

# I believe in Minimum Viable Technology

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November 30, 2018

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How many devices have you looked at this morning?  
I'm on seven.

- I checked the time on my bedside travel clock
- I listened to a comedy on my DAB radio
- I used a stopwatch to time my press ups
- I wrote my diary using a typewriter
- I sent a text message on my feature phone
- I took a photograph with my smartphone
- I typed these words into my computer

You'll note that all of these tasks could have been accomplished using only one tool: my smartphone. **So why have seven devices when I could have only one?**

After all, the smartphone does many things excellently.

Most people in the world will never have owned a camera as good as the one on the back of their smartphone (myself included).

Smartphones have normalised the miracle of GPS navigation, made mobile internet access a pocketable habit, and serve us as powerful micro-computers whose potential is limited only (it seems) by the imaginations of app developers.

I have used my smartphone to practice yoga, answer emails, chat with work colleagues, catch up on the cricket, check train times, monitor my sleep, write blog posts and, of course, track my smartphone usage.

Incredibly, this is quite normal.

But whereas the smartphone is a complex technology, basically indistinguishable from magic to most people (myself very much included), single-purpose tools like my travel clock or DAB radio are what I call Minimum Viable Technology.

Rather than starting out with what the tool can accomplish (*Ooh! Look, it's a clock and a radio and a stopwatch and a phone and a camera AND a yoga teacher!*), the principles of Minimum Viable Technology first define what you want from life (*Bleeeurgh, what's the time?*), and then find the simplest tool to match (a bedside travel clock).

# Principles of Minimum Viable Technology

1. Clearly define the single task at hand
2. Use the least complex tool that still accomplishes that single task
3. Stop. Adding. Features. Goddamit.

I believe that such Minimum Viable Technologies offer significant advantages over complex multi-purpose technologies.

# 1. Focus

It is too easy to switch task when using a multi-purpose tool.

We've all been there with smartphones and computers, but it's equally true of other complex technologies – a house, for example.

Would I be more comfortable in the lounge or the kitchen? Should I lie on the bed or rest in a deck chair in the garden? Does the bedroom need another lick of paint, and when am I going to put up those shelves? Is the heating on too high?

It sounds ridiculous, but the plurality of options and the ease of task switching is detrimental to our ability to focus. And losing focus quite possibly makes us more miserable humans.

## 2. Quality

Does the blade on my Swiss Army knife have a sharper cutting edge than the cook's knife in my kitchen? No.

Similarly, does the camera on my smartphone take better photographs than a dedicated SLR? Clearly not.

The best multi-purpose tool will never be superior to the best single-purpose tool, and that has consequences for the way we work (and play).

Are we willing to accept good enough for the best?

In many arenas, the answer will be emphatically yes, but for the most important things in life, the answer simply must be no. Otherwise, what the hell are we doing here?

### 3. Waste

There is an argument that using one device to rule them all is less wasteful, and I wouldn't like to argue with that.

I have now seven devices where one would do and at some point all those devices will end up in landfill and their useless lumps of plastic will out-live me. I feel pretty shitty about that.

But the principles of Minimum Viable Technology tend towards less wasteful behaviour, not more.

For example, the absolute Minimum Viable Technology for cleaning my hair is, quite simply, water. Having grown up in a certain society with certain expectations, however, I have settled on using diluted lemon juice.

No more need to buy expensive (or indeed cheap) shampoos and conditioners. No more need to wonder what all those ingredients are doing to my hair (let alone what happens when I wash them down the sink).

In the final analysis, do I really need my own travel clock? Do I really need my own phone? The wide span of human history argues in the negative. I just don't have the guts to go without.

## 4. Skill

If we all use multi-tools, what will become of the artisan and the artist?

The more basic the technology, generally speaking, the greater the skill you must learn and deploy.

For example, motorists who grew up in the 40s, 50s and 60s had to become semi-skilled mechanics in order to keep their cars on the road.

Modern motorists have no such need. In fact, car manufacturers deliberately make their technology unhackable, so that you have to go back to the approved dealer for repairs.

Technology, as it becomes more complex, leaves in its wake a certain kind of ignorance.

Of course, this ignorance is not always or necessarily a limitation. Drivers who don't know the first thing about car maintenance (myself included) can instead spend their time on other pursuits – but it doesn't make them better drivers.



# Side Bar: It's Not All About 'Devices'

*Technology* is everything humans have ever invented to try and make our lives easier, from agriculture and money, to shampoo and footwear.

Here are some other ways that Minimum Viable Technology influences my life choices:

- I prefer to walk than cycle, if I have the time. This often surprises people who think that I'm a devoted capital-C Cyclist. I am, but also: MVT, baby.
- I wear 'barefoot' shoes that don't over-complicate the business of keeping my feet warm, dry and protected from sharp stones.
- I don't have a gym membership because I can use press up bars and a yoga mat in my own bedroom.
- I eat a primarily plant-based diet: a more simplistic diet than meat-eating in almost every way, from food production to preparation and digestion.
- I don't use supermarkets when there is a low tech greengrocer in town.

If in doubt don't spend money, say no to 'upgrades', and always check the ingredients.

With all this in mind, I believe that my original question should be flipped: **Why have only one device when I could have seven?**

Rather than depending on complex multi-purpose tools for everything, I believe that we should use them as 'catch-all' technologies to mop up the functions that are either unimportant to us, or we simply haven't had the courage, the time, the money or the wherewithal to replace yet.

My smartphone does only one thing better than any other device I have found: GPS mapping when I'm on my bike.

Does that make it worth having? Frankly, no. I cycled around Britain without GPS: it's not a big deal.

But my smartphone sweeps up a few other useful functions that are nice to have, but aren't sufficiently important to me to find a dedicated replacement.

A yoga teacher would be vastly superior to the app on my phone, but I'm just not dedicated enough to make the switch. Likewise, I don't care enough about photography to buy an actual camera.

And so we come to the 50ft-chameleon of the personal computer.

I wrote a line to myself recently: **A computer is not a crutch.** And yet that is exactly how I treat it.

My computer is my workstation and playstation combined. It is my portal into the world, and the screen through which I peer. It is the medium of my creativity.

I know that my life could benefit from applying the principles of Minimum Viable Technology to those moments when I turn to my computer screen.

What do I want from life right now? It's probably not to stand here typing, reading on a screen, or replying to emails.

This computer is so far from being a Minimum Viable Technology that it's actively keeping me from being the person I want to be.

Woah.

I'll see you outside!

The Ted K Archive

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