Judith Kelley:

So has this ever happened to you? So you're headed out and you go check on the weather, and next thing you know you are reading the news, and an hour later you haven't left? Somehow, the moment you touched your phone, you forgot why you were even picking it up in the first place. In other words, do you ever struggle to focus or get easily distracted by your email or your phone?

My guest today is on a mission to help us live well and work deeply in our high-tech world. He says there are ways to free us from our inboxes and screens and live focused lives amidst our increasingly distracted world. Cal Newport is a professor at Georgetown University where he focuses on the emerging discipline of digital ethics. He's one of the founding members of Georgetown's Center for Digital Ethics. On top of that, he's also a New York Times bestselling author. Cal has written several books with titles like Deep Work, Digital Minimalism, and A World Without Email. His books have sold over two million copies, which is just slightly less than mine have sold. He's also contributing writer for the New Yorker, weighing in on hot button tech issues of the day, like for example, whether or not ChatGPT has a mind, which is an interesting question we might get to later. His most recent work offer a bold vision for workers to increase their productivity and focus in the face of communications overload. I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy.

Welcome to Policy 360, Cal.

Cal Newport:

Mel, thanks for having me.

Judith Kelley:

So I'm inspired by your quest to live and work deeply. What does a deep life look like?

Cal Newport:

I usually start with intention so you know what's important to you, what you want to actually do. Once you realize that, then the deep life has care about all the things they're trying to keep you off that path. So someone who's living the deep life, it may look quite idiosyncratic to that individual, but the one thing you're going to see is that they're actually thinking about, "What's important to me? What's getting in my way? How do I want to live? How am I going to get there? What's my vision?" So there's a whole lot of intention, and that intention almost always is going to be something that's going to be acting against the allure of the distracting, especially the digital distracting. You simply cannot give in to an entire ecosystem of digital distraction, and yet still wield meaningful control over the direction of your life.

Judith Kelley:

So prioritizing comes to mind.

Cal Newport:

Prioritizing, being values-driven in things like your technology use, which seems like a minor thing, but I think is major in its implication. That is instead of saying, "I will use every new tool by default until I get a strong enough reason to convince myself to stop using it," you flip that and say, "What do I really want to do? What tools are going to help me do this? How am I going to use them to help me do this thing I care about? Great, if you're not on that list, I don't use you. You have to earn your way onto my list as

opposed to earn your way off." It seems like a subtle difference, but this type of thing makes a big difference.

Judith Kelley:

How did you personally intersect with this concept and come up with this idea of calling it a deep life? Was there something that triggered it in your own life or anything in your own experience that's brought you to this point?

Cal Newport:

It was my book, Deep Work, which came out in 2016, that really changed the trajectory of my writing and thinking. I had written four books before that, but they were not about technology. They were not really about work. But then this book, Deep Work, came out and I was arguing about the value of focus and that we were undervaluing focus from an economic standpoint and creating office environments that were too distracting and we're missing out on this in latent value in the ability to actually focus.

The big feedback I got on that book was, "Why have we got to this place where it's so hard to focus? If this has so many ramifications on our subjective wellbeing, on our productivity, on how well our organizations run, why are we existing in a world where we email all the time and look at our phones all the time?" It was in answering that question that my scholarly concerns turned towards the ethics of technology, understanding the subtle ways in which technology influenced our life. What we're trying to pursue that technology is keeping us away from, this deep life concept, all of that stemmed out of me trying to understand why the book Deep Work was even necessary in the first place.

Judith Kelley:

I guess I want to take a step further, what made you personally write a book about deep life?

Cal Newport:

Yeah, well, I mean the book Deep Work, so it's-

Judith Kelley:

Deep work, sorry.

Cal Newport:

Deep Work, yeah, but that itself came out of the book before. There's this interesting follow-on effects to my book. I had written a book in 2012 called So Good They Can't Ignore You, and it was a contrarian career advice book. So I wrote this book when I was postdoc at MIT, was facing the academic job market, and I just had this notion of there was any time in my life of really understanding how people use work to develop meaning in their life, this was the time in my life I was going to get the most leverage out of that. So I wrote this book, and the argument of the book was we put too much focus on trying to identify preexisting passions, and actually passion often is something that's cultivated. One of the key activities in cultivating passion was getting really good at something.

And so the follow-up question I got to that book was, "Well, how do I get really good at something?" And so my answer to that was, one thing that really helps you get good at something is focus. I had trained in the theory group at MIT where I was surrounded by elite focusers, Turing Award-winning, MacArthur Award-winning applied mathematical theoreticians who could stare at a whiteboard three hours without blinking, world-class focusers. I had thought about focus as a tier one skill you could train

or be good at, and so when it came time to answer this question of, how do I get good? I said, "You know focus is a big part of this story we don't talk about."

I had stumbled into the topic of deep work thinking about things like skill and skill development. And then once that book came out, people said, "Yeah, but it's so hard to focus, and technology is stopping us." And that was really the pivot point where I began to think much more formally about technology and its impact.

Judith Kelley:

That's interesting. It's really interesting and now I'm starting to appreciate why you said intentionality when I first asked you or intention, because we all focus. We focus a lot actually. We may even be over-focusing on some things but not what we chose to focus on, right?

Cal Newport:

Yeah.

Judith Kelley:

I mean that's precisely what's so hard.

Cal Newport:

Yeah. What do we focus on? Yeah, how do we choose to do it?

Judith Kelley:

How do we choose to do it?

Cal Newport:

How do we choose to do it, right? Why for example, are we giving so much time to this particular app on our phone? We might realize we don't have a good answer for that. But the big issue that came up with Deep Work was my definition of focus was one that we weren't doing. The subtle thing I added based on the neuroscience of concentration was you're not really focusing if you switch your attention at all during that session. And so a lot of people thought during this time period they would say, "I'm a single tasker. I don't keep multiple windows open. I don't have my inbox open next to Microsoft Word when I'm writing." But what they were doing instead is every five to six minutes doing a quick check, "Let me just check my inbox real quick. Let me see what's going on in my phone."

The neuroscience taught us, those quick checks could be almost as bad because they initiate this whole neurological cascade of network switching inside our heads, which we then arrest just a couple of minutes into our inbox check and then try to switch our network back to what we're working on. But before we can fully network switch to that context, we go back to the inbox, and this was really a killer. So we had people thinking, I single task, but they were doing this back and forth, back and forth. And so when they thought they were focusing, they weren't. And so actual uninterrupted time of non-trivial duration, that became very rare. That almost entirely disappeared from a lot of knowledge work sectors. Almost everything was done with some amount of interleaving back and forth.

Judith Kelley:

Okay, so an analogy is popping into my mind, tell me whether it's at all valid or where it has any merit or whatever. Imagine that you have two cars and you want to move both cars from point A to point B and they're parked next to each other. You get in car A, and ideally the most efficient way of doing this is you drive it to point B and then you go back and you get the other one and you drive it to point B. You're saying what we're often doing and what is hyper inefficient is driving the first car 10 yards, stopping it, getting out, going to the other car, driving it 10 yards, getting out, going back, and that actually that transaction time of starting the car again, i.e., starting our brain again, moving from one to the other is a net loss of productivity.

Cal Newport:

Yeah, I think that's a good analogy because it takes time to go back and forth, so in the end, it takes you much longer to actually park both cars. The cognitive reality is even worse than that because it's not just the immediate cost of I have to close down this window, bring this window back up, go and find the right information. There's a switching cost that happens in your head as well that can take five, 10, up to 15 minutes that has to do with what networks within your head are activated or inhibited.

So it gets even worse. So if I look at an inbox for just 30 seconds, but I see in that inbox highly salient information, because it's typically going to be messages from people I know who need things from me, which is something that the human brain cares a lot about, so I start switching over to that context of this issue that my department chair is having with me. Then if I come back to everything is exactly where it was, it could take 10 up to 15 minutes for all of those networks I started firing up there when I glance on my inbox to actually shut down. So we could probably extend this metaphor somehow to maybe have one car somehow is in the dark and one is in the light. So when I move to the car from the light to the dark, it's not just a time to switch cars, but it takes a while for my eyes to adjust to the dark, so I can't drive very well for a while. So it slows us down even more than we realized.

Judith Kelley:

Feel free to build on this analogy in the future.

Cal Newport:

I think we could have five or six more steps-

Judith Kelley:

Five or six different paths.

Cal Newport:

Instead to we're driving somehow the car to an important destination and there's a metaphorical reign of distraction we can build. We'll keep going.

Judith Kelley:

All right, so everybody who's listening and is still with us and haven't switched to some other station or another app, they're saying, "Okay, when is it going to tell us what the tricks are?" How do you make sure that you're not sort of overwhelmed by communication and yet don't miss important communication? How do you do that?

Cal Newport:

The thing that's really killing us when it comes to checking inboxes all the time, checking chat channels all the time, it's actually a step removed from the actual decision that check it or not. And it comes down to what are the implicit systems by which you communicate with people and the reason why in the particular office, I'll talk about what I do here in a second, but the reason why in an office we check an inbox all the time, even when we know we shouldn't is because often what we have going on is back and forth interactions driven by unscheduled messages. So I send you an email, "Hey, what's going to happen with the client tomorrow?" At some point you're going to write back and be like, "Oh, is she coming at 12?" At some point I see that, "Are you sure 12? I heard 1:30." So it's a back and forth interaction. So we're going to have to go back and forth multiple times to resolve it.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

Every individual step is on schedule though, so I don't know exactly when I'm going to hear back. This leads me to have to check all the time.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

Because if it's going to be six or seven back and forth in this volley and we need to reach a decision by 12 because the client's coming, so we have to resolve this. I have to see each of your messages pretty soon after it arrives, which means from a preemptive standpoint, I have to check that inbox all the time. This is why I think it doesn't work just to say to someone, check your inbox less. So I can't check my inbox less because the client's coming. We got to figure out when the client's actually coming. So a lot of what I try to do is how do I reroute these type of interactions out of back and forth on scheduled messages? If you do that, everything else happened in your inbox can wait. It's not a big deal. It's really easy to sequentially your work and only check your inbox at certain times like I do if you do not have multiple ongoing back and forth unscheduled interactions happening.

So as soon as you reroute those to other ways of communicating, I have an office hours call me, come during my office hours if you have a question. Here's my number, if there's something urgent, you want to call me. We have this daily status meeting with our team where we figure out who needs what from whom, so we don't have to go back and forth. As soon as you've rerouted the back and forth out of asynchronous messaging, the inbox becomes much more easily tractable and all the advice that we were trying in the early 2000s doesn't work anymore, works again. Now I can batch my inbox. Now I can check it twice a day. Now I can have smart filters. All the stuff that doesn't work with I have to follow this interaction, does work once you get those out of there. So that's a lot of what I do is think about how do I minimize this amount of back and forth, asynchronous, drawn out conversations that's happening in this medium?

Judith Kelley:

Well, we'll get back to more of your you techniques later, but I was reminded of an old cartoon. There's a cartoon character called Ziggy. I don't know if you know Ziggy.

Cal Newport:

Sure.

Judith Kelley:

And Ziggy is sitting in an armchair. There's a huge pile of newspapers next to him and he's reading them and underneath it says, I love reading the old newspapers because by the time I get around to them, most of the issues have resolved themselves. So in any case, I want to drive a little bit at the technology piece of this. So part of our inability to focus is we don't realize that we're not focusing. We may be so intently focused, "on the wrong things" that we can't even catch ourselves in the act of focusing on the wrong things. Some of this is attributable to how the technology itself is designed to work. So how do you think about who is responsible here and who has to take action? Is it a lot to say the consumer has to figure out how to manage these things, it's up to them, or do we need to focus at the other end as well?

Thoughts?

Cal Newport:

It depends on the technology. I think this is one of the more nuanced but important pieces when thinking about distraction. There are multiple different areas in our life where the end result seems similar. This is a technology I use all the time and it distracts me, but the reasons we do is different and therefore the responses are different. So I want to draw a line between workplace distraction and non workplace phone distraction.

Judith Kelley:

Okay, again, workplace distraction.

Cal Newport:

Email, Slack. I'm on my inbox all the time in work.

Judith Kelley:

Yup.

Cal Newport:

Versus, I'm looking at my smartphone all the time, not for the business applications, but social media-

Judith Kelley:

During your work Cal?

Cal Newport:

During or not during.

Judith Kelley:

I'm just kidding.

Cal Newport:

During or not during, but yes, right. Because they seemed very similar. Right? And often I'll put both these charts next to each other, the email checks per day and the phone checks per day. The end result's very similar. It's a technological device I'm looking at all the time, right?

The work email case study is largely accidental. My argument for how we got to a world where we check email all the time was we introduced this tool for narrow instrumental reasons, which was to replace the fax machine to replace voicemail and to replace interoffice memos. It was just once it was in the office, it had this unexpected side effect of shifting us towards what I call the hyperactive hive mind workflow. Once we had low friction digital communication, we didn't just move our existing voicemails over there, we moved more and more collaboration to asynchronous back and forth messaging. It did not take long before we were overloaded with communication. This was largely unintentional.

In fact, I document a case in my last book at IBM, late 1980s. Talked to an engineer who was there when they turned on their very first email server, and it took them three days to melt down that server three days after they turned it on, before the communication overload was so much more than they predicted that they had to actually go and buy another mini computer. So just the presence of the tool changed the way we worked, and then it was very hard to go back and so we just built around that ever since.

The phone is different, the iPhone was not introduced to distract us. Steve Jobs' vision for the iPhone was not that we would check it 150 times a day. It was designed to combine your iPod with your Motorola razor so you didn't have to carry two devices in your pocket.

Judith Kelley:

And your camera.

Cal Newport:

And your camera. And even that emphasis came a little bit later. But early on, really, because I went back and rewatched the keynote address from 2007, 30 minutes, all he's talking about is music and phone. You have to get 30 minutes into that talk before he even mentions the internet capabilities. So what happened there was once the social media companies moved to mobile and stumbled, and I really do think they stumbled with the like button into the idea of, oh, wait a second. If this phone is always with you, we could start engineering this app to be more irresistible. We could get a lot of engagement out of it. So we look at our phones all the time because there's very large companies that have put a large amount of money into engineering the phone so that we'll look at it all the time. We look at our inbox all the time, it's a completely different story. It wasn't an intentional move to try to monopolize more attention. It wasn't a-

Judith Kelley:

Let's get everybody hooked on email,

Cal Newport:

Let's get everyone hooked on email. That was not the original move. It was not a manager versus labor type, we're going to get more labor out of our workers if we can email, later they appreciated that, but it's not how the change actually happened. It was accidental. And so when we recognize that, the responses become different. So how we respond to the email problem and work is, my big argument has been we have to put in place alternatives. This is an organizational issue, not an individual can't solve this.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

Organizations need to come in and say, "Here now is how we collaborate. Here is how we identify tasks. See who's working on who and communicate about it. Here's the alternative that we are saying, this is what we do. You have our stamp of approval. Here's our alternative to having to just send emails back and forth." The solution with phones is different. There's culpability there. If you engineered your device to be as engaging as possible, there's culpability on the negative impacts on that. There's also changes to how we deal with that. We don't necessarily need an alternative. We can have cultural responses that say things like, "Let's just stop using this," or "Kids shouldn't use this at all." We can have much stronger, more binary responses over there because I think that's a much clearer binary of this company is spending a lot of money to get your time and you're not sure if you want to give it to them. So end result similar. But how we got there I think is different in both cases.

Judith Kelley:

Does that mean that how we get away from there is different also then? Do you have different prescriptions from a policy perspective, what we need to be doing in these different tech spaces?

Cal Newport:

I think definitely because in the workplace there's not really a policy prescription for email overload. The way we work is bad for everybody. Burns out workers, it's unproductive. Bosses don't like it. No one likes it. It's not a good way to work. Our main obstacle over there is complexity. Right now, knowledge work has a culture of autonomy. I trace this back actually to Peter Drucker, the original management theorist who coined the term knowledge work in the 1950s. He was really big on pushing this idea that knowledge work is really autonomous. It's up to the worker to figure out how they work. And we took that idea probably a little bit too far and said, "Okay, so it's also up to the worker how they organize their work," that the term personal productivity did not exist before that.

It's a weird concept in the history of productivity, but it only makes sense in knowledge work. So we're sort of stuck right now because productivity is personal. How you organize your work is up to you. And in that context, we've all fallen into this easy but terrible way of collaborating. That's not easy to fix, but everyone does want to fix it. So the solutions there are going to be ideas, managerial, small companies make the innovations first, bigger companies see them. Innovation, I think it's different with our phones. I think we need a strong cultural response and we have to consider what appropriate regulatory or policy responses should be.

The cultural response I think is really important. We should be willing to say, "I think very carefully about why I use an app. And you know what? I want nothing to do with Meta and I want nothing to do with X, and I don't care if there's some value there. I just don't use this in my life. I don't let my kids have unrestricted internet access until they're 16." We can culturally have very strong responses because none of this, for most people is critical to how their work happens. It's much more optional. And then from a regulatory perspective, we can imagine what's the culpability? I don't know exactly what the answer is here, but if you do design something that has huge impacts, I think we're past that technopoly type mindset of, "Tech does what tech does. I mean, it's not my fault. I just built this thing." We're moving past that, I think from a policy perspective, and that's probably good. And so I think there's room

there for policy responses as well. So those are the right levers over there. It's different when it comes to the office.

Judith Kelley:

What do you think some of those policy responses might look like? I mean, for example, should it be illegal for companies to intentionally try to addict us by reading, say our faces with a camera that's embedded in our device and seeing whether or not we're smiling or not and then feeding us stuff? Should they be allowed to do that?

Cal Newport:

It might be hard to regulate. So there are obviously attempts right now, especially at the state level. There's legislation that's being proposed in multiple different states that is trying to look at addictiveness by design. It's very difficult to regulate. Right now, there's a lot of interest in dark patterns as one of the main targets that people feel that you can regulate, application addictiveness, dark patterns, patterns designed in the functioning of an application meant to do nothing but gets you to return to the app. It turns out to be very difficult to regulate on.

We've seen issues recently with Richard Blumenthal and Marshall Blackburn's attempts to try to regulate the content on the internet to make it kids safe with KOSA, the Kids' Online Safety Act. That's largely falling apart. The coalition around that's falling apart because there's too many unintended consequences and complexities of trying to do it. So this I think is the main issue. I mean, I've talked to senators before who will also say, we should have done something about social media, but I can't tell you yet what that was we should have done. And I think this is the main issue in thinking about policy responses here, is that it feels as if policy responses are necessary. They're also not obvious. And so the question becomes, can we come in here and tinker around with things to fix things? Maybe. Do we need to consider more of the big swing options? You come in and do a radical rethinking of Section 230 and essentially make it financially infeasible to run an online content social media company at scale.

Judith Kelley:

Section 230 is the communications...

Cal Newport:

Yeah, Internet Communications Decency Act.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. Whether or not Decency Act. Yeah, that's right. Which is about whether the platforms have to live by the same standards as the old fashioned press.

Cal Newport:

Yeah,

Judith Kelley:

Right. Yeah.

Cal Newport:

Liability for what they publish and its impact.

Judith Kelley:

So I mean, one of the reasons this is so hard to regulate, and I want to get back to how we manage our own personal lives, but one last question on this. One of the reasons it's so hard to regulate is because our policymakers are not technologists. They're not scientists by and large who understand these technologies. They're usually far behind in coming to appreciate what they can do. And as we go more and more towards AI, some of the technologies are even black boxes for the technologists themselves, but assuming those who create the technology are in a better position to potentially think about where it might go wrong. Are there principles such as like at doctors, they have the Hippocratic Oath, "First do no harm," where companies are made to be, it's possible that they can be held liable for harms, in which case they have to think themselves about the responsibility of what they're doing.

Cal Newport:

I think that's not a bad idea. And I think this is in part what's envisioned when people think about the reform of Section 230 is if you're liable for the impact of your content, yes, that does make it almost impossible probably to have a 2 billion person platform. But the platforms you do have, you have to care a lot more about what's on there. That would probably lead to a more fragmented online information landscape, more heterogeneous landscape where you don't have a small number of major players. I happen to be a big believer regardless of how we get there, that's really important. This is something in a recent New Yorker piece, I argued about this when we were looking at Threads trying to replace Twitter, and my argument is we don't need either of those.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

This notion that it's important to have everybody on the same conversation platform is really, does that make sense? If you put everyone on the same conversation platform, then you have to rely on incredibly aggressive curation because there's 500 million tweets sent a day.

Judith Kelley:

Sure.

Cal Newport:

And when you apply on the curation, you get this weird facsimile of the world. It pushes people in weird places. You also get the issues of everyone looks the exact same. So you're giving sort of an official credence to the worst content on the same level as the best. And actually having a more fragmented info landscape is not necessarily a bad thing. So I tend to be pretty amenable to this notion of who is it good for to have a small number of massive platforms through which most communication happens? Who is it good for to have a private version of the internet? And I think really the only answer is the early investors in those companies.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

It's not a better experience. We can build really good communication applications. There's all sorts of interesting applications and sites. And my last article, I talked about all these interesting things developing online. So I'm a big believer in more competition of places to be online. No one has a monopoly on it. And when you have this competition, even if there's not liability, you can say, "I don't like what's happening over here. I'm going to go over there." You don't have this sense of I'm stuck on this platform whether I like it or not, which we had over the last 10 years when we only had a small number of monopolistic social players.

Judith Kelley:

Right. So in practical ways, what are some small steps people can take to sort of kickstart their journey towards a more focused life?

Cal Newport:

Well, we have to, again, separate out at your work versus your phone uses outside of work. Keep in mind that the real killer from a productivity perspective, it's these context shifts. Every time you change your attention from one thing to another, that's a problem. Work on something until a stopping point, then do something else. And that includes communication. So do not interleave communication with the work you're doing. If you find that's very difficult, almost certainly the thing that's making that difficult is that you have back and forth conversations happening with unscheduled messages. So really then focus all of your internal system reform on how do I minimize the number of unfolding, unscheduled back and forth conversations I do in email and Slack.

What else can I do? Morning check-ins, twice a day there's a set hour where you can always call me during this period, whatever you need to do, you can focus like a laser that that's the problem. And don't just think generally, I should check my email less. I should have better response time norms. That really is what I think the killer is when it comes to your life outside of work and your phone. I'm a big believer in a minimalist mindset, which is different than a minimizing mindset. So it's not about minimizing technology, but minimalism is about intention. And I suggest people temporarily push everything off their plate, every optional piece of technology, social media, YouTube videos, video games, spend a few weeks getting back in touch with what you really want to do with yourself and your time, and then only add things back in that are real wins. So it's the Marie Kondo approach, right?

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

Don't just go to your crowded closet and say, "Let me take this out of here." Now you empty the whole thing and only put back in the stuff you really want to keep.

Judith Kelley:

That's sparks joy.

Cal Newport:

Or this case, supports values, yeah. I'm a big believer in this. I wrote a book about this. I ran this experiment where I had 1600 people go through exactly this exercise of clearing everything out and

then putting things back in that mattered. And what I found is this could be very effective if in that period before between when you clean things out and add things back in, if during that period you are very active at experimenting with new behaviors, doing a lot of self-reflection, joining things, trying things, if you're very active in figuring out what you want to do with your time, then this seems to be really sustainable.

People who do a detox, so they just white knuckle it and say, I just want to use tech less for a little while to clear out the toxins, they go right back to it.

Judith Kelley:

So it's not just about productivity, but it's just about making choices in your daily life. How do you avoid just grabbing the phone and just disappearing into a rabbit hole?

Cal Newport:

I mean, it's not necessarily the worst thing. I mean, if you've been careful in determining just what rabbit holes are open to you, and then it's okay that you have days where you're going to fall down one of those rabbit holes farther than others. It's not so bad anymore. I remember I wrote an essay about this right after January 6th because a bunch of my podcast listeners and readers wrote in and they were saying, "I was watching this news and I couldn't work and I feel bad about it. How do I stay focused during whatever days?" And the response was, "Well, you don't stay focused. Something really arresting happened." It's completely reasonable human behavior that yeah, you're not going to follow your time block plan, get through all your work.

So if you've closed up the rabbit holes you don't want to fall down, then you don't mind just one. So I'll give you one of mine. I'm a baseball fan, and so there's certainly baseball related internet rabbit holes that I will go down in exactly the circumstance, but I'm not going to go down a rabbit hole of TikTok because I don't use TikTok. So that's not even on my plate.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

But I do know the discussion forums for the Washington Nationals, and I'll go there for sure. When I'm losing the energy, things aren't going well. So when you've closed off the places you don't want to be, then you can have a little more grace I think, and not worry so much about it. So it's like, for example, with my kids, right, I'm much more comfortable, they have a Nintendo and they have certain times where they're allowed to play video games, and I don't mind them playing Nintendo games because these are designed to be hard and they can typically play them for a while and then you get kind of worn out and bored by them. This is very different, for example, than if you're on Roblox or something that's internet connected as a game that's designed to need you to play it as much as possible, because the more you play it, the more in-app purchases you do.

Judith Kelley:

Yes.

Cal Newport:

These are two different incentives. So I always say to my kids, "If the game costs a non-trivial amount of money, then that's good because that means their business model is to have this closed world game experience. You play it for a certain amount of time, you're done, and it's good enough that you pay $40 for it. If it's free, I don't want you to be near it." And so we learned, for example, a Nintendo Switch seems fine, but a game on an iPad, their eyes glaze over because the business model over there was different. So partially it's what are the rabbit holes you're open to you? That video game is very different than this video game. And I feel the same way about content. There's whole swaths of content I just don't want to be exposed to. It's why I don't use social media for the most part. I'm just too vulnerable to it. I'm very vulnerable to it.

Judith Kelley:

Does that potentially open up an ethical question in the sense that there are folks like you who can afford to say to your kids, "Just get the expensive fee-for-purchase stuff and don't go near the free stuff." And then there are folks that what they can offer their children are the free stuff.

Cal Newport:

Well, I mean, it doesn't have to be a $60 Zelda game. And also the free stuff is not really free, because what the kids then need to do is in-app purchases and pay the monthly subscription fee and it ends up being more, in other words, there's plenty of video games you can find that are not online and are essentially free. We spent $10 something I would've, when I was a kid, have died for, it was every Nintendo game essentially. I had as a kid from the 1990s. You can get them all because they're so simple now for like 10 bucks, you get 250 games. You have every game I had as a kid. So I'm not so here I'm not worried about an access issue. There I'm not worried about so much.

Judith Kelley:

So just before we end, I just want to switch to the question that you took up in April in the New Yorker about whether AI has a mind. Everybody's thinking a lot about AI these days. My first question to you is, has your perspective on whether AI has a mind in any way, shape, or form changed since April? And where are you now?

Cal Newport:

I am still thinking a lot about it. I'm still writing a lot about it. I'm working on a couple pieces right now, actually. What I would say is the contention of that piece, which is narrowly, how does a large language model like the GPT-35 that ran the original ChatGPT, how does that work? Can we think about that as having something like a recognizable mind because it feels that way when we talk to it. And the point of that piece is once you understand its operation, no, it's an auto aggressive token predictor, this is for a lot of reasons, very different than an intelligence. I mean, among other things, there's no memory, there's no state that updates. There's no possibility of sentience in this architecture. The more relevant question I think though is should we mind where this technology is going and what it's doing? And there I think there's a lot of attention needs to be paid and a lot of concern needs to be paid. The question of sentience is not one that any of these AI companies care about. These architectures aren't moving towards that direction.

Judith Kelley:

It's not the holy grail.

Cal Newport:

It's not the holy grail. No, the holy grail is automating or supporting as many activities as possible that have economic value so they can take a slice of that economic value. And here I think it requires a lot of attention. And I'm very intrigued, for example, what the Writer's Guild did where they came in and said, "Yeah, it's possible to use this new technology to do this, to write drafts of scripts or to improve the script writing process. And we're going to say, No, don't do that." And I think that is an interesting pivot point in thinking about technology in the 20th and 21st century where typically something like that would be labeled Luddism. You can't push back on the technology if you don't use it, someone else will. I think we're more ready to think about that now, saying, "I know we can do this, but we also prioritize certain aspects of the human experience, more progress here." And let's just say, "No."

I think we're going to see more of that. I think we're going to see more areas as gen AI develops where we say, "No. Yes, you could do this. Let's not." I think that's an interesting frame that we haven't, from a policy perspective, we have not been deploying that frame recently. But I think it's interesting that we might, and as I observe gen AI, I think it's a question we really should be having. We really need to avoid a technopoly techno determinist narrative here where we say, "The tech is the tech, and we just need to see what happens and do our best to adjust to the world." I think we're being a little more assertive. And the WGA was an interesting step in that direction. What their resolves, and I'd keep an eye on that.

Judith Kelley:

In terms of does AI have a mind? And as you said, you're still thinking and writing about that. Does AI give us, just as you're thinking, you're looking at the AI and say, "How does it operate?" And then you say, "Does it resemble a mind?" Does AI give us an opportunity to ask a different question, which is, what actually makes a human human?

Cal Newport:

Or what makes sentient sentient? And this is a question that's looked at a lot. I mean, philosophers, look at this for sure. Neuroscientists have been looking at this for sure. We have a century of work on this, and if we put any of those major frameworks to let's say GPT-3 or something like this, it doesn't pass any of those frameworks. So it's beyond even. I mean, any way we've thought about this, and there's some really damning things here in terms of that quest to argue that it's a mind, which again, OpenAI is not trying to do and Google is not trying to do. It's like, no, it's not sentient, but it's something, it's a reasoning engine and it's very powerful. I think one of the most damning things is there's no malleable memory.

Once you train one of these models, which is very hard to do, and it takes 30,000 GPUs in a custom built warehouse and it costs millions of dollars. And the last time they did this was 2022 for GPT-4, once you've trained it, this thing is chiseled in the stone. And then you use this thing to generate token after token to get answers. Nothing in its definition changes, right? It's not updating and changing its model of the world based on what you just said to it. It's not learning once you teach these things. So it's a very static thing that's spread out over multiple GPUs. But again, whether or not they're sentient is really not that important, I think what's important is, and what are they being used for? What can they do? And they're very powerful.

When you push these ideas to this type of scale, it gets eerie the things you're able to do because once you master English language token production, to master that game that's at the core of building a large language model, you have to build recognizers and patterns and generators for so many different concepts that are all encoded in language. So these giant models, the trillion parameters of GPT-4

programmed in here is an understanding of a huge array. And there's a lot of quotation marks around understanding, but basically internal models of so many things in our life and so many ideas that can then be harnessed. And so that's probably where things get interesting is then how do we use that knowledge? Not is it alive, but how are we going to use that knowledge and what else are we going to hook it up to? And what does that do to the human experience?

But again, I say, and I was just talking to some Duke students about this right before we recorded, I'm optimistic about the fact that today we're asking these questions a lot. And I've seen so many technological revolutions over the past 20, 30 years where very few people ask these questions. So we're in a different place as a culture. We have a more of a intentional humanist approach to thinking about technology is emerging. It's almost as if it's emerging out of the battle scarred experience of things just getting out of control. But it is emerging. I think we're willing to look at these things differently, and I'm optimistic about that. At least we're asking hard questions that before it would be a very eccentric policy position, probably more of like a fringe technology critic might bring it up and it'd be largely ignored. Now it's more mainstream. Like, what are we doing with gen AI? Do we really want to do that? Why don't we just say no to this? These are good questions and we're asking them now.

Judith Kelley:

All right, Cal. So you've thrown out a challenge to all us to think about how we interact with technology and how it influences our lives. So let's say that I've been listening to you and I say, "Okay, I get the intentionality thing, but it's a little abstract and I'm not quite ready to ditch all my apps and then put them back in one by one. That seems like a big step." Is there something really fairly small? That as the first step I can maybe try tomorrow?

Cal Newport:

Yeah.

Judith Kelley:

Would that be?

Cal Newport:

Two small things.

Judith Kelley:

Okay.

Cal Newport:

All right. One indirect, one direct. The direct one is try the phone foyer method. And so the idea is when you're at home, you plug your phone in one location. So if you have a foyer and you live in a house

Judith Kelley:

Yeah,

Cal Newport:

Near the door, and that's just where it is when you're at home, like phones used to be. So if you either check for a text message or you get a call, you go over to where it's plugged in and you use it. If you need to look something up, you go over where it is and you use it, but it's not your constant companion. Just try that for a week.

Judith Kelley:

It's not an appendage.

Cal Newport:

It's not an appendage. It's there. I'm not stopping you from doing or looking at anything, but you have to stand in your foyer to do it.

Judith Kelley:

Okay.

Cal Newport:

So that's I think is good training. The indirect advice is pick up a new hobby and join something. Because I think what's often missed in this conversation is that for a lot of people when it comes to phone use outside of work, a lot of it is purposeful. It is a way to actually cope with boredom, a way to cope with things you're unhappy about, ways to cope with pain. It's a mechanism where maybe in a prior time you maybe would've been drinking too much instead, or drug use. It can do something similarly, palliative to people. I just need to drown out stuff that's going on.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Cal Newport:

Putting in place higher quality alternatives for that first makes it much easier if and when you say, "I want to look at this app less," because you have something else now to take its place. And that was one of the big findings of my research on this for that book, was it was as much about putting the alternatives in place to the constant phone use as it was to just resolving to use the phone less. So I tell people, "Maybe your starting point's not with the technology, it's doing things in your life and adding things to your life that are so compelling that the technology itself loses some of the allure."

Judith Kelley:

All right. So find things you like to do, add them to your life and keep your phone plugged in the foyer somewhere fixed in your house.

Cal Newport:

Yep.

Judith Kelley:

All right. Those are good small steps. Cal, thank you so much for joining us.

Cal Newport:

No, thanks for having me.

Judith Kelley:

A really fun and enlightening conversation. And I'm going to go back to my desk and think deeply about my relationship with my email. Cal Newport is the Provost distinguished Associate professor in the Department of Computer Science at Georgetown, where he's one of the leaders of the School's Center for Digital Ethics. We'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelly.