



THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

HAMLET'S BLACKBERRY

A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age
by William Powers

A crisp, passionately argued polemic that challenges the sacred dogma of the digital age—the more we connect through technology, the happier we are—and offers a new, practical philosophy for life in a world of screens.

A few years ago, while at Harvard on a fellowship, I began thinking about how connective technologies are changing everyday life—the way we think and feel, how we do our work, relate to others, and raise our families. I realized that in our rush to connect digitally, we were losing touch with something important and valuable, the world right around us, the one that's waiting for us when we turn away from our screens. I decided to write a book exploring the idea of disconnectedness as a necessary complement to our connectedness. I also wanted to lay out a practical strategy for building a good life in a digital world, drawing on my research about the past, present, and future of connective technologies, and my own experience.

Everyone is now connected to everyone else, all the time. Yet nobody has stopped to figure out the human implications of the new connectedness. Most of us find our computers and handhelds convenient and useful. They help us to get our work done more efficiently and to manage the details of everyday life. On a higher plane, they draw us closer to others in many wonderful ways, and can be fantastic tools of creativity, even sources of inspiration. At the same time, they are making us busier than ever, and increasingly becoming a burden, a time-waster and an obstacle to happiness. There's mounting evidence that the more time we spend interacting with screens, the harder it is for us to focus and think clearly, to do our best work and make the most of life.

Thanks to the wonder of digital technology, we are getting more connected to each other all the time. Yet our connectedness isn't delivering all the benefits it should, or the satisfying lives we crave. . . . As our busyness grows, there's a nagging sense our lives are out of whack.

Many solutions to this problem have been offered in recent years, but no one has figured out how best to use and live with these technologies. My book offers a completely new approach, based on the idea that what we really need is a new way of *thinking* about life in a connected world. In short, we need a new philosophy. For readers who are feeling too connected, increasingly enslaved to their screens, *Hamlet's Blackberry* offers not just hope but a practical answer. Drawing on the lessons of the technological past, I lay out a whole new philosophy of screens. I then talk about how to implement it, using examples from everyday life.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO WRITE ON THIS TOPIC?

As a fellow at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center, I wrote the essay, "Hamlet's Blackberry," about the future of paper as technology. Although futurists have been predicting the death of paper for nearly half a century, for some reason it never goes away. I wanted to figure out why this old-fashioned medium remains in our lives. So I did a lot of research into the history of technology and how human beings interact with their gadgets. For a scholarly piece, the essay received surprisingly wide media coverage, including stories in the *Washington Post*, on National Public Radio and other mainstream outlets as well as blogs about technology, neuroscience, books, media, and many other subjects. It was also discussed in major news outlets in Canada, Europe, India, and Australia.

At a time when everyone is trying to make sense of our hyper-connected world, "Hamlet's Blackberry" hit a nerve. One of its most discussed points was that as the world becomes more technologically connected, we all need to develop new strategies and tools for living and working well. I decided to write a book making this argument to a broad popular audience, and the result is *Hamlet's Blackberry*.

WHAT IS THE CENTRAL THEME OF THE BOOK?

The book looks at technology in an entirely new way, from a philosophical and spiritual perspective. It's about how we can use our gadgets more intelligently, to lead more fulfilling lives in the digital age .

WHAT MAKES THIS BOOK RELEVANT TODAY?

My book offers a fresh, completely original answer to the greatest conundrum of this technological moment. Thanks to the wonder of digital devices, we are getting more connected to each other all the time. Yet our connectedness isn't delivering all the benefits it should, or the satisfying lives we crave. The more time we spend with our screens—texting, emailing, tweeting, etc.—the busier we are. We're busier not just in the external sense of too many tasks crowding each moment. We're *internally* busier, i.e. busier in our thoughts and feelings. As we click through our days, often barely looking up from the screen, I argue, we're losing something extremely

valuable: Depth. Depth of thought and feeling, depth of experience. We're skating the surface of our lives, never diving down.

It's a problem that many of us have been struggling with personally for some time, but it's been hard to get our arms around. After all, connecting via screens makes so much sense, and helps us in so many ways. Screen life can be profoundly rewarding, not to mention fun. Nonetheless, as our busyness grows, there's a nagging sense our lives are out of whack, and a widespread craving for a solution.

The need has gotten more urgent lately, as it's become clear that the costs of connectedness extend far beyond our individual lives. Businesses and other organizations are discovering that hyper-connected workers are so distracted, they can't focus or do their jobs effectively, and it's hurting the bottom line. According to one study, information overload is costing the U.S. economy roughly \$900 billion a year. Various solutions have been proposed and tried, from old-fashioned time-management strategies such as corporate "no email Fridays," to "digital assistants" and other new technologies. None of them are working.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO ACHIEVE WITH *HAMLET'S BLACKBERRY*?

I want to help people thrive in this new era. I contend that we haven't solved the problem because we haven't figured out that what's really driving it is how we think about our screens. Without realizing it, we've been living by a very particular *philosophy* of connectedness. Simply stated, this philosophy holds that it's good to be connected by screens, and it's bad to be disconnected—thus, the more connected you are, the better. I call it Digital Maximalism. The solution, I argue, is to come up with a new philosophy that better serves our needs. The book is about finding that philosophy.

I take the reader on a journey to seven moments from the past that in many ways resemble this moment, times when some astonishing new technology appeared that allowed humans to connect to each other more quickly and easily. People of these eras faced challenges much like the ones we're now facing—overload, extreme busyness—and they felt the same confusion. It happened around 400 B.C., for example, with the advent of writing. It happened at the height of the Roman Empire, and again after the invention of the printing press, and then in the middle of the nineteenth century when railroads and the telegraph arrived. At each moment, I focus on one figure who was unusually thoughtful about the questions raised by the new connectedness of that era. I call them The Seven Philosophers of Screens, though they weren't all technically philosophers, and all but one lived before the age of computers. However, each offers insightful philosophical solutions to the challenges of connectedness, solutions that remain relevant today.

With their help, I construct a new philosophy for the digital age, one that acknowledges the importance of connecting *as well as* disconnecting. Indeed, the more connected we are, the more crucial it is that we know how to disconnect—turn off the screen, return to the third dimension. In the last part of the book I lay out how we can put this philosophy to work in everyday life, using tools that are available to everyone. Here I draw on research from my Harvard project and other sources, as well as personal and family experience, to show that what philosophers have always called The Good Life is still available in the digital age.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William Powers is a leading thinker on life in our information culture. A former staff writer for the *Washington Post*, he has written about media, technology and other subjects for a wide variety of publications including *The Atlantic*, the *New Republic*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Guardian*, *National Journal*, and *McSweeney's*. He has appeared as a commentator in numerous broadcast outlets including National Public Radio and *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. He has been a fellow at Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, where the research for this book began. A two-time winner of the National Press Club's Arthur Rowse Award for press criticism, he lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, with his family.