Reclaiming Attention

What Thirty Days Without Social Media May Reveal

A case analysis of Andrew Feinstein’s before-and-after attention testing and QEEG displays

Central argument. People who experience fragmented attention should consider a structured reduction in social-media exposure, paired with sleep, exercise, and objective tracking. Feinstein’s results are consistent with that recommendation, but the strongest conclusion is behavioral: his sustained-attention performance improved markedly during the intervention period. The brain maps are supporting observations, not stand-alone proof of causation.

Subject clarification

The QEEG images and computerized attention-test results discussed here belong to Andrew Feinstein, a Los Angeles documentary filmmaker and founder of Fein Productions. They are not the author’s medical records.

Abstract

Most people already know that social media can waste time. The more consequential question is whether frequent exposure to algorithmic feeds is already visible in a person's ability to sustain attention, resist distraction, and respond consistently. Andrew Feinstein's public case provides a concrete before-and-after example. Before a 30-day period away from social media, his computerized attention test showed an Accuracy Index of 67, 34 omission errors, a mean response time of 377.5 ms, and response-time variability of 81.7 ms. After the 30-day period, the Accuracy Index rose to 119, omissions fell to 1, response time improved to 322.7 ms, and variability fell to 42.3 ms. His QEEG displays also changed between sessions. These results do not prove that every frequent user has the same pattern or that social-media abstinence was the only cause. They do show why a heavy user who feels mentally fragmented should take the possibility seriously and test it under controlled conditions.

1. This may be what heavy social-media use looks like

The familiar warning that people should spend less time online is too general to be useful. A more specific concern is that repeated exposure to rapid novelty, intermittent rewards, and constant opportunities to switch tasks may train attention toward checking rather than staying. The result may appear as missing details, rereading the same paragraph, reaching for a phone without deciding to, abandoning slower tasks, or feeling unusually restless when nothing new is happening.

Feinstein's baseline gives those experiences a measurable form. On the pre-intervention continuous-performance test, he missed 34 targets and scored 67 on the combined Accuracy Index, roughly two standard deviations below the test's age-adjusted average. That does not mean every social-media user would receive the same score. It does mean that people who recognize the same pattern of compulsive checking, fragmented focus, and intolerance for slower tasks should not assume the problem is merely a lack of discipline.

2. Case subject and source material

Andrew Feinstein is a documentary filmmaker and founder of Fein Productions. In the cited video, he presents personal QEEG scans and computerized continuous-performance-test results recorded before and after a 30-day period in which he stopped using social media. The scans and scores belong to Feinstein; they are not the author's medical records. This paper treats the video as a participant-narrated case study rather than a clinical trial or peer-reviewed medical report.

That distinction matters. Feinstein's educational and professional background may help explain his ability to document the experience clearly, but it does not make the measurements more or less valid. The evidence must stand on the testing method, the displayed numbers, the timing of the intervention, and the consistency of the account.

3. Why this pattern is plausible

3.1 Social media is not equivalent to all screen use

Writing, editing film, reading, navigating, and communicating are all forms of screen use, but they do not impose the same attentional structure. An algorithmic feed repeatedly offers novelty, uncertain rewards, and effortless switching. The relevant exposure is therefore not simply "screen time." It is time spent in an environment designed to interrupt intention and replace it with the next available stimulus.

A broad review of smartphone cognition concluded that habitual smartphone use may affect attention, memory, and delay of gratification, while also emphasizing that the literature is heterogeneous and that causal evidence remains limited (Wilmer, Sherman, & Chein, 2017). Experimental work has also shown that the mere presence of a person's own smartphone can reduce available cognitive capacity during demanding tasks, even when the phone is not actively used (Ward et al., 2017).

3.2 Attentional control and frontoparietal systems

Neuroimaging studies do not show a single "social-media center" in the brain. They instead point to distributed control systems. In an fMRI study of problematic smartphone users, participants showed poorer performance in the presence of distraction and less efficient recruitment and connectivity within attention-related frontoparietal networks (Choi et al., 2021). Another fMRI study found that participants at higher risk of smartphone or internet addiction had more difficulty filtering distractors and showed lower frontopolar activation during endogenous attentional control (Kwon et al., 2022).

Structural findings should be interpreted similarly. Lee and colleagues (2019) reported fronto-cingulate gray-matter differences in problematic smartphone users who heavily used social-networking platforms. Such group differences are associations. They do not establish that social media caused the anatomy, and they cannot diagnose an individual. They do, however, make Feinstein's attention-focused intervention biologically plausible.

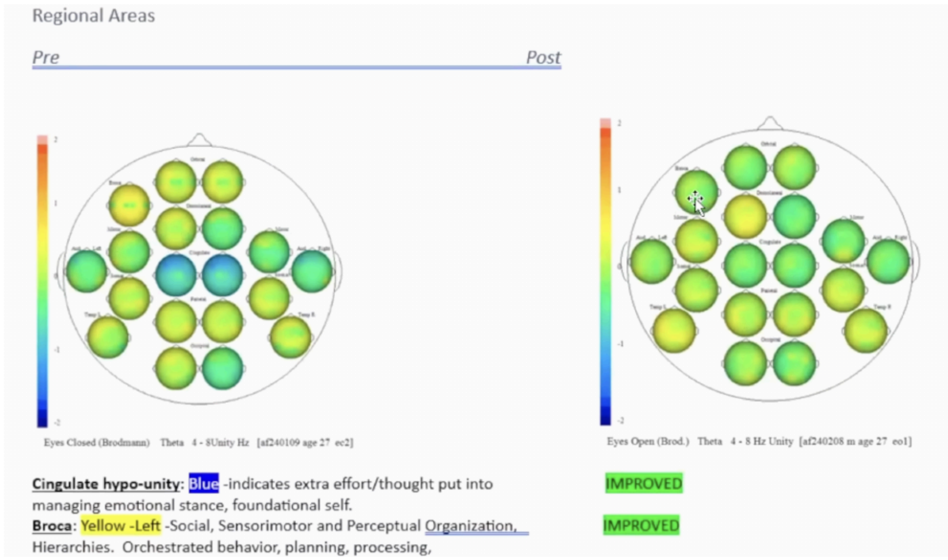
3.3 Why intermittent rewards encourage checking

Social platforms combine cues, uncertain outcomes, and immediate feedback. A notification may be trivial, socially meaningful, or rewarding; the user does not know until checking. That uncertainty is important because reward-learning systems respond strongly to prediction errors, the gap between an expected and an obtained outcome. Repeated checking can therefore become a learned habit without requiring a conscious decision each time. This mechanism is a useful explanation for compulsive checking, but it should not be simplified into the claim that each notification causes a harmful "dopamine hit."

4. What changed after thirty days

4.1 Regional QEEG maps

The displayed regional theta maps compare Feinstein's pre- and post-intervention recordings with a normative database. In the pre image, both cingulate regions are shown in blue and the left Broca-region marker is yellow. In the post image, the same displayed regions move closer to green, the report's normative range. The visual pattern is consistent with a change in measured activity between sessions.



What this shows: a full head map of theta-band activity across scalp regions, labeled by function (e.g., Broca's area for language and sequencing, the cingulate for emotional regulation and self-monitoring). The "Pre" scan shows blue

Figure 1. Regional theta QEEG maps shown in Andrew Feinstein's video. The post-intervention map displays a broader shift toward the report's green normative range. Source: Feinstein (n.d.).

The defensible interpretation is that Feinstein's recordings differed after the 30-day period. The QEEG images are not a diagnostic test for anxiety, intelligence, emotional health, or "brain damage." Recording conditions, artifact removal, reference montage, eye state, alertness, and the software's normative database can all affect the maps. Their value in this case is supportive: they changed in the same general period as the much clearer behavioral results.

4.2 Left temporal power display

A second display compares spectral power at the T7 electrode and a topographic map near 11.47 Hz. After the 30-day period, the distribution is narrower and the left-temporal hotspot is less intense. This does not disprove anxiety or establish a specific emotional diagnosis. It shows that the measured spectral pattern differed between sessions, which is best interpreted alongside the attention test rather than as a stand-alone clinical finding.

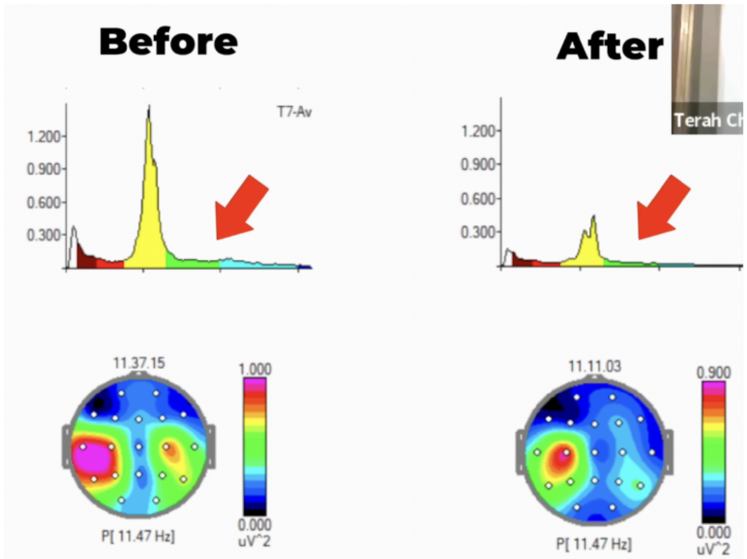


Figure 2. T7 spectral and topographic displays before and after the intervention period. Source: Feinstein (n.d.).

4.3 Continuous-performance-test results

The continuous-performance test is the strongest part of the case because it measures what Feinstein actually did during a sustained task. His Accuracy Index rose from 67 to 119. Omission errors fell from 34 to 1, commission errors from 2 to 1, mean response time improved by 54.8 ms, and response-time variability fell by 39.4 ms. The displayed variability percentile increased from 16 to 92. In practical terms, he missed far fewer targets, responded faster, and became markedly more consistent after thirty days away from social media.

Figure 3. Continuous-performance-test summary shown in Feinstein's video. The largest changes concern sustained attention, omissions, speed, and consistency. Source: Feinstein (n.d.).

Measure	Before	After	Change
Accuracy Index	67	119	+52 points
Omission errors	34	1	-33 errors
Commission errors	2	1	-1 error
Response time	377.5 ms	322.7 ms	54.8 ms faster
Variability	81.7 ms	42.3 ms	39.4 ms lower

Practice effects may account for part of the improvement because people can perform better when they repeat a familiar task. Even so, the reduction from 34 omissions to 1 is too substantial to dismiss as a cosmetic fluctuation. The result warrants replication under standardized conditions, ideally with alternate test forms and a documented intervention timeline.

5. What this case means for a frequent user

A frequent social-media user who feels scattered may recognize Feinstein's baseline more readily than expected: many missed targets, inconsistent response timing, and difficulty sustaining attention. His case cannot tell an individual what their own test would show, but it makes the symptoms concrete. The relevant possibility is not that every user has an identical brain map. It is that an attention system repeatedly trained by novelty and interruption may perform worse when asked to remain steady.

The 30-day result is equally concrete. Feinstein's largest improvements appeared in direct performance: omissions, speed, consistency, and the combined Accuracy Index. Practice effects, sleep, stress, expectancy, caffeine, exercise, neurofeedback, medication, and testing conditions remain possible contributors. Those alternatives limit the causal claim, but they do not erase the magnitude of the observed change. The case supports a serious hypothesis: for at least some heavy users, removing social feeds for a month may reveal how much attentional capacity had been obscured by constant interruption.

6. A thirty-day self-test

The practical response is not another vague instruction to "use your phone less." It is a defined experiment. For thirty days, remove algorithmic social-media feeds and their notifications while retaining purposeful digital work. Record daily social-media minutes, phone pickups, sleep duration, caffeine, and any major changes in exercise, medication, stress, or workload. Complete the same brief sustained-attention task before and after under comparable conditions.

This design will not reproduce a laboratory trial, but it is more informative than relying on mood or memory. The central outcome is whether the person becomes better able to stay with a task: fewer missed targets, less variability, fewer unplanned checks, and greater tolerance for reading, conversation, or work that unfolds slowly. Reintroducing social media afterward, one platform at a time, can help determine whether any improvement persists or reverses.

Conclusion

Andrew Feinstein's case is compelling because it does not stop at the familiar claim that social media is distracting. It shows what severe attentional inconsistency looked like in one person before a 30-day break and what changed afterward. The clearest result is behavioral: 34 missed targets became 1, the Accuracy Index rose from 67 to 119, and response speed and consistency improved substantially. The accompanying QEEG displays changed as well, but they should not be used to diagnose anxiety or claim that the brain was damaged and repaired.

For a frequent user who compulsively checks feeds, struggles to remain with slower tasks, or feels chronically fragmented, Feinstein's baseline may be uncomfortably recognizable. His outcome is not a guarantee, but it is a strong reason to run the same basic test: remove social media for thirty days, keep other variables as stable as possible, and measure attention before and after. The important question is no longer whether social media is bad in the abstract. It is how differently a particular mind performs when the feed is gone.

References

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