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6.11 Unit 6 Writing Assignment

This paper will focus on the book *Hamlet's BlackBerry* by William Powers. It will explore Mr. Powers' ideas on "digital maximalism" and how his approach to technology can be reflected in my own life.

I would like to start with some observations on the virtues of our evermore connected world. Mr. Powers notes, "The creative potential of digital tools is very real, and it's manifest in the exuberant, richly inventive culture that has grown up online in a relatively short time." Hamlet's BlackBerry contains a fair amount of balance when talking about our digital connectedness, while also making the point that it needs to be balanced within the contexts of our lives. The book isn't a luddite encouragement to fully disengage. In the article *The Missing Links*, R. David Lankes states, "Then see reading for what it truly is: a conversation in which authors, readers, and an entire community can use the book to build knowledge and exchange ideas." Digital media is a wealthy resource when used to gain access to reading materials. The trick is to utilize it and find a way to harness knowledge without being sucked into the vortex of so many online distractions.

The many obstacles presented by digital maximalization are illustrated when Mr. Powers addresses the corollaries inherent in such a pursuit; The concept that, "The more you connect, the better off you are, while the more you disconnect, the worse off you are." Remaining perpetually connected can lead to a severe lack of focus on any one task at hand. Indeed, he reflects, "The digital consciousness can't tolerate three minutes of pure focus." In essence, being connected is something we strive for, and digital maximalization can seem like a natural approach that we are all destined for, but we can easily become engulfed in a maelstrom of information without a clear way to "jump ship" and swim to conscious safety.

Digitally or otherwise, I believe it's prudent here to mention the pitfalls of believing multitasking is an effective way to go about out daily lives. In his article *Attached to Technology and Paying the Price,* Matt Richtel laments, "Heavy multitaskers actually have more trouble focusing and shutting out irrelevant information, scientists say, and they experience more stress." Digital maximalization, according to Mr. Powers, seems to be a sure path to multitasking because it causes individuals to focus on so many devices and pathways for the outside "crowd" to work its way into one's internal dialogue, thus eliminating the possibility for deep thought and clarity.

The brilliant parts of *Hamlett's Blackberry* are the solutions to these adverse outcomes. The many philosophical viewpoints provided throughout the ages by the subjects in this text are a stream of various suggestions on how to approach these dilemmas that we naturally seem to desire. Plato's concept of, "*Distance*: The very thing human beings had been running away from since prehistoric times," was illuminating. We always desire to connect with the outside world, but inner thought needs to be pursued uninterrupted, such as when Mr. Powers realizes how some of his best writing has taken place on plane flights where he had no internet access.

One of the more cautionary tales I enjoyed from the book was the story of Sabinus. This lordly Roman figure who set his servants to the task of remembering vast amounts of works from famous writers so he could pull them up during dinner parties had created a kind of ancient

human-powered encyclopedia. He was able to recite great pieces of wisdom, but it's uncertain if he had any deep understanding of the material in full context. It is very much the way we can always access any amount of information by *Googling it*, while not necessarily possessing any mastery of the scanned content.

One of the more concise – and I found useful – observations for how to navigate away from digital overindulgence came from Benjamin Franklin. The concept stated was, "Inner change depends on inner conviction." It's one thing to recognize that too much digital saturation may be a bad thing, but to actually do anything about it, one must have the desire internalized. Towards the end of the book Mr. Powers discusses his families' approach to removing broadband access two days a week over the weekends. Solutions like this echo Franklin's overstated list of virtues, because frankly most people may not be able to disconnect in such a way due to work and family, but it remains something to aspire to if a change in digital lifestyle is desired.

This book reached me in an entertaining way regarding my educational history. I'm currently in my mid-thirties and the year is 2019. I'm just old enough to remember when the digital universe began to seep into our reality, while also remembering a time when learning didn't have anything to do with an internet connection. I can relate to the many instances where Mr. Powers pines for the lost days of being truly alone, but I also feel the many digital pulls he realizes now exist in our lives. I remember quiet walks in the woods where a phone call was not an option, but I can also recognize the times when having said option was beneficial once the technology became available.

In my current circumstances digital maximalization might not be something I'd like to attain, but daily digital access is quite necessary. The obvious circumstance is my living situation while I'm studying this course. I am living overseas and must connect. The more varying circumstances exist in my profession.

I am a teacher at a private international school located in Southeast Asia. My students do not suffer from the plights Susan Crawford addresses in *The New Digital Divide*. They have quite a lot of access to being connected. The interesting thing I quite enjoy though, is our school's policy on not allowing personal digital devices in the classroom. I was a bit skeptical of the policy at first. I thought surly the ability to *Google it* would be useful in some cases, but my students have countlessly impressed me with their own analog knowledge reserves. In the article *A Very Long Disengagement,* Mark Bauerlein cites a pole stating, "Remarkably, 29 percent could not identify the Pacific Ocean." My students are remarkably good with geography even where some are only seven or eight years old. I have a very nice globe of the Earth which lists information in two languages, and they are quite good at pointing out various countries and cities. While I can't determine if their prior knowledge was gleaned from the internet or a non-digital resource, I can be assured that the information has been internalized and they are not engaging in the shallow act of "pulling it up." I'm proud to say I cannot find one Sabinus among them.

Mr. Powers' approach to technology is more complicated when I think about my plans for the future. I certainly won't have the luxury of disconnecting for several days while completing my studies. It is also unlikely I'll be able to do so with my work schedule the way it is. There were useful suggestions on how to do somewhat micro-disconnections that I may be able to adhere to. In the same way Benjamin Franklin set lofty goals, I may be able to search for

some desired outcomes and try my best to adhere to them knowing full well that I might not succeed.

I think one of the more interesting things to consider about the content of this book is how even studying figures lives from hundreds and thousands of years ago can look very similar to studying our own situations today. So, in looking forward, it's important to realize that our digital technology as it stands today could look and behave quite differently in the years to come.

As I mentioned before I grew up during the digital crossover. I've noticed that I've never lost my affinity for real books. I really don't like reading books online or with e-readers. Mr. Powers addresses the concept that all new technologies will destroy all old technologies, and yet we still have paper. I quite agree with the sentiment, "Do we really want to make our books as busy as the rest of our lives?" *Hamlet's BlackBerry* talks a great deal about the busyness we all confront in our lives. It seems that all the technologies mentioned had a duel effect of freeing people up but having unforeseen consequences. It's nice to have email, but I was reminded from this text how much I used to like writing letters and going to the post office. I miss stamps. I see a future for myself of reading words off quite a lot of paper, and thanks to this book, a fair amount of digital responsibility and temperance.