

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### JOHANN HARI: GET YOUR MIND BACK / SAVE DEMOCRACY?

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How long can you pay attention for? No, I mean really. When was the last time you ignored your phone and all the apps and fell into an uninterrupted state of flow? Studies have shown that US teens can only focus on a task for a little over a minute and we adults in the workplace aren't much better, at a three minute average. And yet, says today's guest, democracy requires a population to have the ability to pay attention long enough to identify real problems, distinguish them from fantasies, come up with solutions and hold their leaders accountable. Lose that he says, and we lose our ability to have a fully functioning society. Yikes! If time is what we have as a measurement for our lives lived, then how we spend our time and for what purpose matters. In his latest book, New York Times bestselling author, Johann Hari says it is virtually impossible to have a normal brain these days because we are all victims of attention theft. There are a myriad reasons for it. It is not all our fault, but there are some things we can do and get society to do. Hari's book, "Stolen Focus Why You Can't Pay Attention And How to Think Deeply Again," was on a whole lot of best books of 22 lists. Amazon named it one of three. It is just out in paperback. We last talked to Johann Hari about his book on the war on drugs, "Chasing the Scream." And that was a while ago. I am super happy to welcome him back. Welcome back, Johann, great to have you.

**JOHANN HARI:** Hooray. I'm so happy to be with you Laura. Thanks so much for having me.

**LF:** All right, so break it to me gently. I have just been on a 10-day break, right? And, during that period I felt my stress decrease, my calm increase. I actually managed to read an entire 800 page book, getting COVID again and not being able to see anybody, helped. A snowstorm helped, but boy, I feel great. What is about to happen? You've looked at the science.

**JH:** Well, I wanted to answer this for myself because you know, the reason I wrote the book is because every year that passed, things that require deep focus that are so important to me, like reading books, having proper, long conversations, watching films, we're getting more and more like running up a down escalator, do you know what I mean? I could still do it, but it was getting harder and harder. And like you say, I could see this was happening to huge numbers of people around me. For every one child who was identified with serious attention problems when I was seven years old, there's now 100 children who've been identified with that problem. So I wanted to understand what's happening to us, right? And what I learned is the answer to your question is quite surprising. There's scientific evidence for 12 factors that can make your attention better or can make your attention worse. And loads of the factors that can make your attention worse have been hugely rising in recent years. So I'll give you an example of one of the causes that I think is about to hit you, Laura. I went to MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to interview

one of the leading neuroscientists in the world, an amazing man named Professor Earl Miller. And he said to me, "Look, there's one thing you've got to understand about the human brain more than anything else. You can only consciously think about one or two things at a time. That's it." This is a fundamental limitation of the human brain. The human brain has not changed significantly in 40,000 years. It's not going to change on any timescale we're going to see, you can only think about one or two things at a time. But what's happened is we've fallen for kind of mass delusion. The average teenager now believes they can follow six or seven forms of media at the same time, and the rest of us are not very far behind them. So we're constantly juggling. And it turns out that juggling comes with a really big cost. The technical term for it is the switch cost effect. When you try and do more than one thing at a time, you do all the things you're trying to do much less competently. But I think as you come back into this environment, you're going to be interrupted a lot more. There's a study that found if you're interrupted by something as simple as a text message, it takes you on average 23 minutes to get back to the level of focus you had.

**LF:** One of the things that strikes me from your book, and the book is packed with studies, I encourage people to check it out, is what you say about how lack of attention affects democracy and how in particular lack of attention or the ability to focus predisposes people to embrace sort of simplistic authoritarian solutions.

**JH:** If you think about attention problems, you think, "Oh, I went to the fridge to get a Diet Coke, I got a text from my friend, I replied, I came back to my laptop. I didn't have my Diet Coke." We think of it as this constant low level distraction, which is having profound effects on us and our children, and our ability to think clearly. But the deeper you look into this subject, the more you discover that it's actually having profoundly deleterious effects, not just at an individual level, not just for us and our children, but actually for our whole society, for our democracy. But I spent a lot of time in Silicon Valley with people who designed key aspects of the world in which we now live. They are sick with guilt at what they've done, a lot of them, by the way. And they explained to me, anyone watching, please don't. But if you open Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Instagram now, and you begin to scroll, those companies immediately begin to make money out of you in two ways. The first way is really obvious. You see ads, okay, you don't need me to tell you about that. Second way is much more important. Everything you do on these apps is scanned and sorted by their artificial intelligence algorithms to learn who you are. They're harvesting information about you and they're gathering this information for one reason in particular, they want to keep you scrolling. Because the longer you scroll, the more ads you see, the more money they make. And every time you close the app or your kids close the app, that revenue stream disappears. So all of this genius, all of these algorithms in Silicon Valley are geared when it comes to social media to one thing and one thing only. Figuring out how do we get Laura to pick up her phone as often as possible, open the app as often as possible, and scroll as long as possible. This led to a political effect that no one intended, right? The algorithms are

scanning all of us. They're figuring out, okay, what keeps Laura scrolling? What keeps Johann scrolling? What keeps everyone watching, scrolling? And the algorithms bumped into an underlying truth about human psychology. It's been known about for 90 years now. It's called negativity bias. It's very simple. Human beings will stare longer at things that make them angry or upset than they will at things that make us feel good. If you've ever, seen a car crash on the highway, you know exactly what I mean. And this combines with algorithms that we're exposed to for three, four hours a day designed to keep us scrolling, it has a horrendous effect.

**LF:** It's very interesting though, what you're saying, because you're not simply blaming the technology. We'll get to that. But you're blaming a function of it.

**JH:** The debate isn't are you pro-tech or anti-tech? The debate is what tech, working in whose interests, designed for what goals? We can have all the technology we currently have, but have it not designed to have this effect on us. And just to tease out a little bit more about the democracy element, if that's okay Laura. So this effect, the nice people are muffled, the angriest people are amplified. Imagine that applied to a whole country? Except you don't have to imagine it because we are living it, right? We've been living it for more than 10 years now. I mean, when Jair Bolsonaro, the fascist, and it's not a word I use lightly, who won the Brazilian Presidential election, fortunately just defeated by a hair's breadth-

**LF:** Now living in Florida.

**JH:** Yeah, so he had been a washed up, forgotten far-right senator until the algorithms picked him up, began amplifying him, and the night he won, his supporters at his election rally chanted, "Facebook, Facebook, Facebook." Because they knew why they were there. So there's many reasons why we've got to deal with this attention crisis I would say to anyone watching, at a personal level, just think about anything you've ever achieved in your life that you are proud of. Starting a business, being a good parent, being part of a campaign group, learning to play the guitar, whatever it is, that thing that you are proud of required a huge amount of sustained focus and attention. And when attention and focus breakdown, your ability to achieve your goals and solve your problems breaks down. That's true for individuals. And that's true of wider societies. We've got so many crises we need to deal with that require sustained focus and attention on the part of the citizenry. Now we can get back to that, but we have to first acknowledge what's gone wrong.

**LF:** You know, what is it we want to distract ourselves from?

**JH:** There's a lot of unhappiness, loneliness, people being controlled and humiliated at work in our society.

**LF:** Do you think that's part of the problem?

**JH:** Of course. I mean, as with, you know, the core of addiction is about not wanting to be present in your life because your life is too painful a place to be. That's true if we're talking about opioids. And that's true if we're talking about addiction to scrolling on your phone. So absolutely. Whereas society becomes intolerable for people and many people's lives are intolerable in our current societies, are needlessly painful. Of course you have to deal with that underlying pain. We need to do both, of course. Because where you deal with the underlying pain, you free people up in order to, you know, restore their attention. And where you help restore attention, you free people up to begin to, to solve these deeper problems. So you've absolutely got to deal with both.

**LF:** You have your guy, Tim Miller, in Silicon Valley saying, "You know, we could create technology that would create greater states of calm and reduced stress. We don't, but we could." Any evidence that anybody is out there working on that?

**JH:** Hundred percent, I went to lots of places that are doing it, but, and I'll talk about it in a second, but I would say with all of the 12 factors that I write about in "Stolen Focus" that are harming our attention, there's I think two levels of which we've got to tackle them. I think of them as defense and offense. There are loads of things that we can do to defend ourselves and our children at an individual level. I'll give you an example of one, I feel a bit like a QVC person here, but I won't plug the brand. This here is a kSafe, it's a plastic safe. You take off the lid, you put in your phone, you put on the lid, you turn the dial, push the button and it'll lock your phone away for anything between five minutes and a whole day.

**LF:** And how many times have you tried to crack it open?

**JH:** I go through dozens of things in the book that people can do immediately to protect themselves and their children. And a lot of the book is about our kids as well. But I want to really level with people because I do not think most books about attention are being honest with people. I'm passionately in favor of these individual changes. They're really important. On their own, they're not going to solve the problem. Give you an example of a place that I went to that did it. There's lots of places that have taken steps to do this, but I'll give you an example of one. In France in 2018, they had a huge crisis of what they called Les Burnout, which I don't think I need to translate. And the French government under pressure from labor unions, they would never have done it without that pressure, set up an inquiry to figure out why is everyone so burned out these days? And they discovered one crucial factor. 40% of French workers felt they could never stop checking their phone or email while they were awake. Because their boss could message them at any time of the day or night and if they didn't answer, they'd be in trouble. So I can give those people all the lovely self-help advice in the world, right? They can't do it, if they're going to lose their jobs if they do it, they can't do it. So it required a collective solution,

which the French government, again, under pressure from labor unions introduced. It's very simple. Every French worker by law has what's called a right to disconnect. Just says your work hours have to be stipulated in your contract. And when your work hours are over, unless they pay you overtime, you don't have to answer your phone and you don't have to check your email. We can't do that on our own. You can't go to your boss and go, "I'm just not answering emails after I leave work anymore." Unless you're a very powerful person in your workplace. But together we can assert that, right? And that's had a really profound effect on restoring people's attention in France. And this goes to a really important shift in psychology, I think we need. You know, when I started researching the book, I just thought, "The reason I can't pay attention is obvious. There's something wrong with me. My willpower isn't strong enough." You know, the most important thing I can communicate to people is if you're struggling to focus and pay attention or your kids are struggling to focus and pay attention, this is not your fault. There's nothing wrong with you. And there's nothing wrong with our children. There's something wrong with the way we're living.

**LF:** And you do, I mean, you've said that there are 12 aspects, and we've only touched on a few of them. Some of the others are, you know, the food we eat and the way that we exercise or don't, the way that we are raising our kids, the list is long, not to mention pollution of the environment, et cetera. Are you hearing from governments, from legislators, from people who are trying to address these sort of interconnected issues?

**JH:** The crazy mixture of people who have been responding to the book. I think I've written the only book that has ever been praised by both Hillary Clinton and Tucker Carlson, for example, which was not where I ever expected to be in life, but again, I'll take it. But I think people can see something is really wrong here, and there's a tremendous hunger to deal with this. And also, I think the most important thing related to what I've just been saying is about approaching this in a spirit of optimism. You'll remember when we were young, the dominant form of gasoline by far in the United States and Britain and all over the world was leaded gasoline. And it was discovered by scientists that exposure to lead is really bad for your brain and particularly bad for children's ability to focus and pay attention. And if it's in gasoline, obviously it gets into the air, everyone was breathing in really extraordinarily high levels of amount of lead. And so what happened is in the late 1970s, a group of ordinary moms, what were called housewives at the time, banded together and said, "Well, why are we allowing this? Why are we allowing this for-profit industry to screw up our kids' brains?" And it's really important to notice what they didn't say. They didn't say, "So let's ban gasoline," right? Just like none of us are saying, "Let's dispense with technology." What they said is, "Let's get rid of leaded gasoline and transfer to safer forms." As everyone watching knows, there's no more leaded gasoline almost anywhere in the world now. And as a result, the Center of Disease Control says the average American child is three to five IQ points higher than they would've been had those moms not made that fight and not fought like hell for their children. Now, to me that's a really good model. You've got the

individual defense and loads of things we can do. And then you've got these moms, ordinary democratic citizens who understood the science and fought to get the contaminant out of the environment. Now, I spent a lot of time in Silicon Valley saying, "Well, is there an equivalence of the lead in the lead paint in our technology?" There is, and I talk about what it is in the book. But there's also in all of these factors, whether it's food, the way our schools work, the way our offices work, there are specific elements that the science shows very clearly are trashing our attention. But they're not inherent to the model, right? You can have petrol without lead in it. You can have technology that isn't designed to maximally hack and invade our attention. In fact, we can have it designed to help and aid our attention if we wanted to. Technology exists to do that tomorrow if the incentives are right. For all of these factors, we can put them right if we want to.

**LF:** Do you think more and more of us working from home will make things better or worse?

**JH:** It's not clear. It's not clear. So we know that loneliness massively increases attention problems. People become more vigilant when they're lonely. Working from home can increase loneliness. On the other hand, we know that when people have more control over their time, they're less stressed. We know that stress ruins attention and focus. It's just complicated. And I think it will vary actually from workplace to workplace, depending on how much freedom people are given. It's not totally clear. I do think though, as our friend Naomi Klein said, you know, "If interacting through screens met our deeper social needs, we would all have been fine for the last two years," right? Instead, I never once heard anyone say in the last two years the sentence "Hooray, another Zoom call." right? So what it tells us is there's something about screen-based... Of course there's many good things about screen-based interaction, but it tells us also there's something about it that doesn't meet our needs to be seen and heard.

**LF:** I do want to ask you about the connections between this book and your last two books, and in fact social connections. Because I think we can do all sorts of things and the Biden administration is poised possibly to use anti-trust legislation. There's support from right and left to try to address the monopoly aspect to some of these huge tech platforms. And I'm all for it. But I also think there's an element on us to talk to people, to actually reconnect in our lives. And yet, I think people are still a little loathe to. Broadway's suffering, theater's suffering. People are not going to sit in rooms with other people. We're in a profound moment of choice making. And I guess you're watching, I'm watching, but where's your curiosity taking you now?

**JH:** I'm really glad you teased this out because most people don't ask me about this. There's a very complex interaction between a profoundly lonely society. A society where people are taught that life is all about money and status. A society where people are controlled and humiliated at work and people then not wanting to be present in their lives, right? And I think COVID... Obviously COVID has been primarily a horrendous tragedy for the million Americans who've died and the people who've died all over the world. It's also given us relief from some of the

things that are making us feel bad and accelerated some of the other things that are making us feel bad. It's a complex mixture. What Naomi Klein argues, I think brilliantly, is COVID gave us a taste of where we were meant to be 15 years from now, where everything was going to be done on screens, right? It's given us a taste of the future to which we were headed. She calls it the screen new deal, right? And is that where we want to be? Do we look back on the last two years and go, "What a great time we had, I hope we have more of that."

**LF:** Well, I think it- It's in the complexity that the richness lies. I mean, we talked a few weeks ago on this program with Leah Lakshmi, a disability justice activist who talked about the positives that had come out of this period, particularly for people who had been living in isolation as disabled people and how the technology in some ways is helped and how she hopes people will actually continue to make webinars and meetings available in a virtual way for those who can't get there in person. And make the in-person events more accessible. It's all one big mix.

**JH:** The way I think about it is we're in a race, right? On the one side, you've got these 12 factors that I wrote about that are undermining our focus and attention, many of which are poised to become more powerful. Paul Graham, one of the biggest investors in Silicon Valley said the world will be more addicted in the next 40 years than it was in the last 40. Think about how much more addictive TikTok is than Facebook. Now imagine the next crack-like iteration of Facebook in the Metaverse. That's one side of the race. On the other side of the race, I would argue there's got to be a movement of all of us saying, "No, no, you don't get to do that to us. You don't get to do that to my mind, you don't get to do that to my child. No, that is not a good life. No, we choose the life where..." Of course we have technology and we have speed, and we have all sorts of things, but also where that we have the option for depth, where we can think deeply, where our children can play outside, where we can read books. But to get there, it requires this shift in psychology. We need to stop blaming ourselves. We need to stop blaming our children. We need to stop asking only for small individual tweaks, hugely valuable though they are. We are the free citizens of democracies and we own our own minds. And if we follow the scientific evidence, we can take our minds back if we want to.

**LF:** So the AI image and chat creations that we're seeing come online right now in tremendous number, everything from Chatbots to DeepDream, all those kinds of things, do we just say no? I mean, is there a moment where we just say, "No, no, no."

**JH:** Definitely, no, there's loads of great things about those technologies. I mean, AI is going to uncover all sorts of profoundly liberating things for humanity if we get it right. So it's not a kind of Luddite, no to technology. What we want is A, technology that works for us, not against us. You can only get that with regulation, and B, some life where you are not constantly enthralled to technology. Professor Sune Lehmann in Copenhagen is an amazing man who did the first ever

study that proved that our collective attention really is shrinking. And just by coincidence, the day I interviewed him in Copenhagen, the day before, a couple of days before, a photograph had been released, a lot of people watching will have seen it. It's an image of Mark Zuckerberg, and it's when they unveiled the Oculus virtual reality headsets. And the entire audience of, I think thousands of people is wearing these VR headsets. And Mark Zuckerberg is the only person not wearing a VR headset. And Professor Lehman said to me, "That is a vision of one potential future for us, right? You'll have an elite who don't use this stuff." Mark Zuckerberg doesn't let his children even have an iPad, right? They send their kids to Montessori... Not the elite in Silicon Valley, not just Zuckerberg send their kids to Montessori schools. They go on long meditation retreats, they work very hard to protect their attention, and they increasingly degrade and manipulate the wider population's attention. That is not a good society. No one thinks that's a good society. That's not a good society for us as individuals. It's also... We are not going to solve the climate crisis if we can only think of 45 second bursts, right? We've got to get our attention back for the sake of ourselves and our children and for the sake of democracy. You know, we're speaking shortly after the Brazilian election where President Lula da Silva was, thank God re-elected, but it was a hair's breath. We nearly just lost democracy in one of the biggest democracies in the world. It came very close, right?

**LF:** We always ask our guests, you know, what do they think the story will be that the future tells of this moment?

**JH:** It is possible that they will look back and go, "Look, they had these very deep factors that caused them to really suffer when it came to attention and focus. They came to understand those things and they dealt with them in an intelligent, pragmatic way. And look, now we can think more deeply." That's one option. Another option is they'll look back nostalgically on the time when people had a whole 45 seconds per task in an office, right? Entirely depends on us. The truth is, we have to decide, do we value attention? Do we want our children to be able to read books and think deeply? Do we want that for ourselves? And that's a choice we have to make, right? Now we're not making it in a context of our own choosing. You know, the book is called "Stolen Focus" because your attention didn't collapse, your attention's been stolen from you.

**LF:** Johann Hari's book is "Stolen Focus Why You Can't Pay Attention And How to Think Deeply Again." Johann Hari, thank you so much for joining us and congratulations on the new book.

**JH:** Ah, what a pleasure. What great questions. Thanks so much, Laura, cheers.

**LF:** It's hard to talk about technology without some smart aleck bringing up the Luddites. "You don't want to stand against progress." that person will say, "You don't want to be a Luddite." Well, who were the Luddites, really? They were craftspeople, textile workers and weavers, who



had a pretty good life until technology started being introduced. They worked from home. They had a certain amount of autonomy over their lives. With technology and factories, they knew all of that was about to be wrecked. They didn't start by breaking machines, they started by making demands for phased-in introduction of the technology that was coming, for a share of the profits that were to come, perhaps a tax on textiles, that would fund worker pensions and so forth. They were denied all of that, and that was only when they started breaking up machines, for which they were brutally suppressed, hanged in the streets. Today, well, there's a school district in Seattle that's suing the social media giants for their negative impact on mental health. There's legislation possibly that could be introduced, or maybe our social media bosses will listen to us. What would breaking the machines look like now? I don't know. But I do know that if in the Luddites time what was at stake was the quality of their lives, today, it's the quality of our minds that's at stake. You can hear my full, uncut conversation with Johann Hari about Noam Chomsky, the subject of his next book, a man with no problem with focus, it seems, if you subscribe to our free podcast. All our podcast subscribers get the full, uncut conversation every week. You can find out about that on our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For "The Laura Flanders Show," I'm Laura. For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full, uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at [lauraflanders.org](http://lauraflanders.org).