

Digital Obesity: Our Latest Pandemic

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Obesity is a global issue, and, according to McKinsey, it's costing an estimated US\$450 billion per year in the US alone, both in terms of healthcare costs and lost productivity.¹³⁰ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stated in 2015 that more than two-thirds of Americans are overweight, and an estimated 35.7% are obese.¹³¹

I believe we are reaching a similar or bigger challenge as we gorge on technology and bring on digital obesity.

I define digital obesity as a mental and technological condition in which data, information, media, and general digital connectedness are being accumulated to such an extent that they are certain to have a negative effect on health, well-being, happiness, and life in general.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, and despite those shocking health factoids, there is still little support globally for stricter regulation of the food industry to curb the use of addiction-building chemical additives, or to stop marketing campaigns that promote overconsumption. In America's never-ending war on drugs, harmful foodstuffs and sugars are never so much as hinted at. Just as organic foods now seem to be largely the preserve of the well-off and wealthy, so too can we expect anonymity and privacy to become expensive luxuries—out of reach for most citizens.

Consumers are buying gadgets and apps that will supposedly help them reduce food consumption and increase fitness, such as the Fitbit, Jawbone, Loseit, and now Hapifork—which alerts you by trembling if you eat too fast—very useful indeed.¹³² It appears the idea is to buy (download) and consume yet another product or service that will miraculously, and without much effort, fix the original problem of overconsumption.

Cravability means prosperity

The obvious bottom line is that the more people eat, the better it is for those who produce and sell our food—for example, growers, food processors, grocery stores, supermarkets, fast-food joints, restaurants, bars, and hotels. In addition, we may be shocked to find that, every year, every consumer in developed countries unwittingly ingests an estimated 150 pounds of additives—mostly sugar, yeast, and antioxidants, as well as truly nasty stuff such as MSG.¹³³ These substances are the lubricants of overconsumption. Not only do they make food prettier and more durable, they also make it taste better—as debatable as that is. Thus consumers are strung along by cleverly engineering a "need-for-more" so that it becomes very hard to find the exit from that kingdom of endless, happy consumption.

If this sounds like Facebook or your smartphone, you are getting my drift. The food industry actually calls this cravability or craveability.¹³⁴ In the world of technology, marketers call it magic, stickiness, indispensability, or more benignly, user engagement.

Craving and addiction-tech's business model

Generating this kind of craving, or fueling our digital addictions in such a seemingly benign way, is clearly a powerful business model.¹³⁵ It is easy to apply the cravability concept to the leading social-local-mobile (SoLoMo) super-nodes such as Google and Facebook, or to platforms such as WhatsApp. Many of us literally crave connectivity as we conduct our daily lives, and when we disconnect we feel incomplete.

Yet somehow, I wonder if it really could be in the interest of big Internet firms that a large number of their users end up with digital obesity issues? Is that really in the best interests of the predomi-

nantly US-owned technology and Internet giants?¹³⁶ At the same time, we should not underestimate the strong temptation to make consumers dependent on these marvelous digital foods—to addict us to that serotonin-producing tsunami of likes, comments, and friend updates.

Think 2020 and imagine billions of hyperconnected consumers becoming digitally obese, hooked on a constant drip of information, media, and data—and their own feedback loops. This is a hugely tantalizing business opportunity that will far surpass the market for global food additives—projected by Transparency Market Research to be worth some US\$28.2 billion by 2018.¹³⁷

For a quick comparison of scale, the World Economic Forum estimates that the cumulative value of digitization could reach US\$100 trillion over the next ten years. They suggest this underscores the opportunity to “create a promising future workforce where people and intelligent machines work together to improve how the world works and lives.”¹³⁸ I admit that I like the idea but fail to see how we could still retain our humanity in such a highly machine-centric society.

Whose responsibility is obesity?

Going back to food, you may ask: If the food industry makes so much money with their slightly (or more covertly) evil approach of addiction and cravability, why bother with those few consumers who can't seem to handle these temptations on their own? Isn't it simply their own fault and responsibility? Who would argue that anyone but the individual consumer should ultimately be responsible for handling their own food consumption? After all, it's a free world, and it's their own free will, right?

The problem is that in the coming era of exponentially increasing information and abundant connectivity, this laissez-faire strategy is unsustainable, precisely because we are only at the pivot on the exponential curve—the biggest shocks have yet to be seen!

The two key challenges are that firstly, digital food is mostly free or very cheap and even more ubiquitously available than physical food—it is distributed and instantly available at next to zero cost. Secondly, there are very few obvious side effects and physical warning signals. Most consumers won't understand what is happening or concern themselves with digital consumption and over-connectivity until it's a very obvious problem such as gaming addiction for teenagers in Korea.¹³⁹ Once you are obese it is very hard to reset your life to a different paradigm.

I believe we urgently need precise yet liquid public policies; new social contracts; global digital health standards; localized, responsive regulations; and deeper responsibility and involvement of marketers and advertisers. Technology providers need to (and I believe many already want to) support a balanced global manifesto of digital rights or digital health, consider proactive self-restraint, and switch to a more holistic business model that really does put people first. Hyperconnectivity above all is certainly not going to be our final destination, just like hyper-efficiency cannot be the sole purpose of business. Putting people first means putting our happiness first, and I would argue it's the only way to create lasting benefits in business as well as in society.

“The difference between technology and slavery is that slaves are fully aware that they are not free” -Nassim Nicholas Taleb¹⁴⁰

A tsunami of data is coming

As the amount of data, information, and media available grows exponentially, so a huge digital obesity challenge is now looming large. We need to take it seriously and tackle it because the digital strain will be even more crippling than physical obesity. There is already way too much communication and information in our lives (in fact, of course, it's infinite), and the paradox of choice is running wild all around us.¹⁴¹

We are presented with a fire hose of possibilities, all the time, anywhere, and they are way too tasty, too cheap, and too rich. Not a single day goes by without yet another service offering us more updates from our increasing number of friends; more ways to be disrupted by incessant notifications on pretty much any platform—witness the growing popularity of smartwatches, which are now selling more units than Swiss watches.¹⁴² We are facing exponential growth in consumption options—more news; more music; more movies; more, better, and cheaper mobile devices; and seemingly total social connectivity.

We are drowning in a sea of apps—for dating, for divorces, for reporting potholes, even (as we have seen) for monitoring diapers.¹⁴³ Were under 24/7 assault from location-based alerts and communications such as iBeacons, digital coupons, new ways to send and receive messages at zero cost, 500 million tweets

per day,¹⁴⁴ 400 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute,¹⁴⁵ and the list goes on and on. A veritable tsunami of input and it's dishing up abundance on the outside, but creating scarcity or a lack of meaning on the inside. In other words, we have increasingly more options at lower cost, but we are more worried about missing out, about "what we could have done"—all the time. Where is this going?

Abundance outside, scarcity inside-bicycles for the mind or bullets for the soul?

We are bombarded with information input, and by and large we are pigging out as we once did at the US\$9.99 all-you-can-eat Las Vegas buffets. The overlords of digital nourishment are of course the likes of Google and its Chinese counterparts Baidu and Alibaba. Google's genius lies in creating a seamless heaven (or at least a kingdom) of cross-consumption drawn from a huge number of very sticky and viral platforms such as Gmail, Google Maps, Google+, Google Now, YouTube, Android, and Google Search.

The Google universe is so hyper-efficient, so convenient, and so addictive that it is threatening to become utterly fattening for our brains, eyes, ears, and even our hearts and souls. I like to refer to this as the abundance outside/scarcity inside problem and as the bicycles for the mind or bullets for the soul dilemma: At the same time that our minds are gaining a kind of warp-speed because they are powered by Google et al., our arteries are clogged with all the junk that comes with these nonstop digital feasts, and our hearts are heavy with too many meaningless relationships and mediated connections that only exist on screens.

If indeed "Google knows me better than my wife," we must surely start to consider who is serving whom.¹⁴⁶ Is digital obesity designed into the system, is it more of a hidden agenda, or is it simply an unintended consequence of those very few entities that are now ruling our digital lives?

"We become, neurologically, what we think" -Nicholas Carr¹⁴⁷

"The more a sufferer concentrates on his symptoms, the deeper those symptoms are etched into his neural circuits," writes Nicholas Carr in *What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*:

In the worst cases, the mind essentially trains itself to be sick. Many addictions, too, are reinforced by the strengthening of plastic pathways to the brain. Even very small doses of addictive drugs can dramatically alter the flow of neurotransmitters in a person's synapses, resulting in long-lasting alterations in brain circuitry and function. In some cases, the buildup of certain kinds of neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, a pleasure-producing cousin to adrenaline, seems to actually trigger the turning on or off of particular genes, bringing even stronger cravings for the drug. The vital path turns deadly.¹⁴⁸

New interfaces such as augmented and virtual reality add to the challenge

Achieving a balanced digital diet will become even harder as connectivity, devices, and applications become exponentially cheaper and faster, and as interfaces to information are reinvented. We'll go from reading or watching screens, to speaking to machines, to merely thinking to direct them. In short, we'll journey from GUI to NUI (graphical user interface to natural user interface).

At some point in the not-so-distant future we may have to consider the ultimate question: Do we now live inside the machine, or does the machine live inside of us?

Data is the new oil: pay or become the content

It has been said many times before but it deserves repeating: Data is truly becoming the new oil. Those companies feeding off big data and the so-called networked society are swiftly becoming the next ExxonMobils, eagerly providing the new opium for the masses: digital food, total connectivity, powerful mobile devices, free content, Social, Local and Mobile (SoLoMo) superglue from the cloud via bots, and intelligent digital assistants (IDA). They provide the nourishment that we—the people formerly known as consumers—are in fact creating and sharing ourselves through our mere presence and participation.¹⁴⁹

Yet most of us are getting very comfortable inside these beautifully walled gardens from Google, Facebook, Weibo, LinkedIn, and many others. We are consuming as much as we can while willingly becoming the food for others. As author Scott Gibson recently stated on the Forbes blog, "If you don't pay, you become the content."¹⁵⁰ We are stuffing each other in unprecedented ways, and much of it is incredibly enriching, satisfying, and addictive. But is this a Nirvana, a clever Faustian Bargain, or a recipe for disaster? Or does it all depend on who is doing the asking?

The 2020 horizon for digital obesity

Cisco predicts that by 2020, 52% of the global population will be connected to the Internet—around four billion human users.¹⁵¹ By then, every single piece of information, every picture, every video, every kernel of data, every location, and every uttering by every connected human is likely to be monitored, collected, connected, and refined into media, big data, and business intelligence. Artificial intelligence (AI) powered by quantum cognitive computers will generate mind-boggling insights from zettabytes (one sextillion $(10^{21})/2^{70}$ bytes) of real time data. Nothing will remain unobserved for very long.

Clearly, this could be heaven if you are a marketer, a vendor of the tools that handle those tasks, an over-eager government agency, or just a super-geek. Or it could be hell given the distinct possibility that the very same super-charged information will also enable perpetual global surveillance, as the Snowden revelations have made painfully obvious since 2013.¹⁵²

Not only might we be obese with information, we will also be naked—not a pretty picture!

No longer "if we can," but "if we should"

I predict the question of whether technology can do something will soon be replaced by the more relevant question of whether we should do what technology now affords us, and why. This is already true for many recent innovations and trends such as social media, the quantified self, Google Glass, 3D printing, or the supposedly imminent Singularity (see chapter 1).

Put in the context of digital obesity, the bottom line is this: Just because all of this media, data, knowledge, and even wisdom is becoming instantly and freely available, do we need to soak in it at all times? Do we really need an app to tell us where the music section is located; do we really need to cross-check our genomes before we go on a date; and do we really need to count our steps so that our fitness status can be updated on a social network?

From "more is better" to "less is best"

Finally, it comes down to this: As with food, where obesity is more obvious, we urgently need to find a personal balance in our digital diet. We must define when, what, and how much information we connect to and eat. When must we reduce our intake, take time to digest, be in the moment, or even stay hungry? Yes, there is a real business opportunity here as well: Offline is the new luxury.

I believe that in the next few years, our digital consumption habits will transition from the traditional offline and Internet 1.0 "more is better" paradigm to the concept of "less is best." In striking that crucial balance between ignorant and omniscient—since neither extreme is desirable—we may want to take our lead from Albert Einstein, when he said, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler."¹⁵³