

Is It Even Possible?

It's not surprising that the super plugged-in among us are starting to worry about what all that connectivity is really costing us. Elke Meitzel/Getty Images

The labels "digital vegan" and "digital vegetarian" are buzz-worthy, meme-ready terms that mean different things to different people. The idea behind the tags, though, is simple enough: to try to give a name to those who want to limit the role of digital media in their lives.

These are the serious unpluggers - the so-called digital detoxifiers - the ones who want to, in the words of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, take the ever-connected "complexifiers" out of their lives. Those who not only want to rid themselves of Facebook, but Apple and/or Microsoft and/or Google and/or other digital boogeymen, too.

That's a radical and scary idea for millions. No email. No Twitter. No online calendars. No cat videos. No memes, even.

But those who make the leap - even for a short time and maybe not even as radically as the vegetarians/vegans - are compelled to do so for two main reasons: One, unplugging seems good for your health, mental and otherwise. And two, it's a good way to see just how scary staying completely plugged in really is. Privacy is a huge concern. Serverlist101 know a lot about you if you spend any time online at all - where you bank, where you shop, what you like, what your politics are, who's on your friend list, etc.

That may not seem like a big deal to a grandma in Iowa or a high school student in Florida. But don't fool yourself: We're all in this interconnected world together. People are looking. At everybody.

"For a lot of people, the government really and truly is not after you. And you have bigger fish to fry in your life," says Gennie Gebhart, the associate director of research for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which touts itself as the leading nonprofit defending digital privacy, free speech and innovation. "One thing I tell people is that you're not worried that the government is coming after you. But they may be coming after journalists and dissidents and community organizers, who we all need.

"So things like adopting an end-to-end encrypted messenger, for example - 'I don't need that. I don't care.' - when we use that stuff, you're protecting everybody who also needs that ... If we all use it, who can say whether that end-to-end encrypted message is a highly valuable secret or just me texting my grocery list to my partner? Everything gets much harder for those folks who might be trying to put down those vulnerable people in society. Kashmir Hill, a reporter and editor for the Gizmodo Media Group, recently completed a multi-part series entitled "Goodbye Big Five." In it, she tried to cut the "Big Five" - Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Microsoft - completely out of her life, one a week and, then, all at once.

She used a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to keep those companies from tracking her online movements. She ditched her MacBook Airs and her iPhone for a Linux laptop and a tiny Nokia non-smartphone. (She texted using a number keypad!) She had to give up her browser of choice, her regular email, her contact lists and a good chunk of the internet that is hosted on Amazon servers. Ridding herself of the Big Five, she writes, was "the digital equivalent of a juice cleanse." From the introduction to her series:

Maybe you're in the camp of people who worry that these companies have too much access to our purchases, our movements, our social networks - and perhaps even our thoughts. Maybe you're disturbed by the concentration of so much economic power in a handful of companies built on the West Coast's fault lines. Or maybe you want them to have less insight into your life so they have less sway over our society. But how? How do you reduce their power? Is it even possible?

The headline on her last piece in the series sums up her experience: "I Cut the 'Big Five' Tech Giants From My Life. It was Hell".

"It is, for the average person, practically impossible to fully quit," Gebhart says, which Hill made painfully evident in her series. In reality, it probably isn't even advisable. "The more practical lesson is that there are a lot of opportunities to scale back," Gebhart says. "There are a lot of opportunities to think about exactly where you intersect with different companies and scale it back to where it makes sense for you. It can, many believe, be good for you.

For years, Mary Gomes has included a "digital fast" in her psychology classes at Sonoma State University. She instructs her undergraduates to step away from the screens and put the smart phones down, if not 24/7, at least as much as it makes sense for them in the four days of the fast.

"What I often find is that there's a mix of trepidation, for some, and interest, cautious excitement for others ... sometimes both in the same person," Gomes says. "I really go to a lot of effort to put them at ease ... By the end of the experiment, most people are literally thanking me."

Research has pointed out the damage that too much screen use can do to person-to-person communication. ("[M]obile communication devices such as phones may, by their mere presence, paradoxically hold the potential to facilitate as well as to disrupt human bonding and intimacy," one 2012 study found). Other research has discovered how screen time, especially before bed, can disrupt a body's circadian rhythm and affect sleep.

Gomes listed other pluses of at least temporarily unplugging (being more in the moment, better productivity, a chance to break the habit) in a story for the University of California Berkeley's Greater Good Magazine. She continues to include a media fast in her classes. "I love it. I really do. It feels like there's such a clear purpose for doing this," she says.

People all over are discovering the benefits of getting off the digital grid. There's Screen-Free Week (April 29-May 5 this year). There's the National Day of Unplugging before that (March 1-2). There are others.

Americans, according to Nielsen, spend more than 10.5 hours a day on media. Some of us may check our phones, evidently, some 200 times a day. Is it time for an unplug once in a while, given all the dangers out there?

"I think really the biggest concern I have is how it makes them unaware of all the other options they have. What they could be doing with their attention," Gomes says of her students. "It's more in the missed opportunities."

Some places should be off limits when it comes to technology, otherwise you simply miss out on the good stuff.

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Now That's Interesting

Checking email continues to be a digital time suck for many of us, and we'll do it whenever - and wherever - we can. According to an Adobe survey, 28 percent of us have scrolled through our work email while in the bathroom. Of course, 40 percent of us have used that spot to look at our personal email, too. Sadly, almost half of us take a peek at work emails, at least occasionally, while on vacation.