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books and/on the web: reb.us, pressbooks.com, librivox.org, iambik.com, and a few other bits & bobs.

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Why can't we read anymore?

Or, can books save us from what digital does to our brains?

Last year, I read four books.

The reasons for that low number are, I guess, the same as your reasons for reading fewer books than you think you should have read last year: I've been finding it harder and harder to concentrate on words, sentences, paragraphs. Let alone chapters. Chapters often have page after page of paragraphs. It just seems such an awful lot of words to concentrate on, on their own, without something else happening. And once you've finished one chapter, you have to get through another one.

And usually a whole bunch more, before you can say *finished*, and get to the next. The next book. The next thing. The next possibility. Next next next.

I am an optimist

Still, I am an optimist. Most nights last year, I got into bed with a book—paper or e—and started. Reading. Read. Ing. One word after the next. A sentence. Two sentences.

Maybe three.

And then ... I needed just a *little* something else. Something to tide me over. Something to scratch that little itch at the back of my mind—just a quick look at email on my iPhone; to write, and erase, a response to a funny Tweet from William Gibson; to find, and follow, a link to a good, really good, article in the *New Yorker*, or, better, the *New York Review of Books* (which I might even read most of, if it is that good). Email again, just to be sure.

I'd read another sentence. That's four sentences.

Smokers who are the most optimistic about their ability to resist temptation are the most likely to relapse four months later, and overoptimistic dieters are the least likely to lose weight. (Kelly McGonigal: The Willpower Instinct)

It takes a long time to read a book at four sentences per day.

And it's exhausting. I was usually asleep halfway through sentence number five.

I've noticed this pattern of behaviour for a while now, but I think last year's completed book tally was as low as it has ever been. It was dispiriting, most deeply so because my professional life revolves around books: I started [LibriVox](#) (free public domain audiobooks), and [Pressbooks](#) (an online platform for making print and ebooks), and I co-edited a [book about the future of books](#).

I've dedicated my life one way or another to books, I *believe* in them, yet, I wasn't able to read them.

I'm not alone.

When the people at the New Yorker can't concentrate long enough to listen to a song all the way through, how are books to survive?

I heard an interview on the [New Yorker podcast recently](#), the host was interviewing writer and photographer, Teju Cole.

Host:

One of the challenges in culture now is to, say, listen to a song all the way through, we're all so distracted, are you still able to kind of give deep attention to things, are you able to sort of engage in culture that way?"

Teju Cole:

"Yes, very much so."

When I heard this, I felt like hugging the host. He couldn't even listen to a song all the way through, before getting distracted. Imagine what his bedside pile of books does to him.

I also felt like hugging Teju Cole. It's people like Mr. Cole who give us hope that someone will be left to teach our children how to read books.

Dancing to distraction

What was true of my problems reading books—the unavoidable siren call of the digital hit of new information—was true in the rest of my life as well.

My two-year old daughter, dance recital. Pink tutu. Cat ears on her head. Along with five other two-year-olds, in front of a crowd of 75 parents and grandparents, these little toddlers put on a show. You can imagine the rest. You've seen these videos on Youtube, maybe I have shown you my videos. The cuteness level was extreme, a moment that defines a certain kind of parental pride. My daughter didn't even dance, she just wandered around the stage, looking at the audience with eyes

as wide as a two-year old's eyes starting at a bunch of strangers. It didn't matter that she didn't dance, I was so proud. I took photos, and video, with my phone.

And, just in case, I checked my email. Twitter. You never know.

I find myself in these kinds of situations often, checking email or Twitter, or Facebook, with nothing to gain except the stress of a work-related message that I can't answer right now in any case.

It makes me feel vaguely dirty, reading my phone with my daughter doing something wonderful right next to me, like I'm sneaking a cigarette.

Or a crack pipe.

One time I was reading on my phone while my older daughter, the four-year-old, was trying to talk to me. I didn't quite hear what she had said, and in any case, I was reading an article about North Korea. She grabbed my face in her two hands, pulled me towards her. "Look at me," she said, "when I'm talking to you."

She is right. I should.

. . .

Spending time with friends, or family, I often feel a soul-deep throb coming from that perfectly engineered wafer of stainless steel and glass and rare earth metals in my pocket. *Touch me. Look at me. You might find something marvellous.*

This sickness is not limited to when I am trying to read, or once-in-a-lifetime events with my daughter.

At work, my concentration is constantly broken: finishing writing an article (this one, actually), answering that client's request, reviewing and commenting on the new designs, cleaning up the copy on the About page. Contacting so and so. Taxes.

All these tasks critical to my livelihood, get bumped more often than I should admit by a quick look at Twitter (for work), or Facebook (also for work), or an article about Mandelbrot sets (which, just this minute, I read).

Email, of course, is the worst, because email is where work happens, and even if it's not the *work you should be doing right now* it may well be work that's easier to do than what you are doing now, and that means somehow you end up doing that work instead of whatever you are supposed to be working on now. And only then do you get back to what you should have been focusing on all along.

Dopamine and digital

It turns out that digital devices and software are finely tuned to train us to pay attention to them, no matter what else we should be doing. The mechanism, borne out by recent neuroscience studies, is something like this:

- *New information creates a rush of dopamine to the brain, a neurotransmitter that makes you feel good.*
- *The promise of new information compels your brain to seek out that dopamine rush.*

With fMRIs, you can see the brain's pleasure centres light up with activity when new emails arrive.

So, every new email you get gives you a little flood of dopamine. Every little flood of dopamine reinforces your brain's memory that checking email gives a flood of dopamine. And our brains are programmed to seek out things that will give us little floods of dopamine. Further, these patterns of behaviour start creating neural pathways, so that they become unconscious habits: Work on something important, brain itch, check email, *dopamine*, refresh, *dopamine*, check Twitter, *dopamine*, back to work. Over and over, and each time the habit becomes more ingrained in the actual structures of our brains.

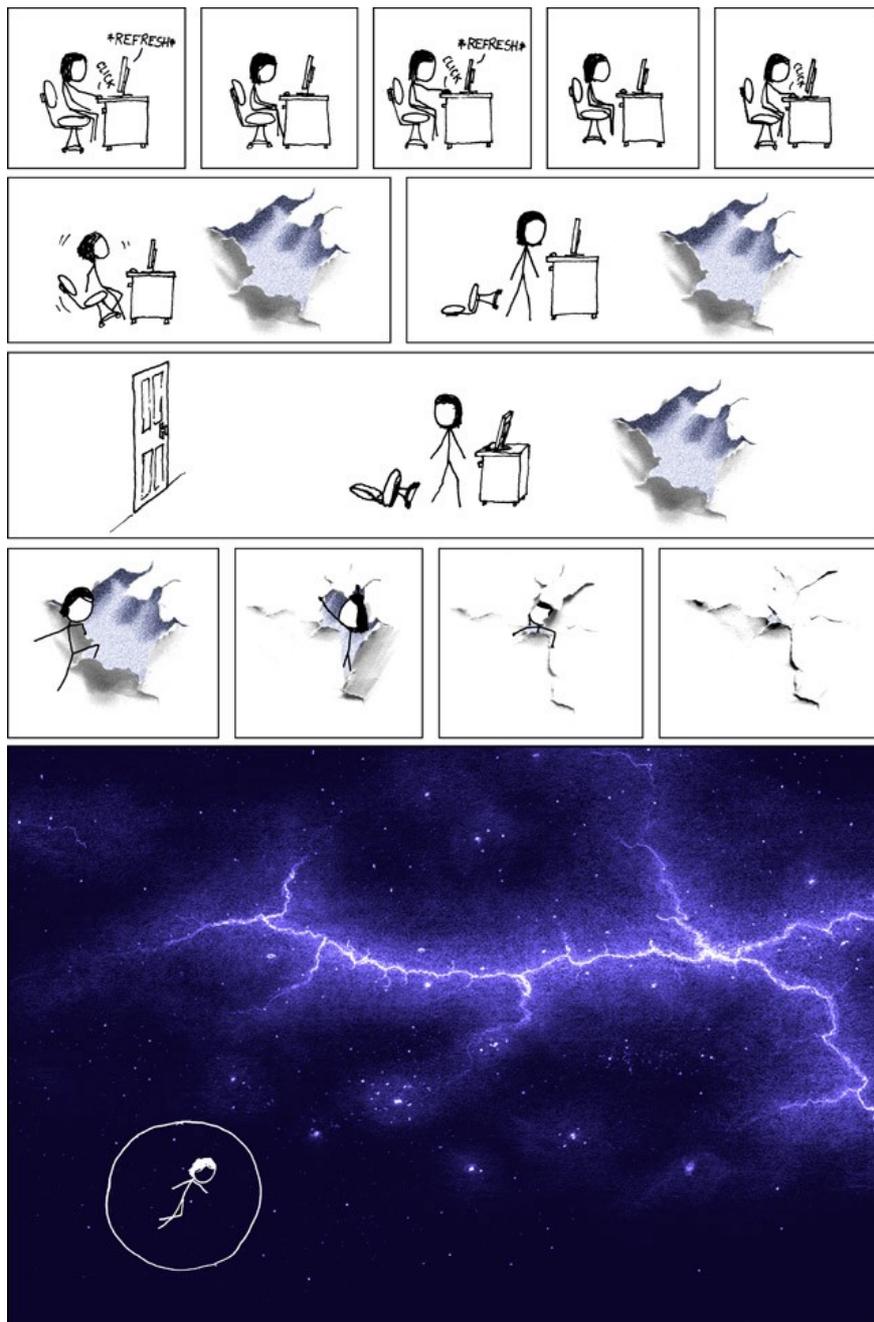
How can books compete?

Pleasing ourselves to death

There is a famous study of rats, wired up with electrodes on their brains. When the rats press a lever, a little charge gets released in part of their brain that stimulates dopamine release. A pleasure lever.

Given a choice between food and dopamine, they'll take the dopamine, often up to the point of exhaustion and starvation. They'll take the dopamine over sex. Some studies see the rats pressing the dopamine lever 700 times in an hour.

We do the same things with our email. Refresh. Refresh.



Choices: Part 1 (xkcd)

There is no beautiful universe on the other side of the email refresh button, and yet it's the call of that button that keeps pulling me out of the work I am doing, out of reading books I want to read.

Why are books important?

When I think back on my life, I can define a set of books that shaped me—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. Books have always been an escape, a learning experience, a saviour, but beyond this, greater than

this, certain books became, over time, a kind of glue that holds together my understanding of the world. I think of them as nodes of knowledge and emotion, nodes that knot together the fabric my self. Books, for me anyway, hold together who I am.

Books, in ways that are different to visual art, to music, to radio, to love even, force us to walk through another's thoughts, one word at a time, over hours and days. We share our minds for that time with the writer's. There is a slowness, a forced reflection required by the medium that is unique. Books recreate someone else's thoughts inside our own minds, and maybe it is this one-to-one mapping of someone else's words, on their own, without external stimuli, that give books their power. Books force us to let someone else's thoughts inhabit our minds completely.

Books are not just transferrers of knowledge and emotion, but a special kind of tool that flattens one self into another, that enable the trying-on of foreign ideas and emotions.

This suppressing of the self is a kind of meditation too—and while books have always been important to me on their own (pre-digital) merits, it started to occur to me that “learning how to read books again,” might also be a way to start weaning my mind away from this dopamine-soaked digital detritus, this meaningless wash of digital information, which would have a double benefit: I would be reading books again, and I would get my mind back.

And, there are, often, beautiful universes to be found on the other side of the cover of a book.

The problems with digital stuff

Recent neuroscience confirms many of the things we sufferers of digital overload know innately. That successful multi-tasking is a myth. Multi-tasking makes us stupider. According to psychologist Glenn Wilson, the cognitive losses from multitasking are equivalent to smoking pot.

(UPDATE: thanks to [Liza Daly](#) for pointing out that Glenn Wilson has publicly stated that this study was part of a paid PR gig, and misrepresented in the media. See:

http://www.drglennwilson.com/Infomania_experiment_for_HP.doc)

This is bad for so many reasons: it makes us less effective at work, which means either we get less done, or have less time to spend doing other things, or both.

Being in a situation where you are trying to concentrate on a task, and an e-mail is sitting unread in your inbox, can reduce your effective IQ by 10 points. (The Organized Mind, by Daniel J Levitin)

It's worse than that though, because this constant hopping from one thing to another is also exhausting.

My least productive days, the days when I have spent the most time jumping between projects and emails and Twitter and whatever else, are also my most exhausting days. I used to think that my exhaustion was the cause of this lack of focus, but it turns out the opposite might be true.

It takes more energy to shift your attention from task to task. It takes less energy to focus. That means that people who organize their time in a way that allows them to focus are not only going to get more done, but they'll be less tired and less neurochemically depleted after doing it. (The Organized Mind, by Daniel J Levitin)

The problem defined

And so, the problem, more or less, is identified:

1. I cannot read books because my brain has been trained to want a constant hit of dopamine, which a digital interruption will provide
2. This digital dopamine addiction means I have trouble focusing: on books, work, family and friends

Problem identified, or most of it. There is more.

Oh, and don't forget about television

We live in a golden age of television, there is no doubt. The stuff being produced these days is very good. And there is a lot of it.

For the past couple of years, my evening routine has been a variation on: get home from work, exhausted. Make sure the girls have eaten. Make sure I eat. Get the girls to bed. Feel exhausted. Turn on the

computer to watch some (neo-golden-age-era) television. Fiddle with work emails, and generally piddle around while that golden-age-era TV consumes 57% of my attention. Be bad at watching TV and bad at getting emails done. Go to bed. Try to read. Check email. Try to read again. Fall asleep.

Those who read own the world, and those who watch television lose it. (Werner Herzog)

I don't know if Werner Herzog is right, but I do know that I would never say about television—even the great stuff, of which there is plenty—what I say about books. There are no television shows that exist as nodes holding together my understanding of the world. My relationship to television is just not the same as it is to books.

And, so, a change

And so, starting in January, I started making some changes. The key ones are:

1. No more Twitter, Facebook, or article reading during the work day (hard)
2. No reading of random news articles (hard)
3. No smartphones or computers in the bedroom (easy)
4. No TV after dinner (it turns out, easy)
5. Instead, go straight to bed and start reading a book—usually on an eink ereader (it turns out, easy)

The shocking thing was how quickly my mind adapted to accommodate reading books again. I had expected to fight for that concentration—but I didn't have to fight. With less digital input (no pre-bed TV, especially), extra time (no TV, again), and without a tempting digital device near at hand ... there was time and space for my mind to settle into a book.

What a wonderful feeling it was.

I am reading books now more than I have in years. I have more energy, and more focus than I've had for ages. I have not fully conquered my digital dopamine addiction, though, but it's getting there. I think reading books is helping me retrain my mind for focus.

And books, it turns out, are still the same wonderful things they used to be. I can read them again.

Workday email, however, remains a problem. If you have suggestions for that, please let me know.

(By the way, I am starting a little email newsletter about books, reading and the technology that surrounds them both. I'll aim to have something new every week or two. You can [sign up here](#)).

