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On Ultra-Processed Content

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On Ultra-Processed Content

When I visited London last month, a large marketing push was underway for the paperback edition of Chris van Tulleken's UK bestseller, *Ultra-Processed People: Why Do We All Eat Stuff That Isn't Food…and Why Can't We Stop?* It seemed to be prominently displayed in every bookstore I visited, and, as you might imagine, I visited a lot of bookstores.

Unable to ignore it, I eventually took a closer look and learned more about the central villain of van Tulleken's treatise: *ultra-processed food*, a term coined in 2009 as part of a new food classification system, and inspired by Michael Pollan's concept of "edible food-like substances."

Ultra-processed foods, at their most damaging extreme, are made by breaking down core stock ingredients such as corn or soy into their basic organic building blocks, then recombining these elements into hyper-palatable combinations, rich in salt, sugar, and fat, soaked with unpronounceable chemical emulsifiers and preservatives.

As Chris van Tulleken points out, the problem with ultra-processed foods is that they're engineered to hijack our desire mechanisms, making them literally irresistible. The result is that we consume way more calories than we need in arguably the least healthy form possible. Give me a bag of Doritos (a classic ultra-processed food) and I'll have a hard time stopping until it's empty. I'm much less likely to similarly gorge myself on, say, a salad or baked chicken.

I was thinking about this book recently as Scott Young and I were prepared to re-open our course, *Life of Focus*, for new registrations next week. One of the three month-long modules of this course focuses on implementing ideas from my book

Digital Minimalism to help you regain control of your attention from the insistent attraction of screens.

It occurred to me that in this concept of ultra-processed food we can find a useful analogy for understanding both our struggles to disconnect, and for how we might succeed in this aspiration going forward.

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To elaborate this claim, I want to be more specific in analogizing food to media content. To start, we can connect passive text-based media, such as books and articles, to **minimally processed whole foods**. Linguistic encoding was the first information-bearing media our species developed; something we've been working with for over 5,000 years.

This timeframe, of course, is too short for evolutionary forces to apply, but it's plenty long for us to have culturally adapted to this format. As with whole foods, consuming writing tends to make us feel better, and we rarely hear concerns about reading too much.

We can next compare twentieth-century electronic mass media — that is, radio and television — to **moderately-processed food** like white bread, dry pasta, and canned soups. As with processed foods, we weren't prepared for the arrival of new mass media forms that where much easier to consume and much more superficially palatable.

As a result, for the first time in our species's interaction with media, over-consumption became a problem. (In the 1960s, the average household television viewing jumped past five hours per day.) Many social critics and educators began to rightly lament this sudden intrusion of electronic media into our cultural landscape (see, for example, this and this and this).

Many of the new media forms built on the consumer internet that subsequently emerged in the late 1990s can be similarly classified as moderately-processed. These include podcasts, newsletters, and blog posts. As with television and radio, the content itself can be valuable, but often times it's not, and the ease of its delivery requires vigilance to protect against over-consumption.

This then brings us back to **ultra-processed foods**, which as the twentieth century gave way to the twenty-first, began to increasingly dominate our diets with their lab-optimized hyper-palatability. The clear analogy here is to digital information offered through the social media platforms that vaulted into cultural supremacy in the 2010s.

As described, ultra-processed foods are created by first breaking down cheap stock foods into their basic elements, and then recombining these ingredients into something unnatural but irresistible. Something similar happens with social media content. Whereas the stock ingredients for ultra-processed food are found in vast fields of cheap corn and soy, social media content draws on vast databases of user-generated information — posts, reactions, videos, quips, and memes. Recommendation algorithms then sift through this monumental collection of proto-content to find new, hard to resist combinations that will appeal to users.

A feedback loop soon develops in which the producers of this stock content (that is, those posting to social media) adapt to what seems to better please the platforms, simplifying and purifying their output to more efficiently feed the algorithms' goal of hijacking the human desire mechanisms.

In this way, the users of social media platforms simulate something like the food scientist's ability to break down corn and reconstitute it into a hyper-palatable edible food-like substances. What is a TikTok dance mash up if not a digital Dorito?

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This analogy between food and media is useful because it helps us better understand responses to the latter. In the context of nutrition, we're comfortable deciding to largely avoid ultra-processed food for health reasons. In making this choice, we do not worry about being labelled "anti-food," or accused of a quixotic attempt to reject "inevitable progress" in food technology.

On the contrary, we can see ultra-processed good as its own thing — a bid for food companies to increase market share and profitability. We recognize it might be hard to avoid these products, as they're easy and taste so good, but we'll likely receive nothing but encouragement in our attempts to clean up our diets.

This is how we should think about the ultra-processed *content* delivered so relentlessly through our screens. To bypass these media for less processed alternatives should no longer be seen as bold, or radical, or somehow reactionary. It's just a move toward a self-evidently more healthy relationship with information.

This mindset shift might seem subtle but I'm convinced that it's a critical first step toward sustainably changing our interactions with digital distraction. Outraged tweets, aspirational Instagram posts, and aggressively arresting TikToks need not be seen as some unavoidable component of the twenty-first century media landscape to which we must all, with an exasperated sigh, adapt.

They're instead digital Oreos; delicious, but something we should have no problem pushing aside while saying, "I don't consume that junk."

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In other news…

As mentioned, my online course ***Life of Focus*** (co-developed with Scott Young) is open for new registrations **next week between June 24-28**. This course draws on wisdom from my books *Deep Work* and *Digital Minimalism,* as well as Scott's book *Ultralearning.* (Learn more here)

In Slow Productivity news: As we reach the half-way point of 2024, my new book was selected by Amazon's editors as their ***#1 Business Book*** of the year (so far)! I was also pleased to see it featured in a list of the nonfiction books "NPR staffers have loved so far this year" as well as in a *New York Times* article on "productivity books time-management experts actually use." If you haven't yet checked out my book yet, do so now…

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