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Substack Readers
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Dear readers,

SUBJECT: On Doom-Scrolling and Brain Fog as Escaping Mechanisms

Sometimes you have to admit that you have lost. Everyone sometimes loses a battle, even the best generals of the past did. It happens. It's not important. What counts is that you do not lose the war. To that end, one must analyze the lost battle closely, to understand the reasons for their loss, identify mistakes, and recognize patterns—this will leave you prepared for the next battle, so that you have more chances of winning.

In the last days, I've lost the battle against *doom-scrolling* (or, more generally, against a slight dopamine addiction). In this brief column, I try to process what happened so that I may be stronger next time.

As almost everyone in this generation, I struggle with what is generally called "*doom-scrolling*:" I spend an embarrassing amount of time neck-bent and eyes-fixed on my iPhone screen, consuming content—mostly short-form Instagram Reels, although sometimes the loop is broken by the infinite scroll in search for a longer YouTube video (that usually ends up in me absent-mindedly watching some useless video of questionable novelty).

Although this is still a problem in itself, the issue is not really with the obscene amount of time I waste in consuming trash (or "slop"), but rather with how I feel at the end of it. On the web¹, I have seen people call it in a way that perfectly describes the feeling: *brain fog*.

I am a computer science researcher—not for reasons of money (I currently work in an Italian public university, where salaries are notoriously low), but because I love the job. I like having ideas or insights, formulating hypotheses, testing them, and writing about the whole process to share it and its results. In my free time, instead, I like writing (pieces just like this) and photography. You can easily see how detrimental "brain fog" is to my life: it genuinely prevents me from exploring my own creativity, not only affecting my free time (and my sanity), but also heavily affecting my work life and, as such, my living means. In fact, no creativity means no ideas; no ideas means no new research; no new research means no funding and, ultimately, no job.

As many of us do, I have set up a whole lot of apps, limits, and routines to prevent doom-scrolling and the subsequent brain fog. Whichever YouTube video on the subject you name, I probably watched it. Everything was working fine (although not perfectly). Until last week.

I was in Germany² for work. My girlfriend decided to join me on her journey back to Spain, where she works. Everything has been going smoothly. Until she had to leave to get to her flight. A surge of some kind of bittersweet sadness and solitude got hold of me as soon as I went back to my apartment after saying goodbye. And then, there I was—scrolling indefinitely in the vain hope of drowning the uncomfortable feelings.

1. I do not really recall a precise source, nor the "first appearance" of the word.

2. For the curious readers, I was in Walldorf (Mörfelden-Walldorf), near Frankfurt am Main.

Now we get to the pattern. I started thinking, and I noticed something: doom-scrolling provided an easy way out every time I was feeling bad, down, or alone. It was not really the letting time slip away, nor the easy dopamine fix that I was searching for. It was the same brain fog that I have been trying to avoid.

The reasoning is as simple as it is rotten: if there is enough fog, I will be numb enough to not *feel*. This is exactly as bad as it sounds: it's nothing at all different from an alcoholic who drinks heavily because they are depressed or want to escape the issues of their own life³.

Let's now move to the conclusion of this column. I apologize to anyone who was expecting a solution—this post is not at all similar to the ones of the *gurus* who have found the way to fix doom-scrolling and reduce their screen time to a tenth. Although recognizing a pattern is the first step in solving the underlying issue, I am still far from being able to provide guidance.

What I can say is simple and possibly trivial. Do not beat yourself up too badly for failing: your willpower won't suffice when you are not at your best. Similarly, every containment system only holds if we do not actively want to circumvent it. However, being aware of your unconscious behavior and tendencies will help when—numbed by your feelings, hoping to escape them—you autonomously walk towards slipping into the same behaviors you want to avoid.

Until next time!

Andrea Esposito

3. This is an over-simplification of alcoholism as a dependency—and I apologize for this. However, it is just an example to help better drive my description.