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Good Intentions, Bad Inventions:
The Four Myths of Healthy Tech

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The tech companies that design and build so many of the devices, platforms, and software we use for hours each day have embraced myths that push a flawed understanding of digital well-being. While we are encouraged that these companies are dedicating greater attention to social media's effect on the mental and physical health of users, their current approaches to improving user well-being fundamentally misunderstand how people engage with technology. At its worst, this approach funnels time and resources to making technology more "enriching" for middle-class white users, while failing to address the systemic harms that minoritized communities face.

The heart of this misunderstanding is **biological determinism**, which suggests that our "Paleolithic" brains cannot resist "God-like" technology, placing too much power in the hands of tech companies to both create and destroy our capacity for attention. But attention is not a fixed biological entity, it is a value-laden social category; people stop using social media of their own volition all the time.

Current approaches to improving digital well-being also promote **tech solutionism**, or the presumption that technology can fix social, cultural, and structural problems. At their core, these approaches lack empirical evidence to support them. We want to replace these myths with new evidence-based narratives that shift the conversation toward agency and equity.

MYTH

1

Social media is addictive, and we are powerless to resist it.

WHY THE MYTH EXISTS

The growth of addiction frames for many behaviors (gambling, overeating, sex) commonly biologize and moralize behavior at the expense of fostering actual well-being. We cannot reduce human behavior to biology without also considering the roles of culture and human agency.

New technologies and forms of media have historically sparked moral panics, even bicycles. The panic often stems from desires to protect and control others, particularly women and children, who are seen as uniquely vulnerable to its harmful properties. Moral panics often use the language of addiction to pathologize the thing they fear.

This myth reinforces the narrative that technology design leads to control of millions of users, locating enormous power with a small group of tech companies.

WHAT THE MYTH OBSCURES

There is very little evidence for tech addiction, and what evidence exists is controversial.

Different people have different responses to technology, even on the same platform. Scholars call this phenomenon "differential susceptibility" to media effects among a subgroup of people, and it holds equally for the differential well-being and mental health impacts of social media on young adults.

Different groups use platforms differently. Marginalized communities may benefit from increased access, visibility, and community through these platforms.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

The concept of addiction does not encompass the full range of pleasures, risks, and uses that people create with technology.

INSTEAD:

- Do not assume that everyone is on the fast train to problematic internet use, nor ignore the possibility that a select few might be on their way to life-diminishing use of a platform.

- Expand research to include the needs and values of a broader range of users, including youth, communities of color, and other historically marginalized populations. Track and incorporate emerging academic research on the topic of digital well-being in product design.

- Diversify tech workers across the company, and don't silo their contributions into disempowered roles. Pay the workers in your Employee Resource Groups for this extra work.

MYTH

2
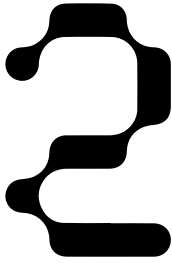
Technology companies can fix the problems they create with better technology.

WHY THE MYTH EXISTS

Technological solutions to social problems seem quicker, cheaper, and simpler to implement than larger social changes.

Tech solutions can seem more objective or neutral compared to policy changes (but can often hide discriminatory effects).

Companies aren't building diverse, interdisciplinary teams at the same rate as they launch new technology, thus asking the same people who built it (and often don't agree that it's flawed) to fix it.

WHAT THE MYTH OBSCURES

Tech fixes, like nudging individual behavior, are paternalistic and place blame on individuals rather than company choices and structures. They are not equivalent to comprehensive and effective policy change.

Historically marginalized groups often shoulder the brunt of mistakes when we "move fast and break things."

Companies should not assume they can release a product without thinking about its unintended uses and then undo the harm that results. This often doesn't work.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

Some technology cannot be fixed by more design, and some technology should not be built at all.

INSTEAD:

- Consider the regulatory, policy, social, and cultural landscape when building something new. Sometimes, the right choice might be to not build a technology at all. Some employees within tech companies have already adopted this stance.

- Instead of technical fixes, consider social or legal change: such as policy, regulation, or culture shifts. Build new, internal policies that privilege a broad and diverse range of user experiences and health in the design process.

MYTH

3
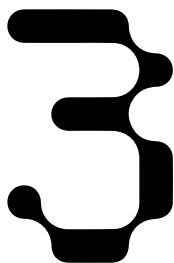
Growth and engagement metrics are the best drivers of decision-making at tech companies.

WHY THE MYTH EXISTS

Silicon Valley investors prioritize metrics like daily active users, monthly active users, user retention, and time spent on the platform as key indicators of growth and ad revenue.

What you can measure becomes what you value: it's easier to measure growth than health and well-being.

WHAT THE MYTH OBSCURES

Numbers seem "objective" even though they are just as much the product of social and cultural forces as anything else. Cultural contexts, in turn, shape how metrics are used and interpreted.

Metrics can tell a story of averages, but averages do not tell the whole story. An over-reliance on numbers often leads to bias and discrimination.

Metrics are self-fulfilling. As Goodhart's law suggests, metrics can fail if given too much power, and over-emphasizing metrics can lead to gaming, manipulation, or "a myopic focus on short-term goals."
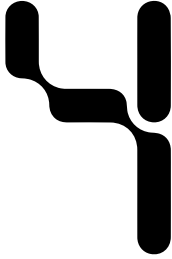
WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

Many of the most important parts of digital well-being cannot be captured by quantitative metrics.

INSTEAD:

- Values, rather than numbers, should drive decision-making. Ask whether what you measure accurately reflects your priorities. Many of our most cherished values are not amenable to quantitative measurement.

- Don't rely on metrics that treat all users the same. Explore how subgroups of users interact with a platform, and develop metrics of user experience for these subgroups.

- Use qualitative methods to generate narratives and provide the full picture of how a platform is used and understood.

MYTH 4

Our health and well-being depend on spending less time with screens and social media platforms.

WHY THE MYTH EXISTS

Social media companies incentivize users to spend as much time on a platform as possible. Some argue that this "attention extraction economy" is why individuals are unhappy, and why societies are failing.

There is a decades-old fear that children spend too much time consuming screen-based media, and that this is substituting for the development of cognitive, social-emotional, and motor skills.

Parents want concrete, actionable rules for limiting children's use of technology.

WHAT THE MYTH OBSCURES

The myth assumes that there is a "better" or "right" way to spend time and attention, and that tech companies can be trusted to make that call for everyone.

Not all screen time is the same. It can be connective, supportive, emotionally enriching, horizon-expanding, and educational, as well as sometimes harmful. Social media can be used as a "release valve" for youth, allowing them to manage the pressures and limitations in their lives.

The myth devalues the ways that social media can be repurposed as an organizing tool for social and racial justice movements, and as a community for marginalized people.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE TELLS US

Health and well-being cannot be reduced to the single variable of screen time.

INSTEAD:

- Ask subgroups of users what they want and value rather than trying to measure it through platform-observed behaviors, which may mask the context behind an action.

- Privilege users' perspectives around value, pleasure, and joy, and work to understand non-quantifiable outcomes.

- Use ethics teams, diverse product teams, and qualitative social science to broaden the values that guide the design of new products.

Letting go of the myths that have structured debates about digital well-being will allow users, parents, companies, and policy makers to develop a more robust and nuanced understanding of the real potentials, and actual pitfalls, of technology use by the variety of people who use it. Social media companies cannot assume that all people on their platforms have similar experiences, nor can they assume that all people will react in the same ways to changes they make. They must instead work to unearth what these different experiences are, determine if they are harmful, and eliminate inequities. Yet tech companies cannot work in a vacuum. Tech insiders should not be left to define the problems with social media, and to propose the solutions. They should integrate the work of diverse social science scholars into their processes. They need to meaningfully engage with outside groups to help them, they need to be led by the evidence, and they need to truly listen to all of their users.

Further Reading

These books inform the broader narratives of this primer. We offer them for those interested in deepening their understanding of these issues.

Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*

Benjamin argues that emerging technologies often deepen racial inequity, even while appearing neutral or benevolent. Her work provides conceptual tools to understand how tech design can be discriminatory.

Watch related Databite

danah boyd, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*

boyd unpacks common tropes about how teens use technology by elevating their voices, their experiences, and the contexts of their lives. She highlights positive and connective uses of networked technologies and demystifies teens' desires for and actions in networked, digital spaces.

André Brock, Jr., *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*

Brock explores how digital media platforms are shaping and are shaped by African American identity. While primarily highlighting the joy and community of being Black online, he also argues that content-sharing algorithms showing racist and racialized content are a form of "weak-tie racism"—a slow violence impacting Black digital culture.

Watch related Databite

Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*

Broussard argues against technochauvinism: the belief that technology is always the solution. By understanding the limits of what technology can achieve, we can make better choices about how technology can and cannot make the world better for everyone.

Sasha Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*

Moving beyond calls for user-centered design and enhanced workforce diversity, Design Justice provides a handbook for exploring the theory and practice of how marginalized communities can lead design processes and dismantle, rather than reproduce, structural inequities and injustice.

Watch related Databite

Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*

Noble challenges the neutrality of search engines. Her research highlights how search engines embed negative biases and perpetuate discrimination, especially for women of color.

Watch related Databite

Theodore Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*

Porter argues that numbers gained prestige in the modern world due to political and social pressure to create the appearance of objectivity. His book explores the social underpinnings of our infatuation with quantitative methods.

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