

THE REVENGE OF ANALOG: REAL THINGS AND WHY THEY MATTER

(DAVID SAX)

March 28, 2018

Although no author likes to have his book lumped with another, this book is an excellent complement to Tim Wu's *The Attention Merchants*. Both books discuss, from different angles, possible practical reactions to the modern dominance of digital toys and tools. Today, when companies such as Facebook and Google are increasingly under fire from across the political spectrum, David Sax's *The Revenge of Analog* reminds us of one possible response—not attack (although I am personally all for attacking such companies), but a return to the active use of pre-digital things. He takes us on a persuasive tour of analog offerings, and makes a compelling case for their continued persistence and growth, even if he seems unaware of some of the less socially beneficial results of that trend.

Sax's premise is that in a range of daily activities, the pendulum has swung away from digital and back towards analog. Not that it will swing all the way back, of course, unless Kim Jong Un nukes us into the nineteenth century, but Sax argues that analog alternatives to digital products will continue to exist and, to some extent, thrive in a world dominated by digital. What this book fails to appreciate, though, is the class divide that is implicit in this vision, with the proletariat inevitably sedated by cheap digital playthings and distractions, funded by continual intrusive and privacy-sucking advertising, while the upper classes fence themselves, and their children, off from the worst aspects of the digital world, which they can do because they have money and time. So, to the extent inequality exacerbated by lack of social mobility is a problem, or we want to reverse the continuing degradation of the lower classes documented by Charles Murray and others, what appears to Sax to be a golden response to digital dominance is instead, or also, another wedge dividing society's haves from the have-nots.

The frame for Sax's exploration is his traveling around the world examining the analog revival in different areas. Naturally enough, he starts with the analog movement probably most familiar—vinyl records. (Or “big black CDs,” as the son of a friend called them fifteen years ago.) He takes us on a tour of Nashville's United Record Pressing, which came

close to shutting at the nadir of vinyl sales (three million units worldwide in 2006; it was nearly fifteen million in the United States alone in 2017, up from twelve million in 2015, when this book was written). Manufacture of vinyl, not just listening to vinyl, is very analog, involving hot, piped plastic and a great degree of art. This is not semiconductor manufacture. (Generally, most people not involved in light manufacturing, as I am, do not understand the degree of art involved, and the huge variability that exists in an apparently linear manufacturing process, such that you need skilled workers to accomplish anything competently and repeatably. Like most things, it is not as easy as it looks.)

Musicians and record companies have also embraced the vinyl revival, in part because profit margins are much higher, but also because for many musicians, in combination with using analog recording equipment, it enables them to create art that hews closer to reality, rather than being manipulated and Auto-Tuned into artificiality and homogeneity. As Dave Grohl says, "I don't want to know how I can tune my voice, because I want to sound like me." In these days where reality is rejected as a touchstone in all areas of life, that's a refreshing view. Along similar lines, Sax quotes studio owner Chris Mara, "[Limitations] move the process forward, in a good way. You can easily get lost in the process. It's easier to stick to the plan when you have limitations." Both these things seem very true to me.

Finally, and most importantly, music listeners have also embraced vinyl, for a range of reasons, from believing it offers better sound to showing how trendy they are. Most importantly, perhaps, vinyl entirely changes the listening experience, from one where endless immediate options paralyze the ability to choose, and devalue any particular choice, to one where a commitment has to be made to listen to a particular artist in a particular manner, with songs in the order chosen by the artist. Sax is correct that this is a wholly different experience than listening to Apple Music, and he's convinced me that in my next audio setup I need to get a turntable and rescue all the vinyl still gathering dust at the house where I grew up.

Sax next turns to paper, where he focuses on the success of notebook maker Moleskine. That company, which is only twenty years old, was created from scratch, successfully wrapping itself in the cachet of famous artists and writers of the analog era, such as Hemingway and Picasso.

This is what Sax accurately calls a “foundational myth,” built around deprioritizing productivity and functionality in favor of “imagination, image and the arts.” (I think Sax overstates the functionality of digital—I’ve gone back to a paper calendar, in large part because it’s more functional than Outlook for most purposes. It’s a Moleskine!) As Sax notes, it’s easier to sell a myth about a physical product, and buying the myth is, like vinyl, a way of showing taste superior to the teeming masses. “Like a Patagonia jacket or a Toyota Prius, it projected someone’s values, interests, and dreams, even if those were divorced from the reality of [his] life.” That said, Moleskine wouldn’t have been successful without the internet, which made selling its foundational myth infinitely easier and cheaper—not through buying ads, but by people being able to see that tastemakers they admired were using Moleskines.

Both vinyl and Moleskine are examples that most people could have conjured up if asked where the analog revival is taking place. Film, though, is less obvious, and it is the next topic. Here Sax discusses something that I have personally seen, because my children wanted them—the revival of Polaroid-type cameras, dominated by Fuji’s Instax, nearly permanently discontinued a decade ago but now a rapidly growing phenomenon. But mostly he focuses on an attempt in Italy to revive the production of picture film, under the FILM Ferrania brand, once an Italian powerhouse, and now a scrappy company that rescued a tiny percentage of the original company’s immense capital assets from destruction. Sax focuses here because, as he says, “it still takes courage—a lot of it—to start a business like this in the digital era.” Yes, since Sax wrote this book, Sony has begun manufacturing its own vinyl, so these trends spread to giant companies, but such movements are started by people who take enormous risks, often more for the love of it than in hope of financial gain. And, in another irony, the internet made making film possible—a Kickstarter campaign allowed a small group to get enough money for the initial setup of the reborn FILM Ferrania.

Each of vinyl, paper, and film offers a mostly individual analog experience—true, such items can be shared, but buying or using them is mostly a personal choice and individual activity. The next topic, board games, is far more social. The nature of digital games is that they are purely atomistic; even if you are playing online against others, for the most part you do not perceive them as real individuals, and you do not

have to evaluate and respond to their social cues in any normal way (as can be seen from even a casual glance at the chatter in any online game), or form relationships to achieve success or obtain enjoyment. Board games, which have experienced a tremendous resurgence, fill “the very human need for social interaction.” These are not somewhat old and tired games like Monopoly, but rather a wide range of “artisanal” games, many expensive and limited edition, that a growing number of people organize social events around, and go to cafes and special shops to browse, meet, and play. The game *Settlers of Catan* was the first big modern success, in the late 1990s, but it has been joined by many others, in which human actions impossible to duplicate by computer, such as negotiation and bluff, play the dominant role. Their success was helped along, again, by the internet, including Kickstarter, and wildly popular game review shows on YouTube, and by related technology, such as 3D printing.

These four items Sax defines as “analog things.” The back half of the book is devoted to “analog ideas.” First up is print, by which Sax means periodicals, such as newspapers and magazines. He outlines how digital periodicals have, basically, been a financial disaster for nearly everyone involved, despite utopian hopes of the opposite, and he shows how technology-abetted analog periodicals solve many of the fatal problems of digital media, from reader engagement to stickiness to obtaining decent ad revenue that pays publishers and writers. Convenience isn’t everything, and people tend to refuse to pay for it—in fact, they often dislike the convenience of online reading, because you never feel like you’ve finished. Sax quotes a deputy editor of the *Economist*, “We sell the feeling of being smarter when you get to the end. It’s the catharsis of finishing.” Ultimately, for most purposes, people prefer paper. Not that paper will defeat digital, but I, at least, have moved wholly back to periodicals on paper (two daily newspapers; multiple magazines), just as if it were 1990. And I’m feeling a lot better for it. Yes, I check online news (though I try to limit it now to twice a day), but any in-depth reading is done on paper, by printing out if necessary. This is the area where I think the analog revival will reach the greatest depth; it would not surprise me if digital publication became a minority of periodicals.

The next “idea” is retail. Sax notes the rebirth of real-world bookstores, even from Amazon itself, where people will pay more and put

themselves to inconvenience for the experience, both a tactile one, and one of being exposed to promising new books, randomly and by curators who far exceed anything Amazon's algorithms can (or ever will be able to) offer. He then talks about other retail items with a similar route to success, such as those offered by Alternative Apparel, and the razor-thin margins that online retailers face (especially given the need to offer low-cost or free shipping, due to pressure from Amazon). Even originally purely online companies like Warby Parker and Birchbox have opened retail stores, and the ultimate example, of course, is Apple, whose showcase stores are the highest grossing per square foot of any in the world (Tiffany is second). Sax also touches on the cultural and social problems created by the destruction of independent retail stores by chain stores and Amazon, yet another example of the destruction of intermediary institutions documented most famously by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*.

Finally, Sax covers work and school. Discussing work, he profiles the high-end watch company Shinola at length, which has brought American manufacturing back to Detroit. (Well, sort of. The Federal Trade Commission takes an aggressive and extra-legal position, not based on any law or regulation, that requires nearly 100% of materials in a product to be of American origin to label something "American-made," and most of what Shinola does is assembly with foreign parts, so they have since been forced by the FTC to back off on their claims to be "Made In America.") Sax's point is broader, though—it is that only by "reskilling," re-creating lost skills, most of which have been lost to overseas, can places like Detroit experience a renaissance. While he does not go on at length (others have done that persuasively), the idea that outsourcing will make us all better off has been proved stupid, among other reasons because making us all on average better off when the benefits accrue mostly to a small slice at the top means the majority of us are worse off, and because America's strategic position and future competitiveness, and dominance, are thereby shattered. Sax quotes a Detroit real estate developer, "You think you'll create these live-work-play communities by putting in a Whole Foods. But these people who don't have jobs and are hungry won't work-play-live. Mother——s will rob you in the Whole Foods parking lot!" Pretty much. It's government actively encouraging projects like Shinola's, rather than choking it like

the FTC does, even at the cost of shrieking neoliberal economists, that will, if it is even possible, restore the American middle class.

As far as school, Sax sketches how online education has proven a total disaster. Speaking of the failed MOOC Udacity, he notes, “Apparently a lesson about Icarus’s journey to the sun wasn’t included in the Udacity syllabus.” Oof. Moreover, handing out technology such as iPads to students, at the expense of hiring more teachers (and in fact in an attempt to avoid doing so, hoping software will displace teachers) has been an equal disaster. Yet both, especially the latter, keep getting pushed, as I again know from personal experience (though at least my children’s school, a private but nonsectarian one, bans cell phone use). Plus, Sax outlines, electronics are dreadful for young children. To take only one of innumerable examples, finger painting on an app is a pale, pale imitation of what a child gets out of finger painting in real life (which is why our children are effectively banned from all television and electronics, with minimal occasional, supervised electronic communication for the older ones).

Sax believes that analog endures because it can, in some instances, “truly provide us with a better experience. . . . Sometimes analog simply outperforms digital as the best solution.” While there is much truth in this, Sax mostly ignores another possible, perhaps greater, reason for using analog—signaling one’s superiority and virtue. Yes, in the context of Moleskine particularly, he mentions this, but maybe most analog is simply a way of demonstrating one’s membership in the upper classes. Or, more simply, it’s a way of showing taste—as Sax says, in the context of vinyl records, “Nothing is less cool than data.” And if it costs money to signal, so much the better for separating oneself from those who can’t afford it.

Sax ends by noting how digital companies have themselves embraced analog-featured offices, and how people with money to send their kids to summer camps costing thousands of dollars are eager to have their children be stripped of electronics for the summer. Sax is right that situations offered by summer camps “eventually lead to individual perseverance and self-respect . . . what most people call character.” But what goes unaddressed is the lack of such effect on the character of those who can’t afford these experiences; whose parents have to work two shifts to make ends meet, and use electronic babysitters, just like

everyone they know, to get a little peace and quiet. Nothing good, is the answer. So when Sax says that, in his experience, “The younger someone was, the more digitally exposed their generation was, the less I found them enamored by digital technology, and the more they were wary of its effects,” I wonder if he at all got outside his class bubble. I doubt it.

The author’s class bubble is exemplified by two of Sax’s analog “items”: paper periodicals and board games. You can read the news online for free, though you are bombarded with ads and you probably will inexorably be driven towards clickbait and political polarization. Or you can subscribe to a physical newspaper for, say, \$300 a year, reading it closely and with consideration. If you make what many people make, that’s nearly a week’s wages. Who among the working class is likely to do that, even if it was a day’s wages? Similarly, artisanal board games easily cost \$100, and you’re not likely to buy one if you make \$10 an hour. And playing them, since these games are mostly directed at adults, requires free time, where someone else watches the children, as well as a culture that prizes active, social activity over passive immersion in television. Who is going to do that? The upper classes, of course, only, thus increasing social division. So, when Sax notes that one reason analog things are valuable is that “[t]here’s a scarcity factor of physical goods, while digital goods are worthless,” that’s true. But physical goods are not free, and so using analog things becomes something that divides us, rather than something that, when analog was universal, united us. That doesn’t preclude analog offering benefits, but it does suggest that digital’s erosion of our social capital isn’t likely to be substantially reversed even if the analog things and ideas Sax profiles become even more widely adopted.