

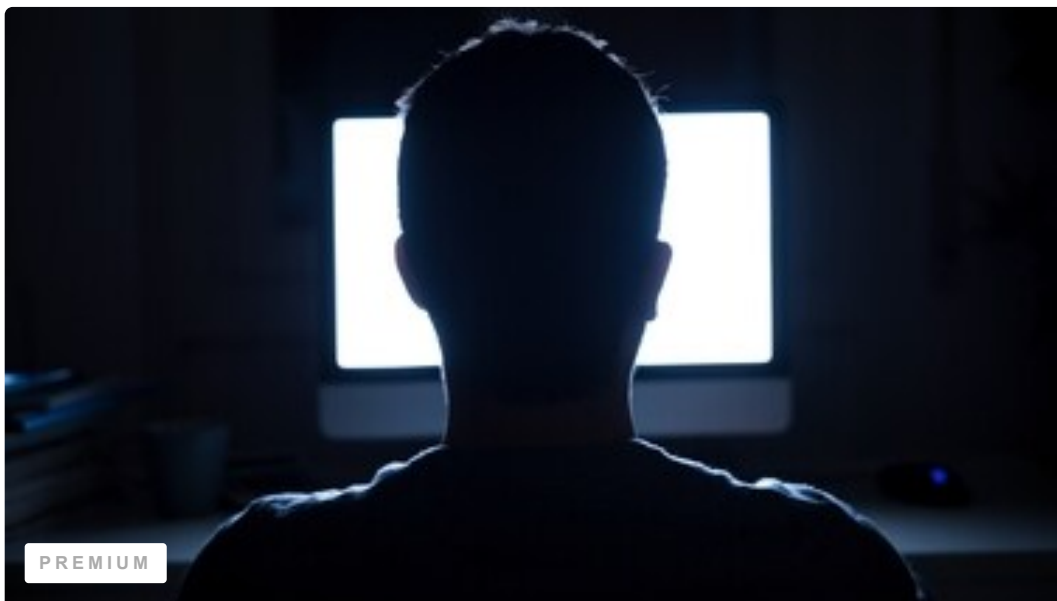
# The three Cs to resolve our poverty of attention

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Cricket

We live in an age of magical technology; but it is leaving us burnt out. Separating the digital environments for our Create, Curate and Communicate modes can help rediscover peace in the digital world



Many people try to get around this by separating their digital lives into work and personal. But these boundaries don't really help us in controlling our attention. (Shutterstock)

He who chases two hares, catches neither.

This adage is so old, we can neither be sure who said it first nor when. All we do know is that it rings just as true today. It is not that our ancestors couldn't enjoy two rabbits, they just understood that they had to get them one at a time.

We live in an age of magical technology and abundant information. News that would've taken months to reach our ancestors, reaches us in seconds. Tasks that would've taken half a day to do, now happen in minutes. And then,

there are ideas that were difficult to imagine even a decade ago (and still have many scratching their heads today) — like a currency with no coins or notes, issued and controlled by no one, just entries on a ledger distributed on many, many computers.

Our reality today is in many ways richer than the imaginations that science fiction writers could dream up. However, they say that a good science fiction writer is not one who predicts the automobile, but one who predicts the traffic jam.

Herbert Simon, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, could've moonlighted as a science fiction writer. When asked, in 1971, about the information age, he offered a prescient observation, “What information consumes is rather obvious: It consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

Most of us are no longer chasing hares, but other hairy goals. Like Simon predicted, blessed with a wealth of information, we've all been cursed with a poverty of attention. Especially in the pandemic-induced work-from-home revolution, far too many of us have reported feeling burnt out or overworked. The most common complaint we heard while writing our new book was that people felt they “can't switch off”.

To understand why, we need to ask what's really changed.

Even in 1971, ie, before the internet, the volume of books, periodicals, radio and TV shows available was far greater than our capacity to consume them. But, back then, to get the information you needed, you had to go to it. If you were

working at your desk in the office, you'd need to go to the watercooler for gossip. Today, tools like Slack do both.

Put differently, the barriers between our different information sources have almost completely vanished. You could be reading up on the new mutation to the spike protein of the Covid-19 virus in one moment, and be sending Shark Tank memes the next. Notifications exacerbate this problem because they demand your attention be redirected at someone else's will.

Many people try to get around this by separating their digital lives into work and personal. But these boundaries don't really help us in controlling our attention. Our email, while it is work, can also be a significant distraction from our most important goals. Foregoing our devices may sound like a good idea, but it makes our lives incredibly inconvenient. In our new book, *The Art of Bitfulness*, we try to offer a simple way out of this problem.

Our ability to focus our attention is inversely proportional to the information presented to us by our environment. In the physical world, this is obvious. Imagine you had to study for an important exam, would you choose a loud party or a quiet library? In our digital environments though, we forget this simple idea. Our smartphones are configured to be everything to us all the time.

There are essentially three modes of attention that all of us seem to switch between — Create, Curate and Communicate. The Create mode is when we are trying to hunker down and focus on one thing. Curate is when we're consuming information for inspiration rather than creation.

You want your attention to wander to what is interesting rather than what is important.

Communicate mode is when we're trying to be managerial about the information we receive. Replying to emails or texts, where we don't want to get dragged into the depths of an issue, but still be on top of it.

It is possible to create three different digital environments, each of which is more conducive to the kind of attention you need for the task at hand. It could be as simple as separating your devices — a laptop for Create mode, your phone for Communicate mode and a tablet for Curate mode. Or you could use different identities on the same device — one login for Create and another for Communicate.

This way, when you're in one mode, you can't slip into the other. Our book details how you can set these up, and make sure these boundaries stay intact.

However, there's a subtle point to this separation that is often lost in our desire to be "always on". There's no hierarchy between these modes, nor a prescription for how much time one should spend in each. We just want people to be able to pick a mode, and stick to it, without depending on their discipline or willpower.

We don't recommend splitting attention modes so that you are more productive. We advocate it because it brings peace. If you are calm, productivity follows.

We want to share with you the experience of one of our beta readers who implemented this system. He is a CEO of

an up and coming startup, and hence, his phone is always buzzing with email, WhatsApp and Slack notifications.

During the lockdowns, he and his equally busy wife had one bonding ritual — watching Netflix on their projector and eating popcorn. However, whenever he had to pause the series for a break, he would check notifications, and to the chagrin of his wife, get pulled into his phone.

But after separating Curate from Communicate, he now says that when he switches off from work, he actually does switch off. He told us that this little trick, not only saved his attention, but also his relationship.

*Nandan Nilekani and Tanuj Bhojwani are co-authors of the book [The Art of Bitfulness: Keeping Calm in the Digital World](#)*

*The views expressed are personal*