Cal Newport has been described as the "man who never procrastinates," so I expected him to be punctual for our interview. He didn't disappoint. He logged onto Zoom from his podcast studio in Takoma Park, Md., fresh from recording the next episode of *Deep Questions With Cal Newport*. Among the deep questions Newport and his guests have taken up recently: "Do I need a better planning system?" " Is the internet hijacking ambition?" "I want work-life balance. Am I doomed to mediocrity?"

As you may have surmised, Newport is a philosopher of productivity. His 2016 breakout book, *Deep Work*, is a foundational text among those clinging to their attention spans in a sea of digital distraction. His books have sold more than 2 million copies.

Newport is also a professor of computer science at Georgetown University, where he is one of the founding faculty members of the Center for Digital Ethics. More recently he has turned his attention to — what else? — artificial intelligence. He's less concerned that AI will take our jobs than that it will erode our capacity to think.

In our conversation, which has been edited and condensed, Newport discussed how AI will change higher ed, why email is a form of "digital water torture," and the need to avoid Professor In Exile Syndrome.

Evan Goldstein: We're speaking a week or two after the debut of an agentic AI tool named Einstein. According to its creator, Einstein can integrate with Canvas and autonomously complete a student's coursework. While this specific tool was quickly taken down — Hebrew University owns the name and image rights for Albert Einstein — is the advent of Einstein a surprise?

Cal Newport: No. If we think about the way language-model-based tools like chatbots work, academic assignments are well suited for exactly what they're good at. Here's a prompt, write an essay in this format of this length. Here is a type of math problem that has been assigned a million times over the years with all the answers online. That is in the Goldilocks zone for an LLM. So I'm not surprised.

Goldstein: What about the agentic quality, this possibility that while a student is sleeping Einstein is completing their coursework?

Newport: The agentic claim is largely overblown marketing. If you think about the standard pre-ChatGPT assignment in college, the hard factor is having a language model that can understand it and write a response. But here's a more pessimistic view: We were already in trouble. The agentic piece doesn't dramatically change the trouble we were already in. That said, we've been here before.

Goldstein: What are you thinking of?

Newport: The web. Before Google and the rise of an easily accessible web, we had a fantastic system for assigning math problems. They appeared at the end of every chapter of your textbook. These problems were a major part of the value proposition of a textbook. It's hard to come up with good problems to test various types of math techniques. You want them to be difficult, but not too difficult, and to push students in the right way.

And then all that had to go away. Every answer key was online; you could just Google it. Now professors write new problems from scratch every year. So the internet completely changed the way we teach math and computer science. There are a lot of other examples from the rise of the web, which is a good proxy for what's happening now with AI.

Goldstein: Does our experience with the web make you more optimistic about AI?

Newport: Yeah, we've been through it before. By far the biggest challenge to the university happened a few hundred years into the existence of the idea of the university, which was the widespread availability of the codex. If you could get the knowledge from the very best thinker on a topic, not the guy who happens to be near you in Bologna, written in a way that's accessible and indexable, why would we ever need to go to a physical building again? The internet was another major challenge. Then the rise of video conferencing. We saw this during the pandemic. Why do I need to be in a room with a professor at this university when I can watch and interact with the best professors over video? But that challenge fell by the wayside because everyone hated taking classes that way. So there's been a long string of challenges. I would put AI high on the disruption list, because, like the web, it requires significant changes to how we think about student evaluation.

Goldstein: You were part of a Georgetown task force on the pedagogical uses of AI. I assume you had a wide range of conversations across your campus. Do you detect a difference between how administrators and faculty think about AI?

Newport: From a university perspective, you have to treat AI like we treated the web. When I was coming up, the wireless web was becoming a thing. Universities could not figure out in advance all the ways it might be useful, but they gave everyone access. I came to Dartmouth in the year 2000, and they had just wired the campus for wireless. Then the university let people figure out how best to use it. Something similar is happening with AI. Faculty and students should have access to AI tools, even though we don't know how this is going to shake out.

The most interesting things are happening with AI and research. Again, we've seen this before. The web massively changed what was possible in research. When I arrived at grad school, my adviser had a wall full of plastic paper sorters that contained copies of the most important papers in the field. It was a huge competitive advantage: I could easily grab and read these papers. During my time there, that wall came down because everyone had access to the papers online. By the time I left grad school, my collaborators were all around the world. The web made it possible for me in Washington, D.C., to work with

scholars in Singapore and Germany. Technology can have huge impacts on productivity. We're seeing it now, especially in the social sciences and in computer science.

The pedagogical uses of AI are still up in the air. The right thing to do is to give professors access to these tools and trust them to figure things out. To what degree there's going to be breakthroughs in pedagogy versus defensive retrenchment — we're still trying to figure that out.

Goldstein: One way the historical example of the web departs from AI is that a lot of people are hostile to the latter in a way that wasn't true of the former. They regard AI as anti-human, something to be resisted. I just read a Substack post by Becca Rothfeld, who was until recently a very good book critic at *The Washington Post*. Here's what she wrote: "I would honestly prefer for a sentient AI to kill every last human being on the planet in some hideously gruesome way than for even one more of us to become the kind of amoral, thoughtless person-shaped vacancy that AI threatens to turn us all into. At that point, I would welcome a violent singularity. Better to lose to the machines than to become the machines."

Newport: I'm very sympathetic. I see a divide in terms of AI's application to areas exempt from humanistic critique and areas that have real humanistic implications. When AI automates tasks that are repetitive or time-consuming or that you would be willing to hand off to a research assistant, I'm not so concerned. If a political scientist can use an AI coding agent to do a more comprehensive and faster data analysis to help them form an argument, that's good.

Where I do get concerned is when AI is used not to augment but to automate thought.

having to reach high peaks of cognitive engagement or concentration. Think about having to write something and facing a blank screen. Blank-screen writing is hard. You might want to avoid that cognitive strain. So you get a good enough draft from AI and maybe edit it. You are spared cognitive strain. That worries me because cognitive strain is at the core of the entire post-Paleolithic human experience. It's at the core of all big ideas. It's at the core of empathy, morality, ethics, notions of justice and human rights and

religion and philosophy. So there is absolutely something to the humanistic critique of AI. We don't want to automate away hard thought. Yes, automate drudgery. But automating hard thought is a dangerous direction to go.

Goldstein: How optimistic are you that we can resist the temptation to automate hard thought?

Newport: It's a huge temptation. This has been a central idea in my work for the past decade, ever since I wrote *Deep Work*. So much satisfaction and productivity and flourishing come from hard thought, but it's hard, and if we don't prioritize it, our capacity to do it is going to drift away.

We were already in an attention economy driven by distracting tools like social media. Now we have cognitive-outsourcing tools like AI. That is a powerful one-two punch to the human condition.

Universities need to explicitly portray themselves as citadels of concentration. The life of the mind is critical to the human experience. It is why you come to a university, just like the entire purpose of a Navy SEAL boot camp is to get ready for the physical hardships of war. Academic institutions need to demonstrate that the life of the mind is hard and worth it. We need to think about cognitive fitness the way we think about physical fitness. There should be a simple rule for being a thinker in an age of AI: Don't let AI write anything for you. Writing is to cognitive health what steps are to physical health. Write that email from scratch. Write that memo with the bullet points from scratch. Don't flee that strain. You need it as much as you need those 10,000 steps a day.

Goldstein: You're proposing a cultural norm against cognitive laziness akin to the one we have against physical laziness?

Newport: Yes. This is a problem that's 15 years in the making. The smartphone revolution and social media kicked this off. Now here comes AI at the worst time from the perspective of human thinking.

Goldstein: Let's get concrete: How do you use AI in your own work?

Newport: Not very much. I do the standard Google plus use of chatbots.

Goldstein: So you use it as a mild research assistant and souped up search engine?

Newport: Yes, and it's often wrong. But it can understand a more complicated search than Google: "There was an article I saw and I think it was roughly from this time period; can you help me find it?" It can parse that query better than Google can. Or I ask it to find me examples of people who said this or that during a particular time period. That's all though. I'm certainly not going to let an autoregressive token generator take over the role of cogitation and crafting of language. That's like if Arnold Schwarzenegger in the '70s used pulleys to help lift weights. What's the point?

Goldstein: You have a large corpus of published opinions and ideas. Have you been tempted to feed into an LLM the archive of your blog, podcast transcripts, your books, and so forth to see how AI Cal Newport performs?

Newport: I already have a great language model between my ears.

Cal Newport in his home in Takoma Park, Md., in 2024. GREG KAHN

Goldstein: Sketch a picture of what AI on a college campus looks like in five years or so.

Newport: There are obvious things. We're going to see a lot more automation of tasks on the borders of being an academic. There are so many things — managing Canvas, calculating grades, moving comments from one place to another — that are low-hanging fruit. There'll be also more automation in research, which will probably lead to more productivity. From the student perspective, we are going to look much more like classic Oxford than we do today. So more in-person testing, more blue books. Also, more Oxford-style tutorials where you sit with a proctor and walk through an argument and they assess how well you understand the material. It will look like my experience at MIT in the early 2000s. When I took an exam, I'd go to the gym and there would be 500 desks

and flag poles with class names. Proctors wandered around. We're going back to something like that.

Goldstein: In 2019, you wrote an essay for *The Chronicle Review* titled "Is Email Making Professors Stupid?" (I take responsibility — or blame — for the headline.) You argued that faculty life is essentially awash in electronic missives, many of which come with an expectation of rapid reply. You called it a form of "digital water torture." Seven years later, has the situation improved or deteriorated?

Newport: Things have not gotten better. Though it's worse in the wider world of office work because the academy isn't reliant on instant-messenger services like Slack. The main problems I talked about in that essay are still problems. And it's particularly hard for academics because unscheduled electronic messaging makes it difficult to focus for long periods of time, which is at the core of what academics do. The academy has been more resistant to meeting culture. It's just more culturally acceptable to be like, "No, I don't want to meet. What are you going to do? I have tenure." Some of us can still be curmudgeonly.

Goldstein: Let's talk about someone who appears in that 2019 essay, Donald Knuth. He is an eminent Stanford computer scientist — *The New York Times* described him as the "Yoda of Silicon Valley." He's long had an eccentric, and to your mind admirable, approach to email. In short, he doesn't use it. His secretary vets and batch-prints his correspondence. Is such an approach viable for most academics, or just for the sort of people who get called the "Yoda of Silicon Valley" by *The New York Times*?

Newport: Only the biggest stars can go Knuth mode. If your research is generating money, or you've won awards, or you have a very expensive endowed chair, the No. 1 thing academics tend to want is an assistant so that they don't have to be on email all day or try to figure out some HR software. The second thing they want is a reduced course load. Because academics most want to think and write and produce new knowledge. Uninterrupted thought cycles are the fundamental resource that universities are mining. The more uninterrupted thought a university mines, the more successful it will be.

If you have that mindset, there's a lot of low-hanging fruit. I recently uncovered an old essay I wrote on my blog. It opened with me reacting to an email that I'd received from the HR department at Georgetown. It basically said, We have this new HR management system and we need professors to check it a few times a day because we'll be posting various notices of things we might need from you. I remember thinking, What is our goal as a university? I don't think the goal is to get HR as streamlined as possible. It's to produce award-caliber theorems or breakthroughs. If we had that mindset shift of maximizing the amount of uninterrupted thought cycles, a lot of people could get a lot closer to the Knuth scenario.

Goldstein: A colleague of mine, Jack Stripling, recently interviewed Scott Galloway. I want to get your reaction to something Galloway said about tenure, which he described as a good idea that's been "bastardized." His case against it was twofold. First, most professors don't need it for the kind of work they do. Second, colleges award it at the point of a career at which productivity tends to tail off. As Galloway put it in his typically hyperbolic way, a third of his colleagues at New York University should be put on an ice floe and sent out to sea. You have tenure. You've written about how the pursuit of it incentivized the kind of deep work that you most value.

Newport: I'm an example of the potential benefits of tenure in a couple of different ways. First, it attracts smart people to academia. Smart people tend to have other options, including options that will make them more money. At the time I came out of school, Microsoft was the big company and I had a lucrative offer to work there. Tenure was part of the attraction to academia instead. I wanted to enter a world where I could think, and if I did it well, I would have the ability to do that without fear. Second, after I got promoted to full professor, I did feel freed to explore new, original, or risky ideas in computer science and computer-science-adjacent fields that otherwise I would not have done. So tenure can be very effective. But Galloway is right in the sense that in every system you get the good with the bad. You're going to get people who completely tune out post-tenure.

Goldstein: Last question about the "Is Email Making Professors Stupid?" essay. I heard that after you published it, your dean invited you to lunch. Was that to slap you on the

wrist or to adopt your ideas?

Newport: I was worried it was to slap me on the wrist, but to my surprise he said he agreed with a lot of my points. So I wasn't completely yelled at, though maybe that was the undercurrent. I still haven't figured that out.

Goldstein: I'm curious about the business of being Cal Newport — how you organize your time, set priorities, safeguard your attention, as well as the financial aspects. How many jobs do you have?

Newport: Everything I do fits under the umbrella of digital ethics, technology theory, and trying to be a public voice on technology and its impact. I have a podcast and a newsletter. I write books, and they tend to follow the same format: This technology came, it broke things, here's how we can fix it. Then there's article writing, which runs the gamut from academic writing to *The New Yorker*. I've cut out other stuff. I rarely give talks. I've paused a lot of computer-science activity, so I can focus on tech theory and digital ethics and not managing grants and students and stuff like that. I've simplified things.

Goldstein: I hear that you don't work on weekends. I'm tempted to call bullshit.

Newport: For the most part. I also don't work in the evening. I try to be roughly 9-5. It mainly works. But there are busy periods when I get frustrated.

Goldstein: So you are human. That's reassuring.

My assumption is that it's been years since your primary source of income is from being a professor. Have you considered walking away?

Newport: Georgetown gives me massive independence. And I get to be on a campus around other smart people. What I've seen with other professors who leave academia, really smart people, is that without the structure, the pushback, the intellectual combat, they end up going in weird directions. I call it Professor In Exile Syndrome.

Goldstein: I'm intrigued by Professor In Exile Syndrome.

Newport: I don't want to name names.

Goldstein: Then I will. Bret Weinstein comes to mind. He seems to have fallen prey to a kind of audience capture. And to maintain the attention of that audience, he's been heading further and further from shore.

Newport: Audience capture can become a real problem, especially if online attention is now your livelihood. You really need those YouTube views to be high. You are going to drift in interesting directions. Also, a lot of professors in exile are very smart people. It's completely believable to them that they're right about this thing, and everyone else is wrong.

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