

Blog posting for November 24, 2016

On *Not* Loving Social MediaUnplugging from the Noise

Some two years ago, a mentor commented to me: “If you’re using your abilities to make positive change, you will succeed.” That statement has been a beacon for me, through the sometimes hectic days of being a freelance writer and editor and in the volunteer work that I do in the community.

Another equally discerning mentor observed that local freelance writers and editors have really only “a thousand billable hours in a year” worth of work. So why spend any of that precious time doing something you dislike? And why spend them on a strategy that could limit your capacity for learning and growth?

Freelancers saying that they do not love social media puts them at risk of being labelled as “luddites,” anti-social,” evolutionary throwbacks and worse.

I engage with social media (especially FB, Li and Tw) and have appreciated some of the communication it has allowed me to receive, especially in conversation with colleagues who have limited availability over email or by phone. But social media is no substitute for genuinely speaking with a person. And I don’t always have time to keep up with social’s minute-by-minute changes, and have no interest in becoming a “star” over it, as many Millennials have rushed headlong to become.

So I was interested to read, in a recent issue of *The New York Times*, an article called: “Quit Social Media. Your Career May Depend on It.” It was written by tenured computer science professor, Cal Newport. (Many thanks to Saskatoon writer and editor Wilf Popoff for sharing the article with me. Here’s the link: <http://nyti.ms/2gay76B> .)

Newport identifies himself as a “millennial computer scientist who also writes books and runs a blog.” He’s no stranger to programming and to high end computer use that would baffle most of us non-specialists. And he’s a powerful writer. Yet he comments: “Demographically speaking, I should be a heavy social media user, but that is not the case. I’ve never had a social media account.” Read on a few more lines and Newport says that he’s not mounting the usual critique that writers like me tend to make—that social media leads to “corrosion of civic life” and shows “cultural shallowness.”

No. Newport challenges us more deeply than that: “You should quit social media because it can hurt your career.” He knows full well the frantic pace with which social users tend to their branding. He acknowledges that many “people in [his] generation fear that without a social media presence, they would be invisible to the job market.”

But he suggests that this thinking is misguided, and that “In a capitalist economy, the market rewards things that are rare and valuable. Social media use is . . . not rare or valuable.” Consider how lies and other misrepresentations that proliferated over social media and that masqueraded as the political or personal values of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, made a travesty of the recent American Presidential Election. Many Americans (and we as Canadian neighbours) decried the hateful, outrageous and spurious claims that Trump himself made. So it was not a tall order to believe lies and misrepresenting statements, especially those attacking Clinton that circulated over social media.

Newport contends that professional “success is hard, but it’s not complicated. The foundation to achievement and fulfillment, almost without exception, requires that you hone a useful craft and then apply it to things that people care about If you do that, the rest will work itself out, regardless of the size of your Instagram following.” Impulsive tweets and postings do not represent a “useful craft.”

He says that the common defense that social media offers connections and opportunities to its users is objectionable. Connections and opportunities can arise in our professional lives that are “not as scarce as social media proponents claim.” Newport says that as he grew as an academic and writer, he “began receiving more interesting opportunities than [he] could handle,” without him having a single social media account. As people work in their chosen professions, they “become more valuable to the marketplace [so that] good things will find you.” He doesn’t dispute that it’s valuable to seek out new opportunities and connections, but only that you need “social media’s help to attract them.”

Secondly, Newport denies that “social media is harmless.” He says it fragments users’ attention spans, so that few people now are able to “concentrate without distraction” on complex thinking or tasks. As when people take a narcotic, the more you use “social,” in “the way it’s designed to be used—persistently throughout your waking hours—” he says, “the more your brain learns to crave a quick hit of stimulus” when facing a moment of silent thought or physical or social inactivity. The brain connects (in Pavlovian response) that silence or inactivity with boredom and seeks immediately to fill the gap.

Why would any sane person comply with a practice that diminishes concentration and so the ability to earn a living?

But it’s Newport’s major grievance with social media that resonates most with me: “It diverts your time and attention away from producing work that matters and toward convincing the world that *you* matter” (emphasis original). Therein lies the narcotic-like attraction, which is both dangerous and “disastrously counterproductive.” The thought that self-esteem (“that *you* matter”) hinges on the number of “likes,” “shares” or attention one receives over social is wretched. There’s no wonder that teens are driven to suicide over this apparently benign form of “communication.”

It was in mainstream press this week that the former Conservative Albertan MLA Sandra Jansen was cyber-bullied and attacked over social media for recently crossing the floor to the governing NDP party. She's received vulgar, abusive missives, threats of intimidation and even death, from both men and women, who troll the internet and social media, cloaked in anonymity.

And last month, mainstream media reported that the average Ontario female high school student was spending a total of five hours per day on social media sites. Besides the lost capacity for reading and learning, these students were subject to cyber-bullying and hate speech that has precipitated clinical depression and even suicide attempts. If you follow the national news, you'll know that several cases of this nature have ended in death by suicide.

Which isn't, of course, to paint all social media use as problematic. These cases illustrate serious abuse. Newport assesses more benign usage as "best described as a collection of somewhat trivial entertainment services that are currently having a good run."

His article provides timely social commentary for anyone who still cares to read and write articles, newspapers, books and journals.

Will you spend the upcoming holiday season with your nose in a smartphone, or reading Lawrence Hill, Alice Munro, *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*? And this is not merely an academic's question or inquiry: well-read professionals from every sector are affected by what they read and write.

I'm reminded that the prolific English psychoanalyst, writer and cultural commentator, Adam Phillips, has refused since the 1990's to publicize an email account, claiming that he wants "less communication." After devoting at least eight hours most weekdays to listening with exquisite attention to the emotional needs of his patients, he has no desire to waste precious family and reading time on the inanities of online "speak." He knows about Instagram, but he works around it. He's not afraid, when necessary, to handwrite an occasional letter. He uses the phone to reach others (and vehemently not to check social media). At least every two years, he publishes a full volume of cultural criticism and his articles appear frequently in *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*. He's one of many examples—now including Cal Newport—of people bucking the tide of social media as a tool for communication.

Newport's own study sounds promising: *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World* (Grand Central, 2015). Based on his article, I intend to read it.

What is your level of comfort with social media and its current use? How long has it been since you last read a significant book of non-fiction (such as biography) or serious fiction (not the likes of Stephen King or Danielle Steele)? If you were stranded for a weekend without WiFi or your favourite electronic device(s), how would you tolerate the withdrawal?

Please share your thoughts with me on my website. I'd be pleased to continue this conversation.