

# We don't need digital detox, but there is a need to rethink our relationship with technology

April 20 2015, by Natasha Mauthner

---



‘My name’s Steve and I’m an internet addict’ Credit: Alatele fr, CC BY-SA

We all know the scare stories. Growing numbers of people are [becoming addicted](#) to the internet and constantly checking their digital gadgets. They are [steadily disconnecting us](#) from real life, real relationships and real meaning. To this supposed problem of digital dependence, an

antidote has been emerging: the "digital detox" retreat. Companies are advertising technology-free resorts, holiday packages, city breaks and summer camps.

One operator has even trademarked the concept. [Digital Detox LLC](#) is a Californian travel company that's motto is "disconnect to reconnect". Its customers are offered a "restorative" break on a ranch in northern California including yoga, meditation, hiking, art and organic food, with no digital devices allowed. At a destination named Camp Grounded, campers are promised a chance to get back to childhood – "with campfire songs instead of YouTube videos, and board games instead of Angry Birds".

And if you were thinking this was only in America, you would be wrong. The Westin in Dublin offers a [digital detox minibreak](#) to "give you the chance to escape from all that electronic chatter". Liberate yourself, the website reads, from your smartphone, laptop and gadgets and replace all that digital clutter with relaxation and renewal.

## **Beyond the travel industry**

The digital detox is just one manifestation of the now widespread notion that to live well in a digitally dependent world, we need to disconnect from [technology](#). In her [2012 book](#), *The Winter of Our Disconnect: How One Family Pulled the Plug and Lived to Tell/Text/Tweet the Tale*, the author and journalist Susan Maushart explains how she grew so concerned about her family's dependence on electronic media that she took them into what she calls "rehab" and a "digital detox" for six months.

[In a similar vein](#) is *Unplugged: How to Live Mindfully in a Digital World*, by Orianna Fielding, whose London-based [Digital Detox Company](#) provides training and retreats for people and businesses. The

book gives readers "techniques that teach you how to manage your online world in a healthy way", including step-by-step detoxing programmes that can last from a few minutes to a weekend.

Many of us are instinctively moving in a similar direction. People are creating technology-free times and zones at home, turning notifications off on their mobile phones and hiding technology from their children or limiting its use. At certain times of day, some people close their email or switch off their internet routers.

## Another view



Digital Detox, San-Francisco style Credit: Rusty Blazenhoff, CC BY-SA

The difficulty with all of this is that it identifies the wrong problem. Talking about [internet addiction](#) starts from the premise that the technology is intrinsically bad and therefore needs to be rationed. In reality technology is neither good nor bad, but simply a means to an end. The notion of living without it is virtually inconceivable. Many of the things we used to do, from buying groceries to calling parents to writing postcards, are now things that we either do or substitute using digital technology.

It doesn't mean to say that spending your life online is necessarily a good thing, but detox is not the answer. It may provide temporary respite, but we have to make up for it as soon as we plug back in. What is the point of coming home after an offline mini-break only to face 200-plus new emails in your inbox?

Unplugging also increases the onus on individuals to manage their digitally dependent lives. It becomes the responsibility of employees to develop strategies to deal effectively with the likes of large volume of emails – a workload unknown to previous generations.

## **More meaningful discussions**

The more pressing issue is how these technologies are being used to create and sustain the market economy that we live in. Online retailers can collect data on our purchases and preferences and sell this information on to advertisers, turning us into commodities. Engaging effectively in [social media](#) and professional networking sites requires constant updating of our profiles and content so that we become marketable individuals. Email can be used as a tool to raise our productivity by making us available outside working hours.

I come up against some of this in my own working life as a university lecturer, at a time when the student-lecturer relationship is moving from



learner-teacher to customer-service provider. Students frequently email me about lectures they increasingly do not attend, and questions that I have already answered in the course handbook and on our website. In a sense, these emails require me to do my job twice.



Never popular: child technology rationing Credit: Sabphoto

But responding still matters in a context where student satisfaction [feeds into](#) university rankings, and academics are under pressure to help make their institutions more marketable. For years I responded by repeating the information, but recently I introduced a policy that they could only email me to arrange a one-to-one meeting, while strongly encouraging

them to ask any questions during lectures and tutorials. I now ignore most other emails.

The number of student emails in my inbox has since decreased and I am having many more meaningful discussions with my students at lectures, tutorials and one-on-one meetings. Digital detox would have had no answer to this problem, except to postpone dealing with the emails. Instead I have both reduced my email traffic and, more importantly, restored my identity as a teacher and my students' identities as learners.

## **A little recalibration**

Individuals and organisations are also changing how they use email in other sectors. Daimler, the German car and truck manufacturer, [implemented a new programme](#) last year that allowed employees to set their email software to automatically delete incoming emails while on annual leave. This "mail on holiday" programme issued an out-of-office reply indicating that the email would be deleted and for pressing matters, offered the contact information of another employee.

All of this goes much further than email, of course. Martha Payne, the Scottish school pupil who [started the NeverSeconds blog](#) on her thoughts and experiences of school meals, [became](#) an international hit and put pressure on caterers to improve their food. Social media in the Arab Spring became the key medium for organising the protests that overthrew governments. Social media is used to bring about social change, not just share the latest selfie.

Disconnecting from digital technologies is like sticking our heads in the sand. It prevents us from asking how technologies are changing our lives in particular ways and whether it is for the better. It also stops us from reclaiming these technologies and re-purposing them for different goals and values.

*This story is published courtesy of [The Conversation](#) (under Creative Commons-Attribution/No derivatives).*

Source: The Conversation

Citation: We don't need digital detox, but there is a need to rethink our relationship with technology (2015, April 20) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-dont-digital-detox-rethink-relationship.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.