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Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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Digital New Year's Resolutions

Happy new year from all of us at Unfinished!

The new year has always been about new beginnings, so we're exploring the ways that technology can both enable and stand in the way of achieving new year's resolutions and long-term goals.

State of Play

Encoded in the DNA of technology is the idea that technology makes things easier, simpler, and faster, which is why we often look to apps, software, and tech-enabled methods to get more done with less time.

From apps that help you build [streaks of good habits](#) to [5-minute daily gratitude journals](#) to [software that helps you reach your personal finance goals](#) to [notifications that help you quit addictions](#), there is a galaxy of technological solutions that all promise the ability to live your best life.

But underneath this promise is an economy that is vying for your attention. The digital attention economy relies on getting users to keep consuming content. The more time you're on your device, the more profit for tech platforms and digital advertisers. The Center for Humane Technology, an Unfinished Network Partner, has an excellent [briefing on the attention economy](#): what it is, how the competition for attention shapes our digital spaces, and what to do about it.

So many ~~books~~ tweets, so little time

But while these digital tools for optimizing our lives are ubiquitous, we often find ourselves spending our time online just trying to stay caught up. There is just so much captivating, algorithmically-customized content to consume that is specifically targeted at us.

To show up in digital spaces is to regularly confront the vast disparity between the unlimited amount of content that exists and the very limited span of our attention and time we can dedicate to consuming it. Attempting to stay up to date on digital content constantly reminds us that we're only scratching the surface, that we're not consuming enough, that just beyond the bottom of our screen, there is more waiting for us.

Digital lives = distracted lives

It's no surprise then that our digital selves are often our most distracted selves. One study found that [people switch their attention every three minutes](#). The average employee [checks their email 36 times an hour](#). Earl Miller, a neuroscientist at MIT, talks about the "[switch-cost effect](#)" where instead of convincing ourselves we are multitasking by checking email, texting, updating social media, and trying to get actual work done—all at the same time, we are actually rapidly switching back and forth between tasks.

The cost? We've lost our ability to focus. Between notifications from our phone, incoming emails, the need to continuously check Twitter, and everything else, our performance suffers: whether that's at work or in our pursuits to achieve long-term goals and resolutions.

Four digital recommendations for the new year

How can we both leverage and limit technology to enable us to live our best lives in 2023?

- **Get informed about the risks** of big technology companies extracting data, surveilling users, and using algorithms to drive attention and profits. Read the Center for Humane Technology's briefing (linked above), and then check out [a talk](#) that Shoshana Zuboff, author of the book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, gave at Unfinished Live about surveillance capitalism and democracy. Go deeper by listening to the [Unfinished Live conversation with Jonathan Haidt](#) about how the profit motives underneath social media are rewiring our minds and our societies.
- **Set digital boundaries:** Use the built-in daily screen time limits on your software and devices to limit your screen time. Consider getting an alarm clock and leaving your phone outside of the bedroom (if you find yourself mindlessly scrolling before bed or when you wake up). Explore other physical or time boundaries in your life to limit when and where you use your devices (like a tech-free sabbath on the weekends).
- **Leverage technology tools and apps** to track your progress. Check out this [article](#) from last year that features tech solutions that can keep you on track (most new year's resolutions fall apart in the first month of the year).

- **Become more selective and proactive with how you spend your time**, whether it's digital or otherwise. It's far easier to get lured into endless scrolling if we're not proactively structuring our time and being selective with how we spend it.

Final Thought

Whether we like it or not, we can't expand the amount of time we have. Oliver Burkeman, author of the book [*Four Thousand Weeks*](#), proposes a unique philosophy to time management: the best way to manage our time is to ground ourselves in the understanding that we have a fixed amount of time in this life (approximately four thousand weeks), and we simply can't do it all or consume it all.

Burkeman writes: "The more firmly you believe it ought to be possible to find time for everything, the less pressure you'll feel to ask whether any given activity is the best use for a portion of your time."

No matter how you spend your time this year, we wish you an extraordinary year ahead!



Other notable headlines

🤖 Pragma Agarwal [*writes in WIRED*](#) that 2023 will be a breakout year for emotional artificial intelligence, or AI that tries to sense and interact with human emotions. Across banking, education, and healthcare, AI chatbots will try to create more empathetic connections with humans by reading their emotions. Despite being trained on larger and diverse data sets, the majority of emotional AI is unable to understand the motivations and cultural factors that contribute to specific emotions. It can pick up that someone is crying, but it can't comprehend the nuance and complexity that led to that emotion, leading critics to raise concerns that the assumptions that AI makes will exacerbate gender and racial inequalities.

🏛️ TikTok has been banned from devices managed by the House of Representatives, according to [*a briefing from Axios*](#). Any member of the House of Representatives who has installed the app will be asked to remove it. Meanwhile, the Senate voted unanimously to pass a similar bill in December that would ban TikTok on government-issued devices. The reason is a perceived security risk of TikTok's association with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). [*FBI Director Chris Wray warned last month*](#) that the CCP has control over the app's algorithm and has the ability to collect user data.

📄 Many in academia are concerned that artificial intelligence chatbots will make it easier for students to cheat in coursework and essay writing. After all, it only takes a carefully crafted prompt fed to OpenAI's ChatGPT for it to generate an original essay on any topic. So OpenAI is "fingerprinting" or "watermarking" the chatbot's output so it's easier to spot cheaters, according to

[an article by Alex Hern in The Guardian](#). The chatbot would subtly tweak the specific choices of words in a way that wouldn't be noticeable to a reader, but is statistically predictable to anyone evaluating machine-generated text. The battle against "Algiarism," or AI-assisted plagiarism is just beginning.

👤 Bruce Daisley highlights the research of Raj Choudhury, an economist from Harvard Business School, in a [recent article on the future of work](#). Choudhury has argued that history tells us it is the most sought-after job candidates who end up shaping what our jobs look like. Today, top talent is demanding complete workplace freedom: ultimate flexibility to work wherever they want. "There are two kinds of companies. One is going to embrace work-from-anywhere, and the second is in denial—I feel those companies will lose their workforce," Choudhury explains. While office-based working is most popular amongst senior leaders (who have their own offices), it has fallen out of favor with everyone else. With technology enabling work to get done anywhere, people want to be everywhere.

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#) on Twitter and [@thisisunfinished](#) on IG) for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

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