A Digital Detox for Digital Archaeology?

written by Jeremy Huggett | 08/04/2016



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Digital detox has been very much in the news of late, with celebrities from film stars to pop singers to video bloggers attempting to digitally detox for a host of different reasons. Ten years ago, Thomas Friedman, the New York Times op-ed columnist and three-time Pulitzer Prize winner, wrote about continuous partial attention – the consequence of our attempts to multitask when on the Internet or cellphone while watching television, typing an email or paper, and trying to hold a conversation with someone – he called it "the malady of modernity. We have gone from the Iron Age to the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Age of Interruption".

He was certainly not the first to draw attention to this – for example, in 1971 Herbert Simon, an American political scientist and Nobel Prize winner, wrote

> "In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a

> poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it." (Simon 1971, 40-1).

It's worth noting the date – well before any personal computers, let alone mobile phones or tablet devices.

Research by the Chartered Management Institute (Worrall *et al.* 2016) recently showed that British workers are effectively cancelling out their annual leave allowance by checking their emails outside their contracted hours. In their report, 61% stated that mobile technology makes it hard to switch off from work, over half (54%) frequently check their emails outside normal working hours, with 21% checking it 'all the time'. This is something I'm very aware of in my workplace – it's a characteristic of academics which isn't helped by our 'no fixed hours' contracts.

As a consequence, digital connectivity has become pathologised (see, for example, Jurgenson 2013). The need to unplug or disconnect has become a health and well-being issue: technology is toxic, addictive, unnatural, and the answer is some form of digital austerity.

So in addition to the holidays, summer camps etc. sold on promises of helping us detoxify, there are apps (inevitably!) which reward you for spending less time on the phone or disable the phone entirely. There's even a detox app in the form of a game – 'Forest' grows trees over time but only if you set a timer and then don't touch your phone or tablet until it runs out, otherwise if you use another app a tree dies and the withered leaf-less trunk remains in your forest as a reminder of your failure. "It's a game you can only win by not playing it".

Of course, in some regards, a lot of this talk of detoxifying is the present-day equivalent of snake oil, sold by quacks and charlatans. So am I some kind of archaeological snake oil salesman, arguing that something is wrong with archaeology and that information technology is to blame? That an offline, non-digital archaeology is healthier, more authentic? That a post-digital archaeology is an archaeology without the digital? Not exactly! In a recent critique of digital detoxing by Natasha Mauthner, she argues that while detox may provide a temporary respite, we have to make up for it as soon as we plug back in. So it isn't as worthwhile – or even as possible – as it might seem to be. To be valuable and effective, the detox should provide an opportunity for recalibration:

> "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." (Mauthner 2015).

Similarly, in a critique of the more extreme forms of digital detoxification, Alexis Madrigal wrote:

> "I refuse to accept that the only good response to an imperfect technology is to abandon it. We need more specific criticisms than the ever-present feeling that "something's not right". *What thing?* Developing a political agenda to remake, improve, or forbid technologies requires some sort of rubric: how can I judge what I'm using? What are the deleterious

> impacts? How are they specific to these media and this time? Which effects are **caused by** the technologies and which are **enabled by** the technologies and which just happen to **occur through** the technologies? What are the ethics? What are the mechanics? What is the baseline?" (Madrigal 2013).

And this is what interests me – I'm not arguing for a return to some pre-digital archaeology, nor am I a luddite or a disconnectionist. I'm as much a techno-enthusiast as the next person, if not more so – I've been using and abusing these devices in archaeological contexts for over thirty years. But Digital Archaeology over the years can be characterised as primarily concerned with exploring the practical uses of computer techniques and technologies, and the computations that can be applied to different kinds of archaeological data in the pursuit of analysis. It has done so in an environment which has been largely uncritical, where the focus has lain in selecting and using tools, and any critique has been primarily restricted to debate surrounding the outputs. The lack of a meaningful dialogue about the intervening digital technologies and their influence on the outputs has left archaeologists open to accusations of technological fetishism. This is despite the fact that digital archaeologists work within a scientific discipline which is predicated upon an artefact rather than nature or culture.

Digital Archaeology should be a means of rethinking archaeology, rather than simply a series of methodologies and techniques. It is not simply a matter of the technology driving these challenges – what is important are our ambitions for the subject, and only then the ways in which digital technology might be used to catalyse, support, develop, and enhance those innovations.

[This is part of a presentation I gave recently at a York Heritage Research Seminar at the Department of Archaeology, University of York. I'd like to thank Sara Perry and her colleagues for the opportunity to try and put some coherent thoughts together. Whether I was successful or not, you can judge for yourself :-)]

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