

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:00:00 Today's episode of Hidden Forces is made possible by listeners like you. For more information about this week's episode or for easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode, transcripts and show rundowns full of links and detailed information related to each and every episode, check out our premium subscription, available through the Hidden Forces website or through our Patreon page.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:00:34 Remember if you listen to the show on your Apple podcast app, you can give us a review. Each review helps more people find the show and join our amazing community. And with that, please enjoy this week's episode.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:00:51 It is in the first chapter of Walden, titled "Economy," that the transcendentalist author and essayist, Henry David Thoreau, famously tells us that, "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." "But men labor under a mistake," he writes earlier, "the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man's existence." And so, Thoreau went to the woods. "I wished to live deliberately," he said, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life. Living is so dear."
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:01:40 What is often missed in Thoreau's reflections from his two-year excursion into the woodlands of Concord, Massachusetts, is the rigor with which he calculated, measured and weighed those essential facts of life. Philosopher Frédéric Gros calls Thoreau's new economics a theory that builds on an axiom which Thoreau establishes early in Walden: "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life, which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately, or in the long run. The striking thing with Thoreau," writes Gro, "is not the actual content of the argument. After all, sages in earliest antiquity had already proclaimed their contempt for possessions. What impresses is the form of the argument. For Thoreau's obsession with calculation runs deep. He says, "Keep calculating. Keep weighing. What exactly do I gain or lose?"
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:02:41 In the century and a half, since Walden's publication, Thoreau's economics - his methodology for apprehending the cost of a thing by weighing and measuring it against the dearness of living - has been supplanted by allegiance to growth at all costs. But unlike the mass of men about which Thoreau writes in the

mid-19th century, today's society is burdened by more than just the labor of miscalculation.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:03:09 In today's hyper-connected, surveillance economy, the mass of humanity has lost autonomy over that calculation, seeding authority to the commanding heights of a new technocracy that governs the behavioral forces of our primitive biology, through platforms scientifically engineered for addiction, supervision, and control.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:03:33 This week on Hidden Forces, Cal Newport, digital minimalism and choosing life in a hyper-connected world.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:03:58 Cal Newport, welcome to Hidden Forces.
- Cal Newport:** 00:04:01 Well, thanks for having me.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:04:02 I'm very excited to have you in studio. I told you that being around you I felt something. I felt a source of Zen, and I think it is actually your lifestyle choices that probably...It's an affirmation of the lessons in your book.
- Cal Newport:** 00:04:14 Yeah, that, and all the drugs I'm on, I guess, right? I joke.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:04:19 Well, Cal, I was telling you...we spoke for a while. You were here early, and I was telling you that when I started reading your book, my initial instinct as I started reading was ... and with the title too, I thought, "Oh, it's another self-help book." I was like, "I've been there, done that. I get it. You know, declutter, I get it. Who doesn't know that too much internet is bad for you?" But it turned out that this wasn't a self-help book. I feel like it's a philosophy in a sense, but maybe I'll just let you instead of running through myself...What do you mean by digital minimalism? What is this book about and why did you feel it was important to write it?
- Cal Newport:** 00:04:53 Well, I had written a book back in 2016 that was called Deep Work, and it was really about unintentional consequences of technology in the workplace. So I got into a whole thing about how we're undervaluing focus in the knowledge economy, and we're over valuing convenience. So this was about email and distraction culture. I began to get a lot of feedback from readers who were saying, "Okay, maybe we buy this premise about what tech is doing in the workplace, but what about in our personal lives?" There's something going on here.

Cal Newport: 00:05:23 So, as I delved into it, what I was noticing is there was definitely a growing unease. It seems maybe two years ago, maybe one and a half years ago was a bit of a fulcrum shift where people went from the self-deprecating jokes, "looking at my phone too much," to actually starting to become uneasy about how much they're looking at the screen. So I got real deep into it. What's going on here? Why are people unhappy? What are the deeper forces at play and what's the solution? So this is the result of me going deep on this growing unease people were having with the screens in their lives.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:05:56 You said two years ago you started noticing it?

Cal Newport: 00:05:58 Yeah, well, so I have always been a somewhat public critic of a lot of consumer-facing technologies. Famously, I've never had a social media account. This is something I've been writing about for a while. Whenever I would write something public, I would mainly get negative pushback. This had been my experience being a public critic of social media, and it was maybe three months after the presidential election when I began to notice the shift in the reactions, and it shifted from, "This is crazy. Why are you anti-internet? Don't you understand the way that Twitter is liberating us to, 'This is interesting. I want to hear more.'?" It was palpable.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:06:34 Is that because of the political swirl around fake news and Russian meddling in the election, the fact that it become politically palatable for the media to discuss this?

Cal Newport: 00:06:45 Well, it was something like that. So I see it through a Thomas Kuhn style paradigm shift type perspective. I don't know if this is true, but this is my working theory is that essentially what happened, is that before the 2016 presidential election for most people the place that social media held in their brain was very positive. It was like Bill Maher said, "Gifts handed down from the nerd gods." That's just where it was in people's mental schema. The election shook that all up because it introduced a lot of potential issues.

Cal Newport: 00:07:13 There were political issues, but it went all the way across the political spectrum so people on the left are upset about Russia, and the fact that Donald Trump was on Twitter, people on the right around this time are getting upset about stories of censorship and perhaps progressive politics going too far in Silicon Valley, but more importantly I think in the particular issues that people are getting upset about after the elections that it changed how they are categorizing social media in their

brain, from a purely positive type gift from the nerd gods, to something that could have flaws.

- Cal Newport:** 00:07:43 I think once they actually shifted. It's like a paradigm shift and how they categorized social media and their mental schema. Once they shifted it to something that could have flaws, it was like the dam broke.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:07:53 That's interesting. A couple of things to follow on that point. We had Gillian Tett on the program, the editor of the Financial Times, and she had made a remark, and it was not the first time. In fact, I'd heard her at a conference about a year before that make the remark, which was that Silicon Valley was beginning to smell to her like Wall Street pre-2008, and that she felt like they were getting near that point where the public was going to begin to lose their romance with Silicon Valley, or that they already had begun to lose their romance with them and that that was going to have repercussions. I think that's part of it too, the allure. The allure.
- Cal Newport:** 00:08:31 Well, I mean, the timing works out about right. What really happened is if you think about social media for example. In the early days, it's just venture backed. So when you're venture backed, what do you want to do? You want users. So you're just doing what you can to make this an interesting experience. It's exuberant. It's interesting. Then you get to this point where those early investors say, "Okay, where's our 100X return?" How we get the 100X return, we're going to need the IPO.
- Cal Newport:** 00:08:52 How we're going to get the IPO to succeed, we're going to have to get these revenue numbers up. How we're going to get the revenue numbers up, we need massively more user engagement minutes. So what really went on is as Facebook and related companies made their shift to mobile, they had to essentially completely re-engineer the user experience, away from something that was much more static and into more in this slot machine model where you're going to check this thing compulsively.
- Cal Newport:** 00:09:14 It worked in the short term. It's why Facebook's valuation got up to \$500 billion, but it had the self-defeating side effect I think of putting it into a position where people are saying, "Listen, you're too good at this. I'm looking at the screen too much." So I think you're wise that that was happening at the same time that people first learned to also criticize social media because the political aspect, so they maybe went too far in the re-engineer towards compulsive use at the same time that people were re-

categorizing these as services that could have flaws. You bring those two things together, there's a groundswell out there.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:09:43 Interesting. You keep mentioning things that set off light bulbs in my head. The thing about the investors pushing Facebook to increase profits because they want their 100X return. That brings up a question of incentives. We did an episode on moral economics dealing with exactly this point, and I think that is a great segue into Thoreau's new economics, and I want to take a quote from your book. You write, "Philosopher Frédéric Gros calls Thoreau's new economics a theory that builds on the following axiom, which Thoreau establishes early in Walden."
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:10:16 "The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life, which is required to be exchanged for it immediately or in the long run. The striking thing with Thoreau is not the actual content of the argument. After all, sages in earliest antiquity had already proclaimed their contempt for possessions. What impresses is the form of the argument. For Thoreau's obsession with calculation runs deep. He says, 'Keep calculating, keep weighing. What exactly do I gain or lose?'" That came to me now because there is a maniacal obsession with profits and with growing GDP.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:10:55 If you really step back and think about it, it's so stupid, and it's almost hard to understand. I wonder if a future generation will look back and actually will struggle to understand how we got to this place where this is how we value the world, where economic externalities, because we can't measure them, which are the most important things are the ones that have the least value because they can't be priced within our system.
- Cal Newport:** 00:11:17 Well, Thoreau very early on understood this argument, and that's what's amazing. I think about Walden, which is always misunderstood. There's a book about nature. This is a book about nature appreciation. There's actually a relatively sophisticated mashup of philosophy and economics. I mean, the test that Thoreau was doing when he went to Walden is ... What he wanted to do was calculate precisely how much money does it take per week to make sure that I'm at the subsistence level, that I have a place to live, I'm not cold, and I have food to eat?
- Cal Newport:** 00:11:47 Then he went backwards and did the math and said, "Okay, so how many hours per week would I have to work in order to generate this much money?" Okay, so everything beyond there in some sense is optional, so now, we can start to weigh what am I getting in return once I add each extra hour on top of the subsistence level of labor. So what he was actually trying to do

was quantify some of these externalities that you're talking about because the way he saw it was your life force, your moments of your life, is one of your main resources.

- Cal Newport:** 00:12:15 So you should quantify it and say, "What am I getting in return? If I'm working 20 extra hours a week, I want to capture that because I don't need that to have a house. I don't need to have food. So what am I getting for it? Okay, I'm getting Venetian blind, or I'm getting a copper pot", right? So he was really trying to make this quantitative argument that's just fundamentally minimalist but also it has a sophisticated economic foundation to it.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:12:36 That I think is where he derived the insight that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.
- Cal Newport:** 00:12:43 Yeah, he was talking about mortgages, right? What he was seeing in Concord, the Concord area in Massachusetts, is that all these people he knew were taking on these massive mortgages to expand their land holdings because the maximalist argument says, "If 100 acres makes me \$100 profit, then if I have 200 acres, I'm making \$200 profits, so I need to grow and I'll take on these mortgages." But what Thoreau was noting is, "Yeah, but that extra 100 acres is going to require another 30 hours of work each week, so is that worth it?"
- Cal Newport:** 00:13:11 So the quiet desperation he was talking about was the people he had seen around and the people that he had grown up with who were trading their life force essentially for more of this profit. When he did the calculations, he said, "This is not an even trade." His favorite analogy is what's the point of buying the wagon that gets you to town 20 minutes faster once a week if it requires two extra hours of work that week? You actually were better off taking the longer walk and saving the extra labor.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:13:36 And that's the point of the weighing in the calculating. It's about bringing a mathematical rigor to a philosophical question.
- Cal Newport:** 00:13:43 Yeah, and that's the first and longest chapter in Walden. It's called Economy, and there's data tables in it.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:13:48 Could we say the digital minimalism by your estimation is another way of saying how to live life intentionally or with intention?

Cal Newport: 00:13:57 Well, so the minimalism idea is one that is ancient. I mean, Seneca talks about this. It goes through Thoreau and of course in the modern times, and it does come back again and again to this idea that focusing your intention or your energy on a small number of things very intentionally, and that is probably going to leave you better off than trying to spread that energy thinner over many more things to return less values. This shows up in all sorts of different aspects of life. So I'm applying it to our digital world because that's new right now and people are suffering, but we're familiar with it from the last few decades in the world of possessions.

Cal Newport: 00:14:32 We're familiar with it in terms of the philosophical or even religious world and trying to understand where your energy should go. So it's an old idea that I'm applying to a new place, which is paradoxically, if you ignore things, it could bring you some value to put that energy on the things that you know is going to bring you a lot of value. You're better off.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:14:51 So, we did another episode with Rebecca Goldstein, which was really on the question of what makes life worth living? I think that comes up a lot in your work into the point about weighing and calculating, and you also make this other great point, and we'll get to that also, which is that computers are multi-purpose machines, and there is something to learning to use devices for application specific purposes, going from a computer to an ASIC or something like that, right?

Cal Newport: 00:15:22 Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:15:22 You also in the book talk about optimization, and I think most people think about optimization in terms of technology. How do I get the most out of my technology? That's kind of what you're saying, get the most out of my technology, but you run it through a rubric. Can you explain to me what that means when you talk about optimization?

Cal Newport: 00:15:42 So I'm thinking about digital tools the same way that, say, a skilled artist or a skilled laborer would think about their physical tools, which is this is something that I'm using to solve a particular problem, and I want to get the biggest return out of my tool use possible. So if you're an artist or a sculptor, let's say, you really understand how the different chisels work and what's the best way to use it. You're not going to use something in a wasteful way or buy a tool you don't really need. I'm essentially bringing that mindset over to digital tools as well.

Cal Newport: 00:16:10 So instead of having this generic phone-mediated lifestyle approach to these tools, which is ... I don't know. It's a companion, right? I look at the screen. I do stuff. I'm an air traffic controller with all my urgent information coming through all day. It's just think about it like tools. So I have a screen. You say, "Okay, why am I using this? How can I get the most value out of it?" Digital minimalists almost always have this how and when question for example that they append onto the what. So they would never just say, "I use Instagram," because there's some reason for "I just use Instagram" and leave it at that. They would say, "How do I use Instagram? When do I use Instagram?" Right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:16:44 Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cal Newport: 00:16:44 So they're thinking about these things from getting a return on investment perspective. If this piece of technology can really help me, I want to be really careful about getting as much of that value as possible while avoiding as much of the cost as possible. Just like a farmer looking at a new piece of equipment would say, "It's not just that I need the hay baler. I really want to figure out what's the way to run this so that it's not going to use up all of my diesel fuel or be way too expensive."

Demetri Kofinas: 00:17:06 And yet I think so many of us, maybe not you, but so many of us have experienced that you just want to just take the technology to its limits and see how much can you with it to the point where it defeats the purpose of the initial use. You mentioned Instagram. That reminded me I love taking pictures. I've taken pictures interestingly enough when I was thinking about this interview. I thought about, "Yes, I was connected as an adolescent because we had internet." We were one of the first families I know of to have high-speed Internet in the home, broadband.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:17:37 But in college the only connectivity that I had beyond ethernet was Napster. We didn't have Wi-Fi. Facebook wasn't invented until 2004. I was at NYU. We didn't get it then, so we didn't have YouTube or any of that stuff. So I started using Instagram at some point. I was taking pictures, and I realized that I wasn't enjoying it. I lost the interest in it because it was no longer about the picture. It was about the likes. It was about the likes.

Cal Newport: 00:18:05 Yeah, and not to be too doom and gloom about social media, but that was re-engineered. I mean, this was the big innovation. This was the innovation that was going to get the revenue numbers where they needed to be, which is social media can't just be about posting information about yourself and seeing

what your friends are up to, because if that's what social media is, which is what it was until whatever it was 2011, 2012. If that's what social media is, you have no reason to really check it that often.

- Cal Newport:** 00:18:32 I mean, I checked my Facebook friends in 2005 on Monday morning. I don't need to log back on Monday afternoon, because unless one of them changed their relationship status or got back from vacation there's nothing new to see.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:18:41 Or they just tell you about it.
- Cal Newport:** 00:18:42 Yeah, they just tell you about it.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:18:43 If they're really your friends.
- Cal Newport:** 00:18:44 So this was a big engineering challenge. How do we get someone to look at this 185 times a day? There's no way 2005 Facebook you would do that, and that's where they understood we need a different stream of information, and this is where you get the like button, and this where you get photo auto-tagging, and this is where you get the little comments underneath the Facebook being emphasized is because now why are you clicking on that icon? It's not to see what your friends are up to or to post something about yourself. It's to look at this stream of one-bit social approval indicators about you.
- Cal Newport:** 00:19:14 All day long now things are coming towards you. These many people liked you. These people tagged you in a photo. They posted a photo about you. Now, the experience became about people are thinking about you, and if you click on this, we'll show you evidence of that, which is exactly exploiting psychological vulnerabilities, and this is what transformed people from, "Hey, this is fun." I sometimes go on here to see what's going on with my high school friend into why am I looking at those things all day.
- Cal Newport:** 00:19:39 It was a brilliant stroke of business engineering. It's what made them so much money, but it was something they re-engineered well after the fact and is arbitrary from a user perspective.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:19:48 Positive reinforcement. I wonder also how important unpredictability is. In that feedback< you made a point about that. I want to pose that as a question for you to answer, but I also want to make the observation that we use social media from the user's perspective. It's interesting to consider that

there is a very small number of human beings sitting in some physical location in Silicon Valley that are running these social experiments from a server that they control.

- Cal Newport:** 00:20:15 Yeah, well, I mean, you have to imagine that the way they use the like button is not in the interest of the users. The like button is in the interest of the people who own those servers, and more and more of social media is on that part of the equation, and that's the shift I think that was starting to make people uneasy is that, "I see. Now we're starting to add features that are not about user acquisition. It's about exploitation of the existing user base," and I think that makes a lot of people uneasy.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:20:41 I want to bring you back to this point about intentionality, and I also want to pull a quote from your book. It's another one from you here. The source of our unease is not evident in these thin-sliced case studies but instead becomes visible only when confronting the thicker reality of how these technologies as a whole have managed to expand beyond the minor roles for which we initially adopted them. What's making us uncomfortable in other words is this feeling of losing control.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:21:11 It's not about usefulness, it's about autonomy. So intentionality and also this idea of reclaiming control I think is interesting. I think that also feeds back to your point about multi-purpose computers versus application-specific devices and tools. I wonder if you have considered ... probably have ... that part of this is that the human brain, we are multi-purpose machines. We are computers and that if we off-load that universal function to another universal computing machine and don't simply use our machines and our devices in application-specific ways that we cause detrimental harm to ourselves. That would not be possible otherwise irrespective of the complexity and usefulness of a device.
- Cal Newport:** 00:22:00 Well, I think that's true. This is part of how we got in trouble with our current technological situation is that in particular, what we were off sourcing to these devices and services was sociality. Now, that's an incredibly complex thing. It's vitally important to human beings. It's a huge part of our species' success. There's millions of years of evolution behind how the human social systems work in our brain, and it's very specific how it functions.
- Cal Newport:** 00:22:26 Now, when you say, "Let's just off-load this into some service that a 20-year-old came up with in a dorm room and completely reinvent how socialization happens," you got to expect that's

going to cause the same type of problems as when we started engineering processed food. Like, "We don't need to trust food cultures. Let's create potato chips." You look up and we have an obesity epidemic. It's the same thing. If you take something that's so human, like how we socialize, and say, "Let's start just messing around with this. Let's mess around with how it works."

- Cal Newport:** 00:22:54 "Let's move more of it to computers. Let's digitize it. Let's just trust that the kids in an incubator in San Francisco are going to be able to re-engineer the foundation of the human species' success from scratch and that's going to go okay," is hubris. But at the time, it seemed, "Hey, why not?"
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:23:12 Are you familiar with Nassim Taleb's concept of antifragility?
- Cal Newport:** 00:23:15 Yes.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:23:16 So is there something to be said about that as well that because our brains require being used in a particular way they would atrophy otherwise? Is there also something to be said about that? Do you think that's driving not specifically atrophy that word but this concept that I'm mentioning is part of the phenomenon that Jean Twenge writes about in her book about Generation Z?
- Cal Newport:** 00:23:39 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:23:40 And devices and mobile connectivity?
- Cal Newport:** 00:23:43 Right. So, I mean, what you're asking in other words is what's going to happen to our brain? Is it going to atrophy or have other effects? Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:23:49 Yes, are we seeing an impact on the brain that we haven't seen in other populations specific to that generation because of the way that they've used machines?
- Cal Newport:** 00:23:59 Yeah. One thing we're seeing is these drastic rises in anxiety and anxiety-related disorders. You can read the literature. The signal I think has only become stronger since I've written this book. So, I've kept up with the literature since then. What you typically do when you have an effect like Gen Z's massive rise in anxiety and anxiety-related disorders is you have to explore lots of hypotheses. One of the hypotheses is that it's smartphones and social media. But there's a lot of other ones too.

- Cal Newport:** 00:24:22 Those other ones are falling by the wayside. I mean, they're falling left and right while the support that it is almost certainly smartphones and social media, conscious anxiety has only strengthened, even in the eight months or so since I submitted the manuscript for this book. So I look at Generation Z as a canary in the coalmine because they're taking this independent variable, which is time spent socializing digitally versus other ways, and they're pushing it to an extreme, which is typically what you might do when you're trying to understand what the effect is of this variable and the dependent variable, which in this case is mental health.
- Cal Newport:** 00:24:53 So you look at the generation that's pushing this behavior to the extreme, and they are. I mean, Gen Z is moving almost their entire social lives to digital interactions, and they're getting an extreme reaction, which is drastic rises and anxiety and anxiety-related disorders. So, to me, that indicates that you're messing around with something powerful. So when you start introducing these dopamine-driven digital interactions into the social sphere, there's a cost to pay.
- Cal Newport:** 00:25:21 We see that, okay, for them, it's really big. The anxiety goes way up. But for everyone else, there's probably this background of anxiety that people just become used to, which actually doesn't need to be there. This might be more recent than we realize. We're just used to it, but it's being caused because we're not using our brain in the way that they were meant to be used.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:25:37 Another thing I want to just throw out there is I do think there's got to be some element of that anxiety that is driven by the loss of control, which brings us back to that point. Not only you have less control in general, but you also have less control over feedback. We talked about feedback and uncertainty about when the dopamine rush is going to come back. But this point about sociality is also extremely important, and I think it also dovetails into this notion of solitude, which is a big part of the book. Talk to me a little bit about that, the importance of solitude, and maybe we can start by defining what that is.
- Cal Newport:** 00:26:11 Well, the definition of solitude, I use, which I adapted from another book called Lead Yourself First, which is about solitude and leadership, is that solitude is freedom from inputs from other minds, which is a little bit different than people think about it informally. Informally, people think solitude has to do with physical isolation. So if I'm on top of the mountaintop, I'm in solitude. If I'm in a crowded coffee shop, I'm not. But the useful definition has nothing to do with your physical location. It has to do with your cognitive state.

Cal Newport: 00:26:41 So if you're processing something that was generated by another mind, you're not in solitude. If you're not, in other words, you're alone with your own thoughts, then you are in a state of solitude.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:26:52 Does that include traffic like walking down the street in the city?

Cal Newport: 00:26:55 Yeah, in a crowded coffee shop or in the subway. I mean, if you're not processing input from another mind, so you're not listening to something, reading something or looking at something on your phone. You're in a state of solitude where you can be on a mountaintop and looking at a phone at a Twitter feed or something and you're not in solitude.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:27:09 But I mean, for example, because I think there are studies. I don't have them to cite them now, but I think there are studies that show many studies that walking in nature is very different for your cognitive health than walking in a city, and that some of that has to do with simply the amount of information that you're processing. For example, drivers, pedestrians, and it's something there to be said about those are decisions that that car is moving because it is being driven by a person, and that is information being sent to you by another mind. Does that fit in also?

Cal Newport: 00:27:39 Yeah, it might. The research you're talking about is to work on attention restoration therapy, which-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:27:44 Which was part, probably, one of your previous books on focus.

Cal Newport: 00:27:47 I have written about it before. Yeah, I mean, the famous experiment there was done in Ann Arbor where they would randomly split the subjects into walking to the arboretum or walking through downtown Ann Arbor, and there were some more positive effects you've got being in the arboretum. There are effects there. You could maybe build a more complicated model of solitude in which what you're interacting with in the cityscape is controlled by other minds, and that might be true, but I think the more general point here that I think is important is that we know from philosophy and literature and now science that time alone with your thoughts is really important.

Cal Newport: 00:28:21 You have to just have time to think about things. The brain, if you want to use this metaphor, a computer metaphor, it has two modes relevant here, right? It can be processing input, so thinking about the computer reading the old disk drive, or that's what the CPU is doing. So it can be bringing an input or it could

be doing computation on that input. All right. Now that it's in memory, let me actually look at the input and try to extract insight out of it, but it can only be doing one at a time.

Cal Newport: 00:28:43 So if all you're doing is consuming the inputs but never taking the time to actually just sit back and think about it, what does this mean? What does it have to do with my life? What's going on with my life? Is there an insight? If you don't give those cycles where it's just you processing internally your input, there's lots of negative things that happen, and this is what I think is happening with Generation Z when they have zero solitude is the brain is fritzing out.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:29:06 Right. You're not actually processing the data. You're collecting it, but you're not processing it and putting it to some kind of order and making use of it in some kind of fundamental way.

Cal Newport: 00:29:16 Yeah, so this is important for both professional insights and self-reflection, but for someone like me who's a theoretician, so I solve math proofs for a living. We've known this for a long time. Oh, you got to get your hours in. You got to get your hours in of walking and thinking. There's no other way to make progress on a math proof, so we're familiar with it.

Cal Newport: 00:29:33 But I think in other fields, people aren't, and then there's the personal insight aspect, which is really important too. I mean, you can't develop as a person without actually spending time thinking about yourself as a person, and some of our most revered leaders historically have this aspect in their life.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:29:48 Yeah, so a few things, because, actually, I think your subtitle to this chapter was *When Solitude Saved the Nation*, and you have a story of Lincoln. We should get into that. But a few things I want to just mention. I wonder, it sounds like you probably agree that people, academics, and creative people certainly who at least make their money and their career in the creative arts probably already know this and understand this. Certainly any writer knows that you need to be in quiet circumstances, disconnected from the world in order to do your best writing, right?

Cal Newport: 00:30:16 Yeah, but even just to get the ideas, I mean, if you were a novelist-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:30:17 Even just the idea?

Cal Newport: 00:30:19 Yeah, you need to be away from the computer as well.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:30:22 Right. We were talking about Warren Buffett. Warren Buffett schedules massive amount of unstructured time. That was a big shock interestingly enough to Bill Gates when Bill Gates learned about that.

Cal Newport: 00:30:29 Yeah, because Bill Gates tries to consolidate that into these think weeks.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:30:32 He was about optimization, but optimization in a different sense, in the way that we most think about it, not in the way you write about it. But this also reminded me of an experience. I am the survivor of brain tumor, which had caused dimension in my life, and I had progressively severe symptoms after my surgery, I had a sudden reacquisition of memories, and I had this actual, very conscious experience of stitching together a timeline and processing all this information that had been blocked off, basically partitioned in my brain.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:31:04 So I think ... I mean, I understand this intuitively, experientially, and also just intellectually. So yes, I just wanted to make that point, but let's go back to this thing you said about personal insights, because I totally agree with this, and I mentioned something about this to you early before we turn on the microphones, which is that I wonder if children are not obviously the most vulnerable people in this situation because a child's ego is developing. A child when it's born, it has no ego. It has no sense of self, right? I think that begins to develop around the age of three.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:31:41 So in order to develop an ego, you need to have, I would imagine, time alone in order to process your feelings, in order to process the world, in order to get a sense of who am I even when you ... let's say you say something mean to another student when you're a kid. If you see that student have an emotional reaction and you hurt them, now, you have an opportunity to process that information internally. You have time alone. Interestingly enough, it makes me think a little bit about our call-out/outrage culture and how people are so afraid to make a mistake because they don't have time to reflect on what they said.

Cal Newport: 00:32:14 Yeah, well, I mean, with little kids, at least they do get that space because they don't have, let's say, a phone or a screen in front them, but they're a good case study. I think where we start to see the problems is what happens when you're 13 or 14, right? There's so much self-development that happens.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:32:30 Oh my God.

Cal Newport: 00:32:31 If you don't have time, you have to go out, go to the party. You say the wrong thing, and then these people get mad at you, and then you get upset. Then you spend the weekend brooding and you really think about it, and you come back the next week and all this type of self-development.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:32:43 So much.

Cal Newport: 00:32:44 How you become an adult? It requires ... I don't know. You could probably quantify it. How many hundreds of hours of self-reflection cycles are needed, you take that away. I mean, you're crippling an entire generation's ability to actually develop their own adult sense of self.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:32:59 So true. You're right. I think it's way more important when you're going through puberty. I mean, that's when everyone becomes self-conscious. That's an interesting fact, right?

Cal Newport: 00:33:08 Yeah, well, I think this is the most alarming thing we're seeing is not just the anxiety and anxiety-related disorders among teenagers but actually the rise and suicide attempts, hospitalizations for self-harm, which is-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:33:19 It's so, so upsetting.

Cal Newport: 00:33:20 ... how we figured out that this is not just self-reporting going up because we're more comfortable for mental illness. The numbers of self-hospitalizations for self-harm skyrocketed. As far as we can, tell it's because you take away the solitude. You take away this time to experiment and figure out what you're about and what you're not about, and you put it all in a public stage where people can tear each other down. There's no room for mistakes. You also miss out. You need to see facial reactions.

Cal Newport: 00:33:44 You need limbic consonants, which is where you actually begin to actually mirror speech patterns and intonations and pacing's, right? Like probably like what we're doing right now that our brain knows how to do this. We're looking at each other's body languages. We're looking at facial expressions. Sociality is very, very hard, so our brain is set up so that we practice it a lot. But you get almost no practice for this if your interactions are texts going back and forth on the screen.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:34:08 So a few and other interesting points, one, I 100% agree with you, and I've found that in-person interviews are a gazillion times better. I almost never do remote interviews unless there's some breaking news situation, which is extraordinarily rare or

some incredible guests that I have tried for a year and I cannot get otherwise, right? But that is so rare to happen because it's so much better. Another thing that's interesting, our crazy, over-medicated, over-technologized society is also over ... What would be the term? Plasticized.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:34:39 We have this obsession with cosmetic upgrades and surgeries and things like this, and Botox becomes so popular, and Botox diminishes your capacity to form empathic impressions, to mimic the other person. You talked about limbic. What was your-
- Cal Newport:** 00:34:53 Limbic consonants.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:34:54 Yeah, I mean, I don't know that's exactly what you were saying, but that made me think of that, right?
- Cal Newport:** 00:34:58 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:34:59 Again, this brings us back to what do we value, right? What is important to us? Is what's important to us not having wrinkles on our face or is what's important to us being able to connect deeper with the person we love?
- Cal Newport:** 00:35:09 Yeah, and we've known this answer forever, right? I mean, what humans need, we've known this since the history of civilization. Once people first started trying to write down wisdom traditions, right? I mean, you need connections with family, close friends, and communities. You need to have responsibility that you take on that gives you a sense of purpose, and you need some enjoyment, if possible, of activities whose quality is intrinsic that helps you see that there's whatever it is, meaning equality in the world that exists despite, let's say, hard circumstances in your life.
- Cal Newport:** 00:35:37 We know these are the things you need. We've known this through all the wisdom traditions. So I don't know why we try to reinvent this. We're never going to circumvent it.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:35:45 So interesting. You keep making me think of other things. Just to put an additional nail in that point around the Botox and the facial expressions. Anyone who's looked at a baby knows babies are so responsive to your facial expressions. You know what I mean?
- Cal Newport:** 00:35:58 Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:35:59 You can see it right in the face of a newborn child. But you mentioned something. I don't remember what it was now. I think it was responsibilities and things like this, and that reminded me of industrial society and its future, Theodore Kaczynski. I told you I did an episode on this, and then I've been in touch with the warden of the Colorado Federal Penitentiary in which he is housed, and he's of course the Unabomber, and he wrote that manifesto, and so much of it dealt with what he called the power process, right? This need by the human animal to impact its environment in order to derive meaning from life.

Cal Newport: 00:36:30 Right. Well, it's an interesting point. Right. I mean, that does show up. We know about that drive, but it can mean different things. So Kaczynski saw it in this negative light that we have to keep impacting the world and changing the world that we have this drive to do it, and by doing so, we make the world worse, right? So he had-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:36:49 Well, he was saying ... I mean, in terms of the power process, he was putting it in a positive light. His point was that we've lost the power process in society today. In the technological future, there will be no power process for the human animal and that everything will be-

Cal Newport: 00:37:02 I see.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:37:03 ... catered to us and we will lose all meaning of life.

Cal Newport: 00:37:05 I see.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:37:05 Life will have no meaning because we don't actually support our own existence.

Cal Newport: 00:37:09 Well, okay, so that then resonates. I haven't read his manifesto at least anytime recently, but those same type of ideas come up quite a bit. I mean, even in ... I mean, what I said in my book for example is I even talk about is a philosophically minded woodworker. I mean, he's talking almost from a neurological perspective to get at the same power process idea that there's this drive to manipulate the physical world with our hands, like literally with our hands, and see changes reflected.

Cal Newport: 00:37:34 Matt Crawford writes about this too in Shop Class ... Soulcraft as Shop Class, Shop Class as Soulcraft. I may have that backwards. But this drive to ... Our brain wants this because it had to spend a lot of time evolving to do this, because, again, being able to manipulate the physical world with our hands was necessary for

our species' survival, so we've got tool use. So, something as simple as I'm manipulating a real object; I'm sawing this piece of wood; I'm sanding it. The joints actually fit together. There's now a new artifact in the real world that I created.

Cal Newport: 00:38:04 I really learned doing the research for this book that that's fundamental whereas I talked about in a previous book, *The Drive for Craftsmanship*, and in the previous book, I had said, "It doesn't really matter if it's digital or not. People just have this drive to actually have skills and produce things of value." Researching this new book, I really got turned around a little bit. But actually, this is not exactly equal. There's a fundamentally human drive for the analog.

Cal Newport: 00:38:26 So it's not just to create things, it's to create things with our hands to actually see our intention reflected in the concrete world in a proprioception style. I actually can now feel and move this thing around. So this power process idea I think is that he's onto something there. He's not onto something with his solution.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:38:44 Right, well, he was a terrorist.

Cal Newport: 00:38:45 With this process, he was a terrorist, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:38:46 He was the Unabomber. Over decades, he was sending parcel bombs in the mail.

Cal Newport: 00:38:50 But there was a lot of great thinkers. I mean, this is a bit of an aside, but I've been on a kick recently really reading a lot of the great 20th century thinkers on technology and philosophy and society. There's a lot of great thinking happening in the 20th century, especially the first half of the 20th century on these type of issues, and this is a big loss that happened is that big think techno-philosophy. We've lost it from the academy over the last 30 or 40 years.

Cal Newport: 00:39:17 It got taken over by these much more scholastic, technological determinism theories that get down into really trying to understand these minute interactions between different groups and the technologies and what services they serve, which is, I guess, interesting but almost unfollowable for someone who's not a high priestess of this type of thinking. But we used to have these big thinkers who were taking the type of disoriented thoughts that Kaczynski had and treating them with systemic seriousness, and I've been rediscovering a lot of these thinkers,

and it's a really rich field, like trying to understand these interactions, and people have different ideas.

- Cal Newport:** 00:39:51 But the conclusion to this aside is part of what I've been trying to do, let's say, with this book or my last book is step back and say, "Okay, I'm a computer scientist, and who better to say let's start interrogating the way that these technologies are interacting with our culture?" And that what I'm hoping to get people back to is not some particular solution or necessarily you have to agree with the way I see things, but let's get back to a culture in which we seriously interrogate these issues and have serious thoughts about what does this mean, what does it mean for our culture, what's the right way to conceptualize, let's say, a smartphone.
- Cal Newport:** 00:40:23 I mean, these are crucial conversations. I think we advocated them for the last 15 or 20 years.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:40:28 Well, I mean in the case of Kaczynski, he lived in isolation, which is very abnormal. It suggests that there was some issue there in terms of empathy. So there was that, obviously, his capacity to inflict harm, but he was also extraordinarily paranoid, and that came across in his writing. But through all that haze, there was an elemental understanding about the long-term force of technology and what it would cause humanity to have to confront invariably in such an early phase that of course Bill Joy quoted it in his famous WIRED article in 1999.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:41:05 But when you spoke about craftsmanship in your book, and what's really cool, Cal ... Jimmy Soni introduced us, and he thought you were going to be perfect for the show, and you really are because not only do so many of these concepts interact with so much we've already done, but you cite so many of our guests. We had Simon Winchester.
- Cal Newport:** 00:41:25 Oh, excellent.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:41:26 Half his latest book on precision engineering was really about craftsmanship.
- Cal Newport:** 00:41:30 Yeah, I read that book.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:41:31 He had mentioned the glassblower, right? He had some glassblower in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, like the greatest glassblower on earth. Who blows glass anyway? Can you get more craftsmanship than that?

Cal Newport: 00:41:42 Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:41:43 You know what I mean? That's like pottery making on steroids though. I don't know if you have any thoughts about that, but I want to go back. We went a little further out there, which is great, but I want to bring it back to this point about Generation Z and solitude. Was there a critical moment where the walls of solitude broke down in our society that you can identify?

Cal Newport: 00:42:07 I mean, it's recent, so until let's say 15 years ago, it would be impossible to banish solitude. I mean, there's just no way that you could banish every moment in your life where you didn't have time alone with your thoughts, right? It was just you're going to be in line at some point. You're going to be stuck in traffic at some point. The iPod I think was the beginning of the step toward solitude deprivation, because it socialized people to this idea that you can now have essentially a source of inputs as default.

Cal Newport: 00:42:35 So this notion of I put the earbuds in, and that's it until I'm in a situation which socially I have to take them out. So this socialized us to this idea that you can be in your own world. It did this because it fit a thousand songs. I mean, the Walkman or whatever, the cassette would run out. You weren't going to bring back your cassettes with you. So that started to socialize us, but still, there were a lot of cases where-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:42:54 It's so interesting though. I just want to highlight that point because you are in your own world, and yet, you're in a world of someone else's making.

Cal Newport: 00:43:01 You're processing inputs from other minds.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:43:03 Which is your point, exactly. You're not actually in solitude. By breaking off from the people around you, you're actually-

Cal Newport: 00:43:10 You're making it worse.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:43:11 You're making it worse, which is so interesting.

Cal Newport: 00:43:12 Yeah, no, you're probably better off walking over here in the streets of Manhattan-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:43:14 You're [crosstalk 00:43:14].

Cal Newport: 00:43:15 ... just seeing what's going on, and here's this person, and this biker's yelling at this person. Your brain can bounce to different

types of places. Yes, and once you take that out, and you're in your own world, you lose solitude. The iPod goes 50% there. Then obviously, it was the consumer-facing smartphone, the non-business case like iPhone and onwards, and the advent of the cellular infrastructure that allowed you to have wireless access everywhere. So now the last place is where it would be weird to have your earbuds in, like you're in the bathroom or in the church pew or something. Those places now you could get solitude breaking, because you can glance at a screen, and the screen has ubiquitous, high-speed wireless internet.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:43:50 Wow.
- Cal Newport:** 00:43:50 So it's what? iPod was 2007. 2012 is where we start to get near, like getting close to ubiquity in the US. So we're talking six years we've had this experiment of trying to banish solitude.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:44:02 And they want to put contact lenses with AR functionality into our heads.
- Cal Newport:** 00:44:06 Yeah, AR is going to eat the whole world.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:44:08 It's so scary. Did you take a cab over here? Or did you just walk? I mean-
- Cal Newport:** 00:44:11 I walked.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:44:11 Okay. Do you take cabs at all in New York?
- Cal Newport:** 00:44:13 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:44:14 So you know how they have those screens that sometimes just play in your face?
- Cal Newport:** 00:44:17 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:44:17 That sometimes makes me angry. When I can't shut it off, I get really angry, and it reminds me of things that I've read, accounts of people who first encountered outdoor advertisements that were in neon lighting. They were so angered by the assault of this advertisement in the middle of their routine. They felt like it was an obstruction.
- Cal Newport:** 00:44:39 Well, there's this great book. Matthew Crawford wrote this book. It's either called The World Outside Your Head or The World Inside Your Head. It's one of those two, but it's actually-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:44:46 The fundamental question.

Cal Newport: 00:44:47 Yeah, that's the fundamental ... It probably really changes the meaning, but it's about exactly this. It's that we're undervaluing mental space and actually having mental space. The way he talks about it is that it's almost becoming an economic inequality that if you have enough money for it, you can get away from this onslaught that you're in the first-class lounge at the airport and away from all the advertisements, and he talks a lot about airports for whatever reason.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:45:10 So, so interesting.

Cal Newport: 00:45:10 You're in the business class seat or whatever it is, but he really words this as an assault that this is a resource that people have, which is their attentional space, and when you're relentlessly assaulted with the clip in the cab, I hear you, and then it recycles if you're going more than a few blocks.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:45:27 I find that screen incredibly obnoxious because ... And it's a great point, right? I mean, being in the back of a New York City cab used to be one of the only places in New York you could be alone, right?

Cal Newport: 00:45:38 Yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:45:38 They had to take that too. Then to go further to your point about business class, indeed, you need to be wealthy in order to have freedom over your attention, and that even goes into media. I mean, the ad-driven model is for the vast majority of people, right? You have to actually be able to spend a certain amount of money to get ad-free content, which is I think if things were priced more fairly, more people would choose that if they understood the cost of giving up their attention. But there is an economic disparity there in terms of the attention economy.

Cal Newport: 00:46:13 Yeah, well, it's complicated because this is often thrown back at me when I talk about the adverse impacts of the attention economy driven social media platforms. Essentially, one of the critiques that comes back towards me is, yes, but having an attention-driven model where we harvest your information and sell things to you. That's what allows this to be open to everyone. That's what allows it to be free. Now, my response to that-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:46:37 That's bullshit.

Cal Newport: 00:46:37 Well, I mean, I think the main issue is it's founded on the notion that you need these giant-walled garden massive platforms in order to take advantage of the social aspects of the internet, and that's where I think they go off the rails. I think the myth they want to teach people is the social internet is too complicated. You're too dumb to figure it out. So what we've done at Facebook for example is we've created our own internet, and it's in our own walled garden, and we'll make it much easier for you because it's too scary out there.

Cal Newport: 00:47:05 What are you going to do? Learn HTML? Come on. It's simpler in here, right? We've built up our own internet, and in a sotto voice. By the way, we're going to watch-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:47:12 Learn HTML.

Cal Newport: 00:47:13 We're going to watch everything that you do, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:47:14 That's so funny.

Cal Newport: 00:47:15 So it subsets like creating this walled garden, the temptation became impossible to resist the temptation to exploit people once they were stuck in your maze, right? So I'm one of these old-school internet nerds even though about that old, but old enough to remember the old internet. I'm one of these internet nerds to say, "We already have everything we need to connect with people, express ourselves, and find interested information using the internet." We don't need internet to existing on private servers because we know when you try to do that. It creates all of these other problems.

Cal Newport: 00:47:44 They're kind of unavoidable. You have everyone of this walled garden, and you're a public company. You have a fiduciary responsibility. Okay, we have to exploit the people once we're here, right? I mean, it's like if you're a publicly traded amusement park company, you have to raise the concession prices because that's a way that you have people trapped, and you can make some money, and your shareholders aren't going to like it if you don't. But we don't need it. That's the point is we have the internet, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48:07 Right.

Cal Newport: 00:48:07 I mean, it's already there.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:48:09 Well, that goes back to your point about the innovation that Facebook's stumbled upon, or maybe stumbled upon is the

wrong word that they were compelled to make when they went public and this focus on the positive reinforcement and this large behavioral experiment. I want to make a plug for one of our episodes because you reminded me of it with HTML and this walled garden. We did an episode on the history of the early internet, really the history of the web.

- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:48:36 It's ironic that the web started off being a liberation from the walled gardens like AOL, and now we've gone back to that, and that also I think brings us back to a conversation we were having. Before we turn on the microphone, which is hashgraph. You're aware of hashgraph. You've been in touch with Leemon Baird. You found this independently. You may have heard about it from this show, but it's definitely something I would love to talk to you about in our over time.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:48:59 But to bring it back to the thing we were talking about before, which was the critical moment, and the breaking of the walls of solitude. You mentioned the iPod and then eventually the cataclysm of the iPhone, the deluge, right?
- Cal Newport:** 00:49:11 Yeah.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:49:11 And with the iPhone, people forget this, and I had forgotten this, and you made it apparent in your book, which was that the unique selling proposition of the iPhone was not that you would have the internet in the palm of your hand. I remember also when Steve Jobs showed rich HTML, I was like, "Well, that's pretty. That's cool. I don't have to go on a Blackberry, but who gives a shit? I don't care. I'm not going to read The New York Times on my phone. But being able to listen to music and have someone call me while I'm listening to music, that's cool."
- Cal Newport:** 00:49:37 They go back to the song when you're done. Yeah, people forget. The main pitch was you have your Nokia RAZR and your iPod both in your pocket. That's too much stuff in your pocket. Can't we combine these? Nokia tried it with the Rucker.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:49:49 Motorola RAZR, Nokia-
- Cal Newport:** 00:49:50 Motorola, not Nokia. Right, right, okay.
- Demetri Kofinas:** 00:49:52 I had a Motorola RAZR.
- Cal Newport:** 00:49:53 There're like the Rucker. They tried it, and yes. So Jobs was a minimalist though.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:49:56 He was a minimalist.

Cal Newport: 00:49:57 His idea was, "What did people loved to do? Let's make that experience better. People loved music. People have been making phone calls for 100 years. I can make those experiences better." This notion that we need a new model of existence in which, again, we're in air traffic controller mode, constantly looking at the information, scanning the skies. That was not on his radar.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:50:14 Well, yes, you're right. He was a minimalist. Another gripe I have with Apple is that since his passing, it's become more cluttered. Everything's become more cluttered on Apple.

Cal Newport: 00:50:23 I think they're guilty though. I think they're feeling guilty. I think the screen time features ... I mean, Apple's in this interesting position because they don't directly profit off of attention, and I think they're feeling guilty about it.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:50:34 You think they're feeling guilty? Or do you think they're saying, "This is an opportunity where we can stick a fork in some of these platforms that make their money off of the attention economy"? We have the platform, the hardware platform with the software and the operating system, and we can make this a point of differentiation because we're not Android; we're not Google.

Cal Newport: 00:50:50 Well, I'm trying to figure it out, right? But adding the screen time features, I think it's a really interesting play. I'm trying to unwind this play where they've added these native features where you can now see how much you're using the phone, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:01 Right.

Cal Newport: 00:51:01 Which is going to lead to less phone use. So you're right. I mean, maybe this is a more Machiavellian play.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:06 But how much of their income is derived from you're using maniacally their phone?

Cal Newport: 00:51:10 Well, that's the thing, very little, right? But maybe more than we think, right? Because why do you need the upgrade? Why do you need the better camera? Because I have to Instagram all of the photos. Why do you need ... I mean, I think they're torn. I don't know. I'm looking at this from the outside.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:24 People have been upgrading their iPhone since day one. They've wanted to upgrade them since day one. They haven't accelerated their desire to upgrade, have they?

Cal Newport: 00:51:30 Well, but the original upgrades were about internet speed, right?

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:32 Right.

Cal Newport: 00:51:33 The original upgrades was about-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:34 And hardware. Fancier hardware.

Cal Newport: 00:51:35 Yeah, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:35 More beautiful hardware.

Cal Newport: 00:51:37 More beautiful hardware, and the internet connections would actually work. But now the upgrades, if you look at all the ads, it's about self-expression, which is code for portraying yourself on social media. I can't figure it out.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:51:47 But remember iPod, too, though. Remember, I mean, they had this ... You mentioned in your book that black silhouette. It was a fashion statement to have a new iPhone, a new iPod.

Cal Newport: 00:51:54 Oh, I agree with that. Yeah, yeah. So there's an aesthetic piece to it as well. So I don't know what Apple is thinking, but anyways, I think it's interesting, and it is a bit of a kick towards the groin as some of these attention economy-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:52:05 I think [crosstalk 00:52:06].

Cal Newport: 00:52:06 ... companies that live on their platform. I mean, Android can't put these features in.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:52:10 Exactly. That's what I think it's about. I think it's a competitive move. I mean, maybe I'm cynical, but I don't think so.

Cal Newport: 00:52:15 Maybe it's branding, yeah, but hey, I'm glad they're doing it.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:52:17 Yeah, I agree if they follow through, and it's not just words. I'll give you an example. I've never enabled Siri. But I consistently find that they make a change to their operating system and then Siri gets somehow moved into some application with a different feature to make it to toggle it on or off and it's default on. So I'm very wary of these tech companies. I know people

that are like, "Oh, Apple. I trust it." I don't trust them. But let's go back to what we were describing before because there's a part in this book, a chapter in this book, and I do want to get into your digital detox, and we'll probably get into that for our subscribers.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:52:52 But you talked about this attention resistance movement and practicing attention resistance. Can you tell me what this is? There's also another term that you throw in there which is you should learn to approach these networks with what you call zero-sum antagonism.

Cal Newport: 00:53:08 Yeah, right. Well, I mean, going back to you mentioned before that the book comes across as surprisingly not self-helpy, which is true. Most of it is actually philosophy. If you want to figure out how to stop these phones from taking over so much of your life, you have to figure out, "Well, what should your life be?" This is sort of fundamental questions.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:53:26 Can I give you a compliment? I just wanted to interrupt and give you one here because I've read a bunch of books like this. So you're right about this, but I would even take the point further. I've read other books like this and you get a sense, and especially if the authors have done a lot of other books like this, and you've done a number of books, so it could have easily happened to you. You get a sense that the author has done a lot of research specifically for this book and this book is derived specifically from that.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:53:54 This didn't feel that way. This felt like it came from a very rich wellspring of knowledge that you have amassed over a lifetime, and I think that is a testament to perhaps the lack of connectivity that you bring into your life and the amount of solitude you spend thinking and processing and having really interesting unique thoughts that aren't cookie-cutter.

Cal Newport: 00:54:15 Yeah, well, I mean that's ... The reality of life of a nonfiction writer, especially idea nonfiction, is that you read all the time to the point where maybe it's too much. But I mean if you want to be in that particular game, this is the hidden reality of it is that you're reading constantly. Just always reading, always taking things and which I love, but it feels more unique now than I think it used to. But to go back to the attention resistance, so the way I was trying to set that up is that ... The book is mainly philosophical because it has to be, right?

Cal Newport: 00:54:43 If it's about regaining autonomy and understanding how to rebuild a life in which technology helps you do what you value,

you have to hint the philosophy, "Well, how do you do that? What do people value?" Most of us, we use technology. But the attention resistance chapter is one in two places where we say, "Okay, now, let's get a little bit more brass tacks in some sense." So the attention resistance is my term for the group of people that are out there, the loosely organized community who are really into figuring out how to use rules and high-tech tools to basically circumvent the attention economy's attempts to capture their attention.

Cal Newport: 00:55:15 So they need something out of Facebook, right? Some group or something let's say. It's like, "How do I get in there? How do I surgical-strike in there, get the value out of this free Facebook group without giving up 50 minutes a day on average or whatever? Or if I'm an artist, how do I use Instagram to get creative inspiration without checking it for a couple hours a day? Or how do I use YouTube to look up my handyman videos? I want to rewire my whatever and YouTube will have instructions, but I don't want to get lost in the feed."

Cal Newport: 00:55:41 So they use high-tech tools, a lot of browser plugins for one thing. I mean, first of all, they never use these things on the phone. The phone is where 90% of the investment is made and the making the service is compulsive. They use browsers. They use browser plugins to try to scrub off the algorithmically generated content so they can't see it. Then they have these really intense rules about, "Okay, when do I use it? How do I use it?"

Demetri Kofinas: 00:56:02 Fascinating.

Cal Newport: 00:56:03 So I call them the attention resistance because they're basically saying, "You're trying to steal my time and attention. I want to deploy my time and attention for things that are high value. You have some feature I need. All right, let's battle. Let's see who's going to win this particular battle." They get in there like Navy SEALs doing a halo jump, like they come in under the radar. They get what they need, and then they're out of there before the companies are able to snag them.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:56:27 We were talking about Claude Shannon before and information theory. This might be a stretch. But the same insight I had around information as a thing when I read Claude Shannon's paper and I read James Blake's book, I had a similar moment just now about attention as a thing. I mean, these resistance, attention resistance practitioner's, as you call them. They're able to identify where their attention is and how to prevent it from being taken, which is so interesting, right?

Cal Newport: 00:56:56 Yeah. The companies understand this. So, Douglas Rushkoff who I admired, his writing has had a big influence on me. He has a good storyline he tells about this, right? You have a growth-driven economy, which we've had ever since it goes back to the medieval ages, right? This idea that we have a growth-driven economy, which you have to have once you're based on money lending. So I need to borrow money to build my company. Now, I have to pay it back with-

Demetri Kofinas: 00:57:19 Pay it back.

Cal Newport: 00:57:20 ... interest. So we have to grow. The economy has to grow. The storyline he tells is essentially what happened is to grow, you have to find new stuff. You need new resources. We ran out of physical resources, and the big insight that was had during the first dot-com boom and especially then when we had the echo boom was attention. We could see it like oil, and we can measure it like oil. I mean, the unit there is not barrels, it's user engagement minutes. But they've seen it quantitatively for a long time. This is why the stock market was so excited about the growth of the digitally mediated attention economy is that this was new lands to conquer.

Cal Newport: 00:57:55 These were new mountains under which you could mine out new minerals. So the economy could keep growing, not because we found the new natural resource to extract out of the ground, but we found that people have X number of attention minutes every day that are being wasted if we could monetize those. So for the last 10 years, stock market growth was driven in part by these companies getting really good at mining this new resource.

Cal Newport: 00:58:16 I mean, Facebook is worth almost twice as much as ExxonMobil at the peak of that, so they see it. The company see attention as a thing.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:58:24 I don't think it was a stretch because the important insight with Shannon was that he was able to quantify this thing that before was ethereal. I wonder to what extent we may be well served if we can find a way to quantify attention, and will that allow us to be able to measure it and value it properly, bring us back to Thoreau's new economics-

Cal Newport: 00:58:45 Thoreau was doing this, yeah.

Demetri Kofinas: 00:58:46 ... calculating and weighing.

Cal Newport:	00:58:47	He was counting hours, right? Hours of labor was his metric, nowadays, his minutes because we're minutes of engagement, but it is being quantified. You could look up Facebook's quarterly investor reports. I mean, it's right in there.
Demetri Kofinas:	00:59:00	You did a great job in the book of bringing in the Amish because they, interestingly enough, are not luddites. They're not against technology. They're just simply very intentional about how and when they use it.
Cal Newport:	00:59:16	I mean, I learned more about the Amish from Kevin Kelly who spent a lot of time among the Lancaster Amish at a certain point in his life. The way he talks about it is you'll be surprised. If you really want to go spend time with the old order Amish like in Lancaster County, you'll be surprised right away. So the story he tells is he pulls up, and a kid goes by on Rollerblades. There's solar panels. The moms are usually disposable diapers on their kids, and because they don't have an anti-technology rule.
Cal Newport:	00:59:40	They have an intentionality rule, which is in that particular community, community is everything. The strength of the community is everything, so when a new technology comes along, they essentially say, "Well, let's test this thing out. We'll have one of our Amish alpha geeks try it. They'll try a cellphone. They'll try a car."
Demetri Kofinas:	00:59:57	The local RadioShack guy.
Cal Newport:	00:59:58	Essentially, yeah, that guy, and we'll see. Does it make the community stronger or does it make it weaker? That's how we decide whether or not to use it. So they're incredibly intentional. They value that way above convenience, so the maximalist attitude that a lot of us have right now that's common in our culture is the opposite, which is if something brings me any value or any convenience, I better bring that into my life. If I don't, it's like someone's taking that from me.
Demetri Kofinas:	01:00:25	There is a romanticism to this philosophy, and I mean that in the historical sense of the term, and we live in an age of futurism, which, again, digital maximalism. And again, to bring it back to Jimmy, he did a great job introducing us because one of the tenants that I wrote in private. I don't think I ever put it out in public. When I had the idea for Hidden Forces was that I wanted a show that was technologically competent, but which didn't lose the humanity and the romance and the qualitative. We did an episode on phenomenology for this reason.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:00:55 But there's something else in what you were saying there about the Amish, something I didn't know that you brought up in your book, which is that when the Amish come of age, they have to leave. They have to leave the community and go live outside and make a decision, as I understand it, about whether or not they want to return. So I think there's something so incredible in that. We talked about this point about choice earlier, but I want to emphasize it again, because I think that we live in a culture and in a society where we value optionality.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:01:26 People want to have their options open. They see closing options as being bad. But in fact, I would make the argument that choosing the act of affirming or committing to something is an indication. It is proof positive that you have volition, that you have autonomy, that you have agency. I think that, the act of choosing, it reveals what matters.

Cal Newport: 01:01:51 Yes, it's intrinsically valuable. Yeah, the act of choosing itself has a value that is orthogonal to the actual topic management. "What is it that we're choosing behind? What do I care about? What do I don't care about?" Put aside the particular topic matter. Just that autonomous action of choosing, "This is important to me, and I'm going to put energy into this. This less important. I'm not," which is why for example there's so much philosophy in my book is I think a lot of what's going on ... It's not the tech. People don't just need to hear new rules about what to do with their phone.

Cal Newport: 01:02:21 I mean, one of the reasons why people become maximalist is because they don't know what to choose. I mean, what are they all about? That's actually a big question, right? The Amish know what they're all about, so it's easy for them to say, "I don't care that a car is really convenient. We're all about community. If we have cars, people go away on the weekends." The community withers. They know what they're all about. It's easy to make their choices. I interviewed in the book a Mennonite named Laura. The Mennonites have a much broader spectrum of how seriously they practice some of these ideas.

Cal Newport: 01:02:49 So she's on more of what they would call the liberal perspective, not in the political sense, but she lives in a city. She's a teacher. She doesn't live in a closed-off community. Well, she doesn't have a smartphone because she really values connection with her friends and family, and she really worries about, "I don't want to have my attention be drawn away from my friends and family." Well, when I'm with them, I want to be with them.

Cal Newport: 01:03:07 So I asked her, "Isn't that really inconvenient?" Her answer was, "Not really. I just have to print out maps before I go places." Now, if you don't know what you're all about, you're like, "Well, why the hell do I want to print out maps when I have ... " Like this would be so great. But when you know what you're all about, then that doesn't suddenly seem so bad. So that's part of what's going on right now is that people don't know what it is that they're all about, and that's why in this book, one of the things I recommend people do is they take this 30-day period.

Cal Newport: 01:03:33 It's not just about detox. You know what I mean? It's supposed to be that you clear the slate of all the stuff in your personal life to tack, and then you rebuild from scratch much more carefully. But what do you do during the 30 days? Why 30 days? It's not just detoxing. It's people need space to actually start making some tentative thoughts about this is what I'm all about. You've got to answer that question, "This is what I'm all about if you're going to be successful in making hard choices."

Demetri Kofinas: 01:03:55 So I want to talk about that. Cal, we're going to end the full episode here and take the rest in overtime. I want to talk about the digital declutter process, which is what you talked about there, and I want to talk about also the importance of cultivating leisure, which I think is a really interesting thing. I also mentioned to you before we started that I had a similar experience myself. I mean, I had this point about dumbing down your phone about I had this experience in 2016 around the time that you said this problem was becoming obvious. I wasn't able to concentrate.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:04:21 By chance, I had my iPhone 6 screen cracked, and I had an old iPhone 5, and I just put it in there. I just said, "You know what? I'm not going to install any application. I had internet, but I didn't have email." So basically, I could decide when I could connect, and I had a phone, and I had text, and it was remarkably liberating, and I loved it, and I didn't feel that level of withdrawal that you would have with a physical addiction, which you also brought up in your book.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:04:45 So I want to talk about these things, and I also want to see if we do have a chance to get into hashgraph because you're a computer science professor in Georgetown, and your insights about this are really interesting, and I think many of our listeners will find them interesting, but thank you for being here for the full episode and stick around for the overtime.

Cal Newport: 01:04:59 Thank you.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:05:00 That was my episode with Cal Newport. I want to thank Cal for being on my program. For more information about this week's episode, or if you want easy access to related programming, visit our website at hiddenforces.io and subscribe to our free email list. If you want access to overtime segments, episode transcripts, and show rundowns full of links and detailed information related to each and every episode, check out our premium subscription available through the Hidden Forces website or through our Patreon page.

Demetri Kofinas: 01:05:35 Today's episode was produced by me and edited by Stylianos Nicolaou. For more episodes, you can check out our website at hiddenforces.io. Join the conversation at Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at hiddenforcespod or send me an email. As always, thanks for listening. We'll see you next week.