

Transcript

INTRODUCTION

00:00 It's a quiet night. You're in the forest and your phone is telling you how to get home. But then your screen goes black. The battery has died. The stars are still there, but you don't know which way to go.

In the past, we knew how to find direction, but now most of us don't. The GPS helped us a lot, but it also took away one of our most important skills.

And that's what I want to talk about today. For everything that technology gives us, it also takes things away. The phone keeps us connected, but it also distracts us. Social media takes away boredom, but it also destroys our attention. AI helps us with many things, but it stops us thinking for ourselves.

So, my question is this. Every generation worries about new technology, but
01:00 usually they are wrong. So, are smartphones, social media, and AI any different?
Or is it just our turn to panic?

Hi there. My name is Rhys, and if you haven't been here before, let me introduce myself. I'm a master's level English teacher from the UK and I'm here to help you level up your English with stories, interesting conversations, and deep dives like today.

If you're enjoying the podcast, don't forget to subscribe. And remember, you can get more out of the podcast with the Podcast Course. I'll tell you more about that a little later on.

MAIN PART

I've been thinking about this a lot, probably because I became a parent last year.

I'm not against technology. I use it every day. But I have to wonder, what is my child growing up into? And what are we losing without even realising it?

But these worries are nothing new.

02:00 Long ago, Socrates worried about writing. He said, "If people write things down, they will stop remembering".

When books became common, teachers worried students would become lazy.

People said television would destroy attention, comic books, rock music, video games. Every generation had something to fear.

And looking back, it kind of seems silly, right? Life moved on. People adapted. So maybe this is just the same old story.

Well, before we decide that, I think that we should notice something.

Even simple technologies change the way we think. Before clocks, people looked at the sun. Before GPS, people just remembered maps. And before calculators, we did a lot more maths in our heads.

These are all real skills. And when technology replaces that skill, then our skills become weaker. That doesn't mean the technology is bad. It just means that
03:00 there's always this trade-off. And I think the problem is that we don't always think about that trade-off.

Now let's look at modern technology. At first it seems the same as the past. A new tool comes in, older people worry, life moves on. But I do think it is different.

Technology in the past had side effects. Modern technology is built to change the way that we think, feel, and behave. And that changes everything.

What time is it? Better check. Oh, a message. Red badge. Scroll. Didn't mean to do that. Scroll again. Didn't mean to do that. Buzz. Ping. Red badge. I'll stop in a second. Scroll. One more. Buzz. Ping. What was the time again?

This isn't because you're weak. It's not because you don't have discipline. It is designed that way.

Humans like novelty. We like new things, right? It's what kept our ancestors alive, looking for new foods, escaping danger, or inventing tools.

04:00 Apps like Reddit and Tik Tok give us endless novelty. It never ever stops. And the more novelty we get, the more it becomes normal.

So we just keep on scrolling and scrolling even when we don't want to anymore.
We keep scrolling, hoping to get that feeling that we got at the start.

And companies know this. So they took away our choice.

A long time ago, the internet had pages. You would scroll to the bottom of the page and then you would decide whether you want to go on to the next page.

You had this natural stopping point to think about it.

But these days we have something called "infinite scroll" where you could just keep scrolling and scrolling and scrolling forever.

So, they took away that choice. There is no stopping point to think about whether you want to move on. You just have to keep going.

05:00 Algorithms learn what makes you angry or shocked or excited and then it gives you more of it. Anger keeps you engaged. Engagement keeps you scrolling and scrolling makes them money.

These technologies were supposed to help us make our lives better. But for many people, it has become an escape from life. Real life now seems slow and boring to them.

Now, I do want to be fair. It would be very easy to say that tech companies are bad and users are innocent. But it's not that simple.

This technology does help us. It does help us with everyday problems and things in our lives. And really, at the end of the day, we do choose to use them, right?

I mean, there are people whose job it is to get us back into the apps, but at the end of the day, we do choose that.

So, technology isn't really the problem. It's just when technology competes for your attention. And it goes further than that.

06:00 Before the internet, we had groups of people in real life. The people you spoke to were the people around you. And your opinions weren't always the same. So, you would have to learn to find the middle ground to find nuance.

These days, you can go online and find a group of thousands of people who have the same opinions as you. So you talk to each other and your opinions get stronger and stronger. There's no middle ground anymore and the other side feel like an enemy.

So, whenever you talk to the other side or you read comments from them or anything like that, then you start to feel attacked, right? You can't relax because you're expecting a fight. And that sounds a lot like anxiety, which is very interesting because a lot of people seem to be anxious these days.

07:00 And yet we just accept it. Every time a new technology comes into our lives, we adopt it. We don't stop to ask what we are gaining and what we're giving up until one day, like the person in the forest, we don't know where we are anymore.

Now again, I'm not against technology. Some technologies help us do things that would otherwise be impossible. I could not make a trombone sound with my body. We could not go into space without machines. And we wouldn't have modern medicine without technology. These technologies extend our abilities.

The technologies that I think we should think twice about are the ones that replace us. Like the calculator that we use instead of doing easy maths in our heads, or the GPS we use instead of thinking about where things are, or AI which we use instead of thinking.

So, is this just another moral panic that future generations will laugh at us for?

08:00 No, I don't think so. I think it is different.

Socrates wasn't up against these big businesses trying to control everyone's behaviours.

Parents against comic books weren't fighting algorithms that were trying to get you addicted. This time it is different.

The technology of today is trying to control the way we feel, think, and behave and who we become.

There is a group of people who don't use this kind of technology. They are called the Amish. You may have heard of them.

They are famous for being against technology, but actually that's not fair. They do use some technology, but they are intentional with what they use.

Every time there's a new tool, they ask themselves, "What will this do to our community, to our work, and to our family?". They think about the trade-offs.

And I think that's what we need to do a little bit more, too.

09:00 And that question, is the trade-off worth it? is the one that I keep coming back to as a parent because my child might not learn from what I say, but they will learn from what I do.

They see how often I pick up my phone. They see how I deal with boredom.

So instead of asking, is this technology good or bad? I ask myself, what kind of person is this turning me into?

Am I more patient or more restless? Am I more present or more distracted? Am I more thoughtful or more reactive?

Because these habits don't stay with me. They get passed on.

So, right now, it feels like we're in that forest.

The stars are still there, but if we're not careful, we might forget how to find our way.

IN CONCLUSION

10:00 Now, let's take a look at some of the most useful words and phrases from today's episode.

The first one is trade-off. Trade-off means a situation where you give up one thing to get something else. In the episode, I said, "It just means that there's always a trade-off". Or another example, "Buying a cheaper phone is a trade-off. You save money, but it may not last as long".

Our next word is distract or distraction. It means to make someone stop paying attention or focus on something else. Earlier, I said, "The phone keeps us connected but it also distracts us". Or you could say, "The loud music distracted me while I was studying".

Our next word is intentional. That means doing something on purpose with
11:00 thought and planning. My example was, "They are intentional with what they use". Or another example, I try to be intentional about my morning routine to start the day well.

Our next word is novelty. That means something new, unusual or interesting. Earlier I said, "Humans like novelty. We like new things, right?". Or, you could say, "Travelling to a new country gives me a sense of novelty and excitement".

And our last phrase today is middle ground. That means a position or opinion between two extremes. Earlier, I said, "You would have to learn to find the middle ground to find nuance". Or, a new example, "In the argument about where to eat, we found a middle ground. We chose a restaurant that we both liked".

12:00 If you would like to get more vocabulary as well as language points and listening practice from this episode, then you can do that in the Podcast Course. There's a link in the description.

Before we finish, I'd just like to thank my dedicated members. That's Anna, Alina, Daisy, and Marcela. And if you want to be a dedicated member and get a free conversation class every month, there's a link in the description.

I'll see you later.

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