Word from the Stacks...

Digital Minimalism On Campus: Distraction and Higher Education

By Gavin Ferriby, University Librarian

Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World, by Cal Newport. Random House, 2019. 256 pages. (Other sources cited in this article are listed at the end.)

Minimalist –anything spare or stripped to its bare essentials. Minimalism became a cultural movement, then a social commitment: live with less than 100 things, or Marie Kondo’s things that spark joy. Is digital minimalism a contradiction in terms?

The present is a digitally maximal time –but it’s all very vague. What’s good is great and best in huge quantities: maximum use of digital media (and social media in particular) to give “people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (—Facebook’s mission statement). How? Just connect, share, and like, and somehow good things will happen. “You never know, maybe you’ll find this useful” – one of the weakest sales propositions ever.

Anything or anyone that seems to resist digital maximalism risk the label “Luddite,” a dismissive reference to 19th-century weavers who destroyed machines to save, they thought, their way of life. Newport is no Luddite: he’s a professor of computer science at Georgetown, author of erudite papers on distributed networks as well as popular works such as So Good They Can’t Ignore You (2012). In Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World (2016) he explored how to maintain focus to do optimal, cognitively demanding work in a world of distractions: high-value, high-impact undertakings rather than low-impact tasks. Digital Minimalism sprang from his readers’ struggles.
**“Digital minimalism is 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 the things you value.” (Cal Newport)**

Digital minimalism is “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”—without the infamous Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Living this philosophy successfully means engaging long-term in cost/benefit analyses: is the benefit worth the time? Time is the most truly limited resource. Clutter is costly; optimizing your time is crucial; intentionality is satisfying: consistently following through on your commitments.

Newport unpacks all this lucidly (he is, after all, a computer scientist). His first chapters lay the foundations: why declutter your digital life? What can you gain? How do you do it and stick to it? His latter chapters focus on practices: how to do a digital de-clutter; how to grow comfortable again with spending time alone; how to reclaim real leisure; how to avoid digital sandtraps such as clicking “like,” and how to find other digital minimalists: community support. He seeks to answer Andrew Sullivan’s plaintive essay, “I used to Be a Human Being” (2016): to help upend Sullivan’s lament “by providing a constructive way to engage and leverage the latest innovations to your advantage” —to be able to “say with confidence: ‘Because of technology, I’m a better human being than I ever was before.’”

Wait—isn’t this the point of an education? Newport acknowledges the depths here: Aristotle, Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln; but he avoids getting pulled off-task. The book is a readable length, but its shadow stretches very far indeed: becoming a better human being stretches far beyond dispelling the enchantments of technology.

Back, for a moment to Sullivan: his moment of insight came after illness, sleeplessness, the demands of a profitable media business (blog), and dwindling friendships. “Multi-tasking was a mirage. This was a zero-sum game. I either lived as a voice online or I lived human being in the world that humans had lived in since the beginning of time.” Why zero-sum? He had (has) only so much time to pay attention. The ceaseless wind-tunnel of distraction “denies us the deep satisfaction that comes with accomplishing daily tasks well, a denial perhaps felt most acutely by those for whom such tasks are also a livelihood —and an identity.”

Many university teachers have noticed that students (especially undergraduates) now seem even less prepared to engage in serious thinking, research, writing, and lab work than a decade ago. Their observations dovetail with major shifts in student mental health observed by counselors in the past few years, validated by Jean Twenge’s research on those born 1995-2012, who grew up with constant access to social media. “Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011… Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones… The effect of screen activ-
The effect of screen activities is unmistakable: the more time teens spend looking at screens, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression . . . . This trend has been especially steep among girls. Twenge’s teenage research subjects in 2015-2016 are (or will) enroll in university classes 2018-2021.

Can this be blithely dismissed: That’s progress, you can’t stop it? “Progress” hides a more sinister reality: the social media apps these young people use so often have been specifically engineered to encourage maximal use through intermittent positive reinforcement and the drive for social approval.

- Apple engineers Justin Santamaria and Chris Marcellino developed the iPhone push-notification technology that affects the same neurological pathways as gambling and drug use: “reward-based behavior that activates the brain’s dopamine pathways.”
- Tristan Harris (“Design Ethicist” at Google) notes that humans crave approval, and companies tweek their apps to hook their users with the power of unpredictable positive feedback, sprinkling “intermittent variable rewards [likes, tags, tweets, etc.] all over their products because its good for business.” Getting a reward is like winning at a slot machine, and “several billion people have a slot machine in their pocket.”
- Sean Parker (Facebook founder) remembers, “The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them, … was all about: How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?”

The combination of phones and social media apps is specifically designed to hook users—especially young people—into prolonged use because their business model is to expose them to paid advertising, political, and entertainment content intended to shape their behavior and gather their votes and dollars. A great many users (especially the young) are compulsively on their phones because they have been hooked—exactly what the phones were designed to do. Sean Parker fears that social media “literally changes your relationship with society, with each other … It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it’s doing to our children’s brains.” Sullivan suggests that this enslavement is merely “new antidepressants of a non-pharmaceutical variety.”

These intentions are not a new idea, but in digital engineering now taken to new extremes. Timothy Wu writes that newspapers were drastically changed by the introduction of advertising in the 19th century: readers became not just subscribers, but also an audience the newspapers delivered to advertisers. Matthew Crawford notes that the first industrial assembly lines, by demanding concentration on repetitious tasks, so altered the experience of work that Henry Ford’s workers simply walked out in 1913. When Ford wanted to add 100 workers to the line, he had to hire 963, and was forced to double the daily wage to keep the line staffed. In broader social terms, Crawford writes elsewhere that advertising through social media apps of the claim a large portion of the “attentional commons” for private purposes in the attention economy, with the resulting surfeit of messages and enervated users. Just as Ford’s innovations in long term fomented a powerful labor union, could a “user union” come to counterbalance corporate attention engineering?
Resisting these claims to wage labor or attention engineering is not new. The 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement inspired by John Ruskin and William Morris grew from their revulsion against mechanized production and the Dickensian, oppressive division of sweatshop labor in Victorian England. Newport advances Thoreau’s famous axiom in Walden, “The cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run.” Rather than the standard account of cost in money, Thoreau counts the cost in life: attention, connection, his pleasure of living deliberately. In the first chapter, “Economy,” Thoreau gives a very straightforward, New England accounting of his life on the pond, replete with tables (his kind of spreadsheet) to show his point that often more is actually less. By contrast, do not our Concord-like students, crushed and smothered under their load of distraction and debt, come to lead lives of quiet desperation?

Is there any solution or alternative?

A hint of a solution has been given, ironically, by Facebook itself. Its own David Ginsberg and Moira Burke ask, “is spending time on social media bad for us?” After reviewing a lot of research, they conclude, “it really comes down to how you use the technology.” This gives the game away: reflective, intentional use (in Newport’s words) “punctures the myth of Facebook as a foundational technology that everyone should just “use” in some generic sense . . . . [they] are encouraging people to think critically about exactly what they want to get out of this service.”

Newport realizes the potential of Ginsberg’s and Burke’s admission. “This mind-set is potentially disastrous” for Facebook because it could result in far less time spent in it, dramatically decreasing its value for advertisers and investors. Any explicit comparison of the real costs of time and attention with the real benefits of social media threatens Facebook’s business model. What is the cost of Facebook calculated in lived experience in the real world?

Reflective, intentional, and “critical use is a critical problem for the attention economy.” By developing minimal and deliberate use of digital technology, users might “front only the essential facts of life,” to see if they can learn what it has to teach: to choose a focused life. Have universities, by so catering to students’ and parents’ anxieties, accepted their students’ distraction by social media unreflectively? The “attentional commons” of higher education has always faced competition, but now faces determined competitors armed with the specific agenda to “consume as much of [their students] time and attention as possible” (Sean Parker).

Universities can reclaim their cultural relevance when they come to understand the greatest threat to education today is not careerism, financial instability, or political hostility, but distraction.
Now is the time for higher education to step up to the challenge of distraction. Mental pseudo-stimuli. This engagement will have to be smart, flexible, subtle, and persistent if we are to challenge the fast food of social media with the slow cookery of a strenuous education.

The past few months have shown that Facebook and other social media sites are hardly invincible and certainly not foundational, as they face sharp-eyed scrutiny from public, government, and investors alike. Now is the time for higher education to step up to the challenge of distraction.

An extended version of this article is published on the University Librarian’s blog The Extensible Librarian

Works mentioned:

Mike Allen, “Sean Parker unloads on Facebook, ‘God only knows what it’s doing to our children’s brains,’” Axios, November 9, 2017


Tristan Harris, “How Technology is Hijacking Your Mind—from a Magician and Google Design Ethicist,” Medium: Thrive Global, May 18, 2016

Paul Lewis, “‘Our Minds Can Be Hijacked’: the Tech Insiders Who Fear a Smartphone Dystopia,” The Guardian October 6, 2017


A Resource You Should Know About: Library Video Tutorials & Guided Tours

The Library has created and curated over thirty videos and guided tours to help users find resources, get research help, use particular databases, use library technology (such as off-campus database access), and manage citations using Zotero. Six of the videos assist faculty with embedding library content in Blackboard course shells, creating reading lists, and learning more about Open Educational Resources (OER). The videos are two-to-five minutes long, and each has a .pdf transcript. The guided tours present slides and material that allows users to perform searches in side-by-side windows. These videos can help save time in class and preparing papers or research assignments. The aim of these videos is to provide the right help in the right place at the right time.

“A Academic Video Online (AVON) provides streaming access to over 63,000 videos, 2000-plus in the field of Psychology.”

A Service You Should Know About: Academic Video Online

The Library has arranged for access to Academic Video Online (AVON) from ProQuest. This provides remote unlimited access to over 63,000 academic videos in numerous subjects prominent in the University curricula. The AVON catalog includes feature film content from high quality distributors such as Kino Lorber, Music Box Films, and Sony Pictures Classics. For example, AVON provides 2000+ video resources for the study of Psychology and Counseling. Each video comes with a keyword-searchable transcript right inside the embeddable video player. AVON has been highly recommended by other universities, and it is a well-qualified candidate to meet the University’s growing need for video at an affordable and sustainable cost.

Library Assessment Project

The Library sponsored the MISO survey (Measuring Information Services Outcomes) jointly with the Division of Information Technology in February. This year graduate students, part-time students, and distant online students were surveyed. Preliminary results are expected in May. Other library assessment projects include reviewing the citations in undergraduate capstone projects in History, and improved gathering and analysis of resource usage information through RedLink (networked pool of usage metrics with visualizations), and improved GoogleAnalytics tracking of usage metrics through QuickSearch and the library’s numerous vendors.
The Library would like to thank our graduate and undergraduate assistants for 2018-2019, who have worked many hours and contributed so much to the life of this organization:

**Graduate Students**
- Caruso, Marco (2019, Sports Communications & Media)
- Dill, Andrew (2020, Physical Therapy)
- Giblin, Stephanie E. (2019, Education)
- Gomez, Skirmantas (2019, Finance)
- Hahne, Jennifer R. (2020, Physical Therapy)
- Mercado, Sandra M. (2020, Physical Therapy)
- Quinn, Kelly A. (2019, Occupational Therapy)

**Undergraduate Students**
- Frederick, Jordan M. (2020, Biology)
- Lavinier, Brianna (2019, Psychology)
- Lavorgna, Lisa A. (2019, Psychology)
- McMahon, Dakota (2022, Exercise Science)
- Mewhiney, Taylor S. (2020, Biology/Pre-Medical)
- Morin, Sean H. (2022, Communication Studies)
- Singleton, Emily (2020, History)

Librarians Dan Fitzroy and Ula Lechtenberg will present a poster session *DLO Casting Call: at the Crossroads of Instructional Design, Technology, and Collaboration*, at the April 2019 Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) in Cleveland.

They will give a similar presentation at NorthEast Regional Computing Program (NERCOMP) in Providence in March.

Zachariah Claybaugh and Ula Lechtenberg will give a presentation *Sharing Our Compass: Faculty Development and Information Literacy* at LOEX (a premier Information Literacy conference) in Minneapolis in May.

They also presented their insights into information literacy and the first-year experience at a meeting of the Council of Connecticut Academic Library Directors (CCALD) in New Haven in February. Gavin Ferriby is this year’s chair of CCALD.

Other recent or upcoming conferences and attendees: Grant Proposals and Writing (Gavin Ferriby and Renata Cioffi), Digital Marketing Book Camp (Renata Cioffi and Sharaya Smith), ER&L (Electronic Resources & Libraries) in Austin, TX (Jeff Orrico), ACRL (Libby Knapik and Renata Cioffi), “Mastering Group Facilitation” with the Organizational Performance Group in April (Beverly Lysobey and Susan Luchars), ALADN (Academic Library Advancement and Development Network) in Louisville (Renata Cioffi and Susan Luchars), and American Library Association Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. (Gavin Ferriby).

Librarians also participate in a wide variety of webinars and web-enabled interactions with Lyrasis and WALDO (library consortia), ACRL, SPARC (open scholarly communications and resources), and a variety of vendors and other partners.

In addition to webinars, presentations and attendance at conferences is a mission-critical, cost-effective way for librarians to continue their professional education by attending numerous sessions on a wide variety of topics at a single location in a short span of time. They regularly report back new ideas, and gain new insights on our existing resources and services.
Gloria Naylor (1950-2016):

Time’s passage through the memory is like molten glass that can be opaque or crystalize at any given moment at will: a thousand days are melted into one conversation, one glance, one hurt, and one hurt can be shattered and sprinkled over a thousand days. It is silent and elusive, refusing to be damned and dripped out day by day; it swirls through the mind while an entire lifetime can ride like foam on the deceptive, transparent waves and get sprayed onto the consciousness at ragged, unexpected intervals.

—The Women of Brewster Place

Digitizing the Gloria Naylor Archive

Sacred Heart University Library has partnered with Lehigh University Library to digitize the papers of the African American writer Gloria Naylor, author of The Women of Brewster Place, Mama Day, and other works. Naylor, who died in 2016, donated her papers to the Library in 2009. Since 2009 they have been sorted and conserved safely. This partnership provides an opportunity to put the contents of these papers online as an open resource for everyone, as well as provide professional-level preservation for the originals, which will return to Sacred Heart University in two years.

Library Support for Regional Schools

Students and teachers Notre Dame High School of Fairfield, and Stamford High School International Baccalaureate program, were hosted by the library in January and March. These school visits have helped to introduce students to college-level research skills, practices, and resources, and encourage high-achieving students to achieve more. Several of the teachers involved have been Sacred Heart University alumni/ae, especially from the Farrington College of Education.

Zachariah Claybaugh, Author

The Library congratulates Zachariah Claybaugh, OER and Digital Learning Librarian, on the publication of his book A Research Guide to Southeastern Europe: Print and Electronic Resources, by Rowman and Littlefield. Claybaugh’s work is designed to assist researchers in locating resources related to the study of the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova (including the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic), Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and Turkey, as well as the region of Southeastern Europe as a whole. The book will be available in print and digitally on March 15, 2019.
Library Hosts Virtual Reality (VR) Experiment

The Library has provided space and basic support for an educational experiment using Virtual Reality. Prof. Enda McGovern and (NAME) have provided a VR experience for students who wish to learn more about speaking in front of a group. The VR computer and head-set is kept securely in a first-floor technology room, and provide a unique opportunity for learning which will become far more common in the near future. The Library hopes to host more VR experiences and educational applications in the future.

Scantron Relocation

The Scantron previously located in the Library’s lower level, has been relocated to the Biology Department. Faculty use the Scantron for machine-reading multiple-choice examinations, a useful technology that uses Optical Mark Recognition (OMR) to record marks on thin paper, and was invented in 1972. Contrary to urban mythology, it is not possible to fool a Scantron machine by putting lip balm on a Scantron sheet.

“Virtual reality enables us to do is to recalibrate ourselves so that we can start seeing those pieces of information that are invisible to us but have become important for us to understand. – Douglas Adams, author of The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy “

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Blind Date with a Book
“Blind Date With A Book” promoted reading by asking volunteer participants to choose a book in a paper wrapper with minimal information for the prospective reader –merely notes and hints such as “nonfiction,” “Chicago” and “murder” (for The Devil in The White City, by Erik Larson). After reading the book, participants will be asked to “rate the date” –and have some fun reading something that is non-academic. “Blind Date” was Thursday-Saturday, March 21-23.

Library First Annual Beach Party
Event to take place before finals on Thursday, April 25 from 1 to 4 PM. Event will have refreshments, prizes, and other fun items.

Library Institute for Faculty, May 15-16
The Library’s second Institute for Faculty, Better Research Assignments, will be held May 15-16, the week after Commencement. Invitations to apply will be coming soon from the Provost’s Office. The format will be discussions, presentations, and individual and small-group work on the processes of a research assignment, and how to teach the content and process for better learning outcomes.
**Staff Changes**

The Library bade farewell and Godspeed to Sue Shim in January, and welcomed Beth Rogers-Ho as a new Evening & Weekend Reference Librarian, as well as Melissa Volman in March. Melissa succeeds Sue, and Beth succeeds Susan Luchars, who became Resource Development and Assessment Librarian in November. Beth and Melissa bring a wealth of experience, including service at Gateway Community College, Fairfield University, and the Edith Wheeler Memorial Library in Monroe. Welcome, Beth and Melissa!

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**Book Recommendations**

- *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens GP Putnam & Sons 2018 (Susan Luchars)
- *The Tattooist of Auschwitz: A Novel* by Heather Owens Harper 2018 (Susan Luchars)
- *This is Where it Ends*, by Marieke Nijkamp, Sourcebooks, 2016 (Shari Baron)
- *Death in the Haymarket*, by James R. Green, Anchor, 2007 (Geoffrey Staysniak)

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**Spring Hours & Numbers**

**Starbucks Library Café**

**Fall & Spring Semester Hours**

**Monday—Thursday**

10:00 AM — 9:00 PM

**Friday**

10:00 AM — 4:00 PM

**Saturday**

CLOSED

**Sunday**

CLOSED

Grab And Go Sandwiches or Salad
With a Selection of Drinks

For a list of special hours please visit our website

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**Che Hours & Numbers**

**Mon. - Fri.**

7:30 AM - 11:00 PM

**Saturday and Sunday**

Students and Faculty members need to have swipe permission to enter the building on weekends

**For more information, please call:**

(203-396-6051)