



Brownies, Brains, and Information Habits

Part 1

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My college-going son, who lives nearby, likes to destress by coming over and using our kitchen to bake treats. He has made a lot of friends in his student apartment complex by handing out samples. (Rocky road brownies are the current hit.) I refer to him as my “treat dealer” because I am hooked. I frequently accuse him of enabling my worst eating behaviors. He feels little sympathy because he says that no one is forcing me to eat them. But honestly, just smelling those baking brownies triggers something in my brain which makes it impossible not to demand an in-kind user fee.

I am also a habitual news junkie. This year, I resolved to get myself out of my news echo chamber. I committed to stop listening to opinion peddlers; cease reading politicized social media posts; and avoid YouTube rabbit holes featuring sensational news clips of political talking heads. Except that, well, like my brownie habit, I can’t seem to stop.

The good news is that I am a critical thinker and a careful discerner of fact from fiction. I assume you are, too, which makes it even more perplexing that 50% of Americans voted for That Guy from That Party. What were we thinking? It turns out we are all thinking the same thing: The half that did *not* vote for the obviously better candidate – the *other* half – must have a serious problem discerning truth.

Social science research shows over and over again that people with deeply held political convictions – irrespective of political ideology – can consume the exact same information yet come to opposite conclusions about what is true. In other words, accessing shared facts is not enough to change minds. To make matters worse, it is not clear that we are even consuming the same information.

Psychologists, social scientists – even media pundits – agree that “the media” is partly to blame for our political divide. In addition to sensationalizing news, mass media constantly intermingles news and opinion without disclaimer. We also have more options and appetite for tailored information that fits our preferred viewpoints, and which provides convenient pretense to question the other side’s facts.

We Are Good People - But Our Brains Are a Problem

The media is not the only problem. Another enormous problem is how our brains receive, process, and act on information. Our brains are designed to provide short-term rewards for things that are helpful in the moment – even critical to daily living (like eating brownies?). Our brain privileges certain repetitive behaviors so much that “about 43% of what people do every day is repeated in the same context, usually while they are thinking about something else,” says Wendy Wood, a social psychologist at the University of Southern California who studies human behavior and habits.¹

These mental shortcuts are manifestations of a built-in, primitive, reward-based system called reinforcement learning. The brain releases hormones that encourage or reinforce a particular action. Whenever the brain has a choice, it gravitates toward the more rewarding option. Over time behaviors become so ingrained that we have little consciousness of why we are doing them – they just become a normal part of our routine. Most of this is actually healthy for our survival and allows us to be remarkably efficient and productive.

While some habits may have been helpful to us in the past, “they’re not necessarily the right thing to do today,” according to Wood.² Some accumulated habits can interrupt our ability to successfully manage our time, be productive employees, hold onto positive relationships, or even live happily. Left unchecked, some habits lead to long-term physical and mental consequences such as stress, anxiety, depression, and chronic illness.

It’s Not about Self-Control

When things aren’t going well in our lives, the common narrative is that we should take responsibility for our actions and will ourselves to change. We tell ourselves that “It’s all our own agency and self-control that will push us in the right direction or make us fail.” However, according to Judson Brewer, a psychiatrist and addiction researcher at the School of Medicine at Brown University, reliance on willpower is a powerful myth with little neuroscientific basis. While self-

control certainly exists, relying on willpower is one of the least effective ways to change behavior. “From a neuroscience perspective, there is no such thing as willpower,” says Brewer, “It’s just not how our brains work.”³ Instead, habits are formed over months or years through the release of rewarding chemicals like dopamine. Through our habits, the brain, in essence, creates a cycle of dependency-induced behavior.

Three Steps to Replacing Bad Habits with Good Ones

How can we improve our ability to access, discern, and accept factual information and use it to engage in healthy civic discourse and debate with people who think differently from us? One thing we can do is mindfully examine how we access, consume, and use information. This will not be easy and may mean disrupting familiar habits. But it is essential if we are going to get back to a sense of common purpose as Americans and as fellow community members. Based on the work of social psychologists and neuroscience experts like Wood and Brewer, below are three steps we can take.

1. Become Aware of Our Habits

According to Brewer, we must identify what triggers habitual behavior, how the behavior feels, and what the results of the behavior are. This can help us better evaluate the true reward or risk of a habit. Let’s take my habit of clicking on sensationalized political videos. Here are some examples of video clip titles that the YouTube algorithm selected for me in early February:

- *Mike Lindell goes CRAZY on Fox News*
- *The Five accuse Democrats of trying to ‘ram through’ relief without GOP*
- *Ocasio-Cortez tweets at Ted Cruz: You almost had me murdered*
- *Jen Psaki ENDS Biden’s career after STUPIDLY admitting his ‘patience’ for China*

Recently, I made it a point to ask myself, “What is it that attracts me to these videos? What do I hope to get from watching them? How do I feel after watching?” During this self-examination, I realized that I get plenty of news from

multiple daily sources. So, if it wasn’t news I was looking for, what was it exactly? Becoming aware of our habits with regard to information consumption is a key first step.

2. Exercise Curiosity about Our Habits

Brewer argues that after we become aware of our habits, rather than pass judgment and punish ourselves, we should adopt an approach that allows curiosity. Making room for curiosity can cause the brain to produce neurotransmitters that stimulate the “upper” brain and create a different kind of pleasantness that competes with the cravings for lower brain stimulation. “Curiosity is contagious,” Brewer says. “The more we practice it, the more we want to practice it because of its intrinsically rewarding qualities – because it feels good.”⁴

As I allowed myself to become curious about my YouTube behavior, I began to recognize that watching these videos produced anger – a sense of righteous indignation – and, strangely, made me to want to watch more. Being curious allowed me to explore what need I was trying to fill through this behavior. First, I discovered that it provided a “short” break from work and responsibility. Second, watching news-related videos fed an important internal narrative that I not waste time. Most unexpectedly, at the end of the day, I realized that I was routinely sharing information, reactions, and emotions gleaned from these videos with my family and friends. I was using it as a bonding experience, which on the surface sounds laudable, except that that the type of conversation it stimulated was ritualistically negative. In essence, we bonded over shared negativity and mutual anger which, ironically, reinforced the habit of watching such videos in the first place.

Fortunately, taking a moment to exercise curiosity about my habit had exactly the effect Brewer predicted: it allowed me to map out and understand my habit and evaluate more objectively the risk and reward of this behavior. It also gave me a sense of “permission” to try something different.

3. Reward Different Habits

Research suggests that to change behavior, we need to reward ourselves for doing something different. Wood argues that if we are proactively trying to do something to improve ourselves,

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we need to make it enjoyable. After all, we are not going to repeat a behavior that we don't enjoy. Brewer calls this "the bigger better offer."

I needed a new habit that gave me a break from responsibility, that was easily accessible, and that didn't require a long commitment. I also wanted something that helped me feel "productive." By accident, I discovered a long-running YouTube series called "Tiny Desk Concerts" produced by National Public Radio. The Tiny Desk Concerts featured everything from older artists like Wynton Marsalis and Sheryl Crow, to bands and performers from around the globe that I had never been exposed to like DakhaBrakha, Monsieur Periné, and Mandolin Orange. After each "concert" (just three songs) I came away feeling happy, positive, and more productive. Most important, I substituted negative

conversations about sensational videos with positive connective conversations with my friends and family. I noticed that quality of conversation improved and the resulting feelings were much more joyful. Fortunately, I found my bigger, better offer.

Ultimately, we are creatures of habit. By employing mindful practices of self-awareness, curiosity, and better reward structures, we can build better habits and regain some control over how we access, interpret, and use information. And, most important, none of this prevents us from sampling a brownie from time to time.

In Part II of this article, which will be published in the May 2021 *The Municipality*, we'll dig into how changing our new consumption environment can help us live up to Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's famous dictum: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts."

1. See Michaela Barnett, "Good Habits, Bad Habits: A Conversation with Wendy Wood," *Health*, October 14, 2019. Retrieved from <https://behavioralscientist.org/good-habits-bad-habits-a-conversation-with-wendy-wood/>.

2. Ali Patillo, "How to Break Bad Habits in 3 Steps, According to Science," *Inverse*. Retrieved from <https://www.inverse.com/mind-body/the-truth-about-making-breaking-habits>

3. Ali Pattillo, "Studies Show 1 Brain Hack Can Stop Addiction Cold," *Inverse*, <https://www.inverse.com/mind-body/curiosity-awareness-behavior-change>

4. Pattillo, "Studies Show 1 Brain Hack Can Stop Addiction Cold."

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