

# Digital Minimalism Summary

By Cal Newport

You may be familiar with Marie Kondo's cult phrase, 'Does this spark joy'? How often do you feel overwhelmed by your stuff? Have you noticed that more and more people are shifting their preferences towards experiences, rather than things?

*Digital Minimalism* looks at decluttering our digital lives, and while not everyone needs this book, everyone should read it because it offers insight into contemporary digital life. Newport covers social media, the attention economy, digital addiction, shallow vs. deep thinking, and how to be alone in a world that's increasingly noisy and distracting.

*Digital Minimalism* is another take on the recent and growing trend towards ridding our lives of things that bring clutter, anxiety, distraction, and so forth. While Marie Kondo wants you to declutter your life of possessions and objects, Cal Newport argues that we need to declutter our lives of unnecessary technology, and take a closer look at our digital lives. He asserts that we all need to have more agency within the attention economy, and step back from technological and digital distractions. According to Cal Newport, our digital lives are a critical area that needs to be decluttered and simplified, to lead more meaningful and productive lives.

How would you describe your relationship with technology? In other words, does it spark joy?

Whether you're a high, medium, or low user, *Digital Minimalism* is an

insightful and thought-provoking book about our relationship with the technology that we use. Newport is a computer science professor, writer, public speaker, and blogger, and his insights on culture and technology are accessible and increasingly relevant. Let's briefly take a look.

## **The Medium Is the Message**

In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan famously coined the term, 'the medium is the message.' Since then technology has come a long way. Every aspect of everyday life hinges on Internet connectivity, cellphone reception, and access to all of the things that supposedly make our lives easier and simpler. McLuhan argues that we need to shift our attention from the message sent via the media, and look instead at the technology itself. In other words, technology isn't neutral, and we need to be more critical of our usage and how we're informed by it.

Newport is very much in McLuhan's camp, and he critically looks at what patterns of behavior digital life have introduced or exacerbated. In short, all media and technology have a social effect, and with every new technology, structural changes and social implications arise. Being informed and critical about the media and technology that we use, is paramount to living in the information age.

## **Digital Minimalism Is a Philosophy**

Newport is by no means a Luddite or technophobe. Instead, he embraces a philosophy based on critical selection, and not unlike the idea, 'does this spark joy?'

So it's not about swearing off all aspects of our digital life, but instead

being self-reflexive and critical about how we're spending our time online. The keyword here is optimization. We all need to optimize our time online, engage in valuable activities, and then chuck out everything that doesn't align with our values. This can be a tricky process, but Newport explains that we need to cut out all of the noise and excess, to focus on what matters most.

To begin the process of adopting the philosophy of digital minimalism, we need to ask ourselves why we use the technology that we do.

Let's look at Facebook as an example. Why do you use Facebook? Is it because you value friendship and connection? Is it because you use it as a news source? Is it because you want to share your life with other people?

None of these reasons for using Facebook seem insidious, do they? On the contrary, all of these values are very sound, and should surely be encouraged; right? Well, if you listen to Newport's compelling arguments, social media isn't the innocent space we make it out to be, and often we find ourselves justifying our use.

Let's take a closer look at Facebook. Newport argues that there's no substitute for real and authentic connection, and social media sites such as Facebook, are all about instant gratification, and "like-seeking" behavior. Furthermore, social media ties us ever more closely to our phones, because we feel the need to continually check-in, see what others are up to, and capture our lives in pretty mundane ways.

How often do you check your phone each day? And how often do you take photos of banal things like your lunch, or take a screenshot of a meme to repost somewhere? What are these images actually adding to

your life? In days gone by, we'd curate careful family photo albums that would have pride of place on a coffee table or bookshelf. Nowadays, our photos are a fleeting moment in time, that no one takes time to look over and enjoy. They form part of an endless timeline to scroll through mindlessly, and the need to capture every aspect of our lives, means that we don't appreciate life's precious moments a lot of the time. Instant gratification is an endless loop, and Newport suggests that the sooner we rid ourselves of these behaviors, the sooner we can focus on what really matters.

So ask yourself why you're using certain media, what they're adding to your life, and what they're helping to build and cultivate. Newport says this can be scary and daunting, but if you want to live your very best life, you have to be brutal and cul everything that's not adding positively to your life.

## **What a Difference a Month Makes**

The first step is always the most difficult. The suggestion is to spend a month analyzing how you use technology, and weed out anything optional or superfluous. This process isn't about ridding your life of everything within the digital realm, but rather to abandon what isn't relevant or essential to how you perform your job, or interact meaningfully with friends and family.

For example, if you use a video platform to connect with your loved ones who live far away, this is something that you should keep doing. However, if you're just mindlessly sending Birthday greetings, and liking unmemorable content on Facebook, this might be something that you want to reflect more carefully on. The basic premise is that if removing a technology harms or negatively disrupts your daily life, then you should

keep it.

You should also go back to basics during this month, which sounds cliched, but it's essential. It's worth taking out a piece of paper and writing down a list of hobbies and activities that you miss doing, or that you think you don't have time to do anymore. Maybe you wish you could spend more time with your family; perhaps you miss spending time hiking outdoors, maybe you can't remember the last time you actually sat down and enjoyed a good book? Once you've created your list of hobbies and activities, you'll have a better idea of what you can get back if you spend less time on superfluous digital distractions.

There are many sayings about denial. 'Denial isn't just a river in Egypt.' 'Never underestimate the power of denial.' 'Delay is the deadliest form of denial,' and 'The thing about denial is that it doesn't feel like denial when it's going on.' Newport says that many people can't make it through the first month because they're in denial and don't have the mindset to believe that they have a problem with digital clutter. Furthermore, they might not have spent enough time focussing on what can be added to their lives by concentrating on their list of hobbies and activities, and having a sense of how much more value these will add to their lives.

As with every addiction, in order to tackle the first month head-on, the first step is admitting there's a problem.

## **Solitude Isn't Punishment and Remember to Focus on Real Connection**

For some reason, many of us are afraid of being alone. Newport suggests

that much of the anxiety that we experience as a society can be linked to a lack of time spent alone. In order to recharge and to engage our brains, we need to spend more time alone, in quiet reflection.

Spending time alone doesn't mean binge-watching a series on Netflix or even reading a book. The idea is to take walks, to spend time alone in nature, to meditate, to write down our thoughts in a journal or diary, and most importantly, to switch off our phones.

The idea of giving up social media may terrify you because it allows you to connect with people who are far away from you. The idea of not checking your emails may not be possible because you need to use this channel of communication for work. Here Newport suggests "batching." Batching isn't a new concept, but it is a helpful one because it allows us to compartmentalize our tasks so that we can focus more directly on what's most important.

What if you only decided to check your social media accounts every Friday afternoon? You'd still be able to connect with friends and family, you'd still get the gist of what's happening on social media, but you'd save hours of time throughout the week that you could use to be a lot more productive. This compartmentalizing is at the heart of batching, and can also help manage distractions such as email and messages. Newport suggests batching these activities too. For example, check your emails and messages every morning, respond to what's urgent, and then ignore all of your inboxes until the afternoon. The problem with continually checking emails and messages, is that it takes us out of deep work mode, and interrupts workflow and productivity.

Do you remember in the old days, in those bygone years before cellphones, where we had landline telephones? Landline telephones were

imbued with a code of conduct, which meant that there were hours of the day where you were unreachable. Nowadays, mobile communication means that we're expected to be available 24 hours a day. To take back control, it's advisable to schedule hours where you're available for conversations. For example, schedule conversations when you're commuting or on a break, so that you can maintain contact with friends and family, but that you're not eating away into your hours of productivity. This may seem very regimented, but forming routines actually makes us develop better communication habits, and don't allow us to fall into the excuse of, 'I don't have time to chat, I'm too busy.'

## **How to Make Yourself Accountable**

Cal Newport aims to write six major papers a year. Most academics are lucky if they write one article per year. Many of us create excuses as to why we haven't reached the same output levels, and might even accuse Newport of having the luxury of a lighter workload, economic stability, or perhaps even good old fashioned luck. Remember what we learned earlier about denial? The cold hard truth is that most of us are trapped in a web of procrastination, and battle to find the discipline to achieve our goals.

Ridding ourselves of superfluous technology is part of the process, but creating a schedule is ultimately what keeps us on track. Many of us may envy Newport for his ability to balance family, health, hobbies, work, etc.. However, he argues that he maintains this balance because he is self-disciplined and sticks to a schedule.

A way of making yourself accountable, is to plan a weekly schedule and create blocks of everything you want to achieve. It's a good idea to leave space for unforeseen or last-minute plans so that you can have a bit of

flexibility. Still, the primary goal is to reclaim as much quality and valuable time as possible, and rid your life of any activities that make your goals less achievable.

## **Reclaiming What Actually Matters**

For a long time, we were led to believe that sleep is a luxury, and that leisure time is for the weak. Newport explains that we have to reclaim leisure and the things that matter to us, and make us feel valuable and productive.

Whether it's fixing, building, or making something, we should all aim to do something creative and meaningful. Enormous satisfaction can be gained from making something from scratch, or fixing something that you might usually outsource. Doing things with our hands is hugely rewarding and satisfying, and the act of creating, rather than buying, adds a tremendous sense of accomplishment. This sense of accomplishment heightens productivity, because spending leisure time productively snowballs to one's work life. After all, productivity shouldn't just be associated with one's career.

Finally, in terms of quality time with friends and family, he also advises joining groups, clubs, and societies. Being part of a community is very enriching and gives us a greater sense of purpose.

## **In Conclusion**

The most significant currency in the world is our attention. Imagine what you could accomplish if you could rid your life of distractions and frivolous activities? Imagine all of the things you could do with your life,



and how many projects you could complete?

The idea isn't to feel guilty and ashamed, but rather to be self-reflective about how we spend our time and what we attach value to. Newport invites us to join the attention resistance by being more cognizant of how we spend our time and the key influences in time-wasting.

Digital minimalism isn't about going back to the dark ages, and ridding our lives of every ounce of technology. Instead, it's about tailoring technology to our specific needs, and spending time without it, to pursue creative and tangible projects. Life moves very quickly, and instant gratification is making us less sensitive to the world around us. We move very quickly from one moment to the next, and often don't stop to savor and enjoy the world around us.

So, maybe start by decluttering your phone. Perhaps you should choose a single device for social media, messaging, and apps, so that you can limit distractions? Set aside a specific time and day to engage with social media, or adopt the principle of "batching" to discipline yourself into restricting trying to multitask. Change your mindset to slowing down, and realize that news and information are often not as urgent as you think they are. Go back to reading the Sunday newspaper instead of cramming every ounce of your day with breaking news.

And finally, believe that your phone will never be smarter than you, and that you have the power to switch off and embrace the silence.