

Book of the day Health, mind and body books

Indistractable by Nir Eyal review - letting tech off the hook

The author of Hooked, a bible of addictive tech design, now offers advice on how not to be distracted. But is his self-help argument convincing?



Spectacular sophistry ... Nir Eyal. Photograph: Christopher Lane

In The Doors of Perception, Aldous Huxley points out that the Lord's Prayer has 50 words, and six of them are dedicated to imploring God not to lead us into temptation.

Today I feel the same way about the creators of our technological environments. We are bombarded at every turn with persuasive design that exploits our psychological weaknesses and often leads us into temptation, habituation and distraction.

So far, the closest thing to a bible for designers who have been enlisted in that war for our attention - those tasked with hacking human psychology to increase "engagement" with their products - has been Nir Eyal's bestselling 2014 book Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products.

Now, five years later, as individuals and societies have begun to discern the extent to which distraction is a feature, not a bug, of the industrialisation of persuasive design, Eyal has returned with a self-help book. Here, as in Hooked, Eyal advances a four-part model - and even describes it as a "superpower" again - only this time it's for users: it sets out how to be "indistractable" in a world that's angling for our attention.

It would be too uncharitable to dismiss Indistractable as merely an attempt to backtrack. It would also be a mistake to place it among the crop of repentant-tech-insider confessionals so fashionable lately - those tragic narratives of grovelling and apology that the media gleefully stenograph for readers who instinctively click on them.

This is a book with two souls. One is concerned with prescription, the other with persuasion. The prescriptive part offers techniques for resisting distraction. These include: scheduling your life so assiduously that you "eliminate all white space in your calendar", beginning with "prioritising and timeboxing 'You' time"; "hacking back" or changing the external triggers that distract you.

However, it is the persuasive soul of Indistractable that merits greater attention. At the book's beating heart is a sales pitch for the blamelessness of technology vis-à-vis distraction.

Eyal's argument is roughly as follows. Distraction is any action we take that's misaligned with "our broader intentions". We often blame technology for distraction. However, because all human behaviour is motivated by the desire to minimise discomfort, the "root cause" of distraction therefore lies within us.

There are many curious contortions here. Eyal's conception of distraction remains mercurial. His foundational claim that avoiding discomfort or dissatisfaction is our motivation for everything we do in life is simply asserted; no evidence is adduced.

In fact, throughout the book he is inconsistent about what he treats as a root cause versus a proximate cause. At various points he is happy to construe all manner of environmental factors - relational, organisational, psychological, and cultural - as root causes of distraction, while treating as a ridiculous moral panic any suggestion that technologies that have literally been designed to distract - many by designers he has influenced - are themselves part of any structural problem.

This is a fundamentally unserious way of approaching the question. Imagine we've just discovered that a facial recognition algorithm is amplifying some racial inequality. In response, we might ask: how could the algorithm be designed so that it promotes equality instead?

I read us not into temptation" to "do not alter a line of the Lord's Prayer, from "lead us not into temptation" to "do not let us fall into temptation". Indistractable is Eyal's attempt at a pope-like pivot.

Technology exists to help us transcend our limitations. This book could have been a welcome recognition by a leading voice in the field that we can't fight distractions on our own - that we shouldn't have to - and that technology, properly designed and incentivised, is necessary for helping us do so.

In Hooked, Eyal wrote: "It will be years, perhaps generations, before society developed the mental antibodies to control new habits." However, in Indistractable he writes: "We have the unique ability to adapt to such threats. We can take steps right now to retrain and regain our brains.

It's one thing to tell this to knowledge workers who ride electric scooters to work and stream productivity podcasts into their AirBuds. But tell it to the single working mother who can barely carve out enough "me time" to take a shower.

To throw everything back on the individual and to ignore the structural causes of distraction is not only unscientific in its approach to human nature, it is unjust in its implications for society, and unimaginative in its capitulation to design. Such a position would be understandable, though still not acceptable, from someone who didn't know better.

James Williams's Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Restriction in the Attention Economy is published by Cambridge. Indistractable is published by Bloomsbury (£20). To order a copy go to guardianbookshop.com or call 020-3176 3837. Free UK p&p over £15, online orders only. Phone orders min p&p of £1.99.

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