



Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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Fewer "App(s) for that"

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Abstract

"When I'm more intentional about prioritizing my presence with others, I make more deliberate decisions that narrow my tech use."

Posting about competing demands for our attention and time 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/fewer-apps-for-that/>

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

Fewer “App(s) for that”

Mike Janssen

March 24, 2022

*This article is part of our ongoing series: **Living with Intentionality**. Our lives are a series of decisions of how best to love others, care for our creation, seek good, prevent harm, and glorify God. We will highlight these articles where fellow believers make very intentional choices that can expand our imagination for what the Christian life—and the life of the mind—can accomplish.*

I've always been interested in computers. I came of age as the internet was gaining ubiquity; I remember excitedly registering for my first Hotmail address shortly after we got dial-up in the late 1990s, and accidentally deleting everything on my family's single computer while trying to install an open-source operating system I'd downloaded (which, unsurprisingly, took *hours* over said dial-up connection). Any time I'd hear of some new software or technological tool that might help me organize something, or more efficiently do my work, I'd spend entirely too long trying to get it set up *just right*. But over time, I came to realize that the digital tools I adopted to do my work and connect with others were shaping *me* as much as I was using *them*.

A few years ago, I read Cal Newport's book *Digital Minimalism* and reviewed it for *in All things*. Newport, a professor of computer science and bestselling author, was far from the first to identify the ways in which personal technology had overtaken our lives, but he offered a helpful process he called a “digital declutter” for identifying the precise ways in my own life that personal technology had taken root, as well as encouragement to reset my relationship with my devices, social media, etc. He advocates removing *all optional* personal technology from your life for a period of 30 days, then slowly and intentionally reintroducing only those technologies which offer significant benefit, and happily miss out on everything else.

Initial Success

I was able to carry out Newport's digital declutter with some success. I haven't had an account on Facebook or Instagram for several years at this point, and I don't miss them at all, despite the occasional inconvenience or missed social event. During the 30-day period of the initial declutter, I cut out podcasts, which I'd enjoyed listening to for 15 years, and found myself with more time and space to think, reflect, and pray.

This didn't mean a complete abandonment of technology. A few months after the declutter, I bought a (smart) GPS watch, took up distance running, and tracked my progress toward my first half marathon using a couple of carefully chosen applications.

I didn't delete my Twitter account, but rarely checked it and was able to keep my smartphone screentime well below the national average of 3.5 hours a day. This all changed in early February of 2020, while trying to figure out who won the Iowa caucuses. This opened a door to reenter social media following the story over the course of several days, though once the caucus drama died down, I was able to disengage.

Until March 11, 2020.

On that night, Rudy Gobert and Tom Hanks tested positive for Covid-19, everything shut down, and the world changed. We stayed home, sanitized our groceries, and, in the ensuing confusion, sought answers. It was incredible and surreal to watch everything play out online in real-time (and on Twitter in particular). As the days turned to weeks, months, and now years, I allowed more digital noise back into my life, particularly via social media and podcasts. While I was grateful for the way in which digital technology enabled me to maintain relationships with friends and family during that period, I also felt an unmistakable increase in anxiety that has been repeatedly identified because of increased time online. As the world has opened back up, the time seemed right to reevaluate my relationship to digital technology.

A Renewed Intentionality

To live an intentional life is to recognize that there are many competing demands for our finite time and attention. Engagement with digital technologies only amplifies and multiplies these demands. This milieu, combined with our own sinful nature, means that in the moment, we often will make choices that do not reflect what we really value. Thus, we need to think carefully *ahead of time* about what we want our lives to look like and incorporate processes and systems that enable us to make it as easy as possible to make the best choices.

As I considered what I want an intentional relationship with personal technology to look like for me, I identified one major feature: engaged, quality time with my children. I don't want my young children (ages 2 and 5) to remember this time in our lives as one in which their dad was constantly looking at a glowing rectangle, or listening to podcasts, and not being engaged with them. Working backward from there, I identified a few news websites and online communities, particularly tied to my hobbies, to block myself from accessing from my phone. There's nothing inherently wrong with these sites, but making them inaccessible from my phone reduces the temptation to pick my phone up when bored.

I also unsubscribed from several podcasts and set a self-imposed rule that I won't listen to podcasts while I'm in the same room as my kids. Finally, in an effort to seek more solitude, I regularly leave my phone on a table in the living room while I'm at home. Crucially, I've also identified a few habits I would like to adopt in place of picking up my phone, such as solving a 7×7 Rubik's cube and reading a few books.

It's only been a few weeks since I've renewed my commitment to intentional personal technology use. So far, it's going well! I am trying not to take that for granted. **Building new habits is hard**, and I would not call these habits (re)solidified just yet. I am grateful to find myself enjoying a bit more solitude, or playing catch with my son, or helping my daughter find LEGO pieces without my phone within reach.

However, I also recognize that I am fortunate to be able to make this choice as participation in modern society has—at times thoughtlessly—become increasingly reliant on ubiquitous access to digital technologies and social media. I have a job in which I do not need to be on call, or constantly connected. Not everyone has this flexibility. Still, we all have the opportunity, dare I say *responsibility*, to evaluate how the digital tools we adopt are shaping us. The experience of re-evaluating my relationship with digital technology has been healthy for me, and I plan to make it a part of my own trimester review processes. I'd encourage you to do the same. When I'm more intentional about prioritizing my presence with others, I make more deliberate decisions that narrow my tech use, maximizing the benefits of digital technology while minimizing its harm, for deeper satisfaction and greater happiness.