

Is it possible to have free time in the digital age?

Digital technologies are sold to us as time saving, efficiency promoting tools which can make life easier, but is this really the case? Eroded work-life boundaries, frequent intrusion from notifications and a proliferation of communications because of digital technology suggests that technology may be costing us more time than it saves.

The TIMED project examined people's experiences of time loss and free time in the digital age. 550 people from the UK, Spain, Czechia, Germany, Poland and Switzerland were interviewed about their day-to-day use of digital technology and how it impacts on their free time. A further 15,000 were surveyed about their experiences of time, digital technology and their wellbeing.

Our findings show that people use technology to fill spare time in their lives to avoid a sense of unproductive time, producing an ever denser form of existence. However, much of this technology use is perceived as a waste of time because it often lacks a clear purpose (other than filling time), the content consumed fails to meet higher order needs for intellectual stimulation and because people get "sucked in" resulting technology being used for longer than intended (1). As a result, people associate technology use with a

sense of dysregulation, regret and guilt. Critically, these negative emotional outcomes were driven by participants perceptions that digital technology "was bad for them" rather than specific experiences of upsetting content (2).

Time is also lost to technology through an extension of work into personal time, proliferation of communication and inefficient system design lengthening tasks. Work is also more dense due to a proliferation of online meetings, which are often perceived as unnecessary. Collectively, this results in greater time pressure, which is associated with increased feelings of depression, anxiety and stress, and a loss of autonomy over time.



Improving citizens abilities to navigate digital time requires coordinated efforts from industry, governmental and citizens. To mitigate the negative impacts of digital technology on time use and experience we recommend the following:

Technology companies should

- *Develop measures of product success which are based on user experience not use duration. These could be informed by new measures of technology use developed in this project which assess quality of digital experience (3).*
- *Provide in-app alerts to users about their duration of use (e.g. you have been on X for 30 minutes, do you wish to continue?).*

Government and regulators should

- *Develop policies which prevent the implementation of algorithms designed to increase use duration.*
- *Implement legislation which protects personal time from work intrusion.*
- *Provide more nuanced and evidence-based account of scientific evidence for the impact of screen time on wellbeing and cognitive function.*

