Is Technology Amplifying Human Potential, or Amusing Ourselves to Death?
by Tristan Harris

When I was about five years old, my mom gave me a Macintosh LC II and I was hooked–not to Facebook or the Internet, they didn't exist yet, but to what it enabled a five year old kid to do that I could never do before.

Like the brilliant technical visionaries of the 70's and 80's at Xerox PARC like Doug Engelbart, Ted Nelson, Alan Kay at Xerox PARC or Steve Jobs, I optimistically believed computers could be "bicycles for our minds" and amplify human potential.

And they did empower us.

But today, in the year 2015, "empowerment" rarely feels like my day to day experience with technology. Instead I feel constantly lured into distractions. I get sucked endlessly into email, distracting websites. I get bulldozed by interruptive text messages, back and forth scheduling, or find myself scrolling a website in a trance at 1am.

I feel like I'm caught in a whirlpool of "Amusing Ourselves to Death," as Neil Postman predicted 30 years ago, where he contrasts George Orwell's vision for the future (Big Brother) with Aldous Huxley's vision in Brave New World in which people "come to adore the technologies that would undo their capacities to think."

In Postman's own words:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books.
What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.

Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information.
Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism.

Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us.
Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.

Orwell feared we would become a captive culture.
Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture ....

As Huxley remarked ... [they] "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions."

– Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death (1982)

Scary how true it feels today, right?

What Huxley is really concerned about, are the things that overwhelmingly seduce our psychological instincts. Not that we should vilify them, but that we should notice how powerful they are and how they might get abused.

Just like we have built-in gustatory instincts for salt, sugar and fat that are actually incredibly useful biases to have, but get abused by our modern food environment, Huxley knew we have built-in psychological instincts for paying attention to our social acceptance & rejection, reciprocity, fear of missing something important, or our extraordinary addiction to looking at cute kittens. These psychological instincts arereally useful to have, but our media environment adversarially exploits these instincts.

How did it get this way?

It's because we live in an attention economy.

An attention economy means that no matter what you aim to make (an app or a website), you win by getting people to spend time. So what starts as an honest competition to make useful things that people spend their time on, must devolve into a ruthless competition to seduce our deepest instincts to get more of people's time – a race to the bottom of the brain stem.

The problem is, to fix it, you can't ask anyone who's in that competition NOT to maximize the time their users spend. Because someone else (another app, or another website) will swoop in and siphon that time away to them instead.

In fact, let's say there's some users who regret a portion of the time they spend on a certain website and would love to have that website on their team to help them spend less time on it. Could that website help?

No. It's that website's job to keep their users playing and clicking, lest their competitor come in to take that attention elsewhere.

So we're not going to get out of this situation, or convince those apps or websites to do something else until we create a new kind of competition – until there's a newthing apps and websites can compete for.

And what if we could make that? What if instead of competing to get us to spend time, apps and websites were competing to help us spend our time well? What if they competed to create net positive contributions to people's lives?

I don't want to be distracted anymore. I want a world that helps me spend my time well.

And that's the conversation I want to start with the "Design for Time Well Spent" movement (http://timewellspent.io) I've spent the last several years thinking about Design Ethics, and the moral responsibility of designers to be careful about the billions of minutes and hours of other people's lives they affect.

But we've got to get real about how "responsible" designers can really be, when that comes into conflict with the competition they're forced to play in.

We need something like an Organic label, to certify new products as being of a different kind, and to reward those designers for being on people's team to help them spend their time well.

This is a long road, but we can do it. We'll need a new marketplace, with premium shelf space in App Stores, browsers and news feeds that make a distinction between the things that are all about helping people spend time well vs. the ones that don't, and we'll need to make it easier to route people to those choices.

Let's start that conversation now. Because I want a world where technology IS about amplifying human potential again, and where I can trust-fall into the whirlpool of technology and know that it IS on my team to help me spend my time, and my life, well.