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We're suffering from 'infobesity' - here's how to control the never-ending scroll

Feeling overwhelmed by the torrent of news? Author Julia Hobsbawm reveals how she stopped her mind – and smartphone – whirring

By Julia Hobsbawm
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I've been up in the middle of the night lately checking for news of the coronavirus, avidly and anxiously switching between news websites, Twitter, Facebook, and a number of WhatsApp groups. I don't mind admitting this has often been at 3am, that hour of sudden waking followed by the dull dread that this situation is real. Click. Click. Tap, tap on the digital dance floor, moving soundlessly from one corner of the internet to the other.

A little voice tells me to stop and breathe calmly to get back to sleep but my mind is now whirring. I carry on clicking way after there is nothing else to know. My fingers keep dancing. Suddenly I am reminded of when I used to smoke, or binge on biscuits, and that twitchy feeling of never being full, never really feeling satisfied. In other words: addictive, unhealthy behaviour.

I allowed myself a week of this but now I'm practising not just social distancing but something else – social health.

The World Health Organization has always included 'social well-being' in its definition of health, but back in 1948 when it came into being, that meant poverty and social class. Now, the word 'social' has taken on a new dimension, from social distancing to social media, as we try to stay connected. But this doesn't mean we shouldn't keep control, even in these anxious times.



Julia Hobsbawm: "Isn't the torrent of news, views, clicks and shares we gorge on all day long a different kind of obesity – infobesity?" | CREDIT: Gary Doak/Eyevine

Research from Ofcom in 2018 showed we pick up our phones once every 12 minutes – or 80 times a day; a global pandemic is a good reason to want to check more often but it is also a perfect excuse to panic. We know our brains respond to the short-term dopamine ‘reward’ hit, which is now built into the design by social media organisations and apps. The price we pay for all of this digital gorging is rising stress levels, social anxiety and, in business terms, less – not more – productivity. The workplace has become dominated by technology with an endless medley of ‘reply all’ emails or project management ‘tools’ like Slack, which drain energy and perpetuate the myth that multitasking is a good thing. It actually isn’t. In fact, research* shows that it takes about 20 minutes to regain concentration after we come offline.

How different is this constant online snacking from the way we overeat sugar or abuse alcohol? If we overeat, we become overweight. Isn't the torrent of news, views, clicks and shares we gorge on all day long a different kind of obesity – infobesity?

We were first warned about ‘information overload’ in the 1970s, when computers began to enter our lives. Back then, they were kept away from us in a ‘server room’, but gradually, they have become totally embedded in our everyday existence: first edging to a desktop, then a laptop and now, in the fully connected internet age, to the smartphones in our hand – perfect for constant snacking.

Just like food, the internet and being connected is of course vital. You can stop smoking or drinking alcohol, hard though that may be. But you have to eat. The same is true of being connected. So what's to be done? I decided to tackle my social health in the same way as I do my physical and mental health and, to my surprise, found that the solutions were both simple and connected.

What we know about obesity is that it can be brought under control by a change in behaviour, which is generally a mix of awareness, motivation and mindset. In other words, you have to notice the problem, you have to want to do something about it and you have to create new habits. The first step is to acknowledge that itchy, addicted urge to constantly check, pick up, distract.

From well before the current crisis, the solution was to focus on what I needed to do more of, not less. So rather than counting how much time I was online or on my smartphone in bed, I started to ring-fence times when I did things which did not involve a keyboard. So, when I was at home, I tried to use my hands to do anything but scroll or type. Now that I am at home almost all the time, it is tempting to endlessly connect with people via WhatsApp – but I prefer to create mini time zones to do this, and instead listen to music or gain unexpected relief from tidying and cleaning.

It's rather like the nesting instinct at the end of pregnancy: I'm finding it calming to declutter cupboards and sweep away metaphorical cobwebs of non-essential things. I made a point of switching to notebooks, hard-copy magazines and books instead of my Kindle, and when I do go online, I set timers, and treat it like going to a place for a fixed period of time.

But the real breakthrough for moving away from the digital life to the physical life came with exercise. I upped my workouts to six days a week and began to do spin classes, where I could put my phone in a locker for an hour and transport my head and body somewhere else entirely. While they're suspended, I've been exercising at home – not touching my phone – and the motivation, energy and physicality are the most incredible antidote to being 'always on'.

Tackling infobesity starts with entrenching new habits. Part of the problem of the 'always on' era is that it blurs the boundary between our home and professional selves. We dip in and out of communication, zig-zagging to and fro in what has been called 'the infinite scroll' – a digital design dreamed up by humans working fiendishly hard with algorithms to get us to keep clicking and keep connected. To over-consume the news, the views, and to share, share and share again.

The neuroscience of addictive behaviour shows that the human brain is wired both to like lots of distraction and to like new things, while also being incredibly sensitive to excessive stimulation. The result is a tightrope – connection on one side, overload on the other – with burnout waiting perilously beneath us.



CREDIT: Edible artwork by The Cakestore. Photography by Light Project Photography

Our neural circuits are just like electronic wiring, in that we can stay connected and keep the current flowing, but we risk melting down if we don't learn how to switch off and power down. The good news is that our brains are incredibly adaptable. Neuroplasticity means we can lay down new cables of connection in our thoughts and actions, to refresh and override the ones causing us harm. In other words, we can change the way this stuff is controlling our lives. I definitely feel that by simplifying my relationship with technology, I simplified other areas of my life too. I discovered that learning to focus and mono-task brings a kind of serenity.

I suspect that the war on infobesity will be never-ending, but I have learnt that, by taking much more conscious control of my digital life, I feel freer – no longer a slave to the screen and the scroll.

Even in this time of pandemic, when of course we have to be online more, we can insist on a new normal – to have limits, boundaries and self-control.

How to fight infobesity

Try to pay attention when you touch any kind of screen. Notice what pulls you in, so you can decide how and when you want to pull back.

Take exercise: walking and listening to a podcast or music is fine – just no texting, scrolling or looking at your smartphone.

Focus on what you can do, in small, positive ways, rather than criticising yourself when you don't do it right.

Use a notebook for your 'to-do lists', so you start to rely on your hands in the oldfashioned way, as tools to think and write, not mindlessly scroll.

List the digital 'foods' you want to avoid or consume less of. Is it Instagram, Facebook or WhatsApp? Can you turn off notifications and turn on screen time checks?

'The Simplicity Principle' by Julia Hobsbawm ([Kogan Page](#), £14.99) is out on Friday.

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