I Can't Find My Cell Phone… I Can Hardly Breathe:
Omnipresent Accessibility and the Fear of Missing Out

by Chelsea Palmer, 2015

Technology's Exponential Alteration of Our Lives

Get on the subway, the skytrain, the metro; whatever it's called in your city or town. Get on the crowded bus, or stand in line at the post office. Look around. How many people have their necks craned downward-- vision at a 45 degree angle, hands raised slightly toward them-- engrossed by the screen of a tiny computer? How many people are encapsulated in a bubble, talking to friends, loved ones or colleagues who might be thousands of miles away? And how quickly has this become the definitive norm, and the unquestioned reality of our shared public spaces?

Leaving the house, there's a quick inventory: keys, wallet, phone. Keys-- they literally unlock your home, car, workplace, all of the physical locations that define your movements. Wallet-- it "unlocks" the range of potential actions available to you, both in terms of identifying yourself and paying for access to goods and experiences. And the cellphone-- in particular, the smartphone-- nowadays, it unlocks almost everything else. We track down necessary information, plans, and directions. We search for love and inclusion (Mook, 2014). All the spaces, concrete and imaginary, that used to be inaccessible-- places too distant or abstract to imagine "visiting"-- now just require certain skills, a small amount of training, to access.

These collections of screens and circuit boards in our hands have changed the way we see ourselves, our connections to others, and most of all, the range of possibilities that lie within our grasp. Of course, every individual user has a different relationship to new technology, and thus experiences a different degree of immersion in these new practices, based on a spectrum from acceptance to rebellion of these overall shifts (Bruce & Hogan, 1998; Bakardjieva, 2005). However, it is undeniable that in the Global North, the vast majority of citizens' lives are deeply affected by modern computer devices and the Internet.

Cell Phone in My Pocket, Ringtone in My Ear

While people have various levels of commitment to their computers-- some just check in on desktop PCs a few times a day, some carry laptops and tablets-- almost everyone who owns a

cell phone travels with it on their person. Ling (2012) talks about the cycle of adoption of phones, tracing the progress from early adoption to their current "stable and taken-for-granted role in society" (p. 35). When we contrast the bulky phones of a few decades ago to the evolution of the tiny, sleek devices which slip into our pockets, there's a clear correlation between the popular embrace of cell phones' utility and the exponential improvement of their physical form.

deGuzman's (2013) short online film, "I Forgot My Phone," perfectly encapsulates the way that these devices have permeated, and now even dominate, our living environments. The film itself is perfect for the short-attention-spanned, visually-entranced modern age: two minutes long, with beautiful and vibrant imagery. More importantly, it is clearly something that speaks universally to the online population: as of this writing, it has more than 48 million views on Youtube, with a "like" ratio of over 80%. This means something. This is important.

As deGuzman illustrates, most of us now live with our cell phones close at hand, so much so that if we ourselves had Bluetooth built into our bodies, we'd always be linked. We slide them into our pockets, so we can feel the vibration of notifications. We ensure they're within hearing range, so we never miss those blips and bleeps, each person's set of tones deliberately chosen. Or we keep them on the table in front of us so we can see the screen flash, the little blinking light. The lifeline.

These omnipresent little gadgets become more than tools, they become extensions of our selves, which seem to bring us a feeling of security and wholeness (Ling, 2012). They become visible indicators, intentionally or not, of our lifestyle preferences and technological priorities. Hamilton (2012) points out how in our technological consumer culture, fierce brand loyalty begins to feel like a declaration of personal identity, immersing "us in a false reality of auto-gratification" (p. 16). This feeling of gratification swiftly becomes cyclical with the flow of planned obsolescence, as the "next big thing" always looms on the horizon (Terranova, 2004; boyd, 2008; Smart, 2011; Passini, 2013).

The comfortable, seemingly "harmless domesticity" of technology itself slowly contributes to the creep of consumer advertising into individuals' senses of self-image (Franklin, 1990, p. 100). Cell phones have become such second nature in our lives that there is a widespread phenomenon of "phantom text syndrome," where individuals misinterpret sounds or physical stimuli as indicators of an incoming text message (Heid, 2015). There is a deeper drive behind this frantic connectivity as well: our notifications no longer indicate the receipt of communication between individuals. The proliferation of social networking opens up a one-to-many platform, and so those notifications could mean that, rather than just one person, the whole crowd is calling upon you, sharing their experiences and responses to your own.

Obsession With Surface Appearances and the Fear of Missing Out

The way we engage with technology, both in terms of consumer ownership and online self-presentation, has an inescapable effect on our membership within social communities. Within Community Psychology, communities are understood to be built upon cohesion and a shared sense of identity (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). That's not to say, however, that they lack in-group conflict and strategic power relations of their own. Perhaps even more than in the past, communities hail and scrutinize one another as subjects by parsing the images we project. The person holding an outdated phone engenders pity or amusement, whereas the person with what appears to be an excessive or flashy device is "showing off." We demand something in the middle, something akin to conformity, but a conformity which fiercely proclaims its individuality.

What we look for in these omnipresent digital networks of interaction is no different than the needs that human beings have always pursued. We want our communities to reinforce our feelings of holism, of agency, and of liberation (Choules, 2007). Now that we can instantaneously connect across vast distances, and find groups who share even our most fringe outsider opinions and interests, we turn to the Internet for validation and inclusion (Bell, 2001; Rosenau & Johnson, 2002; Bakardjieva, 2005). We want "likes" on Facebook, and the approval of our carefully constructed profile information, our uploaded pictures, our inner thoughts and jokes. The boundaries between our internal lives and public personas continues to blur as we learn to broadcast everything about ourselves (boyd, 2004; Reilly, 2013).

Despite this increase in connectivity, some writers warn that people are actually growing more alienated from one another (Meltzer, 2010, Flanagin, 2015). Monbiot's (2014) eloquent opinion piece on what he called "the age of loneliness" underlined that we focus increasingly on the individual alone, constructing a sort of "post-social" reality. Being truly alone seems to erode into an experience of the past (Marvin, 2013). At the same time, being "'all together alone'" within the vast crowd seems to grow more common (Boal, 1995, p. 12). This also meshes with the observation that those who use the Internet in an attempt to escape their real world loneliness may end up even lonelier (Caplan, 2003).

Loneliness is not the only negative emotion stirred up by the Internet and its social networking platforms, as qualitative studies continually report correlation between frequent use of Facebook and vanity or narcissism (Pearse, 2012; Turnbull, 2013). Additionally, one study identified that Facebook users self-reported feelings of lower well-being, while maintaining an experimental control by tracking their parallel, positive self-reports when engaging in

face-to-face social activities and more neutral self-reports while doing neither (Kross et al., 2013). Perhaps some of this is propelled by the "flattening" of rich interactive communication in the absence of real life congregation (Zerzan, 2008; Baron, 2009). Or perhaps it relates to the assumption that we need to present our absolute "best online selves," which is as unachievable as any other expectation of perfection (Cover, 2012). When you see everyone's projected selves, their Instagram pictures carefully cultivated with the best shot out of twenty takes, it's easy to feel inadequate, so small, so uninteresting.

This focus on surface appearances has also increased the proliferation of the "fear of missing out," a popular catchphrase that means exactly what it says. There are so many opportunities for engagement and participation in the modern age, but there is also a vast collection of visible gatherings and experiences that we are not invited to join (JWT Intelligence, 2011). Additionally, the range of possible actions can lead to a desperate second-guessing about the choices we do make, wondering if a different event would have been more fun, doubting that we are truly living our lives to the fullest (Mook, 2014). This can exacerbate people's modern tendency to commit to a number of different invitations, and then barely show up to any of them-- we are afraid to make these choices until we are absolutely forced to (Flanagin, 2015). The fear of missing out can leave us feeling inadequate and excluded, returning to the loneliness which keeps breaking through in the social media realm.

Am I More Than the Sum of My Data?

We are not just attached to these little gadgets, or the bigger ones stowed in our bags or sitting on our desks at home. We are fiercely, intensely attached to the information and artifacts they hold about us, the traces of our online identities that we have uploaded and shared both consciously and unconsciously. Following the ideas of Foucault, Poster (1989) proposes that the "superpanopticon" of modern informational technology constructs another "self" for the individual, "one that may be as socially effective as the self that walks in the street" (p. 123). In addition to the mediated visibility of our social profiles, there is a rising trend toward the collection and analysis of biometric data about the patterns and activities of our daily lives.

This biometric data collection is usually accomplished through the use of wearable trackers which compute movement, heart rate, temperature, and other physical cues (Smolan, 2014). Currently, the collection of this biometric data is primarily applied to health statistics, attempting both to get a more holistic picture of individuals' biological states. Those who buy and use the devices may aim to "gamify" their lives, trying to reach goals and benchmarks that can be recorded along these axes. People who experience fatigue or other amorphous physical issues may also apply this data to understand what works to ameliorate these problems, just as someone with potential food allergies might embark on an elimination diet (Singer, 2011).

Though the sum total of our data is easily tracked and collected in corporations' private databases, it is not as easy for us as individuals to gain access to the bigger picture of big data (Regalado, 2013). In the current business model for the "wearables" that track biometrics, for example, the companies who produce and sell the devices are the ones who technically own the reserve of the resulting data (Singer, 2011).   However, in a TEDTalk, Jer Thorp (2012) points out how, for the individuals that contribute this data, such information can be intensely meaningful and personal within context. The traces of communication we leave, whether written, recorded in multimedia, or tracked by wearables, are all the little building blocks for massive, totalizing scrapbooks.

After all, if we just think of them as scrapbooks, that's less worrying than recognizing centralized databases for what they really are, and confronting their increasing power in the Internet age. However, successfully protecting your data, passwords, and general online life can have unforeseen consequences in the long term. When Michael Hamelin, a tech-savvy scientist, died tragically in a sudden accident, his wife was left with an impossible task: shutting down his accounts and accessing the data and files he had so carefully password-protected (Howell O'Neill, 2015). Though it may be surprising in this transitional period of technology, the new age of data requires a fallout plan, similar to traditional legacies and wills. The extension of data's relevance even beyond the death of our bodies is a crucial indicator of how deeply these new networks permeate our practices and influence our choices.

Foucault's attention to the concrete traces of epistemic shifts in the daily behavior and practices of individuals is clearly adaptable to the way in which some computer users structure their daily lives and represent their identities (Sullivan, 2010). We are captivated by, and immersed in, these technologies in a way that replicates Foucault's (1990) conception of "docile bodies" which are produced by the effects of bio-power. Bio-power involves productive control and conditioning of individuals' actions and personal practices, rather than forcible, repressive power which controls individuals by restricting their options.

The ideal outcome of bio-power, in its unique and complex functioning, is this "docile body" which is a useful body, whether in terms of performing labour or following structurally established societal norms (Shildrick, 2005). This docile body functions as "an object to be manipulated," so to speak, going through the motions that are cast as societal norms (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 134). As we all stare down at our phones, typing away, logging all of our information for corporations to track and analyze, we may be turning into the most docile bodies imaginable.

What Happens When We "Disconnect"?

Our relationships to the Internet fall along a scale from harmonious to disharmonious adaptation (Kelly, 2006). A unique issue within Internet culture, though, is that it is continuously shifting, updated by the very second, and it fluidly transcends totalizing boundaries. Without judging that as a good or a bad thing, it's undeniably happening all around us in the current age. In terms of the positive, social networking services allow us to connect in ways that have never been possible before (Meltzer, 2010; Hamilton, 2012). We can track down old friends, communicate across great distances, and form new relationships. We can voice both our outrage and our joy, and we can share our passions and beliefs. The Internet is a tantalizing and fascinating realm, and like anything enjoyable, it's possible to fall in too far and lose ourselves.

For the entirety of its seventeen minutes, the short film "Noah" takes place solely on the computer screen of a teenage boy as he navigates social media and darts around the programs of his computer (Cederberg & Woodman, 2013). It sounds simple, but it certainly isn't-- it exposes the parallel heartwarming connections and heartbreaking emptiness these platforms place at our fingertips. The titular character orbits paranoia about his relationship, over-analysis of small online cues, and a bored but dedicated engagement with the familiarity of his environment. We can write articles and social theory about the ennui of social media all day long, but "Noah" illustrates it in praxis, leaving us wondering what would happen if we calmed our frenetic clicking and powered down for awhile.

The epistemic reshaping of our lives and identities by these devices and networks has occurred so swiftly but surely that for most people that stepping outside of cyberspace, even for a quick break, doesn't seem like an option. Whether it is direct or not, there can be a significant degree of social pressure to use Facebook and stay omnipresently attached to our cell phones (Meltzer, 2010). This is no longer just a realm of games and instant messaging. For most of us, our jobs depend on these instantaneous communications to some degree, and our friendships and plans for socializing threaten to wither away in the absence of texting, social networking and sharing platforms (Bruce & Hogan, 1998; Crang, Crosbie & Graham, 2006; Moshe, 2012).

Paul Miller (2013) made the conscious choice to "log off" the Internet for a full year. He admitted that life without the Internet sometimes felt incredibly boring, but that was because he was stuck with the time to think, and was forced to entertain himself. Allan (2015) agreed, and shared that without being absorbed by technology, he realized that he actually has far more to think about than he assumed he did. Miller (2013) encouraged the audience to ask themselves how they use the Internet, and how, in turn, the Internet uses them. With mindfulness, it is entirely realistic to reap the benefits of the online sphere without caving to its detrimental effects

(Lichy, 2012). Miller identified this healthy balance as using the Internet as a utility, rather than an all-encompassing reality.

Rejecting modern ICT is almost akin to rejecting modern society (Aronowitz, 1994; Vaidhyanathan, 2011). Currently, in the Global North, a human being without these forms of connectivity can feel left out in the cold, hands up against the glass, looking in on the party. For some, the freedom from the demands to be "always-on" are worth this tradeoff. Both Miller (2013) and Allan (2015) endorsed the healthy idea of fully turning off devices once in awhile, going outside, and appreciating the beauty of the real world. Even "moot," the infamous founder of the controversial forum site 4chan, discusses his need to take a break from social media (Poole, 2014b). Similarly, the well-known comedian Patton Oswalt, who has often caused ripple effects of viral conversation on Twitter, gave a well-worded description of his decision to do the same, and his hope that in the future, he will log off of Twitter for the duration of every summer (Oswalt, 2014). Those who endorse this movement to disconnect emphasize that the world can be more vibrant and present without our constant connectivity, and that devoting our full attention to our everyday lives makes them much richer and more fulfilling. Perhaps this isn't true for everyone, but it certainly bears consideration.