Working is Bad for You
On the Terror of Updates in Our Daily Working Lives

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Maaike Lauwaert questions the issue of the balance between work and life within the cultural field. Our lives are governed by the terror of the updates, she says. How can we resist the burps and farts of a system that is trying to eat us alive?

Last year, an article in *The Guardian* by Rolf Dobelli outlined the hazards of the many news items that we are confronted with or that we intentionally seek out on small and bigger screens. [1] "News is bad for you", Dobelli stated. The ways in which we consume news today, the "limitless quantities of news flashes, which are bright-coloured candies for the mind", trample long-term memory and trigger stress hormones. And, Dobelli asks, how often are these news items truly relevant? The same argument could be made for all those other small, attention-demanding updates that pop-up during the day: buzzing phones, text and email messages, alerts, etc. They distract us, interrupt us and trigger stress hormones (even muscular spasms) while they are very often of a trivial nature.

For instance, while writing on any of the numerous machines I use for writing, new email messages will either pop up in the upper part of my screen or in the right-hand corner, calendars start bouncing as appointments approach or present a flashing little screen that pop ups in front of the document I am working in. The phone will buzz with the same imminent appointments and new email messages and mixes this with personal or professional text messages and reminders of voicemail messages left unchecked, meanwhile, the Facebook window reveals a number 9 in parentheses, indicating that 9 messages are waiting for me to be read. Meanwhile, the Gmail window is flashing because a friend or colleague is G-Chatting me. All of these updates are all standard features on the various machines I work on and their goal seems to be to try to lure me away from that one task I am engaged in. When we switch between these many updates we are not so much multitasking as being constantly distracted from our work. At the same time, the updates keep you occupied as well because there are always more of them popping up and demanding feedback, attention and a reaction.

Some characteristics of what I will here refer to as the terror of the updates are (1) a blurring of the professional (work time) and the personal (free time); (2) a hierarchy-free mix of attention-demanding alerts (e.g., no distinction between sources); (3) the uniformity in size and format suggesting equality, which makes it difficult to distinguish between sense and nonsense, urgent and not-so urgent; (4) the illusion of constant urgency (But how urgent can it be? It can surely wait twenty minutes or maybe even a couple of hours. Why react instantly?); (5) the illusion of being hard at work while actually being distracted from working vis-à-vis a never-ending stream of work-related updates; and (6) the addiction to updates, which makes us seek them out purposefully as we quickly switch

between windows or apps to check out what is new on Facebook, Twitter or whatever platform we fancy.

Analogous to Dobelli's observations, we could also say that our current way of working is bad for us. We should spend more time on one thing at a time and detox from the addiction to updates: focus, concentrate and choose. How can we produce good work when we end up working in short periods lasting no more than a couple of minutes? How can we make good things when we are never not working? What I consider crucial for the cultural field (but surely for other fields as well) at this moment is this issue of how we work, and, to be more precise, the issue of the balance between work and life, care and wellness. The terror of the updates plays a crucial role in the current imbalance between working and living because it permeates all facets of our lives, constantly and incessantly. Too much of our work – and our "non-working" – time is spent on trivial, distracting things that are masked as urgent and demand instant reactions. These distractions are, in the end, nothing more than the burps and farts of a system that is trying to eat us alive. We have to resist this update terror and go back to spending our time, taking care of ourselves and doing actual work. Updates – although these are often communicated in a smaller format – are actually becoming larger and larger and increasingly dominate our work culture and our personal lives. This is not a good development because it does not offer us more satisfaction as workers, it does not increase the quality of what we produce as workers and it is certainly not making us any happier.

However, we seem to be the only obstacles preventing us from revolting against this terror of the updates. We are collectively caught in a frenzy of call and response, action and reaction that makes it very hard to step away, ignore it all and ultimately claim our right to take time off, to disconnect, to reflect before we respond. Of course, the fact that these update mechanisms are pre-installed on most new machines does not help either. It is often a hassle to figure out how to turn them off, if this is even possible. Who or what benefits from sending us all these updates? Is it really as simple as big media companies focusing our attention to generate advertising revenues? Or is there also a more complex mechanism of mass deception at play in which we are being kept in a "happy" state of constant distraction so we do not have to focus on what is actually, really happening (the destruction of the social welfare system, the increased privatisation of profits and socialisation of losses, the monopoly practices of food industries and the various attacks on the environment)? But who is responsible for all this? There is no mastermind; we are as much a part of the problem as the companies that develop these technologies. It is a collage of actors and issues that have been woven together into a very complex network of problems. This means that we, the people, will have to claim our right to seek out any updates ourselves instead of being involuntarily submitted to a torrent of unsolicited, never-ending pings and beeps that governs our lives today.

Maaike Lauwaert writes on contemporary art for various magazines and blogs and works as a visual arts curator at Stroom Den Haag, an independent centre for art and architecture in the Netherlands. Before starting at Stroom, she worked at the Mondriaan Foundation and completed a PhD in the cultural sciences at the University of Maastricht. Her work has been published in *Metropolis M, Kaleidoscope, Modern Painters, Art Agenda*, among others.

Footnotes

1. Rolf Dobelli, “News is bad for you”, available online at: m.guardian.co.uk

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Labour, Media Society

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