

TEXTE

Technology is unruly. New innovations bring with them a host of unintended consequences, ranging from the troubling to the downright depressing. Social media makes us lonely. Too much screen-time makes teenagers fall behind their peers. And at the more feeble end of the spectrum, many of us have walked into an obstacle while texting. Whatever glorious vision animates the moguls of Silicon Valley, it surely can't be this.

5 We're much better at designing complex systems than we are at predicting their behaviour, argues the writer Edward Tenner. Even though unintended consequences are inevitable, Tenner thinks they can be powerful catalysts for progress. But even the notion of an "intended consequence" is problematic when it comes to tech. Evgeny Morozov points out that we tend to confuse the positive consequences of information technology with intended ones, downplaying the significance of other natural, but rather less noble, upshots like pornography, surveillance and authoritarian control.

Free time is a case in point. Technology makes us more productive, but it's also accused of unreasonably extending the domain of work. So does tech liberate us, or enslave us? And what does it really "intend" to do? In 1930, the economist John Maynard Keynes predicted that the most pressing concern of the man of the future would be "how to occupy the leisure which science and compound interest will have won for him." It hasn't quite turned out that way – but Keynes wasn't entirely off the mark. When we consider the lot of the average labourer of the past, our complaints about work-life balance start to sound pretty peevish. And the rise of technology really has, it seems, given us more free time than ever. So why do we still feel harried ?

It's worth noting that modern leisure is just as tech-saturated as work. Americans who subscribe to Netflix spend more time on the site than they do eating and having sex combined, TDG research found. The average Briton spends 1 hour 20 minutes every day monitoring four social media accounts, according to research from the Global Web Index. But all this screen-time makes us uneasy. To co-opt David Foster Wallace's description of attitudes to television in the 1990s, there's a "weird hate-need-fear-6-hrs-daily gestalt" about the whole thing. But technology doesn't just offer us escape. It promises to transfigure our bodies, our minds and our very souls by making us fitter, happier, and more productive - but it does it by insinuating that we're, well, a bit suboptimal as we are. "There's an app for that" comes with a whispered aside: "You know you're doing it wrong, right?"

Criticisms of tech can sound shrill, but it's not antediluvian to notice the impossible desires technology breeds. Our devices present us with simulacra of beautiful, fit, fulfilled people pursuing their dreams and falling in love, and none of them are browsing the web at 11pm on a Saturday night - unlike us. We click and swipe our woebegone way through a vibrant world where nobody whois anybody spends their free time in front of a glowing screen, painfully aware that our only access to that world is through that very glowing screen. But we're no fools. We know that nothing on the web is as it seems. We long to detach ourselves from the whole circus once and for all - and so we turn once again to the internet to research digital detoxes and vent our tech-related spleen. The web has a way of dancing around us, knowingly and self-referentially and maddeningly deflecting every attempt we make to express our unease.

35 But prying our free time from the clutches of technology isn't necessarily the answer. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno argued that "free time" is an artificial concept – and it's anything but free. For Adorno, free time is the very prorogation of work: it is "nothing more than a shadowy continuation of labour". Today's tech-saturated leisure trade – to say nothing of the trillion-dollar behemoth that is the "wellness industry" – is an integral part of a world in which we are treated as consumers first and citizens second. Talk of reclaiming free time is missing the point. What we need is control of the time we already have. [...] We love to praise tech, and we love to condemn it. We equate it with chaos, power, love, hate; with democracy, with tyranny, with progress and regress - we laud it as our salvation, while lamenting it as our scourge. Like any technology that has come before it, digital technology is all of these things. But it's essentially none of them.