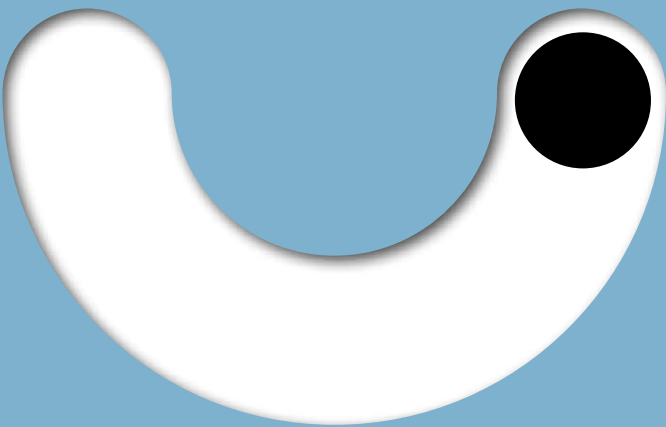A User's Guide to

Digital Wellbeing

di•gi•tal

adjective

Relating to smartphones, computers,
and other networked electronic devices

well•be•ing

noun

The freedom to spend one's time in a way
that aligns with one's personal values

Introduction

Digital Wellbeing

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Introduction
Distraction.

You're gazing at a screen of flickering images. You're watching but also somehow absent. If somebody were to ask you why you were watching, you're not sure you could give a good answer. It's certainly not enjoyment. Nevertheless, you're captivated, or perhaps just captive.

This peculiar feeling of mindlessly clicking through high-distraction, low-fulfilment digital content is widespread – it's quite possible that by now it's familiar to billions of people. And because of this universality, it's often the starting point for those calling for us to rethink our behaviour around technology.

Currently the most influential of such voices is the Center for Humane Technology, who are very direct in their analysis. Their website proclaims that "technology is hijacking our minds and society." Part of this story is about freedom, and the sense that though it is me that is clicking and swiping through the internet, it feels somehow out of my control. Regaining this freedom means regaining lost and distracted time – time I could devote instead to the things I truly value.

In order to do this, however, we must change our attitude toward digital technologies, and develop behaviors that allow us not only to cope with the complexity of the digital age, but to thrive and grow with it.

Anxiety.

Anxiety over technology is as old as technology itself. In ancient Greece, Plato lamented the advent of writing, suggesting that it would make people's memories feeble through lack of use. When the first steam trains vastly increased the speed of travel, some worried that the high velocity would cause a woman's uterus to explode.

Today, we worry that technology will change our lives, that it will ruin our relationships, or that it will take our jobs. And, to some extent, our worries are justified. Technology can and will transform our societies in a way that might be unrecognizable to past generations. This can be disorienting, even frightening.

However, to live in fear of technology is to live in fear of human potential and creativity. In fact, Plato had a point: it might be true that our memories are weaker now than they were in his time. However, in return, the written word has opened huge vistas for culture and collective memory.

We must strike a balance. We must remain critical and responsible when considering technology, without sliding into reactionary alarmism. In other words, technological development has always presented new possibilities for growth and power (or abuse of power), and it is our responsibility to decide how these technologies are used, and what kind of future we want to create with them.

Omnipresence.

The advent of digital technologies – the personal computer, the internet, the smartphone – make these questions more urgent than ever before. As our personal, networked devices have become ubiquitous in all parts of our lives, our anxiety about what they might do to our individual as well as collective wellbeing has grown.

However, we shouldn't crumble under this anxiety. Digitization does not spell our ruin. But as tech becomes more complex, our understanding must do the same. We need to be clear-sighted about the power of digital technology, including the harmful effects that it can and does have.

This booklet is meant to be an aid in navigating the complex relationship we have with digital technologies. On the one hand, they help us do meaningful work, they allow us to connect and communicate, they make our lives more convenient, and they even expose beautiful and surprising information that we might never have seen. On the other hand, they can eat up our time, "hijack" our attention, and make it harder than ever to switch off.

Let's talk about how we can harness the gifts of technology while mitigating its harm.

Digital Wellbeing Addiction.

Some commentators, including doctors and psychologists, have talked about "digital addiction." Addiction is a scary word, which for many people immediately conjures images of substance abuse. The feeling of being trapped in our digital devices is troubling – but is it justified to compare these devices to drugs?

Some problematic or obsessive tech use is similar to drug abuse in that they both stem from an impulse to avoid negative or painful feelings. This pattern of avoidance can soon become compulsive.

As a guide for how to approach digital wellbeing, however, the analogy to substances is not especially helpful. The problem with this comparison is that the way to tackle drug or alcohol addiction is to reduce intake – normally to zero. With technology however, simply trying to reduce would be the wrong approach. Instead, we want to suggest a different analogy, one which addresses the ambiguity and complexity of our relationship with technology: food.

Our digital diet.

Food can be unhealthy, and even addictive. It can cause severe damage and acute stress if consumed in a way that is bad for your body. However, even if we do develop a harmful relationship with food, or become addicted to it, removing food from our lives entirely is not an option. Rather, we must reconfigure our relationship with food and develop healthier habits – all while continuing to consume it.

This process of reconfiguration would begin with understanding your own body – what does it need, what does it crave or want, what kind of decisions can you make in order to feel empowered and healthy?

Just as the food we consume affects our physical wellbeing, the way we consume digital media can also profoundly shape how we feel. And the same kind of introspection and reflection is the first step when contemplating our digital diets. How often do you feel like you have accomplished something after using your device? How often do you feel like you have wasted time? And if you take a step back, are there aspects of your life which do not get the attention they deserve?

Know thyself.

This points to a crucial idea: the cornerstone of digital well-being is getting to know yourself better. In the end this is the only way to understand, and then shape, your relationship with your digital devices.

For centuries, priests and mystics have instructed: know thyself. But today it's not just a spiritual calling – it's also a race. As Yuval Noah Harari points out, our digital devices are working hard to understand us. They collect and analyse our data – from our reading habits to our bank statements to our heart rates. Could they come to know us better than we do ourselves?

This self-knowledge matters. Without it, we run the risk of being manipulated without noticing or understanding what's happening. It's not necessarily that there is some evil plan on the part of tech companies or anyone else. No, the real danger is a situation where there is no plan: where our everyday experience, our education systems, our thoughts, are not being governed by values or ideals, but by the impersonal mechanics of algorithms and market forces.

Attention.

Ever more of our experiences in the modern world are mediated through digital devices. We pick up the phone to contact a friend, to check the time, or to fill spare moments. As a consequence, digital devices are beginning to change not only the way we behave, but also our very experience of the world.

These devices make it so easy to begin a new task or to check a different platform that we often find ourselves working on multiple tasks at once. Our attention becomes fragmented between different topics or aspects of our lives. And though we may think that we are superb multitaskers, neurologists are discovering that this is a myth. Keeping several concepts in the mind at once is not something that we are capable of.

What feels like holding several concepts in the mind at once actually turns out to mean rapidly switching between different items. The brain enters a highly activated, though highly inefficient state in which it is saturated with dopamine. Afterwards, we are left with the feeling of having worked very hard, without necessarily having accomplished anything. Our sense of effort has become uncoupled from real productivity.

This state of activation can tilt us into a crash, leaving us feeling confused, exhausted, and overwhelmed.

Our brains.

Adoption of these practices – like instantaneous communication, email at all hours, or keeping 15 tabs open at once – has far outstripped our understanding of their psychological effects. We are only just beginning to understand what this continuous state of partial attention means for our brains, and there are still many unanswered questions.

However, as we come to understand "neuroplasticity" – i.e. our brain's amazing degree of adaptability – it appears that spending time in a distracted state may affect not only our experience in that moment, but also the long-term functioning of our brains. Specifically, neurologists believe that a kind of brain tissue called myelin plays a key role in learning new skills by isolating particular neural circuits. However, continuously flipping between different tasks means that this isolation and reinforcement is weakened, obstructing the learning process.

Put in broader terms, this could mean that spending significant amounts of time in states of mental fragmentation could degrade our ability to process new information or take on diverse perspectives.

Our organizations.

It is a familiar idea in the corporate world – ever more so as we transition to the "knowledge economy" – that a company's most important asset is its staff. This realization has prompted employers to promote employee wellbeing. Of course, the intention is kind, but it's by no means purely altruistic: organizations understand that wellbeing is essential to keeping staff motivated and productive, as well as attracting and retaining talent.

12 Such wellbeing initiatives often recognize the importance of bodily health, and promote it through gym memberships, providing fresh fruit, etc. But our mental integrity and emotional stability are just as important as physical health when it comes to working with focus and enthusiasm. As such, it's time that companies broaden their scope to consider the digital wellbeing of their staff as well. For many people, a significant portion of their digital life is directly connected to their work. So how might we change organizational practices to benefit the people working there?

Into Practice
What to do.

So what can we do? The rest of this booklet tries to offer some direction and guidance to anybody who wants to promote digital wellbeing – in their lives, in their organizations, and in society at large.

But there are no quick fixes. Yes, there are some strategies and even digital tools that can help us on our way, but rather than diving straight into those, there are a couple of important steps first. This actually goes to the heart of the topic. Albert Einstein said: "We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them." By the same token, if our aim is a more conscious and intentional relationship to digital media, the answer cannot be to look for the killer app or read the next "listicle" that will solve all our problems. The answer lies primarily in the process of reflection.

There are three levels to this reflection, which we suggest taking one by one. The starting point is gaining clarity about values. This provides a compass for everything that follows: from there we can develop behaviors that enable us to act and live more truly aligned with our values, and consider what tools support us in this.

Values.

There isn't one single vision of digital wellbeing. It varies for each person, and each organizational context. The reason is that we understand wellbeing to be a measure of freedom to spend one's time in a way that aligns with values – whatever those are for that person or that organization.

For example, it could be that focus is really important to me, in the sense of having time and space to deeply concentrate on a task or topic. In that case I might try to structure my work and habits to minimize distraction. Or, perhaps what I cherish most is reliability, meaning that I prioritize responding to people within a certain time. Or, if curiosity is a core value of mine, frequent change and exploration of new software might really resonate.

We can ask the same questions on a collective level. An organization deeply committed to transparency might translate this commitment into policies about information access.

Exploring values requires introspection and, for teams and groups, discussion. Methods and exercises to begin this journey can be found by web search. Working with a coach can also provide guidance and support in this process, especially for groups. Whether highly structured or not, this reflection is necessary to provide a solid bedrock for everything else.

Behaviors.

Creating a healthy digital diet doesn't necessarily mean simply reducing overall intake, it means becoming more conscious of your tech use, and bringing it in line with your priorities. It might help to designate certain times or perhaps parts of the home as consciously unconnected. For example, many suggest that wherever you sleep should be an off-limits zone for phones and computers. Some people even take a "digital detox" for a few days at a time to reset.

Changes to organizational behavior can have a great impact as well. Arguably more important than which programs and software an organization uses are the norms and expectations which build up around it. How immediately do we need someone to respond to our email? After a vacation, is there a viable alternative to a mountain of unread messages?

Critically examining our behavior can help us see where we've developed unspoken habits or expectations that don't serve us in the pursuit of our values, and may be creating unnecessary stress.

A key part of this may be admitting – to others and to ourselves – things about our digital usage that we find embarassing or shameful: maybe episodes of procrastination on social media, or a background sense of overwhelm and anxiety. It requires, in short, making ourselves vulnerable.

Tools.

How many times do you look at your phone in a day? Have a guess. Well, recent studies have shown that an average American checks their phone 80 times day – that's every 12 minutes on average. And for millennials, it's almost double that. A lot of people don't have a good overview of their tech usage – behaviors how much time they spend, and on what. Now there are various tools – such as Moment – that remedy this by giving them statistics and transparency. Interestingly, the idea is now being adopted by big tech companies: Apple and Google have both developed tools to let their users see how they're spending time with their devices.

A more radical set of tools lets users strategically deactivate their device, or some of its functionality. Flipd locks you out of your phone for set periods of time; LeechBlock lets you block certain websites; Freedom goes further by blocking internet access completely for a set duration. This forced removal of distractions or temptations may help some people focus.

Tools that alter the way we use communication applications – like Inbox When Ready, which hides notifications – could be introduced organization-wide to help change a communication culture. This is not an exhaustive list, and as interest in digital wellbeing grows, no doubt increasingly sophisticated tools will become available.

Changing tech.

This is a "user's guide" and so our main focus here has been what individuals and organizations that use tech can do to improve their digital wellbeing. But the end user doesn't bear all the responsibility here. Let's not overlook the digital structures that people move in, which can get in the way.

For example, many digital products are addictive by design. There are highly paid people working in the tech industry whose job is to use the kind of psychological and neurological ideas discussed above to bypass users' rational mind and get them compulsively scrolling.

The driving force here is the "attention economy." A dominant business model for digital products, particularly online services, is to offer them apparently free of charge to users, and having gained the users' attention, they sell it to advertisers. This creates a situation where the incentives of tech companies are not aligned with the interest of the user. Ultimately, what they are trying to optimize is the quantity of time someone spends on a site, not the quality.

Perhaps by being more aware of these dynamics, users can exert pressure on the tech industry by becoming more selective in their choices. But in the end, the tech industry and its product designers, having gained access to so much of people's lives, have an obligation to handle them responsibly and ethically.

Surfing.

Over a few decades, digital technologies have swept into all parts of our lives. Our level of connectedness, and also our intimacy with our devices, would have been unimaginable just a generation ago. The technological advance has been so quick that our individual and collective ability to use our new tools wisely is struggling to keep up.

The growing conversation about digital wellbeing, to which this booklet aims to contribute to, is about trying to close this gap. We know that technology will keep developing, and at an ever-greater pace. So it's easy to see that it's not enough to just find better ways to handle the hardware and software we use today. Soon enough, that will be updated and replaced.

Instead, we all need to cultivate a dynamic ability that lets us adapt to whatever the future will bring. This ability means being able to identify our values over and over again, recognizing that both we as human beings, as well as technology, are constantly evolving.

The waves of technological change will keep rolling in, higher and higher. Let's choose to be at home in the pitch and swell. Let's learn to surf.

About

Since 2010, we at betterplace lab have been asking what digitization might mean for humanity. But only recently did we start to ask: what does it mean for humans? In other words, as well as looking at macro-level shifts in our institutions and societies, what is changing in people's lived experience? This question led us to research a set of ideas which we group under the title of Digital Wellbeing.

In December 2018, as part of the project *DSISCALE,* we published a trend analysis containing much of the material covered here (this can be found at betterplace-lab. org/dw-trend). But this is a topic which is viscerally personal, touching deeper parts of us than just our rational minds. With this booklet, we aimed to create something more experimental and personal, foregoing some of the details to try and speak to – and maybe provoke – the reader on some of these more emotional or impulsive levels.

Our research has been inspired by many thinkers and sources – too many to comprehensively list here. We acknowledge particular debt to Tristan Harris and the organization he founded, the Center for Humane Technology (humanetech.com), as well as to Joe Edelman, who blogs at medium.com/@edelwax.