



Diving into a digital detox



VICKY BEECHING SWITCHES OFF HER SMARTPHONE IN A QUEST TO READ MORE BOOKS

Some days, I feel like social media should be re-named "anti-social media". It can be a brilliant place – full of humour, breaking news, compelling content and new friends. But it can simultaneously be a nasty playground for trolls; where the constant drip of

criticism wears you down, day by day, if you put your head above the parapet on controversial issues.

Recently, it's felt more like the latter to me. Don't get me wrong – I'll always be a huge social media fan and have no intention of leaving. It's a crucial part of my work as a writer and broadcaster. Plus, many of my friends live in other countries, so Twitter and Facebook are the lifeblood of our communication. But lately, the online negativity and nastiness have been making my soul feel weary.

The spikes in abusive messaging usually happen after I publish a piece about LGBT equality, or do a TV or radio slot on that same subject. I know to expect it – it's just part of my job. Everyone has the right to reply, and I welcome discussion and disagreement if it's carried out in a respectful manner.

Often that's not the case, and the abusive comments go deep; I wouldn't be human if they didn't. After all, when it comes to issues like same-sex marriage, or the place of gay, lesbian and bi people in the Church, it's not just an idea they are attacking – it's the core of who I am. If you're an openly LGB or T person online, you may well have experienced the same. My heart goes out to you if so.

The trolling and unpleasantness I face in cyber-space has got me thinking: I want to stay on social media, but also to limit the time I give to it. I guess this article is, essentially, the Confessions of a Social Media Addict! Better balance is my goal, and I'm going to spend this autumn seeking it out. In short: I need a digital detox.

The main casualty of social media, for me, has been reading books. I used

to read way more than I do now. I'd throw a paperback in my bag each morning and use the pauses in my day to get through a few more pages. I'd read on my commute, or when standing in boring queues (as we Brits do a lot!) and before bed. Now those time-windows are spent online; refreshing Twitter, Facebook, scanning through Instagram or watching vlogs on YouTube.

I have to make my way through various books for work. My PhD requires a shed-load of research, as do some of my journalism projects. But reading for pleasure – books that will spark my imagination, enlarge my perspective, and take me to fascinating places – rarely happens any more and I miss it.

I brought this topic up with friends over the summer and was surprised that they felt similarly. Many of them had stopped reading, saying social media was filling the gap that books used to occupy. We all agreed that reading felt like a bit of a luxury – especially for those with small children – but that somehow we managed to find time to check Facebook even on the craziest days, so perhaps we could substitute a

few of those moments and crack open a book instead.

The average person spends more time on electronic devices per day than they do sleeping; eight hours and 41 minutes to be exact. That's a pretty startling figure, but when I think about a typical day, it sounds about right. In fact, I probably exceed that amount. Writing my memoir and various newspaper articles, working on my PhD thesis, watching movies, surfing social media or Skyping friends; it's all digital.

Over the summer, many of us took this to a whole new level with Pokémon Go. We walked around in a semi-daze, half looking at the pavement and half lost in augmented reality. To my amused surprise, I found that Googling "Pokémon injuries" brought up a long list of news articles. People broke collar bones, twisted ankles, walked into glass patio doors and had close shaves with traffic, all because they were so absorbed in trying to "catch them all".

Our generation consumes more content than at any previous time in human history. What's questionable though is the quality of that content. How much of it is cat memes, photos of other people's dinner, and watching arguments back and forth over differing opinions? Probably a pretty high proportion. In cyberspace, we often trade quality for quantity.

I want to make sure I'm consuming content that makes me a better person, and for me, that must involve books. I've enjoyed Googling "50 Books You Must Read Before You Die". It's fascinating to see how different each person's "must reads" are. I'm also compiling an ever-evolving list of what qualify as "the classics" in literature; although again, people's ideas on what qualifies as a "classic" are interestingly diverse.

Many of those classics are free to download on an e-Reader. That fact, plus my general love of gadgets, has made the Kindle a firm friend. Although it feels technologically backward with its greyscale screen and slightly clunky form, I appreciate the

simplicity – no notifications and no distractions! The minimal weight also means I take it can everywhere and it lives in my bag.

So, what have I been reading, you may wonder? Most recently I cried my way through Kate Gross' stunning book *Late Fragments*. If you haven't read it, stop everything and get a copy. It's equally heart-warming and heart-breaking.

I'm deeply interested in spirituality, so I've been dipping in and out of my favourite Christian writers; Henri Nouwen, Richard Rohr, Rowan Williams and Frederick Buechner. Also, Buddhist writers like Pema Chodron and Thich Nhat Hanh continue to expand my mind and heart.

I enjoyed Max Porter's unusual but profound *Grief Is The Thing With Feathers*, and a couple of Stephen Fry's excellent offerings: *Moab Is My Washpot* (his autobiography) and *Stephen Fry In America*, detailing his travels across all 50 of the US States.

I've also read through the *Chronicles Of Narnia* again; something I enjoy doing every few years as I see new things in the stories each time, and love being transported back to the snowy Narnian wood and the world behind the wardrobe.

Another topic I love to read about is LGBT history. It's crucial that we know our own history: how the journey toward equal rights has progressed; the people who've gone before us and paved the way; the suffering they faced and the ways the law has changed (and still needs to change) around the globe. Knowing all of this helps us become more grateful to the pioneers who otherwise risk being forgotten, and it gives us an understanding of our place in the wider story, reminding us we are not alone.

If you haven't read much LGBT history, give it a try. Google "LGBT reading list" and you'll find an array of options, from academic histories to works of fiction, memoirs, and everything in between. Try tinyurl.com/LGBTreading-list for LGBT History

Month's suggestions.

As I began my digital detox this month, I had a few concerns. I wondered if spending less time on social media and more time reading would make me feel like I was losing touch with friends. Oddly, it's proving the opposite. I'm having conversations with my community about their favourite books, then as I read them and share my reflections, it's making our relationships deeper. Working your way through a person's "bucket list" of books is a brilliant way of investing in friendship and seeing the world through their eyes.

My new reading habit is affecting me in another positive way: it's helping me sleep better. Unsurprisingly, a paperback is a proving to be a more peaceful end to the day than reading the opinions of Twitter trolls. Plus, as most of us know, the blue light from screens damages our REM sleep. A staggering 81% of us are using smartphones or tablets in bed, which isn't helping our overall wellbeing.

Obviously, world peace isn't likely to be ushered in any day soon by the formation of reading groups. But, still, I can't help thinking if we all spent a little less time glued to social networks, and more time getting lost in the pages of an inspiring book, society might feel like a more positive place. Books have a potent way of ushering peace into our minds; of helping us step back from our rigid worldviews. We see through the eyes of the author for a few hours and hopefully, come away changed for the better.

So, my goal is to enjoy a more balanced approach this autumn; one that keeps me tweeting, but also includes time offline with paperbacks and pumpkin spice lattes. Reading is contagious, so I hope this article sparks your desire to dig out the books you've bought but never opened. Right... I'd better go; my Kindle is calling, and I'm half-way through a brilliant novel...

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