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DANIEL LEVITIN ON 'THINKING TO DISTRACTION'

FEATURES | ADAM FORREST | FEB 25, 2015

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creative.

From social media to pseudo facts... it's the age of digital overload, says neuroscientist Daniel Levitin

A lot of gainfully employed people on Planet Earth have a very strange working life. It's now considered normal to check your Twitter feed 10 or 20 times a day, fire-fight work emails popping up through the afternoon, keep on top of Facebook communication, all the while texting, Instagramming, Snapchatting, finding time to read that really important piece on how the government is spying on you, and watch the YouTube video of the kitten meowing to Katy Perry.

But it's okay – you're multi-tasking, right? Well, I'm afraid there's some bad news. Renowned neuroscientist and psychologist Daniel Levitin says we've all been kidding ourselves. Multi-tasking is "delusional". The more we switch our attention, the more we tire out our brains. We think we're getting more done but information overload is making us less focused, less productive, less efficient and less

Information overload is making us less focused, less productive, less efficient and less creative

Levitin tells me journalists have particularly distracted minds. "It's more like being an air traffic controller than anything else," he laughs. "You guys have to be scanning a lot of information. It's causing the brain to be switching attentional focus all the time, and each switch comes with a cost.

"My colleagues and I discovered where that switch happens: the insula. And constantly using the insula – you see the effects in poorer judgment, poorer decision-making and feeling stressed."

Oh dear. Levitin's new book The Organized Mind explains in some detail just what we're doing to our brains. It turns out the attentional switching the internet demands reduces glucose and increases the stress hormone cortisol. It also creates a dopamine-addiction feedback loop, effectively rewarding the

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brain for losing focus.

"The novelist Jonathan Franzen said recently he doesn't think any good novelist is able to write while they've got an internet connection," says Levitin. "It's simply too distracting."

But don't despair. The Canadian scientist also wants to help us learn how to clear out the cobwebs and prioritise properly without cutting all ties with your internet service provider. "You can put some systems in place," he says. "It's smart to conserve your energy by making the important decisions early in the day. Short naps are good. And brain extenders, anything that gets information out of our heads and into the physical world like calendars or to-do lists, can help declutter our minds.

"If you have a single email account where everything lands – work stuff, emails about a party, a receipt from Marks and Spencer, a link to a cat video – that's no way to be," he adds. "So separating things out into separate email accounts – business, personal, online bookings and orders – that actually can help reduce distraction."

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Levitin talks with professorial fluency but he knows some pretty groovy people. The brain boffin has worked on and off as a stand-up comic, and as a producer and sound engineer for the likes of Blue Öyster Cult, Chris Isaak and The Grateful Dead.

His book This is Your Brain on Music was a surprise bestseller and won Levitin some very famous fans – Paul Simon, David Byrne and Yoko Ono. "As a Beatles fan, the letter I got from George Martin about the book was one of the greatest things that's ever happened to me," he beams.

And music, says Levitin, can help ease us into one the healthiest states for the waking mind – daydreaming. "Any of us can learn to do it because the daydreaming mode is the default mode of the brain," he says. "The problem is that most of us think it's unproductive or lazy so we push against it. In this over-caffeinated age, we think we can't afford to stop work for five minutes.

"But of course five-minute breaks in which the brain just meanders are exactly what we need to replenish and restore brain functioning. It's the state we get in when we really relax – when we listen to music or go for walks in nature."

So there you have it. Turn off Twitter, shut down the emails, put your headphones on and tell your boss you're off for a walk in the park. Doctor's orders.

The Organized Mind by Daniel Levitin is out now in hardback (Penguin, £20)



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