

Four Steps to Becoming Mindful (Instead of Mind Full) in Social Networking

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When was the last time you gave yourself the luxury to stop and think? I mean literally stop and think, not a momentary attempt to recall something from memory. With the explosion of social networks, this has become increasingly more difficult to do.

Ironically, it has become even more important in this world of **hyperthinking**. That is the term I am now using for what's starting to happen in our heads in this on-demand world we live in. It presents a challenge that I foresee to be one of the greatest obstacles to our ability to manage our mental process—and it will only get worse unless we intentionally become conscious of how we are thinking and using our brains.

Back to Brain Basics

The era we now live in is a world of *continuous partial attention*. This is different than multi-tasking. Continuous partial attention is defined this way by [Linda Stone](#) who coined the term:

To pay continuous partial attention is to pay partial attention – CONTINUOUSLY. It is motivated by a desire to be a LIVE node on the network. Another way of saying this is that we want to connect and be connected. We want to effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment. To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter.

She differentiates this from multi-tasking in the following way:

The two are differentiated by the impulse that motivates them. When we multi-task, we are motivated by a desire to be more productive and more efficient. We're often doing things that are automatic, that require very little cognitive processing. We give the same priority to much of what we do when we multi-task – we file and copy papers, talk on the phone, eat lunch – we get as many things done at one time as we possibly can in order to make more time for ourselves and in order to be more efficient and more productive.

When we pay attention to something, we are engaging our brains. Attention is critical because it is an essential activity our brains perform. But as Stone explains, with continuous partial attention, we aren't motivated to be more efficient. We're scanning, staying busy, staying connected. New technologies and 24-hour connectedness trigger our brains and fuel the adrenaline rush we get when information comes in and connections can be accessed in an instant, anywhere in the world.

This partly explains the explosion in social networking over the past few years. A [new report](#) from Forrester Research shows that 55.6 million adults around the globe, just less than a third of the US population, now visit social networks at least monthly, up from just 15 percent of adults in 2007, and around 18 percent last year.

And as dramatic as those numbers are, e-mail still far outweighs social networking activity with 165.4 million users. E-mail is part of the continuous attention challenge, however, particularly when you consider how many people now access their e-mails on mobile devices, getting "pinged" whenever a new message arrives.

Doing two things at once has always held great appeal to me personally, but it's not without its consequences – it can impact our speed of processing and in particular our memory. I learned this lesson the hard way, when I was living in France working as an interpreter. I thought this just might be my calling in life. I quickly discovered it was not for me.

My interest in interpreting came from a desire to learn about many different new areas through the exposure I would get interpreting for a wide array of experts. I practiced with my family, who were visiting a small town in southern France with me, by interpreting for them while we toured the beautiful old city with a guide who spoke only French. After the tour was over, they were thrilled with all that they had learned. I, on the other hand, could not remember a single thing I had said. My brain was so busy continuously processing, paying attention to

the sentences to come, that I immediately moved on without retaining anything that came before.

Researchers at UCLA recreated a similar challenge with 20-somethings and were able to document this decrease in memory function. Other research has shown us that it slows down our ability to process, as the brain “task switches” between competing attention areas. Simply put, we pull our mental energy toward the need to concentrate and away from memory and new learning.

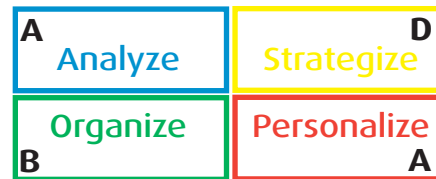
A column in Fast Company by Jamais Cascio ([Social networking and the Brain: Continuous Partial Empathy?](#) 4/14/09)) references famed neurologist Antonio Damasio’s recent research that brings up another challenge:

In a media environment where our social encounters happen very quickly, we may not be giving our brains a chance to generate appropriate compassion or admiration. This is especially problematic with regards to compassion, as we may find ourselves building insufficient bonds of empathy, critical to communities undergoing stress.

A 4-Step Process for Going from Mind Full to Mindful

All this said, social networking offers us a great opportunity to engage our social brains, supporting and increasing our ability to connect with others in ways and amounts we never before thought was possible. In addition, it can make it easier for those who may not traditionally be as comfortable forging connections. Introverts, for example, who may find interaction with others energy draining or stressful, can reach out in ways that may better align with their natural predisposition.

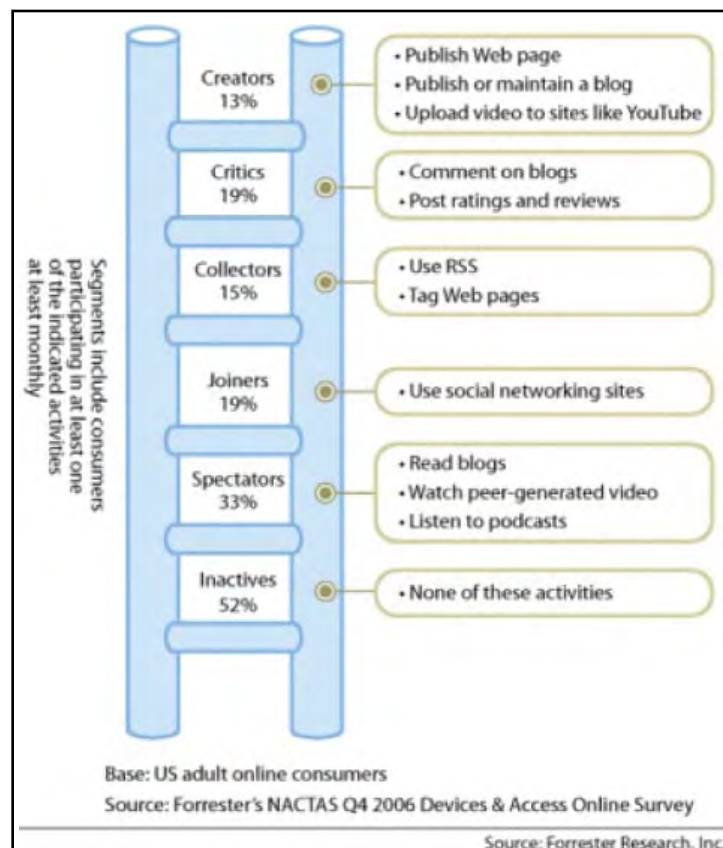
The best way to get control (or at least the illusion of it) and manage our attention is to become very intentional and conscious of how we are using our brains. The Whole



Brain® Model provides a terrific means to organize, understand and manage our attention.

1. Go to the A quadrant (Blue): ANALYZE: Where are you today?

- ◆ Start by determining where are you on the “ladder of social networks” (see chart below from Forrester Research).
- ◆ Write down how much of your time is spent on each rung of the ladder on average per week (you may wish to monitor it over an average week to verify your data.).
- ◆ Analyze how much of your time and productivity is consumed by your activity. Unless your job description requires it, this is probably time that has worked itself into your day without your realizing it.



2. Go to the C quadrant (Red): PERSONALIZE: Who are you interested in connecting with, for both personal and professional reasons?

- ◆ How does it make you feel to connect with people you knew from the past?
- ◆ How does it feel to make new friends?
- ◆ What interests do you have that you would like to connect with others on?
- ◆ How can you have fun with it?

3. Go to the D quadrant (Yellow): STRATEGIZE: Why are you interested in Social Networking?

- ◆ What can you discover and learn?
- ◆ How could you use it to stimulate your thinking? Take a mental break? Help you get unstuck?
- ◆ Think about and jot down, in no particular order, all of the reasons why social networking is something you can and want to engage in. Think of all the positive things you accomplish from your social networking. For some ideas go to:
 - What is it: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network
 - Top ten and comparison list: <http://social-networking-websites-review.toptenreviews.com/>
 - How it helps learning: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/06/080620133907.htm>
 - For entrepreneurs: <http://www.gaebler.com/Advantages-of-Social-Networking-Sites.htm>
 - Personal: <http://personalweb.about.com/b/2009/08/20/why-social-networking.htm>
 - Job hunting: <http://www.examiner.com/examiner/x-13521-SF-Workplace-Communication-Examiner~y2009m7d14-Why-social-networking-is-an-impor->

tant-tool-for-effective-job-hunting

- Also, look for industry specific sites. For example, if you're a learning professionals, check out: <http://c4lpt.co.uk/edunetworks.html>

4. Go to the B quadrant (Green): ORGANIZE: How much time can you devote to social networking and how will you manage it?

- ◆ In other words, what will you decide NOT to do that will allow you to do this? Many people, like me, do their social networking in the evening. The good news is that it takes me away from mindless activities like watching TV. The challenge is that it also takes me away from reading or spending time with family, etc.
- ◆ How much time can you devote to social networking:
 - Daily:
 - Weekly:
- ◆ What time of day will you devote to social networking?
- ◆ Which sites will you engage in?

There is a plethora of tools you can use to manage the time and attention that social networks can take. The Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies has compiled [a great list](#). I recommend you use some of these tools so you can manage your attention most effectively to be mindful instead of mind-full!

Ann Herrmann-Nehdi is CEO of Herrmann International and an expert on the ways individual thinking styles can impact performance, effectiveness and overall results.

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