

# Reducing Digital Clutter

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## ABSTRACT

Our lives are filling up with digital clutter and we are allowing software tools to do more and more for us as a service without having any influence or control over the tools themselves. Is this approach a good thing or a bad thing?

### 1. Introduction

Over the last decade I have, like many others, seen a relentless increase in the number of bits that I am responsible for. Digital ones and zeros pile up, invisible but no less real than everything else, digital clutter as pervasive as physical clutter, stopping us from getting on with whatever it is that we want to do.

Is there an alternative to this way of being? Do we have to accept that this is the way things are? Or is there an alternative? What is it we're trying to do anyway?

### 2. Your choice of system dictates your freedom

Most users will have experience of the two main platforms. You're either on Windows or you're cool and rebellious, with a Mac. And that's fine for most people, most users. These systems are designed to let you do what you want to do. You can write a document, create a spreadsheet or a presentation, send emails and talk to anyone, anywhere. If you didn't have a computer, however, it wasn't the end of the world. You could use paper and send a letter or call someone on a landline. Oddly enough, you might have been more productive in the days when it took more time to communicate with someone else. You'd have to think and write carefully, because you wouldn't get a reply for weeks. Big things got done that way.

Now, I'm not arguing that you should go back to using a typewriter although there's a good chance it will make your writing better. My argument is that systems that make it easy to do something

create their own problems. These problems are not always obvious in advance but eventually they need dealing with.

For example I, like many others, have used web mail systems like Gmail for over a decade. It turns out that I have around 80,000 emails, 29,000 of which are unread. The last time I looked at this it seemed like emails use around 0.0018 kgs of CO<sub>2</sub> which makes my email footprint around 144 kgs of CO<sub>2</sub>. If I kept those emails for another decade that's over a tonne of CO<sub>2</sub>. And if there are hundreds of millions of users in the same boat as I am, that's a lot of carbon. But, then again, this is not a new problem. The big providers know about this and are trying to make their operations greener. Of course, the solution is to keep doing what you're doing, accumulating without constraint and it will all get better later.

Is this the only way to do things?

### 3. The problem with advocating frugality

This is a hard argument to accept for people who believe in being frugal, for those who believe that it's important to be responsible and use just your share of resources. I have an intrinsic sympathy with that argument and feel like the solution to dealing with more is by choosing to have less but it's also possible that it's the wrong approach. Or, at least, it's not wrong but it leads to other problems that you perhaps hadn't considered.

For example, if you advocate control and frugality you remove the incentive to create and innovate. Why do anything better when what you have is fine? Or is it more complex than that? Perhaps it's that some problems have been solved but

people insist on doing the same thing again and again, because it's not just about being able to do the thing but also about being able to make money and charge for it. It is, after all, also about business.

If you don't give people an incentive to get rich by being creative and inventive then you run the risk that they will do only what they have to do to survive, life will be gray and barren and dull and lifeless. If you let them do anything they want then you run the risk that those who have power and capital will exploit those who don't. It always comes down to balance, and the mix of institutions and rules that serve to build a society of equals rather than a nation of consumers. Perhaps what it tells you is that it's good to have a choice but it's up to you to make sure you are in a position to make a choice.

Here's the thing. If you teach people that stuff doesn't matter and they don't need it, then people who make the stuff don't have anything to do. And so they don't try and make it better either. As long as people need stuff and stuff wears out, then the people who make stuff can make a living. But there's a problem when you make something that lasts for ever. For example, if you come up with a pair of jeans that will never wear out, never tear, never fade, you'll also find that you don't have a business. Yes people will buy the first pair but they don't need another one. Software is a bit like that. Once you have it and it works - it doesn't really wear out. So you have to construct a reason to keep people paying, you make it bigger, ostensibly better, so that people need a bigger computer. You make it a service and constantly push updates so people feel like they're getting something for their monthly payments.

#### 4. Can we step away from the system?

Possibly. Probably. I'm trying an experiment. Instead of using my main machines, which are getting a little old now, I'm going to start using a Raspberry Pi B+ for much of my work. There's no reason why most of what I do can't be done in a tiny computer like that. The words you are reading now are written using `ed` in a terminal and formatted using `groff`. I draw pictures using `mypaint` and graphs using `graphviz`. It's interesting how words and images work. I have close to a million words of text and they take up only a few megabytes of space. The images, on the other hand, they take up gigabytes. You know

the saying about a picture painting a thousand words — but it turns out that words are a much more compact way to express things.

#### 5. Is there a point to this paper?

No, not really. I haven't written one for a while and having the Pi gave me an excuse to test out the workflow. I do feel, however, that cloud storage and constant backups and always on systems are not a good thing. There is little reason why we can't take responsibility for maintaining our own systems and keeping backups and managing our information in a way that works for us. There is this move, driven by governments, to a cloud based approach as if that will solve all problems. The problem it will solve is how cloud software providers can guarantee a secure income. It will, like all other solutions create its own raft of problems.

The point for users is that they do have a choice. They can stick with the main platforms and go with the cloud. Or they can roll their own. Letting others do the work for you makes it easy to do simple things. Taking responsibility enables you to do the hard things only you can do.

#### About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

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