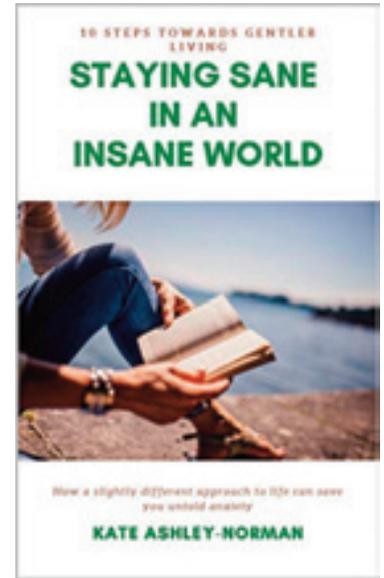


Turn Off The Noise. Turn Off The Fear. Regain Control

Kate Ashley-Norman says a constant diet of dreadful media headlines and a bombardment from social media, on top of interest rate rises and the cost-of-living crisis, is causing us to lose focus, feel fear and lack control. Is device divorce the solution?



What have been the headlines lately? Asks Kate Ashley-Norman.

Inflation is dropping, the energy price cap is going to be lower than predicted come July, the United Kingdom is not officially in a recession and if you're lucky enough to live in Scotland and have had enough of being Hamish, you now only have to wait three months before officially becoming Hannah.

Oh! And Spare has proven that there is still a buoyant UK literary market!

All positive stuff, yes? Or are they more likely to be full of tragic happenings taking traumatic twists and turns while the cost of living curbs our enthusiasm and we negotiate the big shocks the economy still has in store for us

No – in my opinion, it is all so catastrophic.

everyday life, including mundane as well as significant events. This produces a discourse of fear, the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of everyday life'.

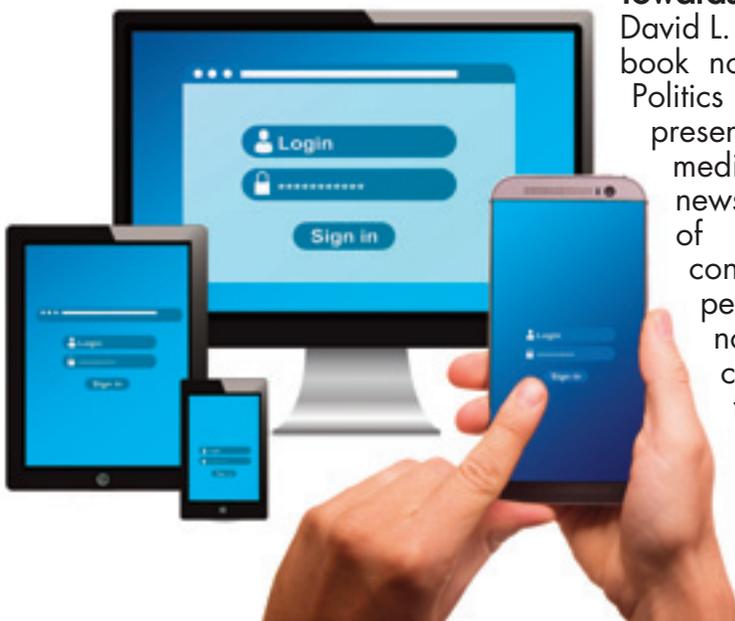
Mobile devices

This book was written in 2002, before the explosion (note catastrophic use of language) of social media in our lives. Through those small devices that are constantly on our persons, we all have notifications pinging through to our consciousness every few minutes throughout the day. Google alerts, newspaper sites, Twitter, emails, reminders, alarms...the urgency to keep us all informed and on track feels inescapable.

Yet can we do without them now? They are not just phones for verbal communication. We bank on them. We buy tickets. We have bus and train passes. We take photos on them. We message through them. We check up on our kids with them. We count our steps. They hold

Towards a Politics of Fear

David L. Altheide wrote in his book notes for 'Towards a Politics of Fear' that 'Fear is presented in the mass media, especially the news media, as a feature of entertainment. The constant use of fear pervades crises and normal times and it becomes part of the taken-for-granted word of 'how things are'. One consequence is that it begins to influence how we perceive and talk about





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important daily information, often medically important. We speak to the doctor on them. We plan our days through them. For many of us these days the Smartphone is a crucial part of our day to day lives.

Stolen Focus

The level of the industries vying for our attention is frightening – one that Johann Hari explored in his latest book ‘Stolen Focus (Why You Can’t Pay Attention – and How to Think Deeply Again)’, which highlights how our desire to exercise self-discipline around scrolling through our phones is constantly scuppered by the hundreds of thousands of social media paid engineers paid to keep tweaking the algorithms that keep us hooked in the same way gamblers are to their slot machines.

Awareness

I’m afraid I don’t have the answer to reducing time on smartphones other than to encourage self-discipline. Even as I write, my phone is in front of me pinging its way into my atten-

tion with notifications that are absolutely meaningless in the great scheme of things.

The biggest defence that you can have is awareness. Awareness that the mass media is there as a form of manipulation – a manipulation that has been taken from its rawest form, as may have been recognised as propaganda in the past and made even more sophisticated by the social media giants.

X marked the spot

Malcom X famously said of the media: “The media’s the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent – and that’s power. Because they control the minds of the masses.” Multiply that several times over by social media and you can understand how we have become so polarised.

While Hari seems to indicate that it is not our fault that we are so addicted to our phones, it is still vital to recognise that freedom of choice does still exist. And that freedom of choice

hangs on your ability to switch off the device when it is not needed.

I have four children and I want to know that I can be contacted by them whenever is necessary. I too was one of four – we survived without being contactable 24 hours a day. My parents’ generations survived with a single landline located in the hallway. And they were the lucky ones – many other families made do with the callbox at the end of the street!

Accentuating the negative

Most headlines used for online media are negative, provocative, catastrophic. Human nature has a propensity to veer towards the negative – something to do with feeling more in control around unpredictable circumstances. It takes strength to buck that trend. Some of that strength comes from switching off those elements of your smartphone that are not doing you any good. Social media and newspaper sites are an excellent place to start – but please keep reading The Installer. **i Kate**