A common complaint against technology, though perhaps not worded this way, is that it reduces movement. People move their fingers on controllers more, but their bodies less. No longer do we move to the library to write a research paper. We can have groceries delivered, call into work meetings from home, and participate in social networks but never meet our neighbors. It seems that technology allows mass stagnation.

This is in stark contrast to the old revolutionary motto, “I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees” (citation needed). I think there are two curses upon human nature—a deep seated self-centeredness[[1]](#footnote-1) and persistent apathy. These two curses leave us stagnate—unable to progress or (to avoid the pitfall of novelty bias[[2]](#footnote-2)), to protect the status quo.

I don’t think apathy is caused by technology, but I also don’t think technology is made to help apathy. What’s left for us then is to consider what technology can do to raise people to their feet (though hopefully not to die). Perhaps it is zilch. Maybe a digital detox is the only remedy. I would like to propose an alternative. I’ll call it computational prompted movement. This approach will not make the mistake of old methods and try to replace human endeavor. Rather, it will seek to supplement human action. In this sense, it will be much like human-centered computing. Furthermore, it will use rigorous, analytical methods. In this sense, it will be like theoretical computer science and analytical philosophy. But, it will also be dynamic such as to handle uncertainty.

I think computational methods can bring some interesting insights to some of society’s most perplexing questions. I want to be able to help activists solve the intractable problem of motivating people to show up. I want to empower citizens to be active in their communities.

“The point is that you have to work. That’s why the propaganda system is so successful.” (Chomsky)

Give a series of examples where computational methods could’ve been useful

If you look at the world of technology, you’ll see that many things lead to stagnation rather than movement. Facebook was intended to virtualize the college experience. It ended up replace much of our pier to pier, face to face relationships with virtual relationships. I’m interested in things that are intended to augment not virtualize.

1. The evolution of events in the media
2. The interaction of companies and labor unions through time and collective bargaining agreements
3. Explanations of senate/congress votes
4. Work satisfaction/dissatisfaction

Labor union strikes (work stoppages): correlation between words in CBA and the duration of the strike. Can we determine whether the sentiment of the CBA is in favor of the company or the employees? Does duration predict the leaning of the CBA?

I’m interested in researching social phenomena in such a way to increase equality and democracy rather than decrease it.

Computation, Philosophy, and Socioeconimcs are the topics that interest me the most. I'm a firm believer that the lines we draw in academia are unnecessary (i.e. I don't have to pick one of these). I consider myself a

I'm interested in a few complex, dynamic systems (e.g. the interaction of the corporate and public world, the labor movement and work ownership, and the media, to name a few). I'm also interested in the semantics of these systems. The complexity of these systems leads me to want to work on developing computational methods for analyzing them. As a result, I'm interested in graph mining to discover structure in these systems and natural language processing to attempt to understand their semantics. Feel free to contact me at cbelth@umich.edu.

1. David Foster Wallace: “Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See John Piper and “The Grass is Greener” parable. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)