

The Acceleration of Addictiveness

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What hard liquor, cigarettes, heroin, and crack have in common is that they're all more concentrated forms of less addictive predecessors. Most if not all the things we describe as addictive are. And the scary thing is, the process that created them is accelerating.

We wouldn't want to stop it. It's the same process that cures diseases: technological progress. Technological progress means making things do more of what we want. When the thing we want is something we want to want, we consider technological progress good. If some new technique makes solar cells x% more efficient, that seems strictly better. When progress concentrates something we don't want to want — when it transforms opium into heroin — it seems bad. But it's the same process at work.

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No one doubts this process is accelerating, which means increasing numbers of things we like will be transformed into things we like too much.

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As far as I know there's no word for something we like too much. The closest is the colloquial sense of "addictive." That usage has become increasingly common during my lifetime. And it's clear why: there are an increasing number of things we need it for. At the extreme end of the spectrum are crack and meth. Food has been transformed by a combination of factory farming and innovations in food processing into something with way more immediate bang for the buck, and you can see the results in any town in America. Checkers and solitaire have been replaced by World of Warcraft and FarmVille.

TV has become much more engaging, and even so it can't compete with Facebook.

The world is more addictive than it was 40 years ago. And unless the forms of technological progress that produced these things are subject to different laws than technological progress in general, the world will get more addictive in the next 40 years than it did in the last 40.

The next 40 years will bring us some wonderful things. I don't mean to imply they're all to be avoided. Alcohol is a dangerous drug, but I'd rather live in a world with wine than one without. Most people can coexist with alcohol; but you have to be careful. More things we like will mean more things we have to be careful about.

Most people won't, unfortunately. Which means that as the world becomes more addictive, the two senses in which one can live a normal life will be driven ever further apart. One sense of "normal" is statistically normal: what everyone else does. The other is the sense we mean when we talk about the normal operating range of a piece of machinery: what works best.

These two senses are already quite far apart. Already someone trying to live well would seem eccentrically abstemious in most of the US. That phenomenon is only going to become more pronounced. You can probably take it as a rule of thumb from now on that if people don't think you're weird, you're living badly.

Societies eventually develop antibodies to addictive new things. I've seen that happen with cigarettes. When cigarettes first appeared, they spread the way an infectious disease spreads through a previously isolated population. Smoking rapidly became a (statistically) normal thing. There were ashtrays everywhere. We had ashtrays in our house when I was a kid, even though neither of my parents smoked. You had to for guests.

As knowledge spread about the dangers of smoking, customs changed. In the last 20 years, smoking has been transformed from something that seemed totally normal into a rather seedy habit: from something movie stars did in publicity shots to something small huddles of

addicts do outside the doors of office buildings. A lot of the change was due to legislation, of course, but the legislation couldn't have happened if customs hadn't already changed.

It took a while though—on the order of 100 years. And unless the rate at which social antibodies evolve can increase to match the accelerating rate at which technological progress throws off new addictions, we'll be increasingly unable to rely on customs to protect us.

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Unless we want to be canaries in the coal mine of each new addiction—the people whose sad example becomes a lesson to future generations—we'll have to figure out for ourselves what to avoid and how. It will actually become a reasonable strategy (or a more reasonable strategy) to suspect everything new.

In fact, even that won't be enough. We'll have to worry not just about new things, but also about existing things becoming more addictive. That's what bit me. I've avoided most addictions, but the Internet got me because it became addictive while I was using it.

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Most people I know have problems with Internet addiction. We're all trying to figure out our own customs for getting free of it. That's why I don't have an iPhone, for example; the last thing I want is for the Internet to follow me out into the world.

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My latest trick is taking long hikes. I used to think running was a better form of exercise than hiking because it took less time. Now the slowness of hiking seems an advantage, because the longer I spend on the trail, the longer I have to think without interruption.

Sounds pretty eccentric, doesn't it? It always will when you're trying to solve problems where there are no customs yet to guide you. Maybe I can't plead Occam's razor; maybe I'm simply eccentric. But if I'm right about the acceleration of addictiveness, then this kind of lonely squirming to avoid it will increasingly be the fate of anyone who wants to get things done. We'll increasingly be

defined by what we say no to.

Notes

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Could you restrict technological progress to areas where you wanted it? Only in a limited way, without becoming a police state. And even then your restrictions would have undesirable side effects. "Good" and "bad" technological progress aren't sharply differentiated, so you'd find you couldn't slow the latter without also slowing the former. And in any case, as Prohibition and the "war on drugs" show, bans often do more harm than good.

[2]

Technology has always been accelerating. By Paleolithic standards, technology evolved at a blistering pace in the Neolithic period.

[3]

Unless we mass produce social customs. I suspect the recent resurgence of evangelical Christianity in the US is partly a reaction to drugs. In desperation people reach for the sledgehammer; if their kids won't listen to them, maybe they'll listen to God. But that solution has broader consequences than just getting kids to say no to drugs. You end up saying no to science as well.

I worry we may be heading for a future in which only a few people plot their own itinerary through no-land, while everyone else books a package tour. Or worse still, has one booked for them by the government.

[4]

People commonly use the word "procrastination" to describe

what they do on the Internet. It seems to me too mild to describe what's happening as merely not-doing-work. We don't call it procrastination when someone gets drunk instead of working.

[5]

Several people have told me they like the iPad because it lets them bring the Internet into situations where a laptop would be too conspicuous. In other words, it's a hip flask. (This is true of the iPhone too, of course, but this advantage isn't as obvious because it reads as a phone, and everyone's used to those.)

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