

Participating in the Always-On Lifestyle

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I love filling out surveys, but I'm always stumped when I'm asked how many hours per day I spend online. I mean, what counts as online? I try to answer this through subtraction. I start by subtracting the hours that I sleep (~7.5 if I'm lucky). But then a little bird in the back of my brain wonders whether or not sleeping with my iPhone next to my bed really counts. Or maybe it counts when I don't check it, but what about when I check Twitter in the middle of the night when I wake up from a dream? I subtract the time spent in the shower (0.5) because technology and water are not (yet) compatible. But that's as far as I can usually get. I don't *always* check Wikipedia during dinner, but when there's a disagreement, the interwebz are always there to save the day. And, I fully admit, I definitely surf the web while on the toilet.

Y'see . . . I'm part of a cohort who is always-on. I consciously and loudly proclaim offline time through the declaration of e-mail sabbaticals when all content pushed my way is bounced rather than received. (There's nothing more satisfying than coming home from a vacation with an empty inbox and a list of people so desperate to reach me that they actually called my mother.) But this is not to say that I only have "a life" when I'm on digital sabbatical. I spend plenty of time socializing face-to-face with people, watching movies, and walking through cities. And I even spend time doing things that I'd prefer not to—grocery shopping, huffing and puffing on the treadmill, and so on. All of these activities are not in and of themselves "online," but because of technology, the online is always just around the corner. I can look up information, multitask by surfing the web, and backchannel with friends. I'm not really online, in that my activities are not centered on the digital bits of the Internet, but I'm not really offline either. I'm where those concepts break down. It's no longer about on or off really. It's about living in a world where being networked to people and information wherever and whenever

you need it is just assumed. I may not be always-on the *Internet* as we think of it colloquially, but I am always connected to the network. And that's what it means to be always-on.

There is an irony to all of this. My always-on-ness doesn't mean that I'm always-accessible-to-everyone. Just because my phone buzzes to tell me that a new message has arrived does not mean that I bother to look at it. This is not because I'm antiphone but because I'm procontext. Different social contexts mean different relationships to being always-on. They are not inherently defined by space but by a social construction of context in my own head. Sometimes I'm interruptible by *anyone* (like when I'm bored out of my mind at the DMV). But more often, I'm not interruptible because connection often means context shift, and only certain context shifts are manageable. So if I'm at dinner, I will look up a Wikipedia entry as a contribution to the conversation without checking my text messages. All channels are accessible, but it doesn't mean I will access them.

I am not alone. Like many others around me, I am perpetually connected to people and information through a series of devices and social media channels. This is often something that's described in generational terms, with "digital natives" being always-on and everyone else hobbling along trying to keep up with the technology. But, while what technology is available to each generation at key life stages keeps changing, being always-on isn't so cleanly generational. There are inequality issues that mean that plenty of youth simply don't have access to the tools that I can afford. But economic capital is not the only factor. Being always-on works best when the people around you are always-on, and the networks of always-on-ers are defined more by values and lifestyle than by generation. In essence, being always-on started as a subcultural practice, and while it is gaining momentum, it is by no means universal. There are plenty of teens who have no interest in being perpetually connected to information and people even if they can. And there are plenty of us who are well beyond our teen years who are living and breathing digital bits for fun. That said, many of the young are certainly more willing to explore this lifestyle than are their techno-fretful parents. So while being young doesn't guarantee deep engagement with technology, it is certainly correlated.

What separates those who are part of the always-on lifestyle from those who aren't is not often the use of specific tools. It's mostly a matter of approach. Instant messaging is a tool used by many but often in different ways and for different purposes. There are those who log in solely to communicate with others. And there are those who use it to convey presence and state of mind. Needless to say, the latter is much more a part of the always-

on ethos. Being always-on is not just about consumption and production of content but also about creating an ecosystem in which people can stay peripherally connected to one another through a variety of microdata. It's about creating networks and layering information on top. The goal of being connected is not simply to exchange high-signal content all the time. We also want all of the squishy, gooey content that keeps us connected as people. In our world, phatic content like posting what you had for breakfast on Twitter is AOK. Cuz it can enhance the social context. Of course, some people do go too far. But that's what teasing is meant for.

To an outsider, wanting to be always-on may seem pathological. All too often, it's labeled an addiction. The assumption is that we're addicted to the technology. The technology doesn't matter. It's all about the people and information. Humans are both curious and social critters. We want to understand and interact. Technology introduces new possibilities for doing so, and that's where the passion comes in. We're passionate about technology because we're passionate about people and information, and they go hand in hand. And once you're living in an always-on environment, you really notice what's missing when you're not. There's nothing I hate more than standing in a foreign country with my iPhone in hand, unable to access Wikipedia because roaming on AT&T is so prohibitively expensive as to make the Internet inaccessible. Instead, I find myself making lists of all the things that I want to look up when I can get online.

It's not just about instant gratification either. Sure, I can look up who is buried in the Pantheon later. But the reason that I want to know when I'm standing before it in Italy is because I want to know about the object in front of me whose signs are all in Italian. I want to translate those signs, ask questions about the architecture. And it's 4 a.m., and the guard tells me it's not his job to provide history lessons. What I want is to bring people and information into context. It's about enhancing the experience.

Of course, this doesn't mean it can't get overwhelming. Cuz it does. And I'm not always good at managing the overload. My RSS-feed reader has exploded, and there's no way that I can keep up with the plethora of status updates and Twitter messages posted by friends, colleagues, and intriguing humans that I don't know. E-mail feels like a chore, and I do everything possible to avoid having to log in to dozens of different sites to engage in conversations inside walled gardens. There's more news than I can possibly read on any given day.

So how do I cope? Realistically, I don't. I've started accepting that there's no way that I can manage the onslaught of contact, wade through the mess,

and find the hidden gems. I haven't completely thrown my hands up though. Instead, I've decided to take a *laissez-faire* approach to social media. I do my best, and when that's not good enough, I rely on people bitching loud and clear to make me reprioritize. And then I assess whether or not I can address their unhappiness. And if I can't, I cringe and hope that it won't be too costly. And sometimes I simply declare bankruptcy and start over.

As social media becomes increasingly pervasive in everyday life, more and more people will be overwhelmed by the information surrounding them. And they will have to make choices. Networked technologies allow us to extend our reach, to connect across space and time, to find people with shared interests and gather *en masse* for social and political purposes. But time and attention are scarce resources. Until we invent the sci-fi doohickey that lets us freeze time, no amount of aggregating and reorganizing will let us overcome the limitations presented by a scarcity of time and attention.

In the meantime, many of us are struggling to find balance. We create artificial structures in an effort to get there. I take digital sabbaticals. Others create technologies that restrict them so that they don't have face hard decisions at points when they're potentially vulnerable. For example, late-night surfing from link to link to link can be so enjoyable that it's easy to forget to sleep. But biology isn't very forgiving, so sometimes a time-out is necessary.

Many from the always-on crowd also try to embrace crazy strategies to optimize time as much as humanly possible. Proponents of polyphasic sleep argue that hacking your circadian rhythm can allow for more wake hours; I just think sleeping in small chunks means more loopy people out in the blogosphere. Of course, I fully admit that I've embraced the cult of GTD in an effort to reduce unnecessary cognitive load by doing inventories of various things.

Hacking time, hacking biology, hacking cognition—these are all common traits of people who've embraced an always-on lifestyle. Many of us love the idea that we can build new synaptic structures through our use of networked technologies. While many old-skool cyberpunks wanted to live in a virtual reality, always-on folks are more interested in an augmented reality. We want to be a part of the network.

There's no formula for embracing always-on practices, and we must each develop our own personal strategies for navigating a world with ever-increasing information. There are definitely folks who fail to find balance, but most of us find a comfortable way to fit these practices into everyday life without consequence. Of course, the process of finding balance may appear like we're feeling our way through a maze while blindfolded. We're all going

to bump into a lot of things along the way and have to reassess where we're going when we reach our own personal edges. But, in doing so, we will personalize the media rich environment to meet our needs and desires.

Social media skeptics often look at the output of those who are engaging with the newfangled services and shake their heads. "How can they be so public?" some ask. Others reject digital performances by asking, "Who wants to read what they want anyhow?" Publicness is one of the strange and yet powerful aspects of this new world. Many who blog and tweet are not writing for the world at large; they are writing for the small group who might find it relevant and meaningful. And, realistically, the world at large is not reading the details of their lives. Instead, they are taking advantage of the affordances of these technologies to connect with others in a way that they feel is appropriate.

Each technology has its affordances, and what's powerful about certain technology often stems from these affordances. Consider asynchronicity, an affordance of many social media tools. Years ago, I interviewed an HIV-positive man who started blogging. When I asked him about his decision to start, he told me that it helped him navigate social situations in a more comfortable manner. He did not use his real name on his blog, but his friends all knew where to find the blog. On this site, he wrote about his ups and downs with his illness, and his friends read this. He found that such a mediator allowed him to negotiate social boundaries with friends in new ways. He no longer had to gauge the appropriateness of the situation to suddenly declare his T-cell count. Likewise, his friends didn't have to overcome their uncertainty in social situations to ask about his health. He could report when he felt comfortable doing so, and they could read when they were prepared to know. This subtle shift in how he shared information with friends and how friends consumed it eased all sorts of tensions. Technology doesn't simply break social conventions—it introduces new possibilities for them.

It's also typically assumed that being always-on means facing severe personal or professional consequences. There is fear that participating in a public culture can damage one's reputation or that constant surfing means the loss of focus or that always having information at hand will result in a failure to actually know things. But aren't we living in a world where knowing how to get information is more important than memorizing it? Aren't we moving away from an industrial economy into an information one? Creativity is shaped more by the ability to make new connections than to focus on a single task. And why shouldn't we all have the ability to be craft our identity in a public culture? Personally, I've gained more professionally from being

public than I could have dreamed possible when I started blogging in 1997. For example, I'll ol' me had no idea that blogging controversial ideas backed with data might get me an invitation to the White House.

Ironically, the publicness of social media also provides privacy in new ways. Many of those who embrace the public aspects of social media find that the more public they are, the more they can carve off privacy. When people assume you share everything, they don't ask you about what you don't share. There are also ways to embed privacy in public in ways that provide a unique form of control over the setting. Certainly, people have always had private conversations while sitting in public parks. And queer culture is rife with stories of how gay and lesbian individuals signaled to one another in public arenas through a series of jewelry, accessories, and body language. Likewise, in-jokes are only meaningful to those who are in the know, whether they are shared in a group or online. And there are all sorts of ways to say things out loud that are only heard by a handful of people. These become tricks of the trade, skills people learn as they begin fully engaging in an always-on public culture.

Being always-on and living a public life through social media may complicate our lives in new ways, but participating can also enrich the tapestry of life. Those of us who are living this way can be more connected to those whom we love and move in sync with those who share our interests. The key to this lifestyle is finding a balance, a rhythm that moves us in ways that make us feel whole without ripping our sanity to shreds. I've lived my entire adult life in a world of networked information and social media. At times, I'm completely overwhelmed, but when I hit my stride, I feel like an ethereal dancer, energized by the connections and ideas that float by. And there's nothing like being connected and balanced to make me feel alive and in love with the world at large.