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January 16, 2015 4:31 pm

## 'The Organised Mind', by Daniel J Levitin; 'The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying', by Marie Kondo

Review by Tim Harford

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Two very different books claim they can help us to cope with the excess of information, tasks and belongings



The challenge of “getting organised” is both commonplace and oddly particular. Organising my study is a different problem from organising a library, or organising a drinking session in a brewery. Organising things can be practical to the point of banality (what’s the best way to store socks?) but it can also be philosophically deep.

Consider the *Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge*, a Chinese encyclopedia conjured up in an essay by Jorge Luis Borges. The oriental tome organises animals into categories thus: “(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”

Daniel Levitin is a professor of psychology and behavioural neuroscience; Marie Kondo is a professional cleaner. Both have written books that promise to help us get organised, although they are quite different. Kondo’s is a brief and bracing practical guide to tidying up your home. Levitin’s sprawling discussion aspires to provide a comprehensive account of the way we think about organising everything from possessions to friends. Levitin offers enough psychological detail to suggest why our mental categories do

not match Borges's encyclopedia. Yet he also frequently dabbles in the dispensing of practical tips. He has studied not only psychology but "HSPs" (Highly Successful Persons) and with his advice, perhaps you can be an HSP too.

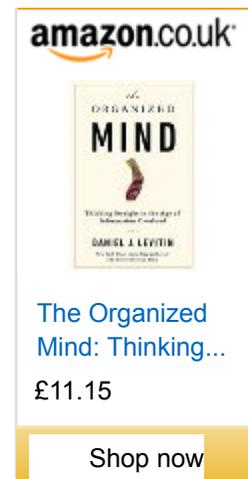
Both books agree that everything should have a place and be put back in that place. Levitin expands on that, explaining that our memory for locations is well developed; hence, the well-known trick of committing a list of things to memory by assigning each thing a place in an imaginary physical space, a "memory palace".

Yet there is a big difference in approach here. Levitin seems to approve of devising organisational systems for a complex world; Kondo believes that before we organise, we must first simplify. Levitin describes a system in which letters are printed in triplicate to allow filing chronologically, by topic and by correspondent. Kondo suggests that we could do without most of our paperwork: even love letters become a drag if you hoard every one.

Levitin's approach to computers illustrates this disagreement. He makes the familiar argument that multitasking is a distracting problem. His solution is to buy several computers, each with a single purpose: one is for work, one for domestic tasks, one for social networking, one for reading books and so on. He is apologetic about the cost of this, but one wonders if even a millionaire could make the system work.

First, all these devices use the internet, and the internet is inherently multifunctional. Second, these categories are more porous than they seem: how to categorise an email from a work colleague inviting you to a party? Third, it's not clear at all that maintaining several distinct email accounts helps anyone process email. Many productivity gurus advise pooling your emails as they come in, and not being too fussy about categorising them on the way out. Simple beats well-organised here, and complex filing systems aren't worth the hassle. As Borges understood very well, they are inevitably a poor fit for the rich mess of reality.

Kondo declares that too much organisation is a trap. Instead of getting rid of things we don't need, we buy stuff to organise the stuff we already have. None of this really helps, she claims. Once you get too clever about storage you lose track of what you own, and that way lies bloat



and frustration.

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Levitin's approach to organisation seems more rational. He is always willing to throw in some talk about dopamine, the prefrontal cortex or inhibitory neurotransmitters. Kondo, eccentrically spiritual, believes in saying thank you to old socks before discarding them. Pragmatically speaking, though, Kondo is both more radical and more persuasive. To the extent that Levitin offers sensible practical advice, it is well-worn (why not carry a notebook and write down ideas and tasks so you don't strain to remember them?). And when he admiringly describes the way that Joni Mitchell has a custom drawer for Scotch tape, another for masking tape, a third for string and rope, a fourth for mailing and packing products, and so on, one can only imagine Kondo trying to slap both Mitchell and Levitin into sanity.

This predilection for comprehensiveness weighs on Levitin's book in another way: it's long, and while it does contain a great deal to intrigue, the parade of disparate topics makes it less than the sum of the parts. There are tens of thousands of words on topics that are perfectly interesting in isolation (Bayes' rule; how to estimate quantities; how online dating works) and yet they do not seem to fit together.

Consider each thing, writes Kondo, and ask "Does it spark joy?" Only then should you keep it. Levitin might profitably have taken that advice.

**The Organised Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload**, by Daniel J Levitin, *Viking*, RRP£20/ Dutton RRP\$27.95, 528 pages

**The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying: A Simple, Effective Way to Banish Clutter Forever**, by Marie Kondo, *Vermilion*, RRP£7.99/ Ten Speed Press, RRP\$16.99, 256 pages

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*Photograph: Getty Images*

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