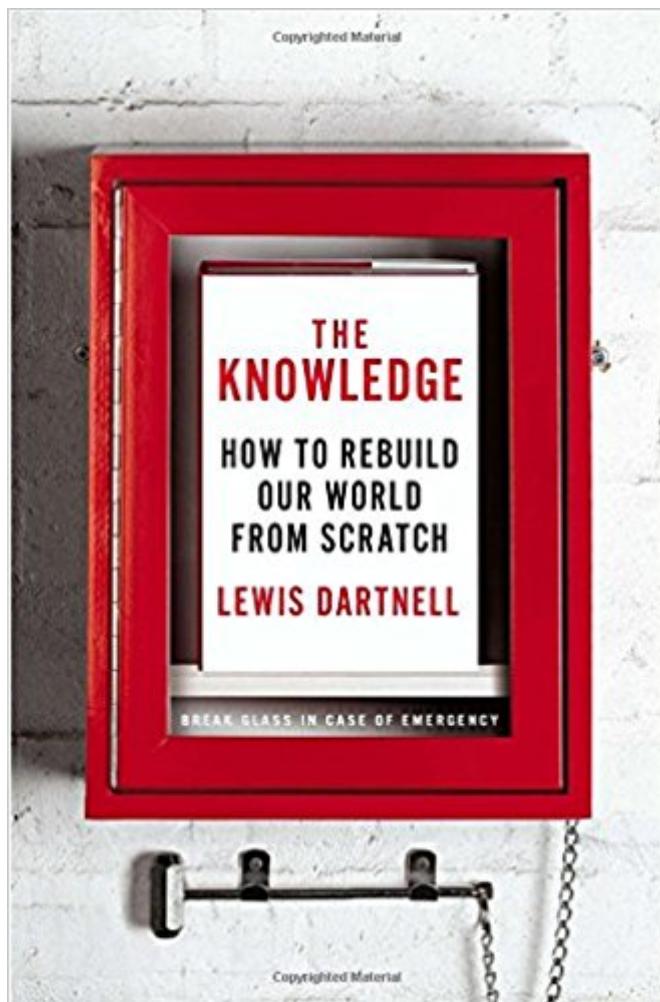


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The Knowledge: How To Rebuild Our World From Scratch



Synopsis

How would you go about rebuilding a technological society from scratch? If our technological society collapsed tomorrow, perhaps from a viral pandemic or catastrophic asteroid impact, what would be the one book you would want to press into the hands of the postapocalyptic survivors? What crucial knowledge would they need to survive in the immediate aftermath and to rebuild civilization as quickly as possible? A guide for rebooting the world? Human knowledge is collective, distributed across the population. It has built on itself for centuries, becoming vast and increasingly specialized. Most of us are ignorant about the fundamental principles of the civilization that supports us, happily utilizing the latest—or even the most basic—technology without having the slightest idea of why it works or how it came to be. If you had to go back to absolute basics, like some sort of postcataclysmic Robinson Crusoe, would you know how to re-create an internal combustion engine, put together a microscope, get metals out of rock, accurately tell time, weave fibers into clothing, or even how to produce food for yourself? Regarded as one of the brightest young scientists of his generation, Lewis Dartnell proposes that the key to preserving civilization in an apocalyptic scenario is to provide a quickstart guide, adapted to cataclysmic circumstances.

The Knowledge describes many of the modern technologies we employ, but first it explains the fundamentals upon which they are built. Every piece of technology rests on an enormous support network of other technologies, all interlinked and mutually dependent. You can't hope to build a radio, for example, without understanding how to acquire the raw materials it requires, as well as generate the electricity needed to run it. But Dartnell doesn't just provide specific information for starting over; he also reveals the greatest invention of them all—the phenomenal knowledge-generating machine that is the scientific method itself. This would allow survivors to learn technological advances not explicitly explored in *The Knowledge* as well as things we have yet to discover. *The Knowledge* is a brilliantly original guide to the fundamentals of science and how it built our modern world as well as a thought experiment about the very idea of scientific knowledge itself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Dartnell, a UK Space Agency research fellow and award-winning science writer, specializes in the field of astrobiology, including how microorganisms could survive on Mars. It's no wonder, then, that this renowned young scientist is fascinated by survival tactics, the underlying theme of this ambitious inquiry into how people might be able to rebuild the world as we know it if an apocalypse came to pass. As much as any writer could cover the history of technology in 300 pages, Dartnell presents a good case. His account quickly progresses from raising crops to making soap, shearing and spinning wool, mining coal, generating electricity, and building radios. Of course, since this is all speculation, it's hard to predict what people would be able to scavenge and what will be left intact or who might be on earth besides yourself. Dartnell doesn't address questions of governing this survivors' society or how people would collaborate on rebuilding or how hopeless some will feel without Google and smartphones. Still, Dartnell's vision is a great start in understanding what it took to build our world.

--Laurie Borman

The Wall Street Journal: "The Knowledge is a fascinating look at the basic principles of the most important technologies undergirding modern society. A fun read full of optimism about human ingenuity. And if I ever see mushroom clouds on the far horizon, this might be a good book to reach for." • Boston Globe: "[Dartnell's] plans may anticipate the destruction of our world, but embedded in them is the hope that there might be a better way to live in the pre-apocalyptic world we inhabit right now." • New York Post: "A stimulating read, a grand thought experiment on re-engineering the food, housing, clothing, heat, clean water and every other building block of civilization."

Good broad overview of the history of technology and the complexity of supply chains in our modern

world. But it was a missed opportunity to provide a reference work with detailed information on these technologies. What is in the book is good, it focuses on the key industries for our society, but I would have liked to have seen a bunch of supplementary technical material that would have been necessary to give some depth to understanding these industries. On the bright side, it has a good and expansive bibliography, but in some ways it's too big unless you have access to a major research library. A shorter list of recommended continued reading would have been nice.

This book is an incredibly ambitious work. Try to imagine the world that would face the survivors of an apocalyptic event such as a pandemic disease. We have numerous fictional accounts to guide us and there are analogous historical events such as the Dark Ages following the fall of Rome or Europe after the plague wiped out a third of its population. Then go past that event and ask yourself how the survivors would rebuild civilization. Imagine a sort of recipe book telling an average person what would be required to rebuild our very complex and interdependent technological civilization. If you're not aware of the sort of problems this would involve, read this book. Even the most diligent survivalist would not have anticipated the kind of problems inherent in this task. Fortunately for us, Lewis Darnell has thought the problem through. This is not a book that is narrowly directed to those anticipating the eminent end of our civilization, though it would be a useful thing to have in that situation. Rather, it is an educational work which shows us how dependent we are on the accumulated knowledge passed on to us from countless generations of our ancestors for meeting our daily needs. This is not light reading, but the careful reader will find rich rewards in wading through the vast technical knowledge of this author. What I learned from this book is to never doubt the resilience of humans in the face of whatever adversity we encounter. At the same time, you will be surprised to find out how deeply dependent all of us are on things about which we know little or nothing. Gary Jackson

Quite a fun read for me. I think you would like this if you are curious about how things work. It is not a "survivalist" book. It is a book designed to inform people about how little we understand the foundations of our technology. I think we often are unaware of the actually brilliant efforts our ancestors made just to get us to the level of production we take for granted today. I sometimes get the impression from peers that they think people in the past were kind of dumb not to have cell phones and microwave popcorn. But the people saying that are completely ignorant of the complex path of development we have taken and would be hopeless about even how to begin to do these things if they had to start from scratch. So... a good book for those interested in the history of

technology; but also a good book for the reader of science fiction as these concepts tie in with many works of that genre in an indirect way. It was well written and edited.

We read this book in our book group and I liked it a lot. Some people may be disappointed that it isn't a "practical" prepper manual but there are dozens of those out there. I thought it was a really interesting book on the underlying science behind the technology that runs our world ("technology" defined very, very broadly -- from refining metals on up). He doesn't have a step-by-step guide on how to make coal into coke but he tells you how it's basically done and why you'd want to do it. I finished the book with a greater appreciation of our everyday world.

The book does not contain the whole HOWTO, is more a guide to think on what ifs, and has the pointers to where to find more information. It makes you think on the fragility of our world as we know it, coming from the last couple of centuries of high energy availability at low price, and how we depend on this for our life. We are proposed a scenario where this is not anymore available, with clues on how to recover, and pointers to where to find information to gather. Not for eager preppers, but for general public to understand the situation as it is. Does not cover in my opinion the danger from the removal of rational thinking, and how to grant the same level of freedom of thought we have today: remember Clarke's three laws and what religion has done in the past to undermine development. Project a couple of generation in this post apocalypse and you will see the danger for recovering "scientists" to be burned on pyres (again!).

This is an excellent book on several levels. Dr. Dartnell has approached the subject of essential skills for building a civilization in the first place, or rebuilding one if necessary, with rigor and scholarship. He is attempting to encourage discussion of a variety of topics that arise from the book directly, or evolve from it, at a web forum he created. The potential exists for people to organize around the theme of collecting and linking the skills and knowledge that would be needed to rebuild civilization. Such organized preservation activity would lend itself to guiding creating of new human civilized communities away from Earth. In addition, the abundance of refugees on Earth in 2015 is a potential source of people to undertake creation of "civilized communities" right here! 2015/10/03
Addendum: Dr. Dartnell also sponsors a forum for readers of his book: discuss.the-knowledge.org

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