*Rule #3*

# Quit Social Media

In 2013, author and digital media consultant Baratunde Thurston launched an experiment. He decided to disconnect from his online life for twenty-five days: no Facebook, no Twitter, no Foursquare (a service that awarded him "Mayor of the Year" in 2011), not even e-mail. He needed the break. Thurston, who is

described by friends as "the most connected man in the world," had by his own count participated in more than fifty-nine thousand Gmail conversations and posted fifteen hundred times on his Facebook wall in the year leading up to his experiment. "I was burnt out. Fried. Done. Toast," he explained.

We know about Thurston's experiment because he wrote about it in a cover article for *Fast Company* magazine, ironically titled "#UnPlug." As Thurston reveals in the article, it didn't take long to adjust to a disconnected life. "By the end of that first week, the quiet rhythm of my days seemed far less strange," he said. "I was

less stressed about not knowing new things; I felt that I still existed despite not having shared documentary evidence of said existence on the Internet." Thurston struck up conversations with strangers. He enjoyed food without Instagramming the experience. He bought a bike ("turns out it's easier to ride the thing when you're not trying to simultaneously check your Twitter"). "The end came too soon," Thurston lamented. But he had start-ups to run and books to market, so after the twenty-five days passed, he reluctantly reactivated his online presence.

Baratunde Thurston's experiment neatly summarizes two important points

about our culture's current relationship with social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and infotainment sites like Business Insider and BuzzFeed —two categories of online distraction that I will collectively call "network tools" in the pages ahead. The first point is that we increasingly recognize that these tools fragment our time and reduce our ability to concentrate. This reality no longer generates much debate; we all feel it. This is a real problem for many different people, but the problem is especially dire if you're attempting to improve your ability to work deeply. In the preceding rule, for example, I described several strategies to help you

sharpen your focus. These efforts will become significantly more difficult if you simultaneously behave like a pre-experiment Baratunde Thurston, allowing your life outside such training to remain a distracted blur of apps and browser tabs. Willpower is limited, and therefore the more enticing tools you have pulling at your attention, the harder it'll be to maintain focus on something important. To master the art of deep work, therefore, you must take back control of your time and attention from the many diversions that attempt to steal them.

Before we begin fighting back against these distractions, however, we

must better understand the battlefield. This brings me to the second important point summarized by Baratunde Thurston's story: the impotence with which knowledge workers currently discuss this problem of network tools and attention. Overwhelmed by these tools' demands on his time, Thurston felt that his only option was to (temporarily) quit the Internet altogether. This idea that a drastic *Internet sabbatical*[*] is the only alternative to the distraction generated by social media and infotainment has increasingly pervaded our cultural conversation.

The problem with this binary response to this issue is that these two

choices are much too crude to be useful. The notion that you would quit the Internet is, of course, an overstuffed straw man, infeasible for most (unless you're a journalist writing a piece about distraction). No one is meant to actually follow Baratunde Thurston's lead—and this reality provides justification for remaining with the only offered alternative: accepting our current distracted state as inevitable. For all the insight and clarity that Thurston gained during his Internet sabbatical, for example, it didn't take him long once the experiment ended to slide back into the fragmented state where he began. On the day when I first starting writing this

chapter, which fell only six months after Thurston's article originally appeared in *Fast Company*, the reformed connector had already sent a dozen Tweets in the few hours since he woke up.

This rule attempts to break us out of this rut by proposing a third option: accepting that these tools are not inherently evil, and that some of them might be quite vital to your success and happiness, *but at the same time* also accepting that the threshold for allowing a site regular access to your time and attention (not to mention personal data) should be much more stringent, and that most people should therefore be using many fewer such tools. I won't ask you,

in other words, to quit the Internet altogether like Baratunde Thurston did for twenty-five days back in 2013. But I will ask you to reject the state of distracted hyperconnectedness that drove him to that drastic experiment in the first place. There is a middle ground, and if you're interested in developing a deep work habit, you must fight to get there.

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Our first step toward finding this middle ground in network tool selection is to understand the current default decision process deployed by most Internet users. In the fall of 2013, I received insight into this process because of an article I

wrote explaining why I never joined Facebook. Though the piece was meant to be explanatory and not accusatory, it nonetheless put many readers on the defensive, leading them to reply with justifications for *their* use of the service. Here are some examples of these justifications:

- "Entertainment was my initial draw to Facebook. I can see what my friends are up to and post funny photos, make quick comments."
- "[When] I first joined, [I didn't know why]… By mere curiosity I joined a forum of short fiction stories. [Once] there I improved

my writing and made very good friends."

- "[I use] Facebook because a lot of people I knew in high school are on there."

Here's what strikes me about these responses (which are representative of the large amount of feedback I received on this topic): They're surprisingly minor. I don't doubt, for example, that the first commenter from this list finds some entertainment in using Facebook, but I would also assume that this person wasn't suffering some severe deficit of entertainment options before he or she signed up for the service. I would further

wager that this user would succeed in staving off boredom even if the service were suddenly shut down. Facebook, at best, added one more (arguably quite mediocre) entertainment option to many that already existed.

Another commenter cited making friends in a writing forum. I don't doubt the existence of these friends, but we can assume that these friendships are lightweight—given that they're based on sending short messages back and forth over a computer network. There's nothing wrong with such lightweight friendships, but they're unlikely to be at the center of this user's social life. Something similar can be said about the

commenter who reconnected with high school friends: This is a nice diversion, but hardly something central to his or her sense of social connection or happiness.

To be clear, I'm not trying to denigrate the benefits identified previously—there's nothing illusory or misguided about them. What I'm emphasizing, however, is that these benefits are minor and somewhat random. (By contrast, if you'd instead asked someone to justify the use of, say, the World Wide Web more generally, or e-mail, the arguments would become much more concrete and compelling.) To this observation, you might reply that *value is value*: If you can find some

extra benefit in using a service like Facebook—even if it's small—then why not use it? I call this way of thinking the *any-benefit* mind-set, as it identifies any possible benefit as sufficient justification for using a network tool. In more detail:

**The Any-Benefit Approach to Network Tool Selection:** You're justified in using a network tool if you can identify any possible benefit to its use, or anything you might possibly miss out on if you don't use it.

The problem with this approach, of course, is that it ignores all the negatives

that come along with the tools in question. These services are engineered to be addictive—robbing time and attention from activities that more directly support your professional and personal goals (such as deep work). Eventually, if you use these tools enough, you'll arrive at the state of burned-out, hyperdistracted connectivity that plagued Baratunde Thurston and millions of others like him. It's here that we encounter the true insidious nature of an any-benefit mind-set. The use of network tools can be harmful. If you don't attempt to weigh pros against cons, but instead use any glimpse of some potential benefit as justification for unrestrained

use of a tool, then you're unwittingly crippling your ability to succeed in the world of knowledge work.

This conclusion, if considered objectively, shouldn't be surprising. In the context of network tools, we've become comfortable with the any-benefit mind-set, but if we instead zoom out and consider this mind-set in the broader context of skilled labor, it suddenly seems a bizarre and ahistorical approach to choosing tools. In other words, once you put aside the revolutionary rhetoric surrounding all things Internet—the sense, summarized in Part 1, that you're either fully committed to "the revolution" or a Luddite curmudgeon—

you'll soon realize that network tools are not exceptional; they're tools, no different from a blacksmith's hammer or an artist's brush, used by skilled laborers to do their jobs better (and occasionally to enhance their leisure). Throughout history, skilled laborers have applied sophistication and skepticism to their encounters with new tools and their decisions about whether to adopt them. There's no reason why knowledge workers cannot do the same when it comes to the Internet—the fact that the skilled labor here now involves digital bits doesn't change this reality.

To help understand what this more careful tool curation might look like, it

makes sense to start by talking to someone who makes a living working with (nondigital) tools and relies on a complex relationship with these tools to succeed. Fortunately for our purposes, I found just such an individual in a lanky English major turned successful sustainable farmer, named (almost too aptly), Forrest Pritchard.

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Forrest Pritchard runs Smith Meadows, a family farm located an hour west of D.C.—one of many farms clustered in the valleys of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Soon after taking control of the land from his parents, as I learned, Pritchard moved the operation away from

traditional monoculture crops and toward the then novel concept of grass-finished meat. The farm bypasses wholesaling—you cannot find Smith Meadows steaks in Whole Foods—to sell direct to consumers at the bustling farmers' markets in the Washington, D.C., metro area. By all accounts, the farm is thriving in an industry that rarely rewards small operations.

I first encountered Pritchard at our local farmers' market in Takoma Park, Maryland, where the Smith Meadows stand does good business. To see Pritchard, usually standing a foot taller than most of his suburbanite customers, wearing the obligatory faded flannel of

the farmer, is to see a craftsman confident in his trade. I introduced myself to him because farming is a skill dependent on the careful management of tools, and I wanted to understand how a craftsman in a nondigital field approaches this crucial task.

"Haymaking is a good example," he told me, not long into one of our conversations on the topic. "It's a subject where I can give you the basic idea without having to gloss over the underlying economics."

When Pritchard took over Smith Meadows, he explained, the farm made its own hay to use as animal feed during the winter months when grazing is

impossible. Haymaking is done with a piece of equipment called a hay baler: a device you pull behind a tractor that compresses and binds dried grass into bales. If you raise animals on the East Coast there's an obvious reason to own and operate a hay baler: Your animals need hay. Why spend money to "buy in" feed when you have perfectly good grass growing for free right in your own soil? If a farmer subscribed to the any-benefit approach used by knowledge workers, therefore, he would definitely buy a hay baler. But as Pritchard explained to me (after preemptively apologizing for a moment of snark), if a farmer actually adopted such a simplistic mind-set, "I'd

be counting the days until the 'For Sale' sign goes up on the property." Pritchard, like most practitioners of his trade, instead deploys a more sophisticated thought process when assessing tools. And after applying this process to the hay baler, Pritchard was quick to sell it: Smith Meadows now purchases all the hay it uses.

*Here's why...*

"Let's start by exploring the costs of making hay," Pritchard said. "First, there's the actual cost of fuel, and repairs, and the shed to keep the baler. You also have to pay taxes on it." These directly measurable costs, however, were the easy part of his decision. It was

instead the "opportunity costs" that required more attention. As he elaborated: "If I make hay all summer, I can't be doing something else. For example, I now use that time instead to raise boilers [chickens meant for eating]. These generate positive cash flow, because I can sell them. But they also produce manure which I can then use to enhance my soil." Then there's the equally subtle issue of assessing the secondary value of a purchased bale of hay. As Pritchard explained: "When I'm buying in hay, I'm trading cash for animal protein, as well as manure (once it passes through the animals' system), which means I am also getting more

nutrients for my land in exchange for my money. I'm also avoiding compacting soils by driving heavy machinery over my ground all summer long."

When making his final decision on the baler, Pritchard moved past the direct monetary costs, which were essentially a wash, and instead shifted his attention to the more nuanced issue of the long-term health of his fields. For the reasons described previously, Pritchard concluded that buying in hay results in healthier fields. And as he summarized: "Soil fertility is my baseline." By this calculation, the baler had to go.

Notice the complexity of Pritchard's tool decision. This complexity

underscores an important reality: The notion that identifying *some* benefit is sufficient to invest money, time, and attention in a tool is near laughable to people in his trade. *Of course* a hay baler offers benefits—*every* tool at the farm supply store has something useful to offer. At the same time, *of course* it offers negatives as well. Pritchard expected this decision to be nuanced. He began with a clear baseline—in his case, that soil health is of fundamental importance to his professional success—and then built off this foundation toward a final call on whether to use a particular tool.

I propose that if you're a knowledge

worker—especially one interested in cultivating a deep work habit—you should treat your tool selection with the same level of care as other skilled workers, such as farmers. Following is my attempt to generalize this assessment strategy. I call it the *craftsman approach* to tool selection, a name that emphasizes that tools are ultimately aids to the larger goals of one's craft.

**The Craftsman Approach to Tool Selection:** Identify the core factors that determine success and happiness in your professional and personal life. Adopt a tool only if its positive impacts on these factors substantially outweigh its negative

impacts.

Notice that this craftsman approach to tool selection stands in opposition to the any-benefit approach. Whereas the any-benefit mind-set identifies any potential positive impact as justification for using a tool, the craftsman variant requires that these positive impacts affect factors at the core of what's important to you and that they outweigh the negatives.

Even though the craftsman approach rejects the simplicity of the any-benefit approach, it doesn't ignore the benefits that currently drive people to network tools, or make any advance

proclamations about what's "good" or "bad" technology: It simply asks that you give any particular network tool the same type of measured, nuanced accounting that tools in other trades have been subjected to throughout the history of skilled labor.

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The three strategies that follow in this rule are designed to grow your comfort with abandoning the any-benefit mind-set and instead applying the more thoughtful craftsman philosophy in curating the tools that lay claim to your time and attention. This guidance is important because the craftsman approach is not cut-and-dry. Identifying

what matters most in your life, and then attempting to assess the impacts of various tools on these factors, doesn't reduce to a simple formula—this task requires practice and experimentation. The strategies that follow provide some structure for this practice and experimentation by forcing you to reconsider your network tools from many different angles. Combined, they should help you cultivate a more sophisticated relationship with your tools that will allow you to take back enough control over your time and attention to enable the rest of the ideas in Part 2 to succeed.

# Apply the Law of the Vital Few to Your Internet Habits

Malcolm Gladwell doesn't use Twitter. In a 2013 interview he explained why: "Who says my fans want to hear from me on Twitter?" He then joked: "I know a lot of people would like to see less of me." Michael Lewis, another mega-bestselling author, also doesn't use the service, explaining in The Wire: "I don't tweet, I don't Twitter, I couldn't even tell you how to read or where to find a Twitter message." And as mentioned in Part 1, the award-winning *New Yorker* scribe George Packer also avoids the service, and indeed only recently even

succumbed to the necessity of owning a smartphone.

These three writers don't think Twitter is useless. They're quick to accept that other writers find it useful. Packer's admission of non-Twitter use, in fact, was written as a response to an unabashedly pro-Twitter article by the late *New York Times* media critic David Carr, a piece in which Carr effused:

> *And now, nearly a year later, has Twitter turned my brain to mush? No, I'm in narrative on more things in a given moment than I ever thought possible, and instead of spending a half-hour*

*surfing in search of illumination, I get a sense of the day's news and how people are reacting to it in the time that it takes to wait for coffee at Starbucks.*

At the same time, however, Gladwell, Lewis, and Packer don't feel like the service offers them nearly enough advantages to offset its negatives in their particular circumstances. Lewis, for example, worries that adding more accessibility will sap his energy and reduce his ability to research and write great stories, noting: "It's amazing how overly accessible people are. There's a lot of communication in my life that's not

enriching, it's impoverishing." While Packer, for his part, worries about distraction, saying: "Twitter is crack for media addicts." He goes so far as to describe Carr's rave about the service as "the most frightening picture of the future that I've read thus far in the new decade."

We don't have to argue about whether these authors are right in their personal decisions to avoid Twitter (and similar tools), because their sales numbers and awards speak for themselves. We can instead use these decisions as a courageous illustration of the craftsman approach to tool selection in action. In a time when so many

knowledge workers—and especially those in creative fields—are still trapped in the any-benefit mind-set, it's refreshing to see a more mature approach to sorting through such services. But the very rareness of these examples reminds us that mature and confident assessments of this type aren't easy to make. Recall the complexity of the thought process, highlighted earlier, that Forrest Pritchard had to slog through to make a decision on his hay baler: For many knowledge workers, and many of the tools in their lives, these decisions will be equally complex. The goal of this strategy, therefore, is to offer some structure to this thought process—a way

to reduce some of the complexity of deciding which tools really matter to you.

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The first step of this strategy is to identify the main high-level goals in both your professional and your personal life. If you have a family, for example, then your personal goals might involve parenting well and running an organized household. In the professional sphere, the details of these goals depend on what you do for a living. In my own work as a professor, for example, I pursue two important goals, one centered on being an effective teacher in the classroom and effective mentor to my graduate students,

and another centered on being an effective researcher. While your goals will likely differ, the key is to keep the list limited to what's most important and to keep the descriptions suitably high-level. (If your goal includes a specific target—"to reach a million dollars in sales" or "to publish a half dozen papers in a single year"—then it's too specific for our purposes here.) When you're done you should have a small number of goals for both the personal and professional areas of your life.

Once you've identified these goals, list for each the two or three most important activities that help you satisfy the goal. These activities should be

specific enough to allow you to clearly picture doing them. On the other hand, they should be general enough that they're not tied to a onetime outcome. For example, "do better research" is too general (what does it look like to be "doing better research"?), while "finish paper on broadcast lower bounds in time for upcoming conference submission" is too specific (it's a onetime outcome). A good activity in this context would be something like: "regularly read and understand the cutting-edge results in my field."

The next step in this strategy is to consider the network tools you currently use. For each such tool, go through the

key activities you identified and ask whether the use of the tool has a *substantially positive impact*, a *substantially negative impact*, or *little impact* on your regular and successful participation in the activity. Now comes the important decision: Keep using this tool only if you concluded that it has substantial positive impacts and that these outweigh the negative impacts.

To help illustrate this strategy in action, let's consider a case study. For the purposes of this example, assume that Michael Lewis, if asked, would have produced the following goal and corresponding important activities for his writing career.

Professional Goal: To craft well-written, narrative-driven stories that change the way people understand the world.

Key Activities Supporting This Goal:

- Research patiently and deeply.
- Write carefully and with purpose.

Now imagine that Lewis was using this goal to determine whether or not to use Twitter. Our strategy requires him to investigate Twitter's impact on the key activities he listed that support his goal. There's no convincing way to argue that Twitter would make Lewis substantially better at either of these activities. Deep

research for Lewis, I assume, requires him to spend weeks and months getting to know a small number of sources (he's a master of the long-form journalism skill of drawing out a source's story over many sessions), and careful writing, of course, requires freedom from distraction. In both cases, Twitter at best has no real impact, and at worst could be substantially negative, depending on Lewis's susceptibility to the service's addictive attributes. The conclusion would therefore be that Lewis shouldn't use Twitter.

You might argue at this point that confining our example to this single goal is artificial, as it ignores the areas where

a service like Twitter has its best chance of contributing. For writers, in particular, Twitter is often presented as a tool to establish connections with your audience that ultimately lead to more sales. For a writer like Michael Lewis, however, marketing doesn't likely merit its own goal when he assesses what's important in his professional life. This follows because his reputation guarantees that he will receive massive coverage in massively influential media channels, *if* the book is really good. His focus, therefore, is much more productively applied to the goal of writing the best possible book than instead trying to squeeze out a few extra

sales through inefficient author-driven means. In other words, the question is not whether Twitter has some conceivable benefit to Lewis; it's instead whether Twitter use significantly and positively affects the most important activities in his professional life.

What about a less famous writer? In this case, book marketing might play a more primary role in his or her goals. But when forced to identify the two or three most important activities supporting this goal, it's unlikely that the type of lightweight one-on-one contact enabled by Twitter would make the list. This is the result of simple math. Imagine that our hypothetical author

diligently sends ten individualized tweets a day, five days a week—each of which connects one-on-one with a new potential reader. Now imagine that 50 percent of the people contacted in this manner become loyal fans who will definitely buy the author's next book. Over the two-year period it might take to write this book, this yields two thousand sales—a modest boost at best in a marketplace where bestseller status requires two or three times more sales *per week*. The question once again is not whether Twitter offers *some* benefits, but instead whether it offers *enough* benefits to offset its drag on your time and attention (two resources that are

especially valuable to a writer).

Having seen an example of this approach applied to a professional context, let's next consider the potentially more disruptive setting of personal goals. In particular, let's apply this approach to one of our culture's most ubiquitous and fiercely defended tools: Facebook.

When justifying the use of Facebook (or similar social networks), most people cite its importance to their social lives. With this in mind, let's apply our strategy to understand whether Facebook makes the cut due to its positive impact on this aspect of our personal goals. To do so, we'll once again work with a

hypothetical goal and key supporting activities.

Personal Goal: To maintain close and rewarding friendships with a group of people who are important to me.

Key Activities Supporting This Goal:

1. Regularly take the time for meaningful connection with those who are most important to me (e.g., a long talk, a meal, joint activity).
2. Give of myself to those who are most important to me (e.g., making nontrivial sacrifices that

improve their lives).

Not everyone will share this exact goal or supporting activities, but hopefully you'll stipulate that they apply to many people. Let's now step back and apply our strategy's filtering logic to the example of Facebook in the context of this personal goal. This service, of course, offers any number of benefits to your social life. To name a few that are often mentioned: It allows you to catch up with people you haven't seen in a while, it allows you to maintain lightweight contact with people you know but don't run into regularly, it allows you to more easily monitor

important events in people's lives (such as whether or not they're married or what their new baby looks like), and it allows you to stumble onto online communities or groups that match your interests.

These are real benefits that Facebook undeniably offers, but none of these benefits provide a significant positive impact to the two key activities we listed, both of which are offline and effort intensive. Our strategy, therefore, would return a perhaps surprising but clear conclusion: *Of course Facebook offers benefits to your social life, but none are important enough to what really matters to you in this area to*

*justify giving it access to your time and attention.*[*]

To be clear, I'm not arguing that everyone should stop using Facebook. I'm instead showing that for this specific (representative) case study, the strategy proposed here would suggest dropping this service. I can imagine, however, other plausible scenarios that would lead to the opposite conclusion. Consider, for example, a college freshman. For someone in this situation, it might be more important to establish new friendships than to support existing relationships. The activities this student identifies for supporting his goal of a thriving social life, therefore, might

include something like, "attend lots of events and socialize with lots of different people." If this is a key activity, and you're on a college campus, then a tool like Facebook would have a substantially positive impact and *should be used.*

To give another example, consider someone in the military who's deployed overseas. For this hypothetical soldier, keeping in frequent lightweight touch with friends and family left back home is a plausible priority, and one that might once again be best supported through social networks.

What should be clear from these examples is that this strategy, if applied

as described, will lead many people who currently use tools like Facebook or Twitter to abandon them—but not everyone. You might, at this point, complain about the arbitrariness of allowing only a small number of activities to dominate your decisions about such tools. As we established previously, for example, Facebook has many benefits to your social life; why would one abandon it just because it doesn't happen to help the small number of activities that we judged most important? What's key to understand here, however, is that this radical reduction of priorities is not arbitrary, but is instead motivated by an idea that

has arisen repeatedly in any number of different fields, from client profitability to social equality to prevention of crashes in computer programs.

**The Law of the Vital Few*:** In many settings, 80 percent of a given effect is due to just 20 percent of the possible causes.

For example, it might be the case that 80 percent of a business's profits come from just 20 percent of its clients, 80 percent of a nation's wealth is held by its richest 20 percent of citizens, or 80 percent of computer software crashes come from just 20 percent of the identified bugs. There's a formal

mathematical underpinning to this phenomenon (an 80/20 split is roughly what you would expect when describing a *power law* distribution over impact—a type of distribution that shows up often when measuring quantities in the real world), but it's probably most useful when applied heuristically as a reminder that, in many cases, contributions to an outcome are not evenly distributed.

Moving forward, let's assume that this law holds for the important goals in your life. As we noted, many different activities can contribute to your achieving these goals. The law of the vital few, however, reminds us that the most important 20 percent or so of these

activities provide the bulk of the benefit. Assuming that you could probably list somewhere between ten and fifteen distinct and potentially beneficial activities for each of your life goals, this law says that it's the top two or three such activities—the number that this strategy asks you to focus on—that make most of the difference in whether or not you succeed with the goal.

Even if you accept this result, however, you still might argue that you shouldn't ignore the other 80 percent of possible beneficial activities. It's true that these less important activities don't contribute nearly as much to your goal as your top one or two, but they can

provide *some* benefit, so why not keep them in the mix? As long as you don't ignore the more important activities, it seems like it can't hurt to also support some of the less important alternatives.

This argument, however, misses the key point that all activities, regardless of their importance, consume your same limited store of time and attention. If you service low-impact activities, therefore, you're taking away time you could be spending on higher-impact activities. It's a zero-sum game. And because your time returns substantially more rewards when invested in high-impact activities than when invested in low-impact activities, the more of it you shift to the latter, the

lower your overall benefit.

The business world understands this math. This is why it's not uncommon to see a company *fire* unproductive clients. If 80 percent of their profits come from 20 percent of their clients, then they make more money by redirecting the energy from low-revenue clients to better service the small number of lucrative contracts—each hour spent on the latter returns more revenue than each hour spent on the former. The same holds true for your professional and personal goals. By taking the time consumed by low-impact activities—like finding old friends on Facebook—and reinvesting in high-impact activities—like taking a

good friend out to lunch—you end up more successful in your goal. To abandon a network tool using this logic, therefore, is not to miss out on its potential small benefits, but is instead to get more out of the activities you already know to yield large benefits.

To return to where we started, for Malcolm Gladwell, Michael Lewis, and George Packer, Twitter doesn't support the 20 percent of activities that generate the bulk of the success in their writing careers. Even though in isolation this service might return some minor benefits, when their careers are viewed as a whole, they're likely more successful not using Twitter, and

redirecting that time to more fruitful activities, than if they added it into their schedule as one more thing to manage. You should take this same care in deciding which tools you allow to claim your own limited time and attention.

## Quit Social Media

When Ryan Nicodemus decided to simplify his life, one of his first targets was his possessions. At the time, Ryan lived alone in a spacious three-bedroom condo. For years, driven by a consumerist impulse, he had been trying his best to fill this ample space. Now it

was time to reclaim his life from his stuff. The strategy he deployed was simple to describe but radical in concept. He spent an afternoon packing everything he owned into cardboard boxes as if he was about to move. In order to transform what he described as a "difficult undertaking" into something less onerous, he called it a "packing party," explaining: "Everything's more exciting when it's a party, right?"

Once the packing was done, Nicodemus then spent the next week going through his normal routine. If he needed something that was packed, he would unpack it and put it back where it used to go. At the end of the week, he

noticed that the vast majority of his stuff remained untouched in its boxes.

So he got rid of it.

Stuff accumulates in people's lives, in part, because when faced with a specific act of elimination it's easy to worry, "What if I need this one day?," and then use this worry as an excuse to keep the item in question sitting around. Nicodemus's packing party provided him with definitive evidence that most of his stuff *was not* something he needed, and it therefore supported his quest to simplify.

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The last strategy provided a systematic method to help you begin sorting through

the network tools that currently lay claim to your time and attention. This strategy offers you a different but complementary approach to these same issues, and it's inspired by Ryan Nicodemus's approach to getting rid of his useless stuff.

In more detail, this strategy asks that you perform the equivalent of a packing party on the social media services that you currently use. Instead of "packing," however, you'll instead ban yourself from using them for *thirty days*. All of them: Facebook, Instagram, Google+, Twitter, Snapchat, Vine—or whatever other services have risen to popularity since I first wrote these words. Don't formally deactivate these services, and

(this is important) don't mention online that you'll be signing off: Just stop using them, cold turkey. If someone reaches out to you by other means and asks why your activity on a particular service has fallen off, you can explain, but don't go out of your way to tell people.

After thirty days of this self-imposed network isolation, ask yourself the following two questions about each of the services you temporarily quit:

1. Would the last thirty days have been notably better if I had been able to use this service?
2. Did people care that I wasn't using this service?

If your answer is "no" to both questions, quit the service permanently. If your answer was a clear "yes," then return to using the service. If your answers are qualified or ambiguous, it's up to you whether you return to the service, though I would encourage you to lean toward quitting. (You can always rejoin later.)

This strategy picks specifically on social media because among the different network tools that can claim your time and attention, these services, if used without limit, can be particularly devastating to your quest to work deeper. They offer personalized information arriving on an unpredictable

intermittent schedule—making them massively addictive and therefore capable of severely damaging your attempts to schedule and succeed with any act of concentration. Given these dangers, you might expect that more knowledge workers would avoid these tools altogether—especially those like computer programmers or writers whose livelihood explicitly depends on the outcome of deep work. But part of what makes social media insidious is that the companies that profit from your attention have succeeded with a masterful marketing coup: convincing our culture that if you don't use their products you might *miss out*.

This fear that you might miss out has obvious parallels to Nicodemus's fear that the voluminous stuff in his closets might one day prove useful, which is why I'm suggesting a corrective strategy that parallels his packing party. By spending a month without these services, you can replace your fear that you might miss out—on events, on conversations, on shared cultural experience—with a dose of reality. For most people this reality will confirm something that seems obvious only once you've done the hard work of freeing yourself from the marketing messages surrounding these tools: They're not really all that important in your life.

The reason why I ask you to not announce your thirty-day experiment is because for some people another part of the delusion that binds them to social media is the idea that people *want to hear what you have to say*, and that they might be disappointed if you suddenly leave them bereft of your commentary. I'm being somewhat facetious here in my wording, but this underlying sentiment is nonetheless common and important to tackle. As of this writing, for example, the average number of followers for a Twitter user is 208. When you know that more than two hundred people *volunteered* to hear what you have to say, it's easy to begin to believe that

your activities on these services are important. Speaking from experience as someone who makes a living trying to sell my ideas to people: This is a powerfully addictive feeling!

But here's the reality of audiences in a social media era. Before these services existed, building an audience of any size beyond your immediate friends and family required hard, competitive work. In the early 2000s, for example, anyone could start a blog, but to gain even just a handful of unique visitors per month required that you actually put in the work to deliver information that's valuable enough to capture someone's attention. I know this difficulty well. My

first blog was started in the fall of 2003. It was called, cleverly enough, *Inspiring Moniker*. I used it to muse on my life as a twenty-one-year-old college student. There were, I'm embarrassed to admit, long stretches where *no one* read it (a term I'm using literally). As I learned in the decade that followed, a period in which I patiently and painstakingly built an audience for my current blog, *Study Hacks*, from a handful of readers to hundreds of thousands per month, is that earning people's attention online is hard, hard work.

Except now it's not.

Part of what fueled social media's rapid assent, I contend, is its ability to

short-circuit this connection between the hard work of producing real value and the positive reward of having people pay attention to you. It has instead replaced this timeless capitalist exchange with a shallow collectivist alternative: *I'll pay attention to what you say if you pay attention to what I say—regardless of its value.* A blog or magazine or television program that contained the content that typically populates a Facebook wall or Twitter feed, for example, would attract, on average, *no* audience. But when captured within the social conventions of these services, that same content will attract attention in the form of likes and

comments. The implicit agreement motivating this behavior is that in return for receiving (for the most part, undeserved) attention from your friends and followers, you'll return the favor by lavishing (similarly undeserved) attention on them. *You "like" my status update and I'll "like" yours.* This agreement gives everyone a simulacrum of importance without requiring much effort in return.

By dropping off these services without notice you can test the reality of your status as a content producer. For most people and most services, the news might be sobering—no one outside your closest friends and family will likely

even notice you've signed off. I recognize that I come across as curmudgeonly when talking about this issue—is there any other way to tackle it?—but it's important to discuss because this quest for self-importance plays an important role in convincing people to continue to thoughtlessly fragment their time and attention.

For some people, of course, this thirty-day experiment will be difficult and generate lots of issues. If you're a college student or online personality, for example, the abstention will complicate your life and will be noted. But for most, I suspect, the net result of this experiment, if not a massive overhaul in

your Internet habits, will be a more grounded view of the role social media plays in your daily existence. These services aren't necessarily, as advertised, the lifeblood of our modern connected world. They're just products, developed by private companies, funded lavishly, marketed carefully, and designed ultimately to capture then sell your personal information and attention to advertisers. They can be fun, but in the scheme of your life and what you want to accomplish, they're a lightweight whimsy, one unimportant distraction among many threatening to derail you from something deeper. Or maybe social media tools are at the core

of your existence. You won't know either way until you sample life without them.

## Don't Use the Internet to Entertain Yourself

Arnold Bennett was an English writer born near the turn of the twentieth century—a tumultuous time for his home country's economy. The industrial revolution, which had been roaring for decades by this point, had wrenched enough surplus capital from the empire's resources to generate a new class: the white-collar worker. It was now

possible to have a job in which you spent a set number of hours a week in an office, and in exchange received a steady salary sufficient to support a household. Such a lifestyle is blandly familiar in our current age, but to Bennett and his contemporaries it was novel and in many ways distressing. Chief among Bennett's concerns was that members of this new class were missing out on the opportunities it presented to live a full life.

"Take the case of a Londoner who works in an office, whose office hours are from ten to six, and who spends fifty minutes morning and night in travelling between his house door and his office

door," Bennett writes in his 1910 self-help classic, *How to Live on 24 Hours a Day*. This hypothetical London salaryman, he notes, has a little more than sixteen hours left in the day beyond these work-related hours. To Bennett, this is a lot of time, but most people in this situation tragically don't realize its potential. The "great and profound mistake which my typical man makes in regard to his day," he elaborates, is that even though he doesn't particularly enjoy his work (seeing it as something to "get through"), "he persists in looking upon those hours from ten to six as 'the day,' to which the ten hours preceding them and the six hours following them

are nothing but a prologue and epilogue." This is an attitude that Bennett condemns as "utterly illogical and unhealthy."

What's the alternative to this state of affairs? Bennett suggests that his typical man see his sixteen free hours as a "day within a day," explaining, "during those sixteen hours he is free; he is not a wage-earner; he is not preoccupied with monetary cares; he is just as good as a man with a private income." Accordingly, the typical man should instead use this time as an aristocrat would: to perform rigorous self-improvement—a task that, according to Bennett, involves, primarily, reading

great literature and poetry.

Bennett wrote about these issues more than a century ago. You might expect that in the intervening decades, a period in which this middle class exploded in size worldwide, our thinking about leisure time would have evolved. But it has not. If anything, with the rise of the Internet and the low-brow attention economy it supports, the average forty-hour-a-week employee—especially those in my tech-savvy Millennial generation—has seen the quality of his or her leisure time remain degraded, consisting primarily of a blur of distracted clicks on least-common-denominator digital entertainment. If

Bennett were brought back to life today, he'd likely fall into despair at the lack of progress in this area of human development.

To be clear, I'm indifferent to the moral underpinnings behind Bennett's suggestions. His vision of elevating the souls and minds of the middle class by reading poetry and great books feels somewhat antiquated and classist. But the logical foundation of his proposal, that you both *should* and *can* make deliberate use of your time outside work, remains relevant today—especially with respect to the goal of this rule, which is to reduce the impact of network tools on your ability to

perform deep work.

In more detail, in the strategies discussed so far in this rule, we haven't spent much time yet on a class of network tools that are particularly relevant to the fight for depth: entertainment-focused websites designed to capture and hold your attention for as long as possible. At the time of this writing, the most popular examples of such sites include the Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, Business Insider, and Reddit. This list will undoubtedly continue to evolve, but what this general category of sites shares is the use of carefully crafted titles and easily digestible content, often honed by algorithms to be

maximally attention catching.

Once you've landed on one article in one of these sites, links on the side or bottom of the page beckon you to click on another, then another. Every available trick of human psychology, from listing titles as "popular" or "trending," to the use of arresting photos, is used to keep you engaged. At this particular moment, for example, some of the most popular articles on BuzzFeed include, "17 Words That Mean Something Totally Different When Spelled Backward" and "33 Dogs Winning at Everything."

These sites are especially harmful after the workday is over, where the freedom in your schedule enables them

to become central to your leisure time. If you're waiting in line, or waiting for the plot to pick up in a TV show, or waiting to finish eating a meal, they provide a cognitive crutch to ensure you eliminate any chance of boredom. As I argued in Rule #2, however, such behavior is dangerous, as it weakens your mind's general ability to resist distraction, making deep work difficult later when you really want to concentrate. To make matters worse, these network tools are not something you join and therefore they're not something you can remove from your life by quitting (rendering the previous two strategies irrelevant). They're always available, just a quick

click away.

Fortunately, Arnold Bennett identified the solution to this problem a hundred years earlier: *Put more thought into your leisure time*. In other words, this strategy suggests that when it comes to your relaxation, don't default to whatever catches your attention at the moment, but instead dedicate some advance thinking to the question of how you want to spend your "day within a day." Addictive websites of the type mentioned previously thrive in a vacuum: If you haven't given yourself something to do in a given moment, they'll always beckon as an appealing option. If you instead fill this free time

with something of more quality, their grip on your attention will loosen.

It's crucial, therefore, that you figure out in advance what you're going to do with your evenings and weekends before they begin. Structured hobbies provide good fodder for these hours, as they generate specific actions with specific goals to fill your time. A set program of reading, à la Bennett, where you spend regular time each night making progress on a series of deliberately chosen books, is also a good option, as is, of course, exercise or the enjoyment of good (in-person) company.

In my own life, for example, I manage to read a surprising number of

books in a typical year, given the demands on my time as a professor, writer, and father (on average, I'm typically reading three to five books at a time). This is possible because one of my favorite preplanned leisure activities after my kids' bedtime is to read an interesting book. As a result, my smartphone and computer, and the distractions they can offer, typically remain neglected between the end of the workday and the next morning.

At this point you might worry that adding such structure to your relaxation will defeat the purpose of relaxing, which many believe requires complete freedom from plans or obligations.

Won't a structured evening leave you exhausted—not refreshed—the next day at work? Bennett, to his credit, anticipated this complaint. As he argues, such worries misunderstand what energizes the human spirit:

> *What? You say that full energy given to those sixteen hours will lessen the value of the business eight? Not so. On the contrary, it will assuredly increase the value of the business eight. One of the chief things which my typical man has to learn is that the mental faculties are capable of a continuous hard activity; they do*

*not tire like an arm or a leg. All they want is change—not rest, except in sleep.*

In my experience, this analysis is spot-on. If you give your mind something meaningful to do throughout *all* your waking hours, you'll end the day more fulfilled, and begin the next one more relaxed, than if you instead allow your mind to bathe for hours in semiconscious and unstructured Web surfing.

To summarize, if you want to eliminate the addictive pull of entertainment sites on your time and attention, give your brain a quality alternative. Not only will this preserve

your ability to resist distraction and concentrate, but you might even fulfill Arnold Bennett's ambitious goal of experiencing, perhaps for the first time, what it means to live, and not just exist.