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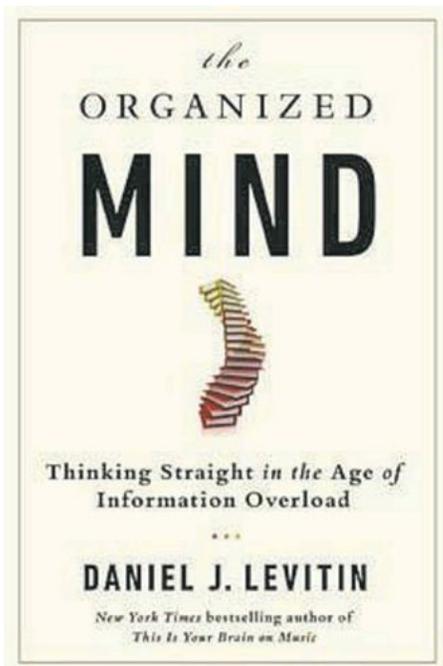
Bringing order to our cluttered minds

Reviewed by: Michael Dudley

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Daniel Levitin wants to help you keep better track of your keys.

In this hefty yet accessible pop-psychology/self-help book, the McGill University psychology professor and behavioural neuroscientist offers the lay reader an entertaining if sometimes meandering cocktail of theory, anecdotes and practical strategies for making better decisions and keeping track of important objects (keys being a frequently mentioned example).



The bestselling author of *This Is Your Brain on Music*, Levitin believes that highly successful people (HSPs) are those who are able to train themselves to actively index, sort, filter and retrieve useful information, while at the same time avoiding distraction and multitasking -- a skill set he refers to as "the organized mind."

To bolster our efforts to adapt to a staggeringly complex informational environment, Levitin argues that we need to revisit our basic critical thinking and numeracy skills, so as to be able to understand and make better decisions about our world, particularly where they concern classification and probabilities.

In much the same way as he did with *This Is Your Brain on Music*, Levitin starts with the necessary theoretical building blocks for understanding how our brains actually process information and the pitfalls associated with those processes. We are hard-wired to detect novelty, but not necessarily to appreciate significance. As a result, we sometimes only see what we are looking for, such that the unexpected can be invisible to us -- as the (now well-known) YouTube video of the gorilla and the

white-shirted basketball players attests.

Many of us are also poor at assessing risk and probabilities, and sometimes make terrible decisions as a result. As well, multitasking and succumbing to the constant distractions of email, texting and status updates not only saps our productivity, but (according to at least one study) can have a measurable negative effect on our IQs.

With these foundations in place, Levitin then applies his principles to improving memory, cognition and critical thinking in our home and social lives before delving into decision-making about health and medical interventions, managing your time and organizing a business.

The book's strength is how it makes neuroscience, social psychology and information theory readily accessible, not only through Levitin's breezily enjoyable writing style, but through the frequent use of illustrations, activities, quizzes, illusions and cartoons.

Levitin is at his best when describing the workings of our brain, and explaining the nature of our

BOOK REVIEW

The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload

By Daniel J. Levitin

Allen Lane, 486 pages, \$30

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decision-making, often by recounting experiments from the psychology and social-psychology literatures, and recounting personal anecdotes -- more often than not drawn from Fortune 500 CEOs and other so-called "HSPs."

He is less successful, however, in translating cognitive theory into practical advice. Many of his suggestions -- such as leaving an umbrella by the door at night to remind you it might rain tomorrow, or keeping track of important information on recipe cards -- comes across as fairly unremarkable and common-sensical.

As well, for all his emphasis on critical thinking, Levitin appears to have never heard of critical theory -- or an understanding of the political economy of power relations -- and as a result displays throughout a lack of skepticism and sophistication about the political world. His discussion about mass-media bias, for example, comes across as uninformed and simplistic (no, Rachel Maddow is not the liberal equivalent of Ann Coulter), as does his assertion that if former U.S. president George W. Bush had trusted Saddam Hussein, who insisted there were no WMDs in Iraq, the U.S. would not have invaded.

The Organized Mind unintentionally demonstrates the limits of any one discipline in comprehending social phenomena: behavioural neuroscience may be able to help us navigate the information age -- by improving our decision-making and keeping track of our keys -- but doesn't really lend itself to grasping its socio-political complexity.

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