



## Part One: This Is Your Brain on Netflix

For just a second, imagine this: You've just finished watching a couple episodes of your favorite show on Netflix—say, *House of Cards* or *Orange is the New Black*. While you're sitting there, having a debate in your head about whether you should watch another episode or go tackle some chores, something happens with absolutely no warning whatsoever. Time stops.

You're sitting there, still in front of the screen, frozen in time. You can look around a bit, but for some odd reason, no other part of you will move.

Then, something even more peculiar begins to happen: you glance to your left, and see that a scientist—she's decked out in a white lab coat and all—has just entered the room, and she's wheeling a giant machine your way. It's an fMRI machine—a fancy brain-scanning machine that maps the blood flow through your brain to see which parts of your brain are the most active. After putting your head inside the machine, the scientist leaves. She returns a few seconds later, rolls a monitor toward you, and attaches it to the machine.

She flips a switch, and out of the corner of your eye, you see your brain scan on the screen in front of you.

If this bizarro scenario actually happened, what you saw on the screen would blow you away.

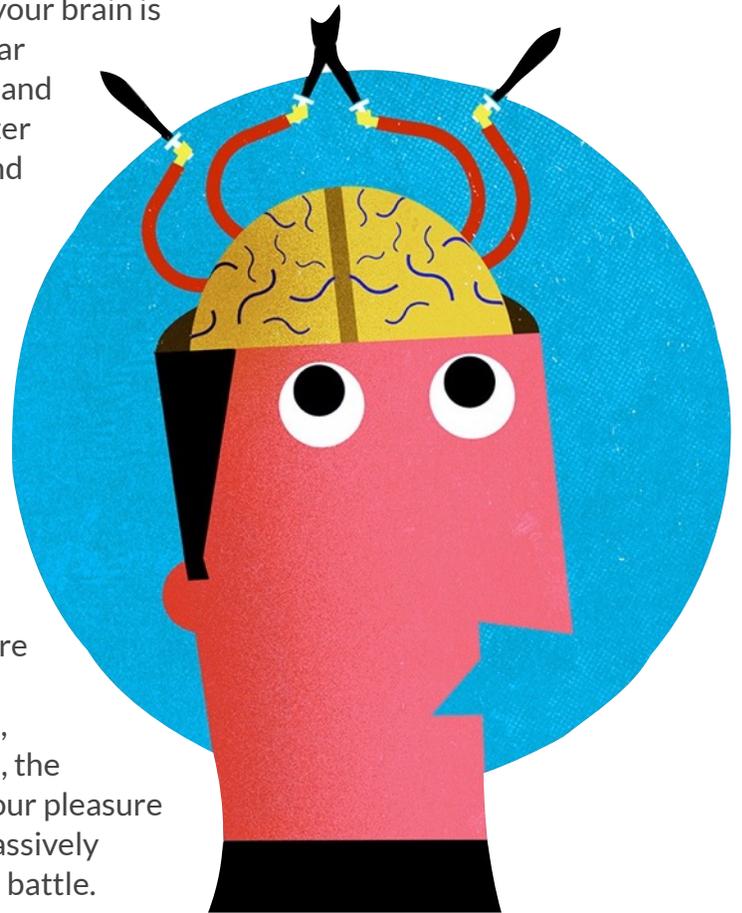
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In the moment when you're debating whether to continue binge-watching your newest favorite show, your brain is at war with itself on a neurological level; a war that rivals the ones between the Democrats and Republicans in *House of Cards*, between Walter White and Hank Schrader in *Breaking Bad*, and HYDRA and SHIELD in *Agents of SHIELD*.

It's a war between the logical and the impulsive, between the planning region of your brain and the emotional region of your brain.

In the exact same moment, the two parts of your brain want very different things. The logical part of your brain—your prefrontal cortex, to get technical—knows you should probably be doing something more productive with your time, like cleaning, exercising, reading a book, or, let's be honest, doing pretty much anything else. Meanwhile, the emotional part of your brain that contains your pleasure centers—your limbic system—wants to be passively entertained right then and there. It's a fierce battle.

Each time, there is only one victor. If your emotional limbic system wins and you watch another episode, your prefrontal cortex pleads with you to do something better with your time. When your prefrontal cortex wins, you wind up feeling a little restless, and more than a little annoyed and disappointed with yourself. Every time you have this debate, electrochemical signals in your brain crackle like thunder, your brain lights up, and one side wins out. To me, many parts of the idea of binge-watching are fascinating—like that it's a relatively new phenomenon. Netflix says 61% of subscribers do it regularly and that 73% of them view it as a positive thing. But above all this, I find this battle inside your brain to be the most fascinating part. Because here's the thing: this battle doesn't just happen when you're deciding whether you should binge on another episode. The exact same battle takes place when we debate things with ourselves throughout the day, like hitting the snooze button one more time, getting a donut with our morning coffee, going for a run after work, or watching Netflix instead of doing chores.



## A Month of Binging

For the past month, as a productivity experiment, I watched a ton of Netflix. Like, really—an enormous amount. For the entire month of July, I watched at least eight hours of TV shows, movies, and documentaries on Netflix every second day—including on weekends. When all was said and done I had consumed 128 hours of programming, a whopping 165.77 gigabytes of bandwidth, and \$245.59 of delivery food.

The goal of the experiment was simple: to see how binge-watching Netflix affected my productivity. Every second day, when I worked (again, including on weekends), I observed how my motivation, willpower, and energy fluctuated relative to what I watched. I ran this experiment partly because I had some time on my hands after submitting my book manuscript early, but my main goal was to dive deep into how the phenomenon of binge-watching affects how we live and work, as well as whether it seeps into other parts of our life. (Spoiler alert: it does.)

I've conducted a lot of weird productivity experiments for this site— like living in isolation for 10 days, working 90-hour weeks, drinking only water for a month, and using my smartphone for only an hour a day for three months. I have to say that I learned the most from this one. Every second day, when I got back to work and observed my motivation and discipline change, I was often taken aback by how differently I worked, and how driven I was. But above all else, the most fascinating part of the experiment was observing this battle that happened inside my brain all month—and how it impacted other aspects of my life as the experiment progressed.

To make the lessons I learned from the experiment as digestible as possible, I've captured the five biggest takeaways below. I hope you find them as fascinating as I do.



## Part Two: Five Huge Lessons



### 5. There are more fruitful ways to unplug

Chances are, we'd all be a whole lot fitter, healthier, wealthier, and more productive if we acted rationally and obeyed our prefrontal cortex 100% of the time. But let's be honest, living like a robot would get boring pretty quickly. Our brains are just as emotional as they are rational, and we all need to switch off from time to time. This is what makes the idea of binge-watching so attractive on the surface. When we come home from work and we've used up all of our brain juice, the easiest option seems like ordering a pizza and vegging out in front of the TV for a few hours.

Perhaps the most stunning statistic I stumbled upon during this experiment was just how much TV the average person watches every day. According to Nielsen, the average American watches a whopping *34 hours* of TV every week—equal to 4.85 hours of television every day. I binge-watched Netflix for *eight hours* every second day for an entire month, and watched 128 hours in total. Over that same timespan, though, the average American watched 150 hours—22% more TV than I did during this experiment. And that Nielsen survey only tracks TV; another survey found that the average Netflix subscriber watches an additional 90 minutes every day.

You'd have to be a total prude to not be enticed by the incredible amount of quality TV out there, yet I couldn't stop thinking about all of the other things I could have been doing with my free time.

As the month went on, the number of podcasts and Audiobooks on my phone increased, and the books in the to-read pile on my desk (on the right) stacked up higher. I was accustomed to plowing through them at a pretty good clip. (Prior to this experiment, I watched only an hour or two of Netflix in a typical week—not counting when new seasons of *House of Cards* come out, of course.) I also had less time and motivation for the things I usually love doing, like exercising, meditating, going for walks, and going for the occasional massage. I even noticed that my mood became shot by the end of the experiment—an effect noted in a study conducted at the University of Texas at Austin, which found feelings of loneliness and depression to be linked to binge-watching.

**So, what could you be doing with your time instead of binge-watching TV for hours on end?**

Activities like

- exercising
- meditating
- reading
- listening to music
- going for a nature walk
- spending time with friends and family
- and investing in a creative hobby

all actually reduce the levels of stress hormones in your body, which is

something watching TV or Netflix can't do. They'll also lead you to experience "flow" more often—that magical feeling where time seems to fly by so fast it doesn't exist at all—which has been shown to make you happier and a lot more engaged. They'll fire up your prefrontal cortex—but unlike work, not enough to exhaust you. Activities like those also provide you with a bigger return on your time, to boot.

Watching TV is fun and stimulating, but as far as your happiness, motivation, and productivity are concerned, I think it's a dish best served in small portions.



*The books in my to-read pile. I didn't clean my desk before taking this picture, because I can't stand when people do that. Normally this pile would be half the height by the end of the month.*



## 4. There are actually productive ways to binge-watch

But that said, if you do decide to have the occasional Netflix marathon, it is possible to binge-watch TV shows and be a little productive at the same time.

As soon as I posted about this experiment, many readers wrote in to share how they level up while watching Netflix to become more productive. They cook, clean, and a whole lot more. One reader, Patrick McKnight, trained to climb Mount Everest while watching movies on Netflix—he wore a mask that deprived him of oxygen as he trailed on a stationary bike to acclimatize to higher altitudes, so he could make the trek in four weeks instead of ten. Others made an effort to watch Netflix with other people, so they could create a shared experience instead of just mindlessly killing time.

As I also found during this experiment, one of the best ways to become more productive is to **work on relatively mindless tasks—tasks that require a lot of time, but not much attention to complete—while you binge-watch.**

Mindless tasks like

- doing the dishes
- cleaning up around the house
- doing laundry
- working out
- organizing your files

all require little attention, but quite a bit of time. The less attention a task requires, the better suited it is to be tackled while you soak in a show or three on Netflix. I can't remember the last time my house was as clean as it was at the end of this experiment.

At the beginning of the experiment, when my motivation wasn't yet shot, I instinctively got out my second computer so I could answer simple emails and work on other relatively mindless tasks while I binge-watched. Later on in the month, when I had less drive, I still kept a notepad by my side—instead of my smartphone—to jot down any ideas, and findings I wanted to reflect on later.

Binge-watching is an escape from the real world for a lot of people; one study sponsored by Netflix found that 76% of binge-watchers agree it's "a welcome refuge from their busy lives." But it becomes infinitely more rewarding when you also find ways to spend that time wisely.



### 3. The more attention you give to an experience, the richer it becomes

Over the course of my binge-watching experiment, particularly as I played around with working on other things as I watched brilliant shows like *Sherlock*, *Sense8*, and *Planet Earth*, I noticed something curious: the more I focused on a show, the more I enjoyed it, and the higher I rated the show in my [tracking spreadsheet](#).

There is a simple reason why [multitasking](#) won't make you more productive: your brain can't actively focus on two things at the same time. The best it can do is rapidly switch between them. While multitasking may be a good approach to tackling mindless tasks, more important tasks require your full attention. Your brain—and more specifically your

limbic system—are more stimulated when you work on more than one thing at a time, but you don't actually accomplish more, because your prefrontal cortex can't truly multitask.

In my experiment I noticed that I assigned higher ratings to the shows I paid more attention to. This led me to a simple realization: **experiences become richer when you give them more attention.**

For example, think back to the best meal you've ever eaten. Chances are you weren't scarfing it down in front of the TV. You probably focused all of your attention on the food while you ate. Now, also think back—really, give this a shot—to the best date you've ever been on, the best book you've ever read, the best trip you've experienced, or even the happiest you remember yourself being. During each of those events, you were focused on one thing, which led you to a much deeper and more enjoyable experience.

Doing just one thing at one time is difficult—whether you're watching Netflix, answering email, or hunkering down on a report. You're probably trying to do other things even as you read this article. There's no way around it. It's human nature. But while the temptation to attempt it is strong, our brains simply aren't wired to focus on more than one thing at a time.



## 2. Your motivation is a flywheel

Another curious thing I discovered over the course of the experiment was **even though my energy levels didn't take a huge hit, my motivation sure did.**

By the end of the month, I had a fraction of the motivation I did at the start, and my negative habits began to compound—fast. I was a little more motivated on days I watched shows that made me think—the ones that fired up my prefrontal cortex. But passively consuming shows, even on good days, left me dragging my feet at the end of the month.

There is a Ben Franklin quote I love: “If you want something done, ask a busy person.” The quote is counterintuitive on the surface, but the more you think about it, the more sense it makes. The most productive people are the ones who build up the most momentum with how they live. Lazy people—like me at the end of this experiment—have zero momentum and need to pump themselves up to do anything.

**Each day, your motivation is like a flywheel.** It’s impossible for a giant flywheel to go from standing still to spinning as fast as possible in an instant. But eventually, as you put more and more energy into it, it spins faster and faster, and builds up momentum over time. A flywheel will keep spinning if you decide to step back from it for a while—but you’ll need to add more energy to it eventually to keep it spinning fast. Our motivation and a flywheel are one and the same.

As the month-long experiment progressed, and I put less and less energy into my flywheel by bingeing every second day, my motivation ground to a halt. Halfway through the experiment, I no longer sprang out of bed early to start work. I eventually started watching more and more Netflix on days I had planned to work and watch no TV at all. I was less disciplined about heading to bed at a reasonable time. I ordered more takeout. I got hardly any physical activity, and I found ways to justify to myself why I shouldn’t exercise or meditate. When it came time to really hunker down to edit my book, prep for a speaking engagement, blow through some email, or even conduct simple research, I had no momentum to get through the simplest tasks. My limbic system took over, and I began to act way less rational and a lot more impulsive than I should have by the end of the month.

Your motivation is a flywheel, and what’s more than that, your habits—positive and negative—compound. Spinning down every once in a while won’t affect you much, and will probably even prevent your flywheel from burning out. But at the same time, it’s important to never let it grind to a standstill.





## 1. Your life is exactly like the Netflix homepage

One of the things that struck me as I dove into this productivity experiment was how, when you're simply looking to be entertained, Netflix provides you with an endless buffet of options. When you have an hour or two to spare, the expansive Netflix grid presents thousands of options for you to watch; everything from nature documentaries, to action movies, to sitcoms, to political dramas. Every tiny square on the Netflix homepage is a rabbit hole, in which you trade your time for entertainment.

Over the last month, I landed on that homepage grid quite a bit. I didn't stare at it for huge amounts of time in one sitting, but I saw the grid often enough that I began to think about it a bit outside of the experiment. This is what made me realize something curious: just like we have a seemingly unlimited number of ways of spending our time after we fire up Netflix, a similar grid exists in every moment of the day—even though we can't see it. **In every moment, we have an unlimited number of options for spending our time; an endless grid of things we can do, consume, or create.**

Of course, we all have constraints—and depending on the nature of your work and life you may have more constraints than others—but as a rule, we have more options than we think.

Right now, I'm in work mode and writing this article. I've built up some momentum, my prefrontal cortex is fired up, and I'm steadily cranking out words while I reference my notes from the experiment. This is where I've chosen to spend my time over the next two

hours. If I were to fire up the theoretical splash screen of all of the options I actually have available to me right now, I have a near-endless number of options. I could email some people I want to interview for this blog, or answer emails that are piling up in my inbox. If I wanted to, I could shut down my computer and pick up a book. I could choose to follow-up with some things on my Waiting For list. I could buy a cheap flight overseas that takes off tomorrow morning, clean my apartment, or book a skydiving lesson.

I have constraints, of course—for example, I haven't published many blog articles since coming down off writing my book, so I'm putting more pressure on myself than usual to write—but I still have a near-unlimited choices for how to spend my time right now.

It's also true for you, right now, reading this article. If you have time to read this article, you have time for other things, too. If you were presented with a Netflix-style menu of ways you could be spending your time right this moment, in addition to reading this article, you could be doing a million other things, like picking up a good book, thinking about where your next vacation should be, putting together a budget for the next year, or learning how to meditate.

You have constraints, like everyone, but in each moment, your options are endless.

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Although your options are wide open, time is limited. There is a day in your life after which you won't have any more days. One day, for you and for me, time will stop, just as it did when you paused to consider pressing play on "just one more" episode of *Breaking Bad*. What you'll be left with is the accumulation of decision points just like that one.

In my opinion, this idea is fun—and not sad or bittersweet—because realizing your time is limited can be *incredibly* motivating. When you realize

- 1 that your time is limited
- 2 that in every moment you have endless options

you can start to spend your time a lot more intelligently, and get your flywheel spinning again.

You can obviously spend your time however the heck you want, and I'd be the last person on the planet to tell you how you should live your life. One of the very best things you can do for your motivation, happiness, and productivity is to decide more often—a lot more often—how to spend your time. In every single moment of your life is an expansive, endless matrix of things you can do, create, and consume. **And crucially, many of these options are a lot more valuable and meaningful than how you're spending your time already.**

Becoming more productive is challenging, especially when you're surrounded by endless distractions and temptations. Your brain is rational, emotional, planning, and impulsive—often all at the same time. This difficulty is what makes certain decisions so rewarding; decisions like working hard instead of bingeing out, hitting the gym instead of sitting on the couch, springing out of bed instead of hitting snooze, and opening a savings account instead of shopping. Because decisions like these are hard and involve ignoring the impulsive part of your brain, not everyone will make them, and so you have that much more to gain when you do. The most productive, happy, and motivated people never stop considering these three ideas: that they're always spending time, that time is limited, and that in each and every moment, they have unlimited options.

It's by stepping back in the moment, forming intentions, and then acting on them that you can become more motivated and productive, much happier, and—maybe best of all—a little more human.

*Illustrations by Sinisa Sumita at [bravedodo.com](http://bravedodo.com).*

