

Cal Newport (2019) *Digital Minimalism*

It's not a myth that social media, apps, and many websites are intentionally designed to encourage compulsive checking and use—the more you click and the more time you spend, the more money they make

- Intermittent (unpredictable) positive reinforcement and the drive for social approval are two aspects of these media that their designers capitalise on to keep us coming back
 - Behavioural addiction research has shown that we get the biggest dopamine spikes when rewards are unpredictable, as they are with slot machines and when we post something new on social media (how many likes will we get?) or click through a website (will I find anything interesting?)
 - Drive for social approval has a strong evolutionary psychology basis as our survival used to depend on maintaining a good in-group status. Social media gives our brains a subjectively powerful, but often factually iffy, reading of our in-group status (how many likes, views, retweets, etc are we getting? Are we being tagged in things by our friends?)
- Attention economy: print publications, radio, TV, websites, online social services like FB, etc. make money by gaining your attention and then selling it to advertisers
 - Attention engineering: exploiting human psych to make people spend more time on the site/whatever and thereby make more money

The problem with screen and media dominance is that they unduly control our time, mood, behaviour, and ability to think deeply (for this last point, see your notes on *Deep Work*)

Thoreau: “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation”

Digital minimalism: use your online and social media time on a small set of things in a focused way that you reflectively believe will serve your core values, then happily miss out on everything else because doing so maximises EV, given opportunity cost

- It's fallacious to ask, ‘does this tool/platform/app/website/etc provide any positive value?’ and then keep using it if it does, because the real question is whether it's worth its weight in opportunity cost (again, time, mood, compulsion, impact on thinking/concentration ability)
 - How much of your life—your time, attention, and brain wiring—must you sacrifice to occasionally stumble across an interesting post (that you probably could have found just by checking the EA forum 1x/week)?
- Digital Minimalism doesn't mean you need to completely quit eg FB. But it might mean eg committing to checking your newsfeed increasingly less often and using FB almost exclusively for messenger

- Remember from Kahneman: sometimes, less is more
- Argument: we hit diminishing returns very quickly with media consumption, but keep using it well after this point because it's addictive (or, I would add, because it's a palliative behaviour with a very low barrier to entry)
- Engage with social media and other digital platforms and services via planned, surgical strikes designed to get all the value you need out of them without sacrificing time and attention to them you don't want to (thereby making them money at the expense of your welfare and productivity)

When implementing digital minimalism, make SOPs for yourself, eg, 'check everything once per day and reply as necessary'

When you cut back on media use, you need to replace it with things of higher quality—if you just leave a gap in your life, you'll likely fall back into media overconsumption

- Lots of TV, social media, and web surfing is enervating and meaningless, and can function as a void filler or pain killer
- High quality leisure activities, like social workout groups, spending time with/calling friends, intramural sports leagues, and reading—things that are active and require more effort—are much more valuable despite higher activation energy required
 - Recommends joining clubs/societies/groups, which when done well combine quality leisure activity with friendship and socialising, and provide an interpersonal accountability mechanism to keep you active/involved

Check out allsides.com for news—for each story, it links to three different perspectives, right, center, and left

It's important to have a balance between solitude and contemplation of your own thoughts and experiences and socialising and collaboration

- Both are necessary and too much of either poses its own dangers
 - Plausibly, constant smartphone and social media connectivity causes anxiety

The default mode network activates when you're not intentionally thinking about anything and is primary social cognition (which makes sense given our evolutionary history—cf. the theory part of your notes on *The Elephant in the Brain*)

His take on the literature on social media use and well-being: if used tactically and sparingly, social media can modestly increase well-being, but when it replaces real-life social interaction, it's negative because real-life interaction is far better

- We're biased to engage in behaviour that requires less energy in the short-term even if it's worse—and even harmful—in the long-term, and this helps explain why people go in for social media over real-life interaction
- Given finite time for socialising, it's a zero-sum trade off between on- and off-line engagement
 - Don't just quit social media and replace it with nothing. Minimise it and use it tactically to your advantage while increasing the amount of deeper interactions you have, like calling friends
- Our brains don't cope well with frequent, stressful interruptions, which is what the onslaught of texts, emails, and other notifications function as

Key Takeaways

Intermittent (unpredictable) positive reinforcement

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High quality leisure

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