

Study Hacks Blog

Aziz Ansari’s Digital Minimalism

May 9th, 2022 · 7 comments



Not long ago, I watched Aziz Ansari’s new Netflix special, *Nightclub Comedian*. I was pleasantly surprised when, early in the show, Ansari demonstrates his commitment to escaping tech-driven distraction by showing off his Nokia 2720 flip phone (see above). Soon after the special was released, Ansari elaborated on his personal brand of digital minimalism in [a radio interview](#):

“Many years ago, I kind of started turning off the internet, and I deleted all social media and all this stuff, and I’ve slowly just kept going further and further. I stopped using email, maybe, four years ago. I know all this stuff is like, oh yeah, I’m in a position where I can do that and have certain privileges to be able to pull it off, an assistant or whatever, but all that stuff I do helps me get more done.”

This commitment to craft over servicing digital communities is not uncommon among top comedians. Dave Attell, who is widely considered by his peers to be one of the best living joke writers, has a lifeless Twitter account dedicated primarily to announcing show dates. Dave Chappelle doesn’t even bother using Twitter at all. “Why would I write all my thoughts on a bathroom wall,” [he quipped last year](#) when asked about his lack of presence on the popular platform.

Professional comedy provides a useful test case for the importance of digital engagement. It’s a field in which both name recognition *and* craftsmanship matter: you need an audience, but you also need to consistently deliver. Many top practitioners, such as Ansari, Attell, and Chappelle, experimented with this trade-off and ultimately decided that focusing on [being so good you can’t be ignored](#), not the frenetic managing of digital legions, was the surest route to sustainable success.

I recently had to spend a fair amount of time on Twitter to research [my latest New Yorker essay](#). Encountering that onslaught of manic dispatches, tinged with equal parts desperation and pyrrhic triumph, I could only hope that these insights forged in the world of high-level entertainment will soon spread.

7 thoughts on “Aziz Ansari’s Digital Minimalism”

1. SHRUTARSHI BASU says:

MAY 9, 2022 AT 5:56 PM



As much as I’m a fan of digital minimalism in general, I don’t think the evidence you’ve presented here supports your conclusion that “being so good you can’t be ignored…was the surest route to sustainable success”. Ansari stopped using email four years ago, long after he was already an established comedian. A quick scan of his Twitter account shows him posting about his shows etc. up until 2019. Chappelle and Attell were established long before social media existed. I think the best we can conclude is that once you’re well-established you can ignore social media and email, or at least get an assistant to handle them for you (as I’m assuming is the case for Ansari’s Instagram account).

REPLY

1. GERARD says:

MAY 14, 2022 AT 6:39 AM

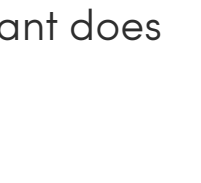


Very good point.

REPLY

2. ADOLFO NETO says:

MAY 9, 2022 AT 6:36 PM

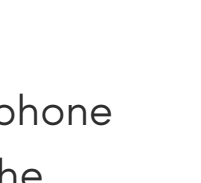


Maybe we all should be able to do what he did if there were some reliable companies doing for us what his assistant does for him.

REPLY

3. JR says:

MAY 10, 2022 AT 12:25 AM



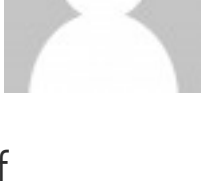
I use a old flip phone too because former CIA agent Jason Hanson recommends it in his book “Spy Secrets that Can Save Your Life.” Basically, you lose situational awareness by the intoxicating data show of a smart phone. I like the old flip phone because it is easier to turn off and take out the battery so the government can’t use the device to spy on you. Flip phones don’t have the memory to store hours and hours of conversations for a burst transmit back to the government collection centers. The benefits to productivity is just a bonus for me since staying alive is a top priority especially with the dangers of texting and driving. Amy Cuddy in her book “Presence” talks a great deal about the iHunch effect of smart phones destroying our mental and physical health as well.

I’ve been shot at in anger so you may not understand my perspective and I don’t care if you don’t. Just don’t expect me conform to your digital preferences unless you pay me a lot of money for it.

REPLY

1. JAMES says:

MAY 10, 2022 AT 3:30 PM



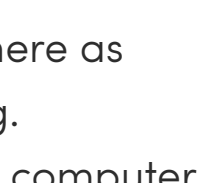
I keep a flip phone in part because I work in a construction-adjacent field. Lots of yellow iron, lots of dangerous equipment going on, lots of pits to fall into if you’re not careful. Construction managers and foremen die because they’re reading emails and don’t notice dozers or haul trucks coming at them. I’ve never gotten an email that couldn’t wait twenty minutes for me to get to a computer.

Besides, I can read the words better on a computer than a phone. Larger screens are a benefit.

REPLY

1. JR says:

MAY 17, 2022 AT 12:49 AM

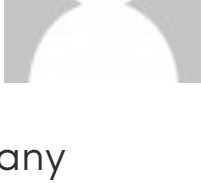


Thanks for the comment. I have worked construction and situational awareness is key there as well. Same thing with smart phones and driving. Basically, anything you would do normally on a computer back in the day should be left to being done on a computer because people are expected to be alert and aware in the real world. This ain’t Disney World folks.

REPLY

4. ALEX says:

MAY 10, 2022 AT 1:21 PM



I think Shrutarshi touched an interesting topic — namely, how successful would a comedian be if they were without any (social) media presence right off the bat?

To give an answer, I will draw on a couple of lessons from Paul Graham and Joel Spolsky regarding startups. It is a subtle lesson that a startup not only has to come up with clever technical solutions, but also to really, really cater to its early clients. Viaweb was a web store, but the founders spent an enormous amount of time selling the site to their early customers, and going to great lengths to make their experience awesome — including manually setting up their stores, something that Viaweb was supposed to .. automate and make easy. Same goes for Airbnb, in the beginning the startup’s founders had to help out with listing properties, taking pictures for the listings and so on, something that the site’s *customers* were supposed to do by themselves.

Why the lengthy detour? Because it shows how important it is to get some traction going. Any project, whether it’s “becoming a comedian” or “becoming a feasible business” requires some early adopters, word of mouth, and a certain amount of promoting.

A distinction that’s easy to miss is that social media, in this context, is a tool. An up-and-coming comedian would have to use social media to promote their stuff, much like they might announce their shows in a printed newspaper. Do they *have* to do this by themselves? No, of course not, they could hire an agency, which in turn would ... still use Twitter/Instagram/Fb and anything else they saw fit for the purpose.

As usual, the devil lies in the details — the tools encourage you to blur the line between professional and personal, intertwining those personas. And yes, I do agree that personal, intertwining those done on social media, is a really weak ersatz of actual communication. So even if one starts with the clear goal of only using s.m. as a tool, it is way too easy to slip and start overusing it in a way that’s ... not useful, at best, and harmful, at worst.

But the point stands. It is very likely that a social media presence may have helped comedians in their early careers.

REPLY

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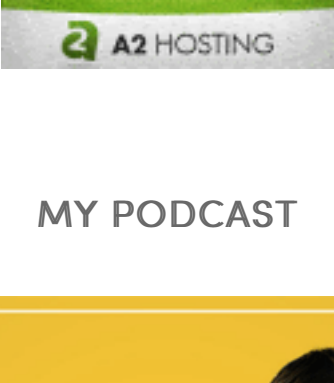
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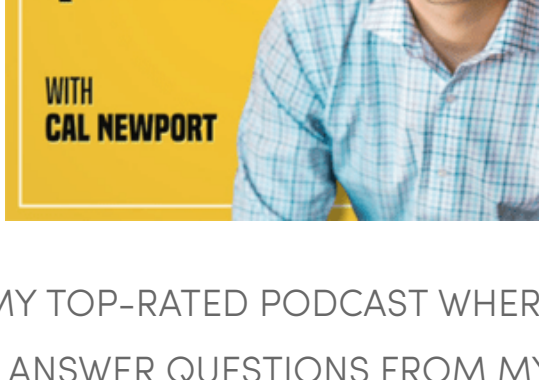
About Cal Newport

I’m a [computer science professor](#) who writes about the intersection of digital technology and culture. I’m particularly interested in our struggles to deploy these tools in ways that support instead of subvert the things we care about. If you’re new to my writing, a good place to start is with my latest book, [A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload](#), or my [about page](#). You can also access over a decade’s worth of posts in the [blog archive](#).

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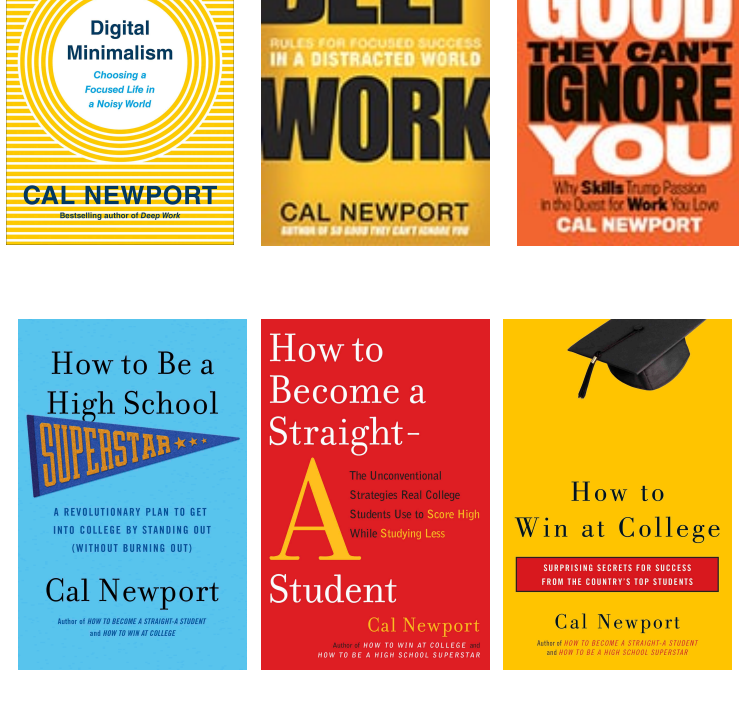
AND THE DEEP LIFE.

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