

Digital life: value or vice?

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I was about to make my biggest decision of the decade. Was I really going to deactivate my Twitter account? As my finger hovered over the screen I was full of doubts... How would I stay up to date? How could I share quality improvement ideas? What opportunities would I miss?

I was one click away from Twitter account annihilation, but many clicks away from the start of my journey. What had driven me to this point? Many years ago, I successfully banished work (especially work email) from my home life.¹ The trouble was that when work email had departed, Twitter came flying in on its wake. It became too easy on a day off to search Twitter for the latest advances in #fallsprevention or #delirium, or to scroll mindlessly through my 'feed', and realise 2 hours later that I had not achieved anything! I had simply replaced one addiction with another.

An early catalyst for change was using Twitter so much on my journey home after a conference-fuelled Twitter binge that I vomited on the train. I took a step-wise approach. First I turned off notifications. Then I removed the app from my mobile, and then my tablet. Next I only used the webpage at conferences or if I had something to promote. The result? – I was distracted at conferences and missed the richness of content, and I became a self-centred, self-promotional twit. Until this point I was entirely self-taught. I had written about 'digital distractions'¹ and 'electronic abstinence'¹ but I am not a technophobe – honest! I am fairly nifty with spreadsheets and I completed my electronic job plan without attending the 3-hour training course.

Ironically, when shopping online using a well-known app, I received a recommendation for the book *Digital Minimalism* by Dr Cal Newport.² Newport, a computer scientist and associate professor is definitely not a technophobe and he has never owned a social media account! My own

approach to electronic abstinence¹ had given me plenty of time and so I read and followed Newport's advice – a 30-day 'digital declutter'.² I had previously enforced a self-directed 40-day abstinence from working at home,¹ but now I would be tackling all digital distractions – including Strava! Under Newport's instruction,² I did not 'tweet' about plans to deactivate my account – there was no farewell. Decision made, and then 'click!' The deactivation process was initiated. If I could avoid logging in for the next 30 days then my account, and everything I had ever tweeted, would disappear forever.

That was 2 months ago, and none of my 'followers' have seemed to notice or mourn my absence – maybe they are too busy 'tweeting'. I will admit to feeling rather smug to be Twitter-less when I heard that the CEO and co-founder of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, had had his own Twitter account hacked.³

There are many good reasons to use social media, for example to connect with support groups, but there are risks. I have found that the reasons we use social media are inextricably linked to its harms.

Boredom

We are never bored – we always have a phone at our fingertips.⁴ When you walk along the street or work corridor, what proportion of people you pass are looking down at a screen? We have forgotten how to entertain ourselves.

Embrace boredom! Boredom is a great way to generate ideas and inspiration.⁴ Enjoy watching the world. Or carry a notebook and pen, book or magazine with you and reach for that instead of your phone.

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Relaxation

Once home after a busy day at work, all we want to do is switch off and relax. Trouble is, instead of switching off – we switch on. The cycle of email, Facebook, Twitter, repeat... That is not proper relaxation – such a cycle has left me feeling dissatisfied, inadequate and unfulfilled.

Try a walk – and leave your phone at home. I have begun to wonder whether a significant benefit of a yoga class is keeping your mobile phone on silent and out of reach for an hour. Try leaving your phone in your bag or in another room, and keep your phone out of your bedroom overnight – except when on-call!

Time management

Digital mobile devices are designed to save us time – internet banking is quicker than travelling to the bank. But how many times have you unlocked your phone for a task such as paying a bill and then after an hour of swiping, texting and using social media, you realise that you still have not paid the bill?! After I wrote my last article on work–life balance,⁵ I tweeted about it (cue self-promotional tweet). Someone replied: ‘too much to do and not enough hours. I’ve really messed up my time management’. It got me thinking... How much time had that individual spent on Twitter that day? What were the notification settings?

Check your screen usage and how many times you unlock your phone in a day. Try turning off notifications and set structured times for checking apps and email.

Conversation

I signed up to Twitter at a specialty society conference – to join a conversation about words that should be banned in Geriatric medicine. I did not walk up to the president and say: ‘Hello, my name is Clare and I think that #pleasantlyconfused should be banned’. That would be socially daunting, with no screen to hide behind – literally. And, I would not get that ‘ping’ of pleasure from the retweets and ‘likes’. I ended up


staying up far too late as the glow of the screen matched the euphoria from the ‘likes’ and I felt very unrefreshed the next morning. That was in 2015 and it should have been a warning, but I was already hooked.

Have real conversations. We presume we know everything that is going on in a colleague’s life by being a Facebook friend. Try asking: ‘How are you, really?’

Sharing and self-validation

Documentation is essential in healthcare, as per the saying: ‘If it’s not written down it didn’t happen’. But this mantra should not be transferable to life. Just because I did not post on Strava about my bike ride around the Aberdeenshire countryside with galloping deer, it does not mean it was not special. Was an experience for your own satisfaction or for someone else’s?

Revel in your experience – not in the ‘likes’. Share it with someone – verbally. If we have ‘shared’ everything already, we can feel as though we have no stories left to tell. And instead of looking for self-validation, let us start a trend to give meaningful feedback to colleagues and trainees.

There will be no option for me to share this article on Twitter; will people still ‘like’ it, learn from it, share it? All I am asking is for you to consider whether your digital life is stealing the time you need for the life you want to lead. To paraphrase Newport, use new technologies as tools to support the things you deeply value – not as a source of value in themselves.² 

Recommended further reading

- Newport C. *Digital Minimalism*. New York: Penguin Random House; 2019.
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