

No Digital Day

Assignments

Assignment Overview

- A short, personal reflection of 3-4 pages
- Students work individually
- Substantial planning required (see below)
- Due anytime between semester's beginning and Monday, November 13
- Must start planning ASAP!

This assignment is lightly adapted from Prof. Amanda Gailey's "No Digital Day" assignment for her "Being Human in a Digital Age" course at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln.



"Amish Buggy" by Ted Van Pelt

Rationale

Human beings have interacted with illuminated screens for a portion of the species' existence that is so small it's hard to calculate as a percentage. If humans have existed for 200,000 years, we've used screens for less than 0.0005% of that time. A stricter definition of "human," requiring symbolic thought, etc., dates the species at 50,000 years old, in which case screens still have been familiar for about 0.002% of our existence. Should we feel so cognitively dependent on them now? What does your brain do without the distraction and convenience of the screen?

Sometime between the beginning of the semester and November 13, you will pick a single 24-hour period—which must include an entire waking day—in which you will dramatically reduce your use of screen-based technology and interactive media, according to guidelines below. This activity is meant to encourage you to think about a few things:

- How cognitively dependent are you on screen technologies?
- How frequently are you tempted to distract yourself with various digital technologies? What triggers prompt you to want to distract yourself? Without familiar devices, what do you do instead? What do you think about or do with your hands?
- How much do these technologies aid you in your schoolwork?
- How do you communicate differently with people when these technologies are not available to you?
- What do you do for entertainment?

The Nitty-Gritty

Each student may choose from the following "No Digital" scenarios, depending on how austere you want to be. But: since you have to do this anyway, I recommend you go big. Though it is a classroom assignment, do your best to make the experiment meaningful.

To Prepare

1. Think ahead when picking your 24-hour period. If you need to get syllabi or assignments off the web, do it ahead of time. If our class falls during your 24-hour period, make sure to print out any readings or other required online materials before the day begins.
2. Consider writing a vacation response for your email and changing your voicemail so people won't wonder why you haven't written or called back (and you won't stress as much about them).

3. If there are people in your life who will definitely worry about you if they don't hear from you over the course of a day, let them know what you're doing ahead of time.
4. Get a watch (or at least scope out working clocks in your environment). Very few phones in 1992 had clocks in them.
5. Be aware of how to reach people by phone. You'll need a phone book or you'll need to write numbers down ahead of time.
6. Turn off automatic notifications on your devices. This one is important. If your phone is buzzing all day—even if you never respond—it will pull you out of the experiment mentally. One significant difference between 2018 and 1992 or 1922 is simply in the number of small alerts clamoring for our attention throughout the day.

On the Day

1. Carry a notebook and pen with you. Whenever you feel tempted to check your email or social media accounts, make a check mark in the book.
2. Take notes on your thought process throughout the day. What triggers you to seek distraction? What do you do instead when that distraction is unavailable?
3. Take notes on other aspects of the day. In what ways were you inconvenienced by the restrictions of the assignment? What aspects of daily life presume constant connectivity (and does this leave anyone out)? Did this assignment alter the way you interact with people you care about?

By October 25

Write a 4-5 page reflection about your No Digital Day. What did you learn about yourself? Would you do this again or for a longer period of time? In a final act of irony, post the reflection to your blog.

Option A: 1992

Just before the web became widely available. You probably would have had a phone at home, cable TV, and a word processor. If you choose this option, the following are not allowed:

- Texting
- Web browsing
- Any use of your phone as something besides a phone—that is, you can dial a number and talk to someone, but that's it. Realistically, you wouldn't have carried a phone around with you, but you can do that as long as you only use it as a phone.
- GPS

- Streaming video
- Streaming music, MP3s, etc.
- Online video games, even through a console

Option B: 1922

Before most screen-based and communication technologies we use today were developed or in wide use. If you choose this option, the following are not allowed:

- Any use phones save for direct calls to other phones using a phone number.
- Any use of any web-based technology or services
- Any use of any screen-based devices, television included (actual radios are fine)

A Note on Honesty

Your job is to remain true to the spirit of this assignment. You aren't expected to dress like a turn-of-the-century dandy or avoid refrigerators—the point is to eliminate the kinds of recent technological advances that arguably lead to cognitive dependence and alterations in your mental processes. There are many ways you could violate the spirit of the assignment, such as having a friend look up information for you. I trust you to use your judgment about what violates the spirit of the assignment.

This assignment depends on the honor system. I'm not interested in policing you to make sure you really did this. It's an exercise in self-awareness and you would be cheating yourself by cheating on the assignment. If you can't go 24 hours without a few modern conveniences, perhaps it is time to admit your cognitive dependence?