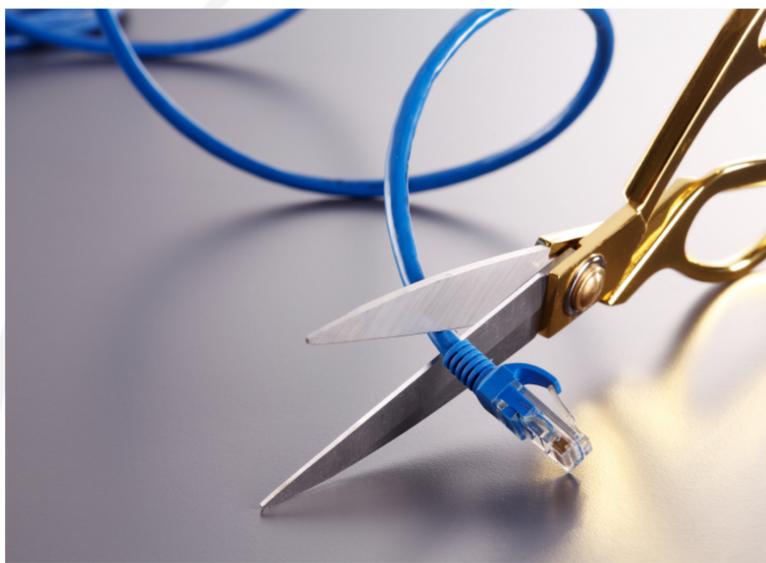


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Seven Apps (and One Desperate Measure) for Beating Distraction

By [Michelle Nijhuis](#) on November 27, 2013 | [Leave a response](#)

When Jonathan Franzen was writing *Freedom*, he isolated himself by stripping down an ancient laptop, [supergluing a cable into the Ethernet port](#), and cutting the cord with a hacksaw. Take that, Internet.

The app [Freedom](#) (no relation, \$10) accomplishes much the same thing with fewer hand tools, and it's become a must-have for many writers. For science writers and other journalists, though, Freedom has its drawbacks. While we're as vulnerable as anyone else to the dopamine drip of Facebook, Twitter, and Zappos, we also have legit reasons to use the Internet as we write.

Luckily, there are several ways to customize our blessed isolation. [Anti-Social](#) (\$15) uses the same mechanisms as Freedom, but instead of blocking the entire Internet, it allows users to block selected sites for a specified time period. [SelfControl](#) (by donation) also allows users to block selected sites, and unlike Freedom and Anti-Social, it can't be undone by rebooting the computer.

I've used SelfControl—both the app and, less effectively, the character trait—for years, and it's helped me meet many a deadline. The only problem is that the user has to open the app, and it can be very tempting not to. One alternative is a Chrome extension called [Productivity Owl](#) (by donation), which runs constantly and allows the user to specify the maximum amount of time he or she can spend on any one distracting site. After, say, three minutes on Facebook, a saucy little owl flies across the screen and the tab closes. It's cute, but since there's no limit on the total time spent on selected sites, a determined procrastinator can just reopen the tab.

[LeechBlock](#), a Firefox extension (by donation) isn't pretty, but it's very flexible: The user can specify up to six sets of sites, then limit access to each set with a customized schedule, total time, or combination of the two. The user can change the settings at will, though—an all-too-alluring loophole. [Nanny](#) (by donation), a version of LeechBlock built for Chrome, allows more sets of blocked sites. And if you're especially distracted by certain [subjects](#), Nanny can block all sites with a specified keyword in their URL. Like LeechBlock, it has immediately adjustable settings.

My favorite so far is [StayFocusd](#) (by donation), another Chrome extension. It's simpler than LeechBlock or Nanny, in that the user creates just one list of sites and limits the total time spent on those sites during each designated workday. There's no escaping the block via rebooting or settings changes, since any user adjustments don't take effect until the following day—clever, that.

StayFocusd makes me much more efficient on email and social media, and I find that I like knowing how much time I've spent on distracting sites each day. StayFocusd also has a "nuclear option" for deadline crunches that works like SelfControl, immediately and irrevocably blocking selected sites for a specified period of time.

What works for you? Let us know below. And if all else fails, remember—there's always superglue and a hacksaw.

Top photo from Flickr (Creative Commons).

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Michelle Nijhuis' award-winning reporting on science and the environment appears in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and many other publications. A longtime contributing editor of *High Country News*, ... [MORE »](#)

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