

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Digital Minimalism

*Choosing a
Focused Life in
a Noisy World*

CAL NEWPORT

Bestselling author of *Deep Work*

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■ IN A NOISY WORLD

Cal Newport

PORTFOLIO ■ PENGUIN



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Version_3

To Julie:
my partner, my muse, my voice of reason

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PART 1](#)

[Foundations](#)



[1. A Lopsided Arms Race](#)

[2. Digital Minimalism](#)

[3. The Digital Declutter](#)

[PART 2](#)

[Practices](#)



[4. Spend Time Alone](#)

[5. Don't Click "Like"](#)

[6. Reclaim Leisure](#)

[7. Join the Attention Resistance](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Notes](#)

[Index](#)

[About the Author](#)

Introduction

In September 2016, the influential blogger and commentator Andrew Sullivan wrote a 7,000-word essay for *New York* magazine titled “I Used to Be a Human Being.” Its subtitle was alarming: “An endless bombardment of news and gossip and images has rendered us manic information addicts. It broke me. It might break you, too.”

The article was widely shared. I’ll admit, however, that when I first read it, I didn’t fully comprehend Sullivan’s warning. I’m one of the few members of my generation to never have a social media account, and tend not to spend much time web surfing. As a result, my phone plays a relatively minor role in my life—a fact that places me outside the mainstream experience this article addressed. In other words, I knew that the innovations of the internet age were playing an increasingly intrusive role in many people’s lives, but I didn’t have a *visceral* understanding of what this meant. That is, until everything changed.

Earlier in 2016, I published a book titled *Deep Work*. It was about the underappreciated value of intense focus and how the professional world’s emphasis on distracting communication tools was holding people back from producing their best work. As my book found an audience, I began to hear from more and more of my readers. Some sent me messages, while others cornered me after public appearances—but many of them asked the same question: What about their personal lives? They agreed with my arguments about office distractions, but as they then explained, they were arguably even more distressed by the way new technologies seemed to be draining meaning and satisfaction from their time spent outside of work. This caught my attention and tumbled me unexpectedly into a crash course on the promises and perils of modern digital life.

Almost everyone I spoke to believed in the power of the internet, and recognized that it can and should be a force that improves their lives. They didn't necessarily want to give up Google Maps, or abandon Instagram, but they also felt as though their current relationship with technology was unsustainable—to the point that if something didn't change soon, they'd break, too.

A common term I heard in these conversations about modern digital life was *exhaustion*. It's not that any one app or website was particularly bad when considered in isolation. As many people clarified, the issue was the overall impact of having *so many* different shiny baubles pulling so insistently at their attention and manipulating their mood. Their problem with this frenzied activity is less about its details than the fact that it's increasingly beyond their control. Few want to spend so much time online, but these tools have a way of cultivating behavioral addictions. The urge to check Twitter or refresh Reddit becomes a nervous twitch that shatters uninterrupted time into shards too small to support the presence necessary for an intentional life.

As I discovered in my subsequent research, and will argue in the next chapter, some of these addictive properties are accidental (few predicted the extent to which text messaging could command your attention), while many are quite purposeful (compulsive use is the foundation for many social media business plans). But whatever its source, this irresistible attraction to screens is leading people to feel as though they're ceding more and more of their autonomy when it comes to deciding how they direct their attention. No one, of course, signed up for this loss of control. They downloaded the apps and set up accounts for good reasons, only to discover, with grim irony, that these services were beginning to undermine the very values that made them appealing in the first place: they joined Facebook to stay in touch with friends across the country, and then ended up unable to maintain an uninterrupted conversation with the friend sitting across the table.

I also learned about the negative impact of unrestricted online activity on psychological well-being. Many people I spoke to underscored social media's ability to manipulate their mood. The constant exposure to their friends' carefully curated portrayals of their lives generates feelings of inadequacy—especially during periods when they're already feeling low—