

Avoiding the Allure of the Web

Contributed by peritonlogon
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I love the web. I depend on the web. I need the web. I think that the web might provide the remedies for what I see as the problems with this country (which can largely be summed up as public discourse and culture coming to resemble advertisements). But that is not what this is about. Avoiding the Allure of the Web means avoiding the distractions that seems to be inherent in it. I wouldn't be writing this if it didn't represent a personal struggle of my own.

The web doesn't just contain vast amounts of information (and misinformation and disinformation). It also presents vast amounts of distractions. It presents us with the opportunity to be unfocused and dissipated. It allows us to fritter away days while being intellectually unchanged. This opportunity presents us (me at least) with a strong temptation. The temptation and the dissipation are different from those of Television. Your hands are involved, your mind is involved, but, if you are not careful, barely involved. With Television there are rarely any things to accomplish. But with the Web, there are always an infinite number. This can be overwhelming because they can cease to hold meaning. Learning about what is happening in the world or discovering interesting content can quickly change from actively learning and seeking to simply trying to satiate a growing boredom. The information, the knowledge, the interest, quickly become lost in the vast quantities of things experienced and the even more vast quantities available. A type of overload occurs. Thinking about browsing like this helps explain the unending number of top ten lists, best ofs, and other superficial presentation methods that seem to dominate news and social bookmarking sites. All this while the medium, the Web, is perfect for thoroughness and well thought, well reasoned content (a writer can't include a link to explain or support a claim in a book, nor can a reader respond in the body of that book). But in order to harness this one must work past the temptations it presents. This is largely a personal problem. You have to work through this yourself. And, as any time where exercising the will and retraining habits is necessary, there are no easy solutions. However, there are some steps you can take on the road, some simple methods that can help to bring meaning to your Web browsing.

- Break up your time. Breaking up time allows breathing room for the mind. Half hour chunks are a good starting point. This is easily done with a timer. Physical ones exist and do provide advantage of taking your focus away from the screen, but there are dozens of working free ones, if you use Opera there is a countdown timer widget also there are others at www.download.com.

- Sit down with a purpose. Say "I am going to learn about such and such and I will not be distracted." Repeat it a few times to yourself, in a whisper if you want to say it out loud but there might be people around. This really does help focus the mind.

- Keep a pad of paper nearby with a list of goals or discoveries. Keep it on your keyboard or lean it next to your monitor. Employing something non-electronic to remind you of your tasks and goals helps keep you in the driver's seat.

- Use Bookmarks and organize them. The structure and the thought put into gathering and organizing bookmarks (or "Favorites in some browsers") helps develop and maintain a purpose to what would otherwise be aimless. It also gives a context to your discoveries. Organizing and reorganizing may seem like either a tedious task or one which lacks direction, but it is through organizing and reorganizing that direction can be created, which means things will be less tedious.

- Avoid the superficial. Lists are very important and can be very informative. Lists are ways to organize relevant data in a more meaningful way. But things titled "Top Ten such and such" rarely qualify as organizing meaningful information. They typically don't have worthwhile links and provide the most fleeting relevance and meaning. Avoid them and other common superficial types of formats unless there is a REALLY good reason not to. There is really no point of reading something that's topical on the Web, you're already likely to forget what you've read in a few moments after you follow a few more links, so why read something where there's nothing to remember in the first place? Doing so simply guarantees that you will be bored and that your hours will disappear leaving you nothing to show for them.