

THE DIGITAL WORLD AND THE REAL WORLD: A BETTER BALANCE

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I love technology. But our gadgets have downsides. The extraordinarily enhanced efficiency with which they allow to perform certain tasks is offset – perhaps more than offset – by their distracting us. This is a problem, for many reasons. One is that creativity requires a combination of focused and unfocused thinking; and both types are drastically impaired by the tendency of our devices to fill up every available moment in which they are within physical reach.

We need to find ways to maximise the utility of our devices and minimise their deleterious effects. These ways, I think, can be sorted into three categories: personal, technical and social.

PERSONAL. Let's face it. Although many people still drown in e-mail, the most egregious digital distractions these days involve social media.

Even if we wanted to (and most people surely don't), it's not realistic to switch off completely from social media. So widely has its usage spread that it traps each of us through our obligations to others. Communication with parents and coaches in my son's new football team requires that I use Facebook. My work – I am a social scientist – demands engagement with colleagues and with the broader public. Social media is unavoidable in that endeavour.

Still, even if connection is inevitable, and in many ways beneficial, I don't need to be connected *constantly* to these media. Being updated on every single contribution to every online exchange and news story is worse than unnecessary. I need a certain distance to deploy judgement and analysis effectively.

For the most part, I find that news is still best consumed in packages, daily or weekly. This means news bulletins (I much prefer radio, often in podcast form). It also means newspapers and magazines. If you can read the right languages, subscriptions to Kindle editions can work nicely. I have taken social-media apps off my smartphone.

TECHNICAL. Decisions about hardware can shape the flow of information that each of us experiences. You might decide, for example, to deprive yourself of certain possibilities, such as being able to access the internet at any given moment.

There is no point in denying the costs involved in such a decision.

Alongside the apps that, for me, are non-essential and/or potentially distracting, there are many that I regard as both essential and not at all distracting. I've got used to having with me my own personal information-management apps – calendar, to-dos, notes, contacts – since I acquired my fantastic Palm V personal digital assistant in 1999. In 2018 only smartphones

can give me that. Almost as important for me these days are navigation and public-transport apps. I would seriously inconvenience my family if I didn't use messaging apps.

Indeed, some important apps work *only* on phones, so couldn't be pushed onto another device, like a tablet. They include a log-in authenticator, ID confirmation, payment and money transfer, and Uber. It would be eccentric, to say the least, for me to reject the convenience that these apps offer.

Smartphones are a fact of modern life. This leads me to a conclusion about hardware choices. For someone seeking to curb digital distraction, I reckon there are two options.

- One is to use a device that handles calls and text messages, and little or nothing else, as an *additional* phone, to be used at particular times – in the evenings, say, or at weekends.

For sure, software development could make it easier to switch seamlessly between primary and secondary phones. Still, smartphones already have call-diversion functions; and other apps let people know that their internet-routed messages won't be answered immediately, because the recipient is offline for a while. These facilities make the additional phone a perfectly realistic option.

- (2) The other option is to run a full-fledged smartphone that reduces destructive digital behaviour. Such a device might have, for instance, a small monochrome screen. It might make the more distracting apps less compelling, while still providing the functionality that people need.

Innovative companies are increasingly filling spectrum between these two options. The Punkt phones, for instance, are excellent candidates for secondary "voicephones". The Blloc Zero 18 might be the first minimalist smartphone. (I am a bit sceptical about devices that try to fill the middle of the spectrum, by offering near- or even full-smartphone functionality in secondary devices. I suspect that they do too much, and cost too much, to be satisfactory to many people. They might yet fill a niche, perhaps.)

More generally, there's much to be gained from thinking through your portfolio of digital devices and using each one at appropriate times and in appropriate places. Like so many other people, I have a smartphone, a laptop and, at work, a PC. But I also have a smartwatch, which reduces considerably the need to check my phone. And I have more specialised tools: a secondary phone; a Kindle; and another e-ink device, the reMarkable "paper tablet".

True, that amounts to quite a few gadgets. But they are efficient in performing their diverse functions. And most of them don't take me past the whole range of potential digital distractions every time I use them.

SOCIAL. It's easier to constrain our own susceptibility to digital distraction if we know that it will incur some sort of social or professional sanction.

For sure, engineering such sanctions is easier said than done. Yes, constantly checking your phone in the company of others, or of running through e-mail or news or even social media during a meeting, is just impolite – in my view, at least. But I seldom feel able to ask colleagues, who are sometimes senior to me, to desist.

Kids, on the other hand, need to have rules imposed. In my own experience, three rules have had a positive effect.

- *The evening rule.* Phones and other connected devices must not be checked after 7pm – at least not without permission from a parent. (The television, however, does not count. Nor does an e-reader.)
- *The travelling rule.* My family uses public transport a lot. When we're doing so together, navigation is the only reason to refer to a phone, and then only briefly. Otherwise, all of us – that is, not just kids – must keep their devices concealed. Even if we have nothing to say to each other, the scope for communication is not closed off by the fact that one of us is immersed in the digital world.
- *The no-two-screens rule.* If the television is on, we're watching it. In a way, it's a social act. So phones and other screens in the same room are banned. (This works especially well with televised sport.)

These rules are fairly easy to police. They simply mean that there are certain times and circumstances in which the connection to the internet can be dormant for a while.

There are no easy solutions to digital overload. In fact, there are no *solutions* at all. But all is not lost. The issue is about finding a better balance between access to the digital world and our orientation to the real world. This balance *can* be improved.