In his book *Hamlet's BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age* William Powers introduces the concept he calls digital maximalism. Powers explains, "We've effectively been living by a philosophy, albeit an unconscious one. It holds that (1) connecting via screens is good, and (2) the more you connect, the better. I call it Digital Maximalism, because the goal is maximum screen time. Few of us have decided this is a wise approach to life, but let's face it, this is how we have been living." Few of us have decided this is a wise approach and yet we seemingly still "plug-in" more than ever. Why is this? In order to understand this phenomenon, one must first look at the strengths and weaknesses of Powers' argument for and against digital maximalism.

Powers expounds, "Connecting enhances life on so many levels, it's common sense to conclude that one should be as connected as possible all the time." This is where Powers begins discussing the pros for digital connectedness. At the heart of his argument are two "essential benefits": one can accomplish the routine tasks quicker and easier, and "nurture our minds, hearts, and souls" at the same time. Powers clarifies, "It's a no-brainer…in this highly competitive world, speed and efficiency are the name of the game." I agree with this assessment; we are taught from an early age that productivity (and the quickness with which one can realize productivity) is the best way to succeed in the "real world." If becoming continuously connected to the different available technologies is the most advantageous way to reach this end, why would we *not* be connected? Powers continues, "It's no exaggeration to say that, at their best, [digital devices] produce the kinds of moments that make life rewarding and worth living. If you've ever written an e-mail straight from the heart, or watched a video that you couldn't stop thinking about, you know this is true." If I can refrain from pessimism (mainly believing that these rewarding moments can be achieved without digital assistance), it is conceivable to appreciate Powers' position. I have had similar experiences to heart-felt emails and unforgettable videos; however, this argument can best be made with my daughter. This past November, my wife and I welcomed a little girl, Charlotte, into our home and, more importantly, our lives. My mother, who had visited the hospital (an hour from home) and stayed late the night before Charlotte was born, had to go back home to work the next day. When the most perfect little being came into this world at 10:57 pm, I was able to send pictures to my mother lying in her bed. This experience would never have been possible without my iPhone. After all, "It's good to be connected, and it's bad to be disconnected."

Alternatively, Powers describes two ways digital life is unsettling. He explains that our digital devices have trained us "to treat our time and our attention as infinitely divisible commodities." This desire to keep searching for new information begins to affect our daily non-digital lives. We begin to lose the ability to "tolerate three minutes of pure focus." Secondly, "The more we connect, the more our thoughts lean outward. There's a preoccupation with what's going on 'out there' in the bustling otherworld, rather than 'in here' with yourself and those right around you." I wholeheartedly agree with this sentiment. I see this in my life, as well as my students' lives. When we are

connected all the time (even when we are sleeping) to literally everything and everyone in the world, we feel an obligation to "reach out and touch the whole world." This is a massive responsibility we have all taken on freely. All of this "digital busyness is the enemy of depth." Powers discusses the importance of depth and why it is so unsettling that as a society we are choosing digital busyness over depth. Depth, he explains, is the moments we treasure forever, those times with substance and wholeness. "And we're losing something of great value, a way of thinking and moving through time that can be summed up in a single word: depth. Depth of thought and feeling, depth in our relationships, our work and everything we do. Since depth is what makes life fulfilling and meaningful, it's astounding that we're allowing this to happen." So why are we allowing this to happen? I believe we are allowing this because we have been mesmerized by flashing lights, and interactive apps, and the promises of connectivity to the rest of the world. We all want to know our lives mean something, that we will be remembered. These digital devices might bring us instant YouTube stardom; however, as Powers' illuminates, without the depth in these experiences our lives are meaningless as we originally feared.

Hamlet's Blackberry has really opened my eyes to a real problem in my life: digital maximalism. How can I ever really enjoy anything when I'm connected to everything? I must pause here to chuckle at the obvious irony of the last statement as I sit on my newly purchased laptop typing away on Microsoft Word while searching William Powers' website for any glimpse into the man I couldn't glean from the novel. This complete control over my life was possibly never more evident than a few years ago. Similar to Powers' story of falling into the water while trying to untie rope from his propeller, I too had a "cell phone meets its untimely demise by water" incident. I was driving my mother's malfunctioning pontoon boat to the closest boat launch to remove it from the water for upcoming repairs. As I neared the launch, the throttle stuck (one of the numerous problems) sending me on a collision course with the cement retaining wall. I turned the motor off, and without pondering the consequences, I leaped into the water to try to stop the boat from receiving further damage. Ultimately, I was able to get the pontoon safely to the dock free of any additional harm. As I was climbing into the boat the sudden realization hit me like a hundred pound brick: my cell phone was in my jeans pocket. My mind filled with all the information I had just lost: all of my contacts (this was exceptionally disheartening seeing as I haven't memorized a phone number in close to a decade), pictures, lesson plans, calendar, etc. The sheer panic I remember feeling is still with me today.

In contrast, I also remember traveling to our camp in the woods for weeks at a time in the early 1990's with no connection to the outside world beside the intermittent visits from my grandparents. Thinking of these visits, Powers' words come to mind, "When it comes to creating a happy, fulfilling interior life, a 'movie-in-the-brain' that makes you want to stand up and applaud, one factor matters more than any other: depth." Interestingly enough, these visits (although small glimpses and connections to the world) provided further depth than the digital connectedness we all experience as we continue living Powers' concept of digital maximalism. I, not unlike Powers, have begun pining for these types of experiences as I constantly hold the weight of the world in my pocket.

These stories help to frame my educational history as well as my current circumstances and plans for the future in regards to Powers' approaches to technology.

As a child, before this Digital Age began, my life was not defined by the technology in it. Humorously I tell my students that there actually was a time before cell phones when students had to call mom and dad from landline phones! This new digital boom began to gain traction when I was in the dorms in my undergrad years. Both of the stories show the contrast between the young me (no technology at camp) and the adult me (phone in water) and how my outlook about the technology that surrounds us has changed. It has been tremendously overwhelming realizing I have been unknowingly living my life as a digital maximalist for quite some time now. So the next logical question is where do I go from here? I have agreed that digital connectedness is both worthy of our praises and damaging to our lives. Like Eric Schmidt, Google CEO, I too wish for a balanced approach to digital connectedness. Therefore, a proper balance between connecting and disconnecting will be in my future. Digital maximalism, by its definition, is not an appropriate approach; however, if an effective balance can be created we could all reap the many benefits our digital devices have to offer.

_____

Don,

Congratulations on reaching the conclusion of the course! It is a real achievement to complete all of the unit readings, books, and assignments with no deadlines except the final one to guide you along the way. Well done!

This final assignment prompts you to use the Powers book as a way to think about our use of technology in general and your own experience with technology and learning. It is perhaps a fitting conclusion to a course on the learning society that digital technology is the focus. Digital technology is a rapidly changing medium for communication and is shaping how we access and create information. It seems that in many ways the learning society will continue to evolve largely based upon the changes in how we learn through our use of digital technology. Thinking back over the learning scenes covered in this course digital technology is pervasive in all areas. This makes the Powers book an especially helpful resource to consider.

Your paper presents an overall discussion on Powers' argument about the "digital maximalist" approach. In general you discuss many of the most important aspects surrounding our use of digital technology, some of the arguments for and against our use of this technology, and include some of the strategies Powers outlines. It seemed from your paper that you are somewhat favorable towards his overall argument yet found some areas in which it could be strengthened. He wants us to establish a more thoughtful and intentional approach to our use of technology, an aspect you do discuss in light of the Powers text. His approach in practical terms does seem "drastic" and perhaps is too much for most people, especially in light of a hyper-connected professional world. The hyper-connectedness we feel may be considered a wonderful example of exactly why Powers was so determined to disconnect and a telling point to illustrate how dominant the pull to be connected really is. As you mention, what can we do to find a way to use Powers as an example though we may not seek to emulate his every move.

In your own experience you highlighted the increasing role that technology has played in your life. You find this lesson to be ironic given the digital nature of this course! Online education has opened up learning opportunities for many students who might not otherwise have had the access to an education. However, you note the fact that digital technology has crept in to your life in a way that can go unchecked and seeks to take over. The constant need for connection can be overwhelming even as we often want to be connected to others. Your paper concludes with a note seeking balance so that we should not be beholden to technology but instead find ways to adjust our expectations for digital connection.

A good job on this final paper and in this course. You were a pleasure to have "in class" this semester. Best wishes for the future.

Grade: 4.00/4

- Graham