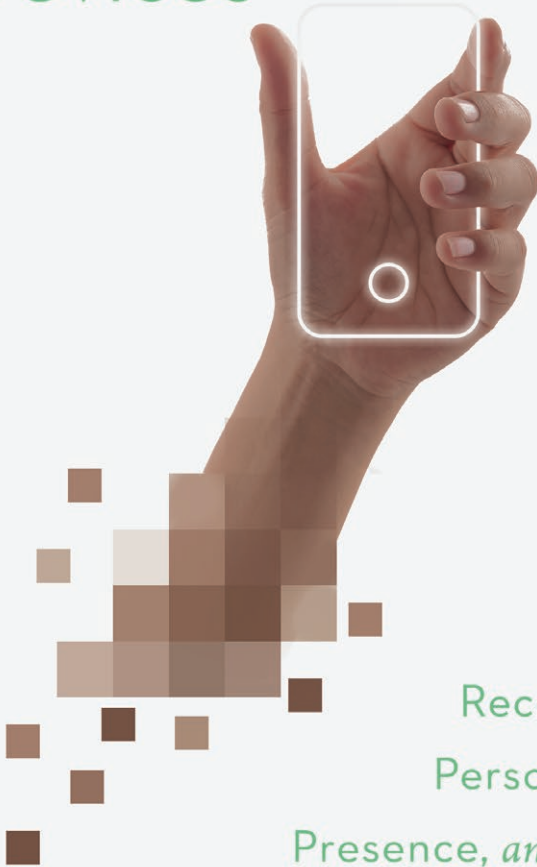


Felicia Wu Song

# Restless Devices



Recovering  
Personhood,  
Presence, *and* Place  
*in the* Digital Age



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# Being at Altitude

## Understanding the Digital Ecology

*Modernity promised us a culture of unintimidated, curious, rational, self-reliant individuals, and it produced . . . a herd society, a race of anxious timid, conformist “sheep,” and a culture of utter banality.*

ROBERT PIPPIN

*Cats have done the seemingly impossible: They’ve integrated themselves into the modern high-tech world without giving themselves up. They are still in charge. . . . Oh, how we long to have that certainty not just about our cats, but about ourselves! Cats on the internet are our hopes and dreams for the future of people on the internet.*

JARON LANIER

**THE FIRST TIME** I was at altitude, I felt terrible and I had no idea why.

A couple hours into a long awaited weekend in the mountains, it began with a dull headache and an inchoate sense of discomfort. We had unpacked the car, the kids had scrambled through the ins and outs of the vacation rental property, and we were finally ready to get playing! Eager to press on with our family’s plans, I ignored my body’s early distress signals and muscled through the afternoon. But as the night wore on, the headache and exhaustion had overtaken me and I was casting desperately for explanations: What was going on? Why did I feel so badly?! Poor fitness? Previous nights of poor sleep? Not enough breakfast?

I self-diagnosed in all the wrong directions, getting more and more frustrated. Finally, my mind found its way through my self-inflicted maze of bewilderment and came to the simple realization, “*Oh right. I’m at altitude.*”

It’s the same with digital technology. At first, everything is exciting and fun! You’re jamming through your to-do list, multitasking with great efficiency. The messaging banter with friends is pretty great. Your social media presence is getting some attention, as people like and re-post your content. But then, a few years in, you begin to feel a vague discontent and sometimes even guilt about your digital life. Checking your notifications starts to feel more compulsive and isn’t as satisfying as it used to be.

In fact, even when things get ugly and you recognize how much you need to make a change, you press on because you don’t know how to stop or change your digital reflexes. It feels impossible. Why? Because we live in an environment that is structured to resist and even punish such change. To realize that one’s growing dissonance is largely rooted in such a digital environment is like realizing, “*Oh right. I’m at altitude.*”

When we are at altitude, even if our minds don’t grasp it, our bodies do and they send out distress signals. Similarly, when we are living in a digitally saturated society, even if our minds don’t recognize it, our bodies and our spirits know—and arguably, they’ve been sending out distress signals for more than a few years now.

If medical knowledge helps us understand that dehydration reduces our body’s ability to acclimate to higher elevations and leads us to drink more water when we’re on the mountain hiking or skiing, sociological insight can help us understand the cultural and structural character of our digital environment and lead us to imagine an alternative way of living in today’s digitally saturated world. A good place to start is simply naming some of the key characteristics of the digital environment and recognizing how they’ve changed dramatically over the last thirty years.

*i.* When the internet first went mainstream in the mid-1990s, the very idea of forming and carrying on relationships through the glow of the

computer screen was met with one of two responses: alarm or euphoria. Some feared that the internet would cause us to neglect our “real lives” because we would be seduced by the avatar-driven fantasies of cyberspace. More, however, were excited by the dazzling prospects of the internet connecting people across the world and creating new avenues of support, community, and empowerment.

Thirty years into this magnificent experiment of digital communication, when we look around at our world today, it seems the optimists were mostly right. We don’t appear to have completely lost touch with reality. We aren’t cloistered in our basements or bedrooms playing the latest equivalent of *World of Warcraft* or *Fortnite*. We still manage to keep our jobs and tend to our families. In fact, many scholars surmise that we may be more connected with each other and more in touch with the “real world” than ever as our technologies enable far-flung friends and loved ones to see each other on screens, share videos and pictures, and even convene virtually during major life moments like childbirths, anniversaries, and graduations.

On the surface of things, while the optimists may have carried the day, even the most strident would have to acknowledge that the actual experience of the internet and the social dynamic of “going online” has completely changed. “Being connected” in today’s world means something dramatically different from what it meant back in the 1990s when the internet of yesteryear was accessed through boxy desktop computers dialed into the wall of our homes or workplaces. Most prominently, “being connected” today is closer to a state of consciousness—a human condition—than a discrete behavior. Unlike the World Wide Web of old, the character of today’s digital technologies and social media push us toward living in, what some scholars call, “a state of pervasive or permanent connectivity.”<sup>1</sup> Once we are in the digital environment with email, social media, and a device, we don’t have to actively “do” anything to be connected.

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<sup>1</sup>Manuel Castells et al., *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 248.

A major part of this shift to permanent connectivity occurred when the internet slipped beyond our desktop computers and into our phones and onto our wrists. The internet became *mobile* and *ubiquitous*. With our digital devices now in our pockets, in our bags, and even beneath our pillows when we sleep, we move through our days and nights draped with the immanent sense of the digital. Ever available and accessible, it is perpetually poised to tend to our desires, living and breathing alongside us.

This 24/7 availability of digital experience would not have revolutionized our lives if the reason we looked to the internet remained stuck in the 1990s when we mostly marveled over such e-commerce innovations as Amazon.com, Travelocity, and eBay, or enjoyed the novelties of reading the news online or using HTML to build our own website. No, what makes our current state of permanent connectivity so culturally compelling is the fact that the digital media and technology of today have become the primary portal to our social lives. Rather than meeting strangers in AOL chat rooms and Usenet forums during the 1990s, today's social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram capitalize on our existing networks of friends, family, colleagues, and professional contacts. Rather than drawing us away from our family and friends as so many early pessimists of the internet had feared, much of our contemporary digital experience is thoroughly looped into our existing ties. We turn to our screens because it is there that we find and experience friendship, family, and relationship. We are often excited about being connected to the internet today not because it connects us to the information superhighway or a limitless shopping extravaganza, but because it promises to connect us to the important people in our lives.

While turning to the digital today offers the possibility of communing with those we love, it is precisely because our digital experiences are *thoroughly social* that its ubiquity and mobility can become a problem. In her poignantly insightful books *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversation*, social psychologist Sherry Turkle explores what it means that friends and family are now digitally tethered. Undoubtedly, to be constantly tethered

to loved ones in this way can be reassuring and pleasurable. But Turkle points out that it can also serve as a crutch when we grow to become people incapable of solitude, fearful of being alone with ourselves, and prone to turning to our screens and away from our immediate surroundings whenever we feel awkward, bored, or anxious.

Moreover, being digitally tethered can foster a growing expectation of constant availability to one's friends and family, regardless of time or day. Just as the digital is always accessible to us, we come to expect the same of people. And even as some of us may intuitively feel that something is not quite right about this arrangement, we can't shake the tendency to express and measure our commitments to each other by the degree to which we are immediately responsive to our friends' digital requests for attention. We have fast become a people who are always available, always on call. Young people grow into their friendships and personal identities in this engrossing fog of social pressures, stresses, and anxieties that had—until this point in human history—mainly been the purview of surgeons, fire-fighters, and workaholics. (And even then, first responders and doctors were professionally obligated to take time away from their beepers.) This does not even address the widely recognized fear of missing out (FOMO) that drives people to compulsively check their devices and respond to notifications at a moment's notice.

While our psychological longings to belong and to be “in the know” can hardly resist the scent of real-time news and updates delivered by our devices, our propensity to check our technologies are further fed by the *infinite novelty* that is designed into our current digital media and services. From the moment a young person gets her own smartphone, she knows that she is gaining access to a mode of life that is perpetually filled with possibility. Her social media feeds are ceaselessly “refreshed,” her games and apps are always “updating,” and there are always new texts, snaps, and “stories” to tend.

When the mobile, social and infinitely novel aspects of the contemporary digital experience are mixed together, the result is a psychological

cocktail of pleasures, anxieties, and felt expectations. This is what it means to be living at altitude. There is a soft tyranny that persistently feeds our desires to check one’s email, peek at one’s Instagram, tweet one more remark, and respond to one more text. Indeed, with our devices in our possession, the promise of fulfillment, completion, and emotional connection feels ever within our reach. These key features are what make the digital experiences of today so difficult to resist, and frankly, much more difficult to even differentiate from our “real lives” because they are so intimately enmeshed in delivering to us our daily sense of reality.

Indeed, being permanently connected means that, even if our devices are not powered on, or even in one’s possession, our consciousness has become sufficiently trained and thoroughly immersed in the habits of mind formed by an unceasing awareness of the constantly shifting landscape of what is being said and posted in the digital realm. Life is constantly “being lived elsewhere” as our bodies are in one place,<sup>2</sup> but our minds and consciousness reside focused on the stuff of our screens. Our collective consciousness is increasingly one in which—no matter where we are or what we are doing—we feel the need to catch up: to catch up on our emails, texts, social media feeds, the news of the day. The internet used to be “out there” in an exotic frontier called cyberspace. Now the internet is very much in the mundane of our kitchen counters and living rooms, lubricating our social lives and infused into our daily rhythms and habits of being. The comparison of “real” and “virtual” from the 1990s simply doesn’t make sense anymore.

Rather it might be more apt—whether your main point of reference is the Bible or the movie cult classic *The Big Lebowski*—to borrow the ancient notion of “abiding” to describe our relationship with digital technologies today. In the same way that Jesus called his disciples to abide in him as he would abide in them, we too have become a people who abide in the digital, and the digital abides in us. And for *Big Lebowski* fans, in the same passive

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<sup>2</sup>Dalton Conley, *Elsewhere, U.S.A.: How We Got from the Company Man, Family Dinners and the Affluent Society to the Home Office, BlackBerry Moms and Economic Anxiety* (New York: Vintage, 2010).



way that “the Dude abides” and rides the currents of life in a medicated and vague hope that all will turn out fine enough, we too may be becoming a people who run the risk of passively riding the digital currents in a numbed hope that all will turn out just fine enough.

Is it any wonder that young adults who have spent significant portions of their formative years catering to the whims of social media’s notifications and algorithmic gatekeeping now express the staggering discovery that something has gone very wrong? Many speak of how “the internet broke my brain” and are on the search for some kind of relief. Indeed, daily we swipe on the glass to refresh our feeds and we gaze with the peculiar gaze of hesitant anticipation commonly seen on casino floors when gamblers pull the lever of the slot machines one more time. Just one more time. We are at altitude, and we don’t even know it.

*ii.* When our daughter was eleven, she began lobbying for a smartphone. Like any shrewd child, she offered reasons that she knew would appeal to us as parents. She told us that a phone would help us know where she was when she went out with friends. She told us that a phone would let her text us if she needed to reschedule a pickup time. She told us that a phone would keep her safe if she found herself in danger. Rather than reveal her desires for social status—because anyone who’s *anyone* has an iPhone and can stay connected with friends through texting or social media—she appealed to the pragmatic functions of the device and how it would help our family life. In doing so, my daughter’s rhetorical strategy appealed to the sense that digital technologies are tools—and just that, tools. She assured us that it would not become her end all and be all. She promised that she wouldn’t become surgically attached to her device in social settings or when alone as modeled by so many of her peers. While her persuasive pitch was just that—a persuasive pitch—her line of reasoning fell into a well-worn rationale for why we need the technologies in our lives.

Most of us think of digital technologies as merely tools. We think of our devices and digital media accounts as making our lives more convenient and efficient, helping us manage our education, our employment, or family lives, along with granting us access to friendship, romance, and entertainment. For the most part, we think of our smartphone or laptop like a hammer. When we have to perform a function or task, we pick it up, use it, and set it down. And just as a hammer can be equally used to build a shelter or smash a window, the internet and its digital technologies can be equally used for good or for ill. It can promote something as empowering as the Arab Spring activism or as destructive as white supremacist hate speech.

People often say, “The internet is just a tool. Its effects depend on who is using it.” This saying, however, is packed with several implicit presumptions. First, it presumes that because most of us are good people, we tend to use digital technologies for good (with the occasional slip-up, of course). Second, it presumes that our digital technologies are neither good nor bad. In and of themselves, they are value-neutral. So when social media platforms like Facebook inadvertently get used to promote violence or fake news to large portions of society, it’s not really Facebook’s fault. The designers, engineers, and companies who produce and distribute these technologies are not to blame simply because they designed the tool. It’s the “bad people” who used the technology in harmful ways who ought to be blamed and held responsible for their actions.

While this common sentiment may tap into some element of truth (certainly, users and their choices greatly influence a technology’s effects on society), it does so at the cost of advancing a misleading and naive view of the inherent nature of technology, whether it be analog or digital. Indeed if we merely scratch beneath the surface, we can see that the outcomes of most any technology are often double-edged swords. For instance, when contemplating the powerful technological shifts that altered the historical constraints of time and space during the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud wondered:

Is there then no positive gain in pleasure, no unequivocal increase in my feeling of happiness if I can, as often as I please, hear the voice of a child of mine who is living hundreds of miles away or if I can learn in the shortest possible time after a friend has reached his destination that he has come through the long and difficult voyage unharmed? . . . [And yet,] if there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice; if travelling across the ocean by ship had not been introduced, my friend would not have embarked on his sea-voyage and I should not need a cable to relieve my anxiety about him.<sup>3</sup>

What Freud understood was the fact that, even when a technology may be used for good, the very opportunity that created that possibility for good may simultaneously expose us to a new risk, a new conundrum, or a new social ill that we had been previously protected from.

Also in his lament for those children and friends who have since left his side, he recognized that each technology yields a specific set of “affordances” that make particular paths of action (or inaction) easier to fulfill than others.<sup>4</sup> Moving away and traveling abroad feel more viable because the technology of the telephone and the telegraph exist. In the case of our digital technologies, such affordances may be intentionally designed into the app or device. For example, the affordance or capacity to spend hours binge-watching serial programming on Netflix or YouTube is designed into the media source because the next episode or recommended video automatically queues up and runs—unless you actually stop it from happening. Sometimes affordances are unforeseen. Consider how checking one’s work email even during nonwork hours has simply emerged as a given and become so ingrained in our cultural mindset that it is difficult to imagine how we would do otherwise, thereby, weakening a longstanding boundary between work and home, public life and private life.

<sup>3</sup>Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), quoted in Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 5-6.

<sup>4</sup>Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 65.

Either way, while we as individuals still retain agency and can choose to use our technology as we would like, the built-in affordances of a technology's design create an unlevel playing field that privileges certain options over others. We *can* choose to watch only one episode on Netflix or we *can* resist checking our work email during vacation, but to do so requires swimming upstream with intention and effort. As media scholar Neil Postman presciently observed before the internet even existed, intrinsic to every technology is “a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, . . . to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another.”<sup>5</sup> Though technological affordances certainly do not *determine* human behavior, it is important to recognize how they create environments that make some worlds and behaviors more imaginable and achievable than others.

In the mid-twentieth century, Walter Ong explored this stage-setting quality of technologies on a much larger scale as he sought to explore the role of media technologies in major civilizational shifts in culture and societal consciousness.<sup>6</sup> He theorized that in societies defined by the oral tradition, great honor and esteem was granted to the elders and storytellers who could speak their tribe's history and identity into being. This all changed when the written word and the printing press offered a visual and linear form of communication that created texts that could be repeatedly recorded and authoritatively analyzed by a new class of scribes, historians, and philosophers. The electronic age of radio and television would further shift cultural authority away from the learned elite and place it in the hands of charismatic performers who could emotionally connect with audiences through the microphone or the camera. According to Ong, every major shift in a communication medium set in motion a cultural and societal shift that catapulted new skills and new categories of people into the limelight. What's helpful about this narrative of human history is that it reveals how

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<sup>5</sup>Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 13.

<sup>6</sup>Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

every technology is not just a tool. Rather technologies are inextricably enmeshed in the very ways that societies distribute cultural power and define knowledge. With the evolving dominance of each new media technology, new skills and training were privileged, and new groups of people rose in status within a society.

Now before we get ahead of ourselves and start imagining human history as merely a chain of civilizational reactions to random objects falling out of the sky, it's essential that we not be overawed by the Wizard of Oz-like magic and alien power of technology, but keep a sober eye trained on the man behind the curtain. Historians of technology consistently remind us that technologies are products of people and their societies. They are indelibly marked by the values and assumptions of inventors and their cultures. As artifacts of a given society, one might say that every technology is "made in the image of" that society—and in particular, that society's class of inventors, designers, scientists, and entrepreneurs. Technology does not simply come forth fully formed like Athena out of the head of Zeus. Because every society and culture is committed to particular ends and visions of the good life—whether it be fortune or honor, freedom or belonging, efficiency or beauty—it can't help but serve as a morally valanced context from which technologies are imagined, created, and implemented in equally morally valanced ways. That is to say, since societies and cultures are inherently constituted by value claims about what is good and what is evil, what is worthwhile and what is to be rejected, their imprint gets set into its dominant technologies.

So while we may be content imagining our digital technologies as merely tools that help us stay organized, avoid traffic jams, and take snazzy pictures, because they are inextricably borne out of meaning-filled and value-laden cultural contexts, it makes more sense to see them as carriers of those meanings and values that direct us toward certain ends. The irony is that of all the technologies that could ever be considered neutral, the story of the internet's creation reveals it to be one of the most value-laden technologies ever imagined.

*iii.* What I have always loved about the internet is its origin story. True to form, it is a story that bucks the trends and defies conventional narratives of innovation. For what lies as the backbone of the internet is a computer infrastructure for networking that miraculously emerged out of the unlikely collaboration between the US Defense Department, computer science professors, and 1960s communitarian hackers and tinkerers. This hilarious set of unexpected bedfellows uniquely drew together government resources, intellectual firepower, and utopian dreams. By juxtaposing these countervailing priorities, there was a chance to yield something utterly new. In the end, the combination of the military’s pragmatic desire for a network with decentralized communication capability, academia’s faith in the virtues of shared knowledge, and the counterculture’s valorization of self-expression, antiestablishment sentiment, and social harmony resulted in the remarkable design and ethos of the internet as we know it.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most surprising aspects of this story of innovation is the distinct lack of economic interest. (In fact, the original ideas were so far out beyond the existing paradigms that no self-respecting telecommunication companies wanted to invest in such a high-risk project.) I don’t think the significance of this commercial absence can ever be overestimated. Arguably, the ideologies of freedom and ethic of mutual sharing that originally shaped the core design of the internet could only have taken root within a context that was free from even a shred of concern for its commercial value.

But even as the internet did become commercialized during the dot-com boom of the late nineties, the utopian myths that developed around the technology went far beyond its functionality. The earliest proponents and champions of the internet spoke in glowing terms that directly drew from the legacy of Enlightenment dreams. They were breathless over the sheer marvel of digital communication and distribution of information across time and space. They sang familiar choruses that praised scientific

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<sup>7</sup>For a full account of the origins of the internet, see Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

knowledge and innovation as the inevitable means of human progress. The creation of what seemed like a parallel universe in cyberspace amplified existing questions about the presumed nature of reality and its limitations, and offered new possibilities of unlocking humanity's full potential. Internet technology became a cultural container that would catch all of our turn-of-the-century hopes of fixing the age-old quandaries of human suffering and global conflict. As such, the internet was always a value-laden technology. It was never neutral and it was never just a tool. It was designed to promote individual freedoms over structural constraints, and the market for its subsequent digital media and services wrapped the technology within a morally valanced story about information being power, and digital connection promising prosperity, equality, and happiness. (As far as I know, nobody has ever promised anything remotely close to that list of social goods about a hammer!)

As the technology evolved and found new life in cloud computing, data-driven services, and user-generated content through social media and blogging, a new industry of digital media and startups took center stage in Silicon Valley. The remnant of software engineers and countercultural utopians who defined the earlier companies like AOL, Microsoft, and IBM, were overshadowed by a new breed of venture capitalists and entrepreneurs whose eyes were trained on the fresh and exciting outside-of-the-box modes of creativity found in companies like Google, Facebook, and YouTube. Like the Gold Rush settlers, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs emerged as modern-day heroes. They were praised for their “rugged individualism” and capacity to strike out on their own, making their mark through sheer ingenuity and wits as they ran headlong into a new untapped digital market that brimmed with potential reward.

With a sure faith in the capacity to engineer and design solutions for virtually any puzzle that arose, startup culture's celebrated mantra to “move fast and break things” gave companies license to privilege the virtues of disruption and innovation over and above social responsibility. Unfortunately as we have all seen, this starry-eyed belief—that any emergent

problem can be fixed with better programming or better algorithms—fed a willful blindness to the polarizing and radicalizing tendencies of social media and the digital landscape. As these troubling dynamics began to clearly affect American civic and political life in 2016, these tech companies have been increasingly called on by consumer advocacy groups, government officials, and scholars alike to address the ways in which the priorities that were embedded in their technology’s design and platform’s policies have unintentionally led to deleterious consequences for American democracy.

Despite Silicon Valley’s desire to imagine itself as an enlightened industry that delivers services and products that are universally inclusive and empowering, the confirmed biases found among venture capitalists to favor those entrepreneurs who are young, white, and male signal the degree to which the digital industry privileges certain voices and perspectives over others.<sup>8</sup> And insofar as every technology is imprinted by the cultural ethos it was borne out of, it should not be surprising to discover that the internet and its digital landscape inextricably mirrors American society in all of its glory and all of its shame.

If we are to recognize how our digital technologies carry within them the values and perspectives of their makers, their culture, and their societal assumptions, perhaps we should be asking: Whose values or dreams are embedded in the design of our apps, platforms, and digital experiences? What type of world was this technology supposed to make possible and encourage? What kinds of lives are these technologies meant to enhance? And how is it shaping mine?

*iv.* The story of the internet’s origins and the subsequent prominence of Silicon Valley demonstrates that our digital ecology inherently reflects what we cherish and believe in North America. Each digital device and

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<sup>8</sup>For an excellent analysis of Silicon Valley culture, see Alice Marwick’s *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).



each app are emblematic of, and enmeshed in, an entire structural and cultural universe that values freedom, information, personal choice, and expression. To stay committed to the myth of the neutral tool then is to remain blind to the fact that just as any artifact is created and employed within any given society and any given time, digital technologies are produced and used within a context that is socially situated not just in a universally human way but in culturally specific, structurally particular ways. Therefore, our digital technologies are flush with values, hopes, fears, biases, and beliefs.

In a deeply sociological sense, technology works the same way that culture does. It tells a story about how life should be. While it is an artifact, and while it has a function or expresses an idea, our digital technologies exist within a fertile and lively ecology that envelopes and sustains our contemporary lives.

When most of us think about digital technology, what probably comes to mind is a particular device like a smartphone, laptop, Bluetooth speaker, or tablet. Or perhaps we think of services, apps, and websites like Netflix, TikTok, Instagram, or email. Whether we are frustrated or exhilarated by what that technology brings into our lives, it's easy to just focus attention on the device or the application. In the tech industry, insiders often use the notion of “the digital” as shorthand for referring to the entire digital realm that is technological, economic, social, and political in nature. To refer to “the digital” reminds us that our technologies are not merely devices and apps but part and parcel of an entire “ecology”<sup>9</sup> of material hardware and software, telecommunications and computing networks, and economic infrastructures. As such, the digital is understood as a system that spans venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, and engineers to social media influencers, content providers, and advertisers.

When we try to tamp down our digital compulsions in a particular area of our lives, we often quickly realize that the problem is not just about

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<sup>9</sup>Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

sharpening our own sense of volition. Rather to do so is to resist and push against an *entire* system that has been constructed and arranged to slide us down particular paths and corridors. So when we try to resist checking our work email during the weekend, we shouldn't be surprised to find that we may run up against a broader and deeper cultural reality that champions productivity and financial success. Or when we unplug from social media for a few weeks, we shouldn't be surprised when relationships feel destabilized when we feel cut off from "everything" that is happening and people question our commitment to friendships. Because any such contestation or resistance against the prescribed practices of this digital ecology may threaten to tear at the very fabric of who we are and what our reality has become, changing our digital habits can feel simply impossible and be quite painful.

Any attempt to question or resist a technological status quo then will require more than a solitary act of personal discipline and self-improvement. To undertake any such attempt requires standing against an entire ecology of cultural and structural forces that function beyond the level of the individual. The digital ecology tells a particular and powerful story about who we are as human beings and how we should live together. It continually conforms us into its narrative image as we more deeply embed its artifacts and practices into our most fundamental ways of being and living out our days. How we manage to challenge the technological status quo then will depend in a large part on how well we understand digital ecology's story.



# THE FREEDOM PROJECT

## Experiments in Praxis

### An Overview

**FOR OVER A DECADE**, I have assigned a twenty-four-hour digital media fast to students in my Internet and Society course. While it is usually greeted with to-be-expected groans, in recent years, more and more students have come to genuinely embrace the opportunity. In fact, the fast has often become a catalyst, a jarring moment of revelation about their largely unconscious and habituated dependence on the digital.

This growing openness to questioning the legitimacy of our digital lives is mirrored in the recent emergence of books with titles that signal our cultural desire for something different from the frenzy that characterizes our times: *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*; *Indistractable: How to Control Your Attention and Choose Your Life*; *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. Each book names the digital discontents of our lives and offers practical tips for taking on the digital beast, promising the possibility of becoming more productive and more focused on living the life we want to live.

One of the books that really caught my attention was Caroline Price's book *How to Break Up with Your Phone*.<sup>1</sup> I was obviously intrigued by the title's clever assertion that we are in intimate relationship with our smartphones and breaking up is hard business, but the real allure was the thirty-day plan that she lays out in the book. *Only thirty days to break up with my*

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<sup>1</sup>Catherine Price, *How to Break Up with Your Phone* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2018).

*phone? Now, this is something I gotta see.* As I read through her plan, I kept wondering: Will any of this actually work? What would (or could?) happen if my students could build on their revelations from the digital fast and be given concrete paths forward for the possibility of genuine change? And so when the next semester of Internet and Society began, I rolled out a new assignment called The Freedom Project.

Price's thirty-day plan takes her readers from the first step of acknowledging the problem, through the baby steps of trying new microshifts in routines, to an eventual breakup for an entire weekend without one's phone and finding a new normal in that relationship. The Freedom Project I assign is an adaptation of Price's plan with the distinctive twist of drawing on James K. A. Smith's language of secular liturgy and counterliturgy (to be discussed in chapter 6) to frame the assignments. While some of the language and suggested practices are drawn directly from Price's book, The Freedom Project is uniquely motivated by three convictions:

First, it is invested in shifting our starting assumptions about what freedom means. When it comes to the internet and our digital devices, notions of freedom tend to be oriented around how the internet frees us from the limitations of time, space, and our bodies. We also often speak of how the internet grants us freedom of information and freedom of speech so that we access and express whatever we want. This freedom is a form of permission or license to do as we please. This freedom is a kind of relinquishing of anything that hinders our desires.

This common understanding of freedom means that any consideration of curbing our digital habits and behaviors often feels as if our freedom is being threatened and constrained. However, this project asserts that we consider opening the door to a new kind of freedom: a freedom from the tyranny of the digital itself.

When we can imagine the grip of the digital on our lives weakened and even dissolving, we can be released from its hold and begin enjoying the fruits of experiencing freedom from our compulsions and freedom from our fears—whether they be about not being good enough, what others

think of us, or getting enough done. When this door is open we also enter into the possibility of experiencing a freedom to be vulnerable and freedom to be fully who we are in all of our capacities and limitations. As Justin Earley asked in his book about habits, “What if the good life doesn’t come from having the ability to do what we want, but from having the ability to do what we were made for?”<sup>2</sup>

Too often freedom-as-license promises us fulfillment and empowerment, but we discover its pursuit to be empty and disappointing. Instead, it is only when we experience a freedom from what has been controlling us that we encounter a genuine kind of empowerment. This kind of freedom is rooted in the understanding that as worshipping creatures, we will always be drawn to serve someone or something. The question is whether that master is going to love us back or not. The Christian tradition’s answer to what the good life entails is rooted in the assertion that the God of the universe who created us and gave us meaning and purpose is a good, trustworthy, and loving Lord to serve. So The Freedom Project is designed to move us down a path of becoming free from the digital habits that would otherwise control us, *so that* we can pursue the kind of freedom that comes from knowing and being known by the triune God.

Second, while curbing, limiting, or completely eliminating our digital usage might prove beneficial, we need to recognize that our souls have appetites. Given our predisposition to love *something*, we can’t just concern ourselves with removing what might be detrimental to our soul formation. We also need to be actively working to discover what we *ought* to be filling ourselves up with in return. And the more we can engage in habits and practices that yield deliciously tasty fruit that we enjoy and relish, we will want to come back for more. And the more we experience and taste enough of that good life, the less power those old fearful or compulsive habits that were nipping at our heels will have over us. In this sense, The Freedom Project shares some key features with historically rooted calls to religious

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<sup>2</sup>Justin Earley, *The Common Rule: Habits of Purpose for an Age of Distraction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 11.

asceticism or voluntary simplicity. As Mahatma Gandhi once taught, “Only give up a thing when you want some other condition so much that the thing no longer has any attraction for you, or when it seems to interfere with that which is more greatly desired.”

With that said, since I am one who can barely manage to keep a New Year’s resolution past the month of January, I recognize that many of us may be fairly pessimistic about our capacity to will ourselves into a virtuous new life or sustain an effort that we know will be good for us. So this project is designed as experiments and exercises, not designed as a “plan” with a tangible destination or measurable indication of success. It is built more as a gentle resource that intends to inspire and from which one can learn, rather than a plan that one can succeed or fail in.

Third, the original version of The Freedom Project was carried out in the context of a college course. My students did it together. They fasted together. They did their digital stocktaking together. They tried new counter-liturgies together. They dreamed of alternative futures together. In doing the project as a class, my students were collectively sharing an experience with all the energies of affirmation, commiseration, and hilarity that naturally generated—serving to make the possibility of genuine change more real. Therefore, while individuals can certainly undertake The Freedom Project on their own, it would be best to recruit a conversation partner or fellow pilgrim to join you in sharing this experience and to expand what feels possible in one’s own life and with others. Friends, small groups, churches, and families can try using The Freedom Project as a way to begin exploring questions and discussions about their individual and corporate use of digital devices in their lives.

One final suggestion is to consider setting aside a section of a journal or keeping a running log of your experiences as you go through each stage and let each stage have its due. In fact, even spending a couple of weeks to complete and reflect on the experience and insights from each stage of The Freedom Project may be more effective than rushing through each stage in rapid succession.

At the beginning of each semester, I tell my students that I personally hope The Freedom Project might lead to some helpful results, but that I have no expectations that they will be necessarily changed by it. I honestly never have any idea what will happen. In the last stage of the project, students write an essay reflecting on how they viewed their digital devices before and after doing the project, and what (if any) new realizations they have about their relationship with the digital. Every year, I have been so astonished by the observations they make about themselves after completing the project that it seemed only apt to offer the project here as a resource to you and your community. Here are a few student observations to encourage you on your way:

- “Prior to this practice, I would have viewed my phone as the next best alternative to a stale conversation; however, I now view it as an inhibitor to my needed fellowship with others.”
- “I used to think of my phone as an extension of myself. I saw it as a part of me—I was anxious without it and could not imagine cutting down my use of it by much let alone cutting it out completely. Now I recognize that it has only become a necessity to my life as culture has evolved to encourage us to adapt tech.”
- “When I am with friends, walking around campus, or by myself doing nothing I feel my phone crying out to me. It begs for my attention. It tells me to check my Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram. Your friends have sent you a video or posted a new photo that you need to see. You have emails you need to look at. It tells me it will save me from awkward conversations and social situations I do not feel like dealing with. I now see that without restrictions and limits, my phone will always be telling me what to do.”
- “In order to better see the reality of my digital device, I have turned them to monochromatic visual effects scale. My phone is essentially black and white and I have had it like that for three weeks now. It is the coolest thing to see my device for what it really is . . . a machine.”

- “If I notice a friend look[ing] down, I should ask them when I notice, and not wait until after I leave to send them a text with the same question. That simple change could make all the difference.”



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