

UNITED WISDOM

Technology as a new habit of noticing and overlooking

Traditions and Worldviews

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Epigraph

> *“A thing may be present to a man a hundred times”.*

William James, *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892), Chapter XI, p. 172. The quotation follows the English text; RU is the editorial translation. James’s next words specify that if someone persistently fails to notice the thing, it does not enter their experience. Text.

What this article is about

Two people walk down the same street. One is seeking an address and watching the navigation app’s blue dot; the other notices a bakery that has closed, a new ramp, and a tree pruned too severely. Their information differs because their attention performed different tasks, rather than because one is more intelligent. Technology participates in setting these tasks before we formulate our own intention.

This article considers technology as a participant in human perception: instrument, interface, and habit jointly determine what becomes noticeable, comparable, and deserving of response. There is no general verdict against screens here. One instrument helps reveal danger, another obscures an important conversation, and sometimes they are the same thing. Understanding requires distinguishing expanded capacities, an altered way of seeing, and loss of a particular skill. “How much time do I spend with a device?” can then be supplemented by a more precise question: “Which aspects of the world have I learned to notice through it, and which have I stopped checking myself?”

I. The instrument enters the task itself

Technology changes both an action’s speed and what we consider the action to be. A paper map requires locating oneself among streets. A navigation app offers the next instruction to follow. Both help us arrive, but in the first procedure we construct spatial relations; in the second, we may successfully execute a sequence of commands. A common result does not make the approaches interchangeable.

Imagine a hypothetical example. A pedestrian arrives on time but cannot explain from which side they entered the square. This is no proof that phones worsen memory. In this episode, they simply did not need to construct an account of the route. Another pedestrian uses the

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same app, examines the map beforehand, and notes landmarks. The device remains the same; the person's participation changes.

The philosopher Peter-Paul Verbeek calls devices' participation in the human relationship to the world technological mediation. Drawing on Don Ihde, he distinguishes an instrument incorporated into bodily action, a reading requiring interpretation, interaction with a device as a separate counterpart, and an unnoticed technical background. Glasses and a thermometer therefore participate in experience differently. Verbeek, "Beyond the Human Eye," opening section.

For everyday choice, a consequence matters: a question about an instrument cannot end with its technical specification. We need to examine the relationship it creates. A notification does more than communicate information; it invites interruption of the current sequence. A task list does more than retain intentions; it establishes a form in which an intention is easier to recognize as completed. A camera does more than hold an image; it invites a search for a frame.

This participation does not destroy freedom. It changes the conditions of its use. Users need the ability to understand which work a button takes on and which work it quietly assigns to them, rather than heroic resistance to every button. An important boundary lies between convenient execution of a chosen task and its unnoticed replacement. You can receive a faultless route to a place you never intended to visit.

II. The new is seen through the old

A technological gaze cannot be opposed to perfectly pure human perception. We already notice the world through language, profession, experience, and expectation. Someone working with sound hears things in a room that another calls silence. Someone caring for an elderly relative sees a step they previously passed without noticing.

In Chapter XI of his brief course, James connects the composition of experience with habits of attention. This is a historical psychological formulation, rather than a modern experiment on social media. Its usefulness here is limited to the initial distinction: physical presence before the eyes does not yet mean someone has made a thing part of meaningful experience. James, Chapters X–XI.

Technology enters an existing selection. A calendar strengthens sensitivity to scheduled time, but not necessarily to participants' exhaustion. An expense system makes purchases visible, while unpaid care for loved ones may remain outside the table. This is not every developer's secret intention. Any representation chooses units and leaves the rest outside its frame.

We should therefore observe learned responses as well as screens. A familiar signal may draw a hand toward the device before a clear question appears. An empty cell may invite filling. Without a numerical indicator, someone may find it difficult to acknowledge that work happened at all. In these cases, the interface continues acting after the app closes.

A habit can also help. A shopping list frees attention for conversation; an available instruction reduces fear of an unfamiliar procedure. Free space does not appear automatically: checking can fill it again. The choice concerns what the freed attention is for. If memory is moved outside, the person must still decide where to direct the opportunity to think that this move creates.

III. A number reveals and conceals

An indicator makes comparison convenient at the cost of a particular reduction. A walk’s duration, distance, and subjective enjoyment are different aspects of one event. If an app shows only distance, it does not lie about the walk. An error occurs when distance becomes the only permissible description.

In a hypothetical scene, someone returns from a pleasant short walk disappointed because the daily target was missed. Another completes a long route but barely remembers where they went. These cases cannot establish that a counter is harmful. For a third participant, the same counter may be a helpful external support for making time to move. The difference concerns the authority granted to the number over evaluation.

Three questions help with an indicator. Which feature does it actually measure? For which purpose is that feature appropriate? What remains significant but unmeasured? These are more useful than debating whether numbers can ever be trusted. An accurate step count can be trusted without trusting the conclusion that it exhausts the day’s quality.

A number is especially persuasive when an experience is difficult to name. Someone remembers diffuse tension during the week and receives a clear graph of completed tasks. The graph offers an intelligible answer. But intelligibility does not prove that the answer addresses the initial question. Sometimes a table answers a question about work’s pace while someone is trying to understand why its meaning has disappeared.

A practical distinction follows between measurement and measurement’s authority. An instrument may perform its narrow work well while a user interprets the result too broadly. Correction need not require discarding the instrument. An independent description can sit alongside it: what happened, which task it solved, at what cost, and what should be preserved. The technological indicator then becomes one witness, rather than chair of the entire inner committee.

IV. Recording is different from understanding

The capacity to retain information changes our relationship to not knowing. What was forgotten once might have meant lost access; now a record is nearby. But availability of an answer and ability to explain its grounds remain different achievements. An old dispute about writing rests on precisely this difference.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates tell a story about Theuth, the inventor of writing, and King Thamus. Thamus fears writing will provide an appearance of wisdom instead of inward assimilation. The story belongs to a dialogue; it is not documentary evidence of a meeting of Egyptian rulers. The philosophical question matters: can a retained sign answer a request for clarification by itself? Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c–275e, Benjamin Jowett's translation.

A modern record is richer than a scroll. It contains search, revision history, and links. The distinction nevertheless remains. Someone may possess an instruction without recognizing when applying it becomes an error. They may find a quotation without understanding whose position it expresses. Hundreds of notes may be stored without noticing that two contradict each other.

A simple thought test helps: what remains if the answer is temporarily removed? Verbatim reproduction is unnecessary. Naming the problem, main argument, and a circumstance requiring revision is enough. This remainder shows that the record participated in thinking, rather than only accumulation.

External memory is valuable precisely because everything need not be retained within. Demanding that someone remember every number would be strange. Freeing memory and abandoning understanding are nevertheless different decisions. The first removes unnecessary burden; the second removes the capacity to judge an answer's suitability. A good archive permits a return to grounds. A bad habit turns even a good archive into a store of confident formulations nobody checks anymore.

A record has another advantage: it can resist the person's own habit. Yesterday's note shows a different promise; a retained letter reveals a condition missing from convenient memory. Technology then supports honesty precisely by refusing to accommodate the present wish. The record must nevertheless remain available in context. An isolated phrase readily becomes a weapon in dispute. The full message sequence reveals clarification, date, and changed agreement. A sensible digital archive therefore retains the question to which an answer belonged as well as the answer. Users also learn to notice sequence: what was said first, which circumstance arose later, and why the result differs from the initial intention. This is a distinct form of attention technology can develop. External memory becomes a means of revising one's version of an event, rather than only confirming an established opinion.

V. Convenience is distributed among people

Technology may simplify one person’s life while creating extra work for another. This is particularly visible when an attractive interface finishes only the visible part of a process. An application is sent in a second; someone must clarify the address, correct a category, and match records manually.

Imagine a small team. A manager introduces a convenient daily reporting form. Work becomes more transparent for her. For an employee handling unpredictable customer requests, the form requires translating real activity into unsuitable cells at day’s end. Both have reasonable interests. “Efficiency” cannot settle the disagreement before we specify whose time and which quality count.

Examining convenience must therefore follow the entire chain. What became faster at the first step? Where did a delay appear? Who corrects a wrong choice’s consequences? Can that person change the form, or only adapt? The last question matters: invisible work often sustains a system that looks complete.

This observation does not presume every automation exploits people. Sometimes the overall gain is large and the extra burden small and recognized. Sometimes the burden really is eliminated. But that must be established through the process, rather than the impression of a screen. Demonstrating an easy entrance does not show a difficult exit.

There is a more personal aspect too. When one person’s calendar schedules a meeting without discussion, formally they merely use an instrument. In practice, they make their own availability the measure of another’s. A shared family task list can distribute care or make unrecorded responsibilities less visible. Freedom to use convenience includes responsibility to see its consequences for participants. The most useful question about a new feature is sometimes simple: who now has to do what was previously considered my part of the work?

VI. Invisibility does not always mean loss

A well-mastered instrument often ceases to attract attention. Someone does not examine every keyboard letter or continually think about their glasses. This invisibility usually means action has become easier. Demanding continual awareness of every means we use would be mistaken.

The problem arises elsewhere: a familiar means changes conditions while earlier trust persists. A search form looks familiar but now provides a short answer instead of a list of documents. Users continue perceiving it as the old point of access. The changed task passes under cover of an old habit.

This can be detected without general suspicion of technology. Notice a particular transition: previously I selected a source, now I accept a prepared account; previously I saw several routes, now I follow one; previously I decided when to stop viewing, now the next item begins without a separate decision. In each case, evaluate gains and losses for your particular purpose.

Sometimes the loss is small. If a sign needs quick translation, detailed examination of the translation system may obstruct the task. Elsewhere the same habit is risky: someone uses a short formulation for an important decision without examining omitted conditions. Sensible settings should depend on the error’s significance, rather than a constant level of user anxiety.

It helps to distinguish background trust from checking attention. The first permits life without inspecting every screw. The second activates at a junction where meaning, responsibility, or an error’s cost changes. We need not always walk without a map. But if a route suddenly leads through closed territory, habitual obedience to the voice should yield to examination of circumstances. Invisibility helps while the person can bring the means back into view at the appropriate moment.

A success signal matters too. A green mark may mean a file was sent, received, or its content checked. These are different events. If an interface uses one sign for the entire chain, users must reconstruct distinctions themselves. A hypothetical employee believes a document was approved because uploading finished; a colleague considers it unread. Their conflict arose before content was discussed. Checking attention here is one clarification: what actual action does the mark confirm? The question helps equally with ordering, applying, and saving a personal note. It expresses no distrust of people and requires no study of the entire system. It restores a definite meaning to “done.” Convenience becomes more durable when the technical signal and human agreement indicate the same stage, and following stages need not be guessed from a button’s color.

VII. Slowing down needs a purpose

Advice to slow down can readily become another indicator: spend a specified number of minutes without a device and check completion. The language of attentiveness then serves the old habit of evaluating oneself by an external form. Slowing down guarantees nothing; it creates an opportunity to notice a particular difference.

In a hypothetical conversation, one person removes their phone from the table but continually thinks of a missed message. Another leaves it nearby, explains beforehand that an important call is expected, and participates fully until it comes. The first performed a visible gesture; the second created intelligible conditions of attention. One gesture cannot confidently establish presence’s quality.

A pause’s purpose is better named in advance. I want to hear how someone describes a problem before proposing a solution. I want to see the street without a route so I remember a landmark. I want to finish an argument without opening a counter-link after every sentence. The pause then has an object, and its result can be discussed without moralizing.

A voluntary pause has limits. Someone may depend on connection for work, care of a loved one, or access to help. Universal disconnection ignores these differences. A more suitable choice is a specific change: remove unnecessary signals during one task, retain a needed channel, and agree on response time. Attention is supported by conditions rather than a demand for continual willpower.

Returning to the world need not be ceremonial either. Sometimes it is enough to see the face just read about in a message, ask whether someone understood a short reply correctly, or note that a walk was good before its result was counted. This is no opposite of technology. It restores the connection between a means and the reason it was adopted. A pause helps if afterward someone understands the object of their action better, rather than merely gaining another occasion to evaluate discipline.

VIII. Skills can be retained selectively

We cannot personally perform everything instruments do. Such a requirement would turn freedom into continual overload. Skills are therefore better considered selectively: which capacities are needed to use external help meaningfully and recover when it fails?

For navigation, this may mean naming the destination, recognizing major landmarks, and finding a safe way to stop. For automatic text, it means formulating a question, noticing a contradiction, and checking a significant link. For a financial app, it means understanding obligations and the difference between a current balance and available funds. Competing with a machine in number of operations is unnecessary.

The task determines this minimum. Someone occasionally visiting an unfamiliar city and a specialist responsible for a group’s route retain different skills. Their human worth does not differ. Responsibility and consequences of error are distributed differently. Users need to know important points of dependence rather than the entire mechanism.

One useful exercise is occasionally performing a bounded part independently, then comparing it with the instrument’s result. Record your own assumption before searching; establish the general direction before starting navigation; read one original document before an automatic summary. The purpose is to support checking, rather than prove independence from civilization.

Learning should yield a real benefit. If an exercise changes neither ability to detect error nor recover action, it may become ritual. A retained skill is valuable for its function, rather than its age. Someone calculating without a calculator may still misunderstand the starting quantities. A calculator user can detect an absurd result if they understand orders of magnitude. The decisive distinction is between delegating an operation and delegating judgment about what it means.

Some skills are retained through conversation among people. If one knows the terrain, another understands the map, and a third notices safety conditions, the group may act more reliably than each alone. This does not justify assigning someone a lifelong duty to check everything. Roles should be discussed and occasionally changed. Otherwise collective competence becomes dependence on an invisible helper. Knowing the group’s own boundary helps too: nobody can restore access, nobody saved the address, nobody understands the input data. Detecting this beforehand is easier than during a failure. Technological literacy includes acknowledging shared uncertainty and finding the needed help. It is more than personal dexterity with menus. Sometimes stopping is the most mature action because a convenient system continues issuing instructions while people can no longer evaluate their consequences.

IX. Arranging attention is shared work

A personal habit depends on its environment, so individual decisions often are insufficient. If a team considers an instant answer a sign of respect, someone receives contradictory demands: focus on difficult work and respond to every signal. Buying a concentration app does not solve this problem.

A shared rule can change. Specify which messages are urgent, ordinary response time, and where a completed decision is recorded. This reduces guessing others’ expectations. It helps senders too: they stop measuring regard for themselves through response speed. But the rule works only if the manager and other participants observe it themselves.

In a family, a similar adjustment begins by recognizing different tasks. One person uses a phone for rest while another coordinates care for a relative. Both outwardly look at a screen. “We spend too much time on our phones” conceals the difference and obstructs fair distribution of attention. Discussing particular times, actions, and expected responses is better.

At the product level, arrangement includes the possibility of stopping, seeing a source, changing order, and understanding an indicator’s purpose. Not every service can offer every option. Its restrictions can nevertheless be named. People have the right to understand what is offered: an instrument for their chosen task, a stream of new stimuli, or a system that proposes the next goal itself.

At the beginning, two pedestrians obtained different streets from one space. A mature relationship with technology does not require them to see the same thing. It requires noticing their own selection and changing it when necessary. Navigation may remain on. The question is whether someone retains the right to look up, check direction, and notice something outside the calculated route. This right connects technical convenience with human attention.

What this means in practice

Choose one recurring task: reading news, finding a route, writing a reply, or planning a day. Describe it without naming the app. For example, “understand what changed and whether it affects me,” rather than “look at the feed.” This translation already reveals whether habitual action matches the needed result.

Across several ordinary episodes, note three things. What did the device help you notice? What did it suggest considering important? What remained outside its representation? This observes action rather than examining willpower. Every minute need not be recorded or the inquiry turned into another difficult duty.

Change one condition. Keep the map onscreen but name a landmark first. Disable one signal type while reading. Beside the number of completed tasks, add a short note about an unfinished significant question. Compare speed and the ability to explain the result afterward. If it became slower without intelligible benefit, restore the previous setting or choose another.

For shared work, add a question about burden. Who found things easier and who now corrects errors? Agree on one clear rule making that work visible. For example, do not consider a sent form complete before recipient confirmation, or specify ordinary response time for a nonurgent message.

Finally, retain a small checking skill proportionate to the cost of error: distinguishing source from retelling, estimating orders of magnitude, or recognizing a safe landmark. The aim is to use means with understanding. Good technology expands access to the world; a good habit preserves the possibility of noticing when the means starts deciding which world you should see.

Key quotation

> *“you seem to consider not whether a thing is or is not true, but who the speaker is”.*

Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275b, Socrates replying to Phaedrus. This is the verified fragment of Jowett’s English translation; RU translates it editorially. It concerns a criterion for assessing the story and does not cancel examination of a source’s origins and reliability. Text.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Similarity and boundary
James: habit of attention ↔ Verbeek: mediation	Both help examine conditions of experience. James concerns psychological selection; Verbeek relationships among human, device, and world.
Plato: recording and assimilation ↔ an external digital archive	The shared question distinguishes access and understanding. Modern search can respond and update; Plato's critique concerns a written sign within living dialogue.
James: mastered action ↔ using navigation	Familiarity frees resources for another task. The navigation example is a contemporary authorial application, rather than James's experiment.
Verbeek: interpreting a reading ↔ practical evaluation of a number	An instrument needs interpretation. This does not make its reading arbitrary or a physical quantity created by the user's wishes.
Platonic clarification ↔ a shared communication rule	Both preserve the possibility of asking about grounds. A messaging agreement is an organizational decision, rather than an extension of Plato's metaphysics.

Primary sources and research

1. William James. *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1892). Passages of Chapters X–XI and XIII were read: habit, selection of experience, attention. A historical basis for distinctions; nineteenth-century physiology is not presented as current consensus.

2. Plato. *Phaedrus*, Benjamin Jowett's translation. The passage 274c–275e was read: writing, reminder, and possibility of clarification. The source of both sides of the dispute about recording.

3. Peter-Paul Verbeek. "Beyond the Human Eye: Technological Mediation and Posthuman Visions". PDF pp. 1–4 were read, particularly Ihde's initial relationship typology. A philosophical framework is used, rather than an empirical assessment of particular apps.

Tags

technology, attention, habit, perception, mediation, William James, Plato, Phaedrus, Peter-Paul Verbeek, Don Ihde, interface, external archive, memory, understanding, navigation, indicator, measurement, interpretation, notification, digital environment, delegation, skill, verification, convenience, responsibility, shared work, choice, everyday life, independent description, burden distribution

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