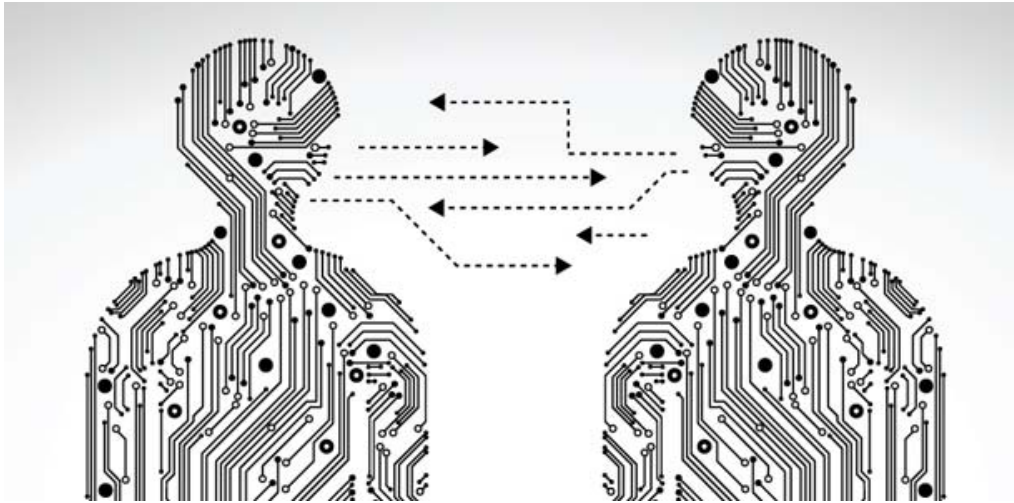


# 'Plug In Better': A Manifesto

By Alexandra Samuel

*The trick isn't to unplug from our devices -- it's to unplug from the distractions, information overload, and trash that make us unhappy.*



A world ruled by spin, in which political influence lasts only until the next embarrassing YouTube video. Industries starved of creative, deep thinking, as focused effort gives way to incessant multitasking. Households made up of neglectful, distracted parents and vacant, screen-glazed children. Human beings reduced to fast-clicking thumbs, their attention spans no longer than 140 characters. That's the future we hear about from Nicholas Carr, Sherry Turkle, and *The New York Times's* [Your Brain on Computers](#) series, which tell us that our growing time online is diminishing both our individual intellects and our collective capacity for connection.

If this dystopian vision drives the call to unplug, there's something more personal motivating those who heed that call. I've been tracking the urge to unplug for the past few years by aggregating and reading blog posts from people who use phrases like "give up Facebook," "go offline," or "without the Internet." When I read accounts of those who've gone offline for a weekend, a holiday, or the 40 days of Lent, they often seem wistful for how their brains, bodies, and relationships feel when they aren't constantly engaged with life online. "Disconnecting from the virtual world allowed me space to connect to the present one," [writes one blogger](#). [Blogs one mom](#), "it's been sorta nice NOT hearing the Cuteness say, 'Mommy, pay attention to me, not your phone.'" ["For the first time in a long time, I experienced silence,"](#) echoes a third.

Unplugging may feel like the most obvious way to access these experiences of intimacy and quiet in a noisy digital world, but the very fact that it's so obvious should make us suspicious. As usual, we're

going for the quick fix: the binary solution that lets us avoid the much more complicated challenge of figuring out how to live online. It's easier to imagine flipping the off switch than to engage with and work through the various human failings that the Internet has brought to the fore.

And it's easier to avoid what is, to many, a very painful truth: Going offline is no longer a realistic option. Sure, we can unplug for an hour, a day, or even a week, but it's not like you can permanently shut off the challenges of our online existence. The offline world is now utterly defined by networks, too, from the pace of our work to the flow of our money. You can look up from the screen, but there is no way to escape the digital.

What you can do is find those qualities of presence, focus, and even solitude in your networked existence. Call it the new unplugging: a way to step back from the rush and din of the Internet, and approach our time online with the same kind of intention and integrity we bring to our best offline interactions.

The new unplugging doesn't require you to quit Facebook or throw out your iPhone. What it requires is careful attention to the sources of our discomfort; to the challenging qualities of online interaction, or of simply living in a networked world. Looking at those pain points, and finding a way to switch them off, is the new unplugging.

**Unplug from distraction:** If you're routinely using three screens at once, distraction can feel like a way of life. But going online is only synonymous with distraction if you assume that what you need to pay attention to is necessarily offline. Sometimes the screen -- with that crucial email, inspiring video, or enlightening blog post -- is exactly what you need to focus on. So unplug from distraction by giving that one on-screen item your full attention: turn off your phone, shut your door, close all the windows and apps that are competing for your attention in the background. Commit to a single task on your computer or mobile device, the same way you might commit to an important face-to-face conversation. You can find freedom from distraction on-screen as well as off.

**Unplug from FOMO:** Fear of Missing Out -- or FOMO -- is one of those human neuroses that has been dramatically amplified by social networking. Even before Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, there were probably conferences you missed attending, concerts you couldn't get into, or parties you didn't get invited to ... you just didn't know about all of them. Nowadays, your social-networking feeds provide constant reminders of all the amazing, inspiring, and delightful activities other people are doing without you. Ouch! Opting out of social networks may feel like the cure for FOMO, but it's the equivalent of standing in the middle of a crowded room with your eyes and ears covered so you can pretend you're all alone. The real solution to FOMO is to accept the fact that, no, you can't be everywhere and do everything. But if that's more than your inner Buddha is ready for, here's my cheat: Click the "hide" button on Facebook updates from friends who are always bragging about their latest cool activities, and use a Twitter client that lets you [filter out the enviable stream of tweets from whatever conference you're not attending](#). That way you can unplug from FOMO without actually unplugging.

**Unplug from disconnection:** One of the ironies of our always-connected lives is that they can leave us feeling less connected to the people who matter most. The urge to unplug often comes from the image of a teen texting her way through family dinner, a dad on his Blackberry at the playground, or a family that sits on the same room but engages with four different screens. But the off switch is not that family's best friend: If anything, the idea of unplugging for family time just sets up an unwinnable war between family intimacy and online connectivity. Instead, families need to embrace the potential of online tools as a way of reconnecting. In *The Happiness Project*, Gretchen Rubin passes along the advice that every couple should have one indoor game and one outdoor game. In the Internet era, every couple or family should also have one video game they play together (we like Bomberman), one online

presence they create together (like a blog or YouTube channel), and one social network where they stay connected (so even if your kids don't want to be your Facebook friend, you can reach them on Google+). If you're using online tools to foster family connection and togetherness, you'll recognize that unplugging is a wishful-thinking alternative to the real work of making Internet time into family time.

**Unplug from information overload:** Whether it's an overflowing inbox, a backlog of unread articles or a Twitter feed that moves faster than we can read, most of us are suffering from information overload. It's one of the most frequent motivations for "digital fasts": the desire to take a break from a stream of information and work that feels overwhelming. That's a useful instinct, since it reflects a desire to assess or even challenge the steadily accelerating pace and volume of work. Unfortunately, when you attempt to address overload by completely unplugging, you also unplug from a lot of the resources that could help you set thoughtful boundaries around your working life. Better to use the Internet to support your work-life balance by building an online support network of friends or trusted colleagues, setting up RSS subscriptions to blogs that bring you insight and inspiration, or starting an online log that helps you track your most meaningful accomplishments each day. Use the Internet to reinforce your resolve to focus on what matters most, and unplug from the overload that comes from the sense you've got to do it all.

**Unplug from the shallows:** If many people feel the urge to unplug, it's partly because they're worried about the results of staying plugged in. What Nick Carr terms "the shallows" encapsulates what many of us experience online: a sense that we're numbing out and dumbing down. But you don't have to unplug from the net in order to find meaning: You can create meaning in the way you use your time online. I've spent a surprising amount of time on evangelical Christian blogs, simply because that's where I find a lot of active inquiry into the challenge of living online with integrity. "When you enter the world of social media, bring Jesus with you," [advises one not-atypical blogger](#). "It's not what we say about Jesus, it's how our lives are being transformed by His message," writes [another blogger on the Christian use of social media](#). "By sharing the details of our lives, we offer people a window into what it means to have faith in our time." As [Elizabeth Drescher, a scholar of Christian social media](#), observes of what she terms the "digital reformation," those who harness social media to their faith "are, in effect, recreating church as an enduring and evolving movable feast -- the very kind of which Jesus seemed so fond." Even if you don't frame your social media usage in terms of a formal religious or spiritual practice, you can unplug from the enfeebling qualities of the Internet, simply by focusing your own time online on the activities and contributions that create meaning for yourself and others.

If this seems like a grab-bag of practices and tools that merely slap a band-aid on the various symptoms that online life can trigger, that's precisely the point. The Internet is an incurable condition - but we can't recognize that as good news until we find a way to treat the various aches and pains of life online.

Once we get our band-aids in place we can get over our preoccupation with unplugging. The reason there are so many blog posts chronicling the results of unplugging is because almost everyone who unplugs, whether for a day or a month, eventually plugs back in. We can interpret that as addiction, or as simple necessity.

Or we can consider a more encouraging possibility: we plug back in because we like it. We plug back in because this new online world offers extraordinary opportunities for creation, discovery, and connection. We plug back in because we don't actually want to escape the online world: We want to help create it.

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