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A Guide to Digital Decluttering: A Review of Digital Minimalism

Abstract

"Digital minimalism is not Luddism, which rejects the technological innovations of the day. Instead, it rejects the way in which most people engage these innovations."

Posting about the book *Digital Minimalism* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/a-guide-to-digital-decluttering-a-review-of-digital-minimalism/>

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in things

March 9, 2019

A Guide to Digital Decluttering: A Review of *Digital Minimalism*

Mike Janssen

Title: *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*

Author: Cal Newport

Publisher: Portfolio

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ISBN: 978-0525536512

I used to read books.

I read a little less in college because much of my reading time was taken up with reading for class, but I had an annual tradition of reading *The Lord of the Rings* over Christmas break. When I got to graduate school, my regular reading stopped altogether. I told myself that it was the busyness of this particular season and didn't worry too much about it. After finishing graduate school, I worked in the private sector for a year before starting my academic career, but my reading habits didn't change. I would occasionally try, but no matter how interested I was in the subject, I would inevitably get bored after only a few minutes and then combat the boredom the way so many people do—by pulling out my smartphone and flipping through social media.

I acquired my first smartphone in 2011 while I was a graduate student. I have always loved tinkering with computers and finding new, more efficient ways of doing things, so

I jumped at the chance to buy a smartphone as soon as I could reasonably afford it (even if it wasn't the iPhone that I really wanted). What I, and many others like me, did not realize was the extent to which constant access to the world's information would ultimately harm us by shredding our attention spans and turning physical socialization into virtual socialization.

These harmful effects (and how to combat them) are the focus of computer scientist Cal Newport's new book *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*. "Human beings are not wired to be constantly wired," he declares in this incisive critique of modern technological life—particularly as it relates to social media and smartphones.

The first part of the book lays out the problem: most of us have (without realizing it) become digital maximalists, adopting any new technology or service that catches our interest. Newport argues that we are on the losing side of a "lopsided arms race" that we didn't realize that we signed up for. We adopted smartphones and social media based on the benefits they promised, and then didn't notice as they slowly changed and grabbed more and more of our attention, paradoxically increasing our connections to others while also inducing greater feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

Newport traces the ways social media giants like Facebook exploit ideas from social psychology, using our innate desire for social approval and intermittent positive reinforcement to maximize the time we spend on their service for their actual customers: advertisers.

Newport is putting forward a call to level the playing field and encourage users to adopt a "philosophy of technology use that covers from the ground up which digital tools we allow into our life, for what reasons, and under what constraints." Borrowing language from the modern minimalist movement, he defines this new philosophy of digital minimalism as "[a] philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value, and then happily miss out on everything else." He then invites his readers to reset their "haphazard" relationships with digital media and replace them with intentional ones, in a three-step process, which he terms the "digital declutter."

Step One: Take a Break

Step one of the digital declutter borrows from the packing party popular among modern minimalists, but instead of packing up everything you own and only unpacking necessities, Newport proposes that you remove all optional technology from your life for 30 days. He observes that it will take a week or two for you to break your habits, so this timeframe is necessary to create new habits. He also provides guidance for identifying what is “optional” while noting that it may be different for different people.

Step Two: Replace Technology with Meaningful Alternatives

Recognizing that step one would almost surely fail rapidly if we merely removed optional technologies, Newport encourages us to find meaningful alternatives (and provides suggestions, especially in the second part of the book), to fill the newfound free time.

Step Three: Reintroduce High-Value Optional Technologies

This thirty-day period is not just a “technology detox”; it is a chance for you to reflect on what you enjoy and what is important to you. When the thirty days is up, you can slowly reintroduce the technologies that support the life you want to live. Newport asserts that acting with intention trumps small conveniences and provides criteria for deciding which digital technologies to reintroduce.

In the second part of the book, Newport builds on the work of thinkers like Thoreau and Aristotle in proposing a set of practices to help sustain an intentional life of digital minimalism: cultivating solitude; choosing conversation and time spent with physically present people; reclaiming leisure by prioritizing embodied physical activities; and joining the “attention resistance” (i.e. putting thoughtful constraints on your technology use).

Perhaps the most surprising suggestion is to cultivate solitude, which he (borrowing from others) defines as “a state in which your mind is free from input from other minds. Newport observes that our smartphones have facilitated filling the smallest amount of potential solitude with quick glances. This explains my difficulty reading books; as soon as my attention wandered, the only thing that could offer relief from boredom was (as it had been conditioned) the instant gratification provided by the phone itself. Newport and others identify this solitude deprivation, brought on by constant connection, as the cause in the rise in anxiety among teenagers, the “iGen”—who average hours per day on their smartphones.

Digital minimalism is not Luddism, which rejects the technological innovations of the day. Instead, it rejects the way in which most people engage these innovations.

Newport calls us to act with intention when it comes to our digital technologies. If you have ever found yourself thinking that you spend too much time on your phone or social media, his book is well worth your time.

As I finish this review, I am nearing the halfway mark of my own digital declutter; I am completely off all social media, I have removed nearly all apps from my smartphone, and I am no longer rushing to fill the quiet moments of my life with the noise of a podcast or video.

I have received several emails from Instagram, wondering if I am having trouble logging in. But no. Instead I am seeking to be more present for my family, friends, and students, and do better, more focused work.

It is, frankly, a relief.