



## CONTINUOUS PARTIAL ATTENTION AND THE DEMISE OF DISCRETIONARY TIME

BY PETER W. PRUYN

**demise, n.:** the end of something that used to exist, especially when it happens slowly and predictably.

**L**eaving work at the end of the day, I turn the corner to the long front hallway of my office building. Ahead of me, I see a woman carrying a stack of three medium-sized boxes. Farther down the hallway in front of her are the large metal fire doors through which one must pass on the way into and out of the building.

Just before she reaches the doors, the woman's cell phone rings. She shifts the boxes awkwardly to one arm and digs for the phone in her purse with the other. Precariously balancing the boxes, she answers the call while continuing to approach the doors. She opens the doors by backing into them—while carrying the boxes and while talking on her cell phone. She manages to make it through without dropping anything.

Let's think about this snippet of reality for a moment. What made the act of opening the doors more difficult than usual was that the woman did so while doing two other things at once. By either momentarily standing still and resting the boxes on the long counter than runs the length of the hallway, or letting the call go to voice-

mail, she could have made that moment much easier for herself.

So why didn't she?

Perhaps she didn't stop because she was in a hurry. Perhaps she was expecting an important call. Or perhaps—Dr. Watson might posit—the important call was from the person to whom she was late in delivering the boxes.

**What does it take for any of us to have the awareness that our behavior is not only a function of habit, but that we might benefit from revising that habit?**

I see this situation as a marvelous confluence of unremarkable habits. The habits in question might be characterized as:

*Habit #1:* When you reach a door, walk through it.

*Habit #2:* When carrying something, put it down only when you reach its destination.

*Habit #3:* When the phone rings, answer it.

To be sure, nothing untoward came of this moment. The woman successfully negotiated the doors without dropping anything. Nevertheless, the ingredients of this moment—habit, technology, and workload—can have far more severe consequences when our responsibilities involve more than cardboard.

In the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore offers one explanation as to why society has been so slow to address the issue of climate change. He uses two equations to show what happens when creatures of habit

use rapidly advancing technology:

*old technology + old habits =*

*predictable consequences*

*new technology + old habits =*

*dramatically altered consequences*

For example, as petroleum-based products proliferate while our habits of consuming them go unchecked, we can harm something as large as a planet. Could there be similar unintended consequences from the proliferation of personal communications technologies? Is our attention becoming polluted, too?

A prerequisite for choice is awareness. What does it take for any of us to have the awareness that our behavior is not only a function of habit, but that we might benefit from revising that habit? At least in part, it takes attention.

### The Limits of Multi-Tasking

Walking down the street recently, I was struck by the fact that the majority of people I passed were talking on their cell phones. What's it like to talk with someone as he is navigating a crowd? How often have you called a friend and partway through the conversation realized that she was paying attention to something other than you? You might notice longer pauses in her responses, or hear "Uh-huh" when you expect a "Yes" or "No."

I recently wondered out loud to a neighbor how the younger generation can get their homework done while watching television. She immediately corrected me: "You mean while watching television, listening to their iPods, surfing the internet, and text-messaging on their cell phones." She was not exaggerating. Perhaps this simply means that her children are in training to be the Olympic multi-taskers that our modern world

### TEAM TIP

Look at how continuous partial attention manifests in your organization and consider simple habits you and your group can change to improve the quality of your attention to issues that matter.

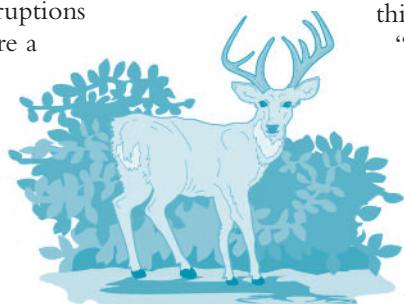
demands. But while multi-tasking has its place, science shows that it is not always prudent.

Researchers have found that driving while using a cell phone measurably impairs driver reaction time—even using a hands-free device. Despite the popular perception that younger people are better at multi-tasking, University of Utah psychology professor David Strayer asserts that, “If you put a 20-year-old driver behind the wheel with a cell phone, his reaction times are the same as a 70-year-old driver.”

Further research by neuroscientists, psychologists, and management professors reveals the limits of our ability to multi-task. Despite the amazing capacity of the human brain, “a core limitation is an inability to concentrate on two things at once,” observed one neuroscientist quoted in the *New York Times*. Using magnetic resonance imaging to pinpoint the bottleneck in the brain, researchers can actually measure how much efficiency is lost when a person tries to handle two tasks at once. “Multitasking is going to slow you down, increasing the chances of mistakes,” says David E. Meyer, a cognitive scientist and director of the Brain, Cognition and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan. He continues, “Disruptions and interruptions are a bad deal from the standpoint of our ability to process information.”

The insidious part is that we don’t notice our own impairment. We are under the impression that our brain can do more than it is capable of. The penalty is not merely our quality of attention while executing tasks but a hampered ability to refocus for the next task. After conducting such studies, some researchers have modified their own behavior to commit to not using their cell phones while driving and only checking their email once an hour.

What? Checking email only once an hour? Doesn’t that sabotage the whole point of having high-speed internet in the first place?



## Continuous Partial Attention

In 1998, Linda Stone, a former Apple and Microsoft executive, coined a phrase that gives a name to the crux of our technology-enabled addiction to information: “continuous partial attention.” Through the miniaturization and proliferation of wireless technologies, we now have the ability to become “a node on the network” in order “not to miss anything.” With the world continually at our fingertips, the internet provides an opportunity for the perpetual instant gratification of information and, conversely, a perpetual lack of delaying gratification.

**Stone described one consequence of becoming habituated to drinking from this fire hose of information “an artificial sense of constant crisis.”**

In a keynote address at the ETech Conference several years back, Stone described one consequence of becoming habituated to drinking from this fire hose of information as “an artificial sense of constant crisis.” And since most of these crises are somewhere else, “We [are] everywhere except where we actually [are] physically.” A friend of mine has labeled this lifestyle “adrenaline soup.”

Let’s contrast the act of using a Blackberry (or “Crackberry,” as some call them) on the subway for a moment with its mental opposite. What is going on in the mind of, say, an athlete tracking a ball, a surgeon incising with a scalpel, or an artist staring at a blank canvas, brush poised? What can we learn from these moments of unadulterated focus? My sense is that such mental states are the source of our greatest creativity. As the author Bill Isaacs once wrote, “Truth is like a deer that comes to stand at the edge of the woods to drink. If you make too much

noise, it runs away. How quiet are you?”

What quality of attention is required to effectively balance not cardboard boxes, but, say, family relationships? How does being habituated to multi-tasking affect one’s response to a spouse coming home from work upset? What if the solution to the greatest dilemma of your marriage is only one brain synapse away—but that synapse is busy watching TV?

On a community level, could the overload of perpetual crisis management hinder civic engagement or even the quality of decision-making at the national level? Omar Bradley surely could not have foreseen our technological dilemmas, but his counsel from 1948 seems no less appropriate: “It is time that we steered by the stars, not by the lights of each passing ship.” Sixty years later, Linda Stone elaborates seamlessly: “It’s crucial for CEOs to be intentional about breaking free from continuous partial attention in order to get their bearings. Some of today’s business books suggest that speed is the answer to today’s business challenges. Pausing to reflect, focus, think a problem through; and then taking steady steps forward in an intentional direction is really the key.”

## Discretionary Time

We are all familiar with the phrase “discretionary income,” income that is left over after one’s basic needs have been met, money that you have choice in deciding how to spend. One might propose the analogue of “discretionary time,” the adult’s version of a “free period” during our day. I fear our discretionary time is eroding.

Indications of this trend are subtle. How often do we have dinner parties any more? How many of your friends still send Christmas cards? When you telephone, how often do you get voicemail as opposed to an answer? When you ask someone, “How are you?” how often is the traditional “Fine” replaced with “Busy”?

We can also observe reactions to these trends. One CEO asks managers to leave cell phones and PDAs at the conference room door as a pre-emptive measure against the so-called “Blackberry prayer” during meetings.

Some businesses are experimenting with one “No eMail Day” per week to encourage more personal interaction. If my experience during a recent unscheduled network outage is any indication, forced to leave their computers, employees actually do start talking to one another.

As discretionary time decreases, socializing becomes more a function of deliberate planning rather than spontaneity. Book clubs are one attempt to fill that void. Meanwhile, other rising trends include massage, yoga, meditation, and Buddhism. Sociologist Alain de Vulpian characterizes these trends as “the immense movement toward social therapy that seeks to relieve society’s aches and pains.”

Wouldn’t our lives be more fulfilling if we built incremental relaxation and reflection into our lives rather than relegating such practices to a self-contained activity a few times a week—if at all? Such “healing arts” are at risk of being band aids, enabling unsustainable lifestyles—“cognitive carpal tunnel syndrome”—for ourselves and our children.

A local environmental activist helps homeowners conserve energy by utilizing a variety of household efficiencies. When asked what behaviors people are most reluctant to change for the sake of conservation, at the top of the list is taking shorter showers; she reports, “A number of people feel like their shower time is a rare spot of quiet and relaxation in a busy life and just don’t want to give their lingering showers up.”

Likewise, I know a middle manager who commutes an hour to work each way. When asked why she bucks the trend of her peers by choosing not to own a Blackberry, she says, “I want that time at the red light to be mine!”

Is that what our discretionary time has shrunk to, the duration of showers and red lights?

### Awareness at the Counter

As I wait at the counter of my local photocopy shop, a well-dressed young woman walks into the store while talking on her cell phone. She holds out two documents to the owner of

the store and asks her to make copies of them.

A minute later, the owner returns with the copies and says, “Seventy-four cents, please.” The young woman, still on her cell phone, hands the owner a credit card. The owner looks at the card and says to the young woman, “I’m not going to run a credit card for 74 cents.” The young woman looks perplexed. She says into her cell phone, “Just a second . . .” and says to the owner, “What?” The owner slowly repeats herself: *“I’m not going to run a credit card for 74 cents.”*

Now understanding, the young woman rummages through her purse for some change. She comes up empty-handed. “I don’t have any cash,” she reports matter-of-factly.

“Well, why don’t you come back when you have some,” the owner declares definitively and hands the woman’s original documents back to her. The young woman, unfazed, returns to her cell phone conversation, zips up her purse, and leaves the store.

As the door closes behind her, the owner stares after her a moment and then exclaims to no one in particular, “Have we lost something? Have we lost something?”

### Seeding the Conversation

“That which we do not bring to consciousness appears in our lives as fate.”

— Carl Jung

I am no less human than anyone else, no less susceptible to the allure of “continuous partial attention.” My mouse-wrist hurts, and I had to turn off my “You’ve Got Mail” beep multiple times in the course of writing this article.

No, I don’t want to go back to horses and buggies. We can’t “go back.” I acknowledge the wonders of our technology: unparalleled access and ability to make connections that would otherwise be highly unlikely. For example, the internet allowed me to find references for writing this piece in the blink of an eye and to share drafts with others who contributed even more. I’m just concerned that the price we are paying for more personal

connections in our lives is that each connection is of less depth.

I want us to unplug, stop, and think: What are the long-term consequences of the trio of habit, technology, and workload? Where will our future athletes, surgeons, and artists come from if our children have no practice with the pure attention upon which such disciplines rely? My intention is to seed this conversation, not provide “the” answer. But I think a piece of the puzzle will be managing these technologies out of awareness rather than habit.

To be sure, socio-economic status, lifestyle, and locale all influence these dynamics. When I introduced the phrase “continuous partial attention” to the father of a two-year-old, he said, “That’s being a parent.” Parenting duties notwithstanding, these are not merely the concerns of alarmists: Experts in child development are mobilizing against the demise of reading just as the toy industry is gearing up for computers for toddlers.

I consider this the single most important issue of our time. Many consider it to be global warming, but I see the habit of continuous partial attention as more significant because it is the “meta problem”: It affects how well we go about solving all problems—if we even recognize them at all.

The amount of discretionary time in our lives limits the quality of our attention; the quality of our attention limits the quality of our awareness; the quality of our awareness limits the possibility of evolving our habits. Without the possibility of attention, we risk becoming prisoners of our own making. ■

“There is more to life than increasing its speed.”

— Gandhi

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