



DEEP WORK & FILM

AN INDUSTRY BUILT ON DISTRACTION

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Executive Summary

The film industry came to be through artistic expression combined with growing technologies, but it began to flourish during wartime periods when the population needed a distraction from the harsh realities they faced. The ability of cinema to be an agent of diverting attention away from the human condition is the very attribute that has allowed it to become a major part of our world culture today.

But as technology has grown in other areas as well, cinema is no longer the primary distraction in our society. Technology has developed to the point where distraction is built into all aspects of daily life. The instantaneous and continuous connection that modern technology provides has affected the way the population thinks and lives on a moment's notice. This causes work habits to change and lessens the amount of deep activity professionals accomplish during the day.

As professionals have geared towards taking precautions against the addictive technologies surrounding them, it is important to note that in some fields the incorporation of these technologies are a necessity. Some may claim that these specific professions do not require deep work in order to thrive, but one would argue that this is not true. The work of Hollywood takes a unique approach to the idea of Deep Work and how implementing technology into the profession has both helped and hindered the industry. This is a matter of managing usage and setting standards to work and live by. This white paper discusses these issues and suggests ways we might find a balance in Hollywood.

Film's Role In Distraction

Moving images became prominent in the 1870's and 1880's when technology began to advance regarding film and camera technology. This began with Eadweard Muybridge's analyzation of movement through still images consecutively taken. The technology he utilized consisting of sequential stills was the basis on which the next cameras were forged upon. From there on, as technology kept advancing, filmmakers utilized technology and innovation to create narratives that were astonishing to audiences.

Elizabeth Nichols, a graduate student at Lancaster University wrote her [thesis dissertation](#) on distracted spectatorship in cinema. For this researcher, as far as the relationship between film and distraction, "[i]t is important therefore to acknowledge that distraction is full of complexity, and that there are a variety of different types of distraction, such as: astonishment, participation and escape." In the beginning, the attraction towards film was through astonishment that the images were moving. The capability of the moving images projected to convey a story was something new. The technology is what dragged people in. Audiences interacted and reacted with the moving images. They began to get hooked.

As technology became more advanced, the narratives became the major distracting agent. People wanted to use the magic of cinema as a form of escapism during times of high stress, for example, wartime. Nichols states that "[o]n city sites throughout America and Western Europe rose cinemas in which for a few hours any customer, rich or poor, could enjoy a standard of comfort and lavishness unknown in everyday life". This put the audience in control if they wanted to participate, and if they did, they could attend. There was no pressure to do so, no necessary sense of immediacy. They had no other source of distraction similar to those we encounter in today's society.

The Problem: Distraction-free living is a way of the past.

Using your cell phone while watching a movie in the theatre is not only distracting to yourself, but to others. This is a well-known concept and is widely accepted, although, in recent years has grown to be less enforced. There are many forms of distraction, but in the internet age, this is more prominent than ever. People look to their technologies because they are available at any instant. There is a constant flow of information. Our minds become

deprived of a sense of agency due to the simplicity of flowing from one article to the next or scrolling down a feed of threads on Twitter. The mind becomes trained to move from one thing to another continuously. An [article](#) from The Guardian written by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic offered some interesting information about how technology has changed our attention spans. The author states that according to Nicholas Carr, who wrote *The Shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains*, the flow of the internet has become “an interruption system” that “seizes our attention only to scramble it.”

Your personal attention has become more and more valuable as distraction undermines us as a society.

This personal attention deficit impacts our ability to work distraction free. The basis of this paper is on Cal Newport’s theory of distraction-free Deep Work. Cal Newport discusses his theory in his book titled [Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World](#) on how our world has become an information economy “that’s dependent on complex systems that change rapidly.” The constant connection at our fingertips has allowed and influenced our society to become accustomed to a constant stream of information. We scroll and click mindlessly.

But what is Deep Work? It’s the ability to remove yourself from all distractions. Deep Work is produced through an intensely focused mindset that allowing your cognitive abilities to reach their full potential. And in today’s society, this is something that you do not see very often, but there has been a push toward this in recent years.

“The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive”

Cal Newport – Deep Work: Rules For Focused Success in a Distracted World

Distraction Economy and Deep Work

Our world as we know it is an information economy. Technology has advanced to the point that everything is right at our fingertips. But this convenience is often taken for granted and has led to a greater issue, a distraction economy. There is a growing gap between the information we can access at any moment and the attention that we are able to give to it. Our brains are moving just as quickly as the information.

The mind’s ability to focus on more than one task at once is therefore limited, but in this day and age, media multitasking is more prominent than ever. According to research, studies have shown that while engaging in multitasking with media, it takes a significantly greater amount of time to read.

Cal Newport discusses the two core abilities that are necessary for individuals to do well in this new information-driven economy.

1. The ability to master difficult things quickly.
2. The ability to produce work that is done at high quality at a fast pace.

These abilities rely heavily on the individual’s ability to do Deep Work, although it is not always seen at the surface. Newport notes that in most professions deep work is required, but that it is not the sole skill that is valuable in the distraction economy.

Newport references an interview with Clifford Nass, a former communications professor at Stanford, who said, “So we have scales that allow us to divide up people into people who multitask all the time and people who rarely do,” and it tends that “people who multitask all the time can’t filter out irrelevancy,” and are “chronically distracted.” But there are many professionals, especially in film and media that require a balance of both distraction-free and distraction-filled work.

Problem & Opportunity: Professional Matters

Communication Pathways Through Technology Make Things More Efficient

For professionals in the film and entertainment industries, technology and media usage is an obligatory matter. When on a film set, the crew must be present at all times and able to be anywhere on set at a moment's notice. Smartphones and handheld two-way transceivers (walkie-talkies) are a big part of how the operation is run. All eyes must be able to find a specific person if needed, the assistant directors must be able to communicate to make sure things are running on time, and preparation for the next steps must be underway. Technology meant to connect people at a moment's notice is an important function of a film set or any profession that needs to stay efficient and on schedule due to time allowances and financial reasons. Smartphones serve an important role on set to share details about certain aspects in wardrobe and production design, without the inconvenience of crowding around, tracking people down, and making a scene.

Cell Phones on a Movie Set

Although phones have been quite useful on film sets, some directors are taking steps to remove them from their sets. They are setting a precedent, but will it stick? Christopher Nolan is among the directors taking steps to remove cell phone usage from sets. An article from the [Washington Post](#) written by Stephanie Merry, Christopher Nolan stated, "It's an unprofessional lack of concentration, so our rule is very simple: if you need to make a phone call or use your phone to text, you go off set." Another powerful director who believes in taking this step will benefit the overall outcome of their films is Quentin Tarantino. The two directors have been around in the industry long before cell phones were an issue on set.

The general consensus among these filmmakers is that once they have taken the time to make sure everything is prepared and set properly, the worst thing that can possibly happen is when something from outside of the scene, like a cell phone ring or conversation, ruins it. Their hard work is ruined when technology is allowed to become an inconvenience. Another director quoted in the same [article](#), William Paul Clark, stated that multi-tasking is a myth because, "you process information linearly so when you look down at your phone, you are stepping out from the other conversation you are having." Sets run more efficiently when everyone is on the same page, and if there are distractions, like social media, texts, and games, people are not going to be on the same understanding level about the task at hand. So although it is frowned upon to have phones on sets, but necessary at the same time, what is the solution?

The Solution: Monitoring Usage Individually Based On Need

The key to being able to manage your efficiency by developing a habit of deep work is to implement routines into your work schedule. Once these routines are set, your willpower will be managed within the schedule. This is an individual matter, based on your specific needs and responsibilities. Newport makes it clear in his first rule in *Deep Work*, stating that "you must be careful to choose a philosophy that fits your specific circumstances." There are many ways to implement deep work into your personal daily schedule, but since every person has different responsibilities there is a lot of freedom in how you choose to do so.

The monastic philosophy of Deep Work works well for writers who want to focus on one professional goal. With this philosophy, the individual eliminates shallow activity to focus solely on their project at hand. Whereas Newport's bimodal philosophy allows you to schedule your time into blocks of intense, distraction-free concentration alongside shorter blocks of shallow activity. Cal Newport suggests in his book that this method works best with productivity if the individual is willing to dedicate "enough time to such endeavors to reach maximum cognitive intensity – the state in which real breakthroughs occur." The other approach that Newport suggests is what he calls the rhythmic approach where in order to implement Deep Work into your life, you must create a habit of investing in a visual aid to remind you of your work progress and do a little every day. The

bimodal philosophy can be seen as best for people who are working in the film industry because it allows for time away from distraction, to engage in Deep Work and creative work, but also have the communication necessary to run a production.

Newport suggests that individuals should not take breaks from distraction to complete Deep Work, but rather set aside time for breaks from focused time to engage in shallow activity. Once a person schedules in advance the time that they are allowed to check their email, texts, or social media, the rest of the time they can spend dedicated solely to deeper, focused activity. Even for professionals like Assistant Directors who need to be in constant communication with their peers in order to keep track of the schedule, this could be beneficial. Newport suggests it would be beneficial, for example, during work hours to schedule every fifteen minutes, five minutes to check your phone and emails. The rest of the time is dedicated to offline, distraction-free work. Therefore you are able to stay in that constant connection, but be able to get distraction-free, focused work completed as well. In this way, you do not have to sacrifice the constant flow of communication. Find a format that works for you, but make sure that the time you set for distraction-free work is utilized only for that.

Many times when productions are in progress, the work is never done even when you are off the clock. Location, rentals, cast, and more are all subject to change. This can become stressful to manage while off set once the day is wrapped. Newport suggests that scheduling a time at home to check emails, phone messages, and texts could be beneficial because it leaves the rest of the time dedicated to more important tasks.

Although, some will say that technology has advanced so far that the free will of users is compromised. Foer writes in an article from the Washington Post titled, [How Silicon Valley is Erasing your Individuality](#), that addictive technology comes from algorithms that shape the user experience specifically for each person. This is not new information, but he comes to the point that the personalized exploitation of our data has changed our minds to become users with our preferences chosen for us, erasing our free will. This absence of free will that Foer suggests comes from human thought being redirected from technologies like artificial intelligence, forming an internal dependency. Being able to take hold of that agency through utilizing technologies only to their maximum benefit is the key to being able to take back free will and your ability to accomplish distraction free work.

Screen Time and Project Management

Understanding how you are using your technologies and using them to your advantage is a big part of the solution in this. Project management systems allow you to individualize and monitor your tasks, as thorough as you need, and keep track of your data. There are many different industry standards to do so. Professionals in the film industry use Movie Magic to schedule and track progress in major motion pictures. But for individuals, utilizing a project management system may be beneficial for someone who is completing many different tasks, or even one extremely large and cumbersome task. Completely up to the preference of the individual, different project management systems will work best. Utilizing a project management system will allow you to dive deeper into your work while monitoring it, without being constantly bugged by distractions and excess papers lying around with to-do lists. This is a benefit of technology in the quest to achieve Deep Work.

But in the case of mobile devices on set, there are applications that can help force you to take that break. Apple's feature called Screen Time on their iOS products is a complete system in which the user can track, monitor, and control the period of time they spend on their apps. Screen Time provides the user with a detailed report on how their device is used throughout the day and the ability to limit it in whichever ways they want. The user may want to utilize this to analyze this time being spent to understand how to better schedule their time to decrease distraction and perform deeper, distraction-free work. And every person has their own responsibilities, so understanding what kind of attention certain roles require for producing the best work possible is key.

Incorporating Deep Work into Screenwriting

Telling Important Stories & Telling Them Right.

There are many things that go into writing a good screenplay. Films are an extraordinary medium because they can tell a story of a lifetime in just about 100 pages. But as of recent, we can see that many movies are very similar. It has become a formula. But good stories take time and dedication. The ones that stick in audiences minds are the ones that are unique. This lack of dedication and distraction-filled work that is creating these screenplays, is disheartening. Good stories are about immersing yourself as a writer and the audience as the viewer. Removing yourself from one universe into the one you are creating. As a writer, not being immersed in your work and making yourself separate from reality will end in an industry of sequels and the same movie with a slight twist. There are stories to be told and messages to be heard, but if we are distracted from those and focus on what is going to formulaically make money, like another one of those action movies with “The Rock”.

Screenwriter Dee Rees offers the advice in an [article](#) to start writing with something you love and to do it on paper. For a writer beginning a project on a computer application, “the blinking cursor can be a turn off.” She states that typing is a mentally corrective process that intimidates your creativity, preventing the best possible outcome of your work. The writer recognizes that people who take on writing as their profession are going to write many projects that never get produced, but being able to be a creator is something that has the opportunity to bring you a lifetimes worth of work if you are dedicated enough to it. You cannot expect everything you write to be picked up and be a hit. It’s not easy work and you must be dedicated to it.

Writing is a process, and for feature-length screenplays, this is even more true. In order to write something magnificent, the writer must be able to dive deep into the story and characteristics of their characters. Martin McDonagh, a screenwriter, stated in an [interview](#) that writing a movie does not “have to be as strict as a three-act structure” and it is important when traveling to keep your eyes open for things that inspire you. Being able to sit down with yourself and dive into the story because you were inspired allows your creative juices to flow. This is best done with no distraction because the story will stay true to itself and be clear. And although writers may benefit from Deep Work the most, there are other jobs that need a mixture of both deep and shallow activity in order to be productive.

Scheduling In Film

Assistant Directors on a film each have their own job, but the First and Second Assistant Directors are most responsible for schedule planning and execution of that schedule on set. They are the ones that are responsible for setting aside time for each scene, each shot, and making sure everything is accounted for. They make sure that they are staying on budget, complying with the union’s rules, and that everything is safe. These people must be able to answer the phone, check emails, and be in contact with the entire production team at all times. Their job is reliant on constant communication because they have a schedule to attend to and change and many responsibilities that they need to attend to at a moment’s notice.

When initially building the production schedule, it may be best to schedule a separate time to answer emails and texts. But while production is happening, everything and anything is subject to change. It is the Assistant Directors’ jobs to make sure they get everything done on time.

Cal Newport would suggest that this job is “shallow work” but in the film industry, this is an extremely tedious job that a whole production relies upon. The collaboration and supervision of many people go into the scheduling that is done by the Assistant Directors. It only makes sense for these people to have to respond to a message at any point in time, because on set things could have changed with the schedule. This effects budgeting, meal times, talent and crew costs, and production time. But when making the schedules initially and filling out reports at the end of each day, this is the time for distraction free work. This is the point in time where they require distraction-

free work because their responsibilities are what keep a production running. This method of work is what works well for the Assistant Directors. But ask yourself what method of work is best for your needs.

Call To Action: Take Back Your Human Agency.

You have the power within your natural human agency to tend to and change your habits according to your goals, needs, and job title.

We so often succumb to technology and the conveniences that it brings to our lives, but this does not have to always be the case, and we do not have to be addicted to these things. Instead, we can utilize them to their full benefits and stop it at that. Cal Newport suggests in his book that our abilities to concentrate have always been present, but we need to train the mind to form them in specific ways. It is within each person's individual agenda to strengthen and train their minds to concentrate in certain ways. If someone's priority is shallow work habits full of distraction over Deep Work, their mind will not function the same as someone who is dedicated and trained to work with distraction-free methods.

This is not as simple as we would hope in many cases, though. Cal Newport suggests in his book that, "[t]here is, however, an important corollary to this idea: Efforts to deepen your focus will struggle if you don't simultaneously wean your mind from a dependence on distraction." This is where your agency comes in. Know what your needs are. If your job requires you to check your messages and emails frequently, with quick responses, try setting aside 5 minutes of time every 15 minutes to do so, as suggested by Cal Newport. If you can get away with checking your messages twice or three times during the work day, change the frequency. Set aside time for distraction, instead of setting aside time for working free from distraction. We all do better work when we can be dedicated to one thing.

Technology is made to make our lives easier, not to hold us hostage.

In Conclusion,

It would be pointless for us to ignore that distraction is a major part of our world in the modern day. The technologies at hand that provide us with entertainment, connection, and information are important because they have allowed our society to progress. Although, many professionals have abused the opportunities that come with technology to create programs that are addictive to users, hindering their abilities without access to these technologies.

There has been an increase in discussion of the narrative focusing on the negativity that comes with these addictive technologies. But when put into perspective, if we manage how we utilize the technology at hand to our benefit and that alone, the negative implications cannot outweigh the positive. The matter in fact is that if we can take back our human agency, we can become more productive, engage in deeper work, and make meaning out of things that have lost it.

Film was created as a distraction. It is only natural that the people making these films have many different responsibilities to uphold, leaving them with long lists of distractions. But within this, we sacrifice originality and quality at some point. There is a level at which this needs to stop. This paper suggests utilizing the technologies necessary to your job and lifestyle for what you will benefit from. Schedule your time around Deep Work, leaving other time for shallow activities and communication. Some professionals, like Assistant Directors, rely on this constant connection, therefore they personally must schedule the opposite way. It's about the individual's needs and finding a balance. Find your balance and do work that is meaningful to you. Create something magnificent.