’

Being indistractable means striving to do what you say you will do. If you care about your work, your family, and your physical and mental well-being, you must learn how to become indistractable.”

ASK- How would that affect us spiritually?

THE FLOOD OF INFORMATION

“We live in an age burgeoning with information, we cry for brevity, and the Bible at times seems terribly discursive. So we scan another chapter as rapidly as possible because we already ‘know’ all this.” DA Carson

Donec We are experiencing something unlike anything in recorded history. For thousands of years information has travelled at the same pace. Until the 1800’s, information travelled at the same rate that it did in Jesus’ day.

The fastest it could move was by horse – pony express. And then technology changed that – what technology? The telegraph. Suddenly news and current events from around the world invaded small towns across the planet.

The question we need to ask is: How does the constant stream of new, late-breaking information affect our pursuit of eternal things?

A week’s worth of the New York Times contains more information than the average seventeenth-century person encountered in a lifetime. Eric Schmidt – founder of Google famously said in 2003: Every two days now we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003. Now we create that much information every 10 minutes.

Every three days — the amount of information online doubles.

That HAS to affect us right?

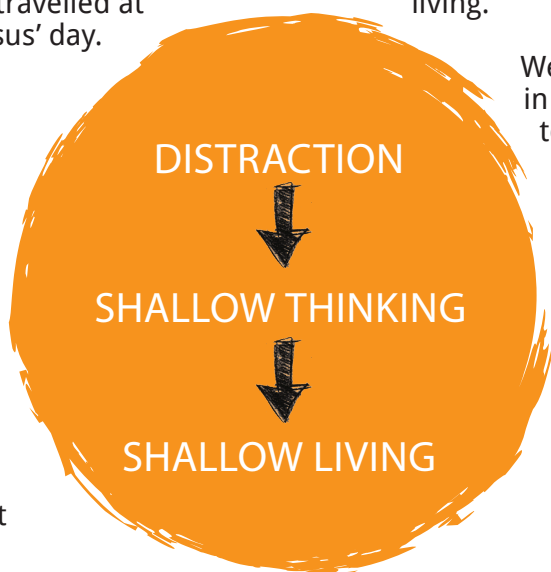
You and I face far more information than people have ever had to sort through in the past. And not just a little more information. Many of us are crumbling under the pressure of it, struggling to deal with the unending flood. Even if it’s on a subconscious level, we feel scattered. We have become distracted people.

“If we are a distracted people, a distracted society, it stands to reason that we would also be a distracted church, Christians with a diminished ability to think deeply.” Tim Challies - *The Next Story*

We may be excited about God, but because we have become a product of our digital world, we have a diminished ability to think deeply about him. More and more of us are finding that we just can’t stop long enough to read God’s Word and meet with God – though it’s rarely ever a time issue – it’s a focus/energy issue.

Here is one of the great dangers we face as Christians: with the ever-present distractions in our lives, we are quickly becoming a people of shallow thoughts, and shallow thoughts lead to shallow living.

We are losing our ability to engage in deeper ways of thinking. We need to take some serious steps to fight distraction so we can think deeply and live purposefully.



In Neil Postman's 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, he compares the dystopian worlds of *Brave New World* and 1984:

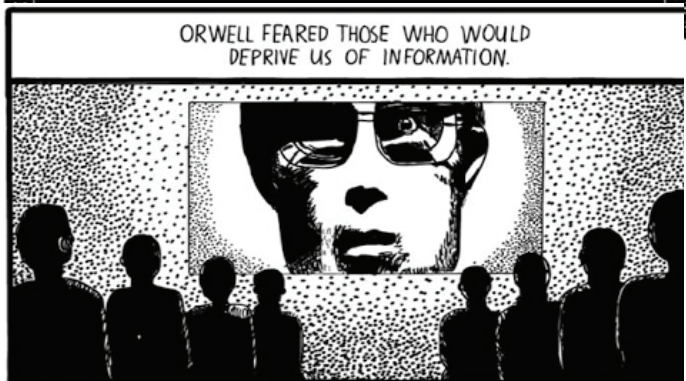
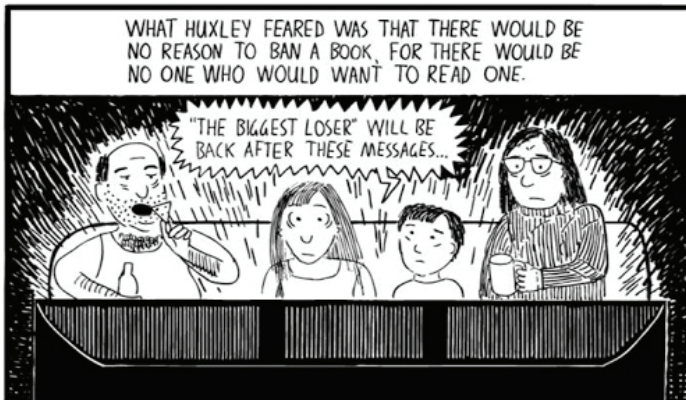
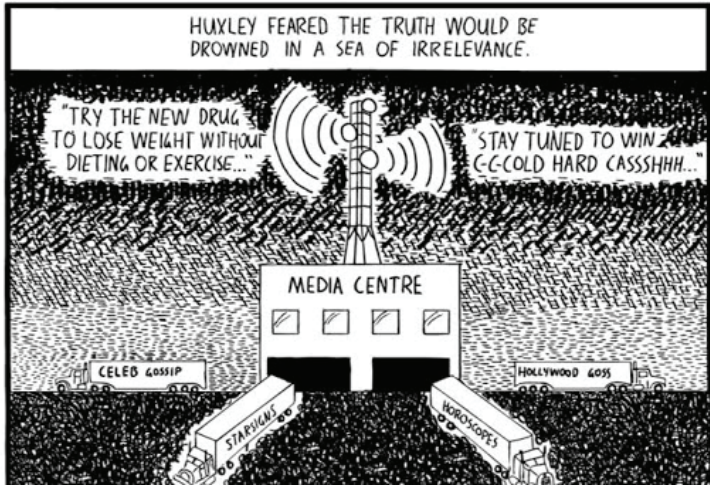
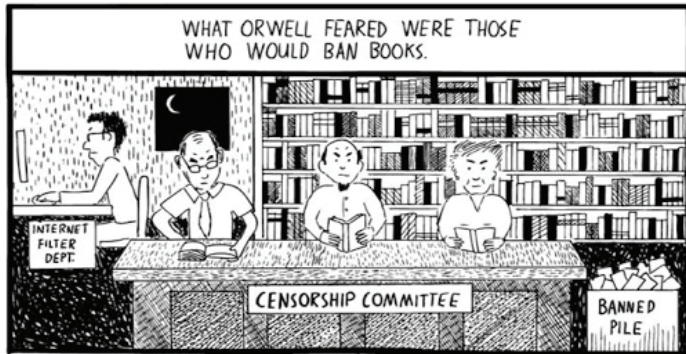
AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH by Stuart McMillen May 2009



ALDOUS HUXLEY
Author: "Brave New World"



vs. GEORGE ORWELL
Author: "Nineteen Eighty-Four"





STEP 1:

“RECOGNIZE THAT
DISTRACTION
STARTS FROM
WITHIN”

Ask: What compels us to compulsively check our phones?

We need to diagnose what is the root spiritual cause beneath our addictions to our phones and social media.

Fill in this blank:

I look at my phone because I am seeking _____ (entertainment, to be informed, to feel connected, because I'm bored).

What drives us to look at our phones? What is the sin beneath the surface?

Conspiracy theory- Our phones don't make us distracted. We as society made our phones so we would be distracted. We want an escape- an intentional tool to self-medicate. So we are turning to phones instead of God. In a superficial way, we look to our phones for meaning. Likes. Validation.

Facebook's first president, Sean Parker, admitted as much when he described how the social network was designed to manipulate our behavior. "It's a social-validation feedback loop," he said. "Exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology." - Indistractable

The root of the issue for me is this: I believe that more digital input (information) somehow leads to fullness of life. If I just read one more blog post on marriage, parenting, ministry...THAT would be the key that solves everything.



STEP 2:

KILL THE BEEP
AND THE BUZZ

Eighty-five percent of phone users allow their phone to interrupt them whenever it wants to. They don't take the time to manually set their notifications.

We only have two options: either our phones can serve us, or we can serve our phones.

If the enemy is too much information constantly pushed at us via distracting beeps and buzzes, an easy solution is: **Turn off notifications.**

I don't need to get a buzz every time someone emails or GroupMe's. Turn them all off. Especially on your Apple Watch. Turn off all buzzes and beeps.

ASK- What are your next steps to fight phone distraction?

ASK- How can we help students in this area?

RESOURCES

- *The Next Story* by Tim Challies (Of the 400 books I have read in the past decade, this book had the most profound effect on my life.)
- *How to Break up With Your Phone* by Catherine Price
- *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* by Nicholas Carr
- *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman
- Netflix's *The Social Dilemma*