



December 2020

Game over!! How did I do? Well, I broke my rules three times:

1. In February, my friend Davey visited from Austin. He had just arrived and wanted to show me the profile of someone new he'd been chatting with on a dating app. He sat beside me on the couch and started scrolling through photos. I realized what was happening as soon as my eyes landed on the first one, but the damage was done. (...I can still remember the wide-brimmed hat she was wearing.)
2. A month later in Berlin, I asked my friend Nadim if I could borrow his phone to text our friend Tucker, who also lives in Berlin. Nadim passed me his phone with a conversation between him and Tucker already loaded. I typed a quick note and hit send, but when I saw Tucker later, he told me I had messaged him on WhatsApp. *I swear it felt like a text!!*
3. As I wrote about in May, after McGill moved all their operations online, I didn't have a way to register for classes. I was told that if I didn't register I would lose my funding, so I gave my McGill username and password to my friend and classmate Vanessa, and she registered for me online.

Beyond these three instances, there were plenty of other ways that the internet spilled into my offline life. For instance, I phoned into my Zoom classes using my cellphone, which is offline, but everyone else on the call was using the internet to connect. Similarly, though less directly, almost every transaction I make – including if I'm paying with cash – can be traced back to the internet somehow. Another example came up when I phoned into CBC radio last month. The host explained that they now broadcast using a digital switchboard, and joked that he had ruined my experiment. I used the moment as an opportunity to discuss the blurry distinction between the internet and the offline world.

So how did I do? I'd give myself a four or a five. My intention wasn't just to spend a year offline. I wanted to explore and share what it was *like* to spend a year offline, and that was bound to include a few slip-ups and insurmountable obstacles – especially in 2020.

The year is almost over, but the world of 2020 doesn't end when the clock strikes midnight on the 31st. When I'm back online next month and again part of the real/virtual world, I will strive to be:

- **Critical:** I will think about the sociopolitical and ecological context of what I do online and be choosy about which sites, platforms, and devices I use.
- **Tempered:** I will hold back and avoid always using the internet, especially when I don't need it.
- **Data-conscious:** I will investigate how my data is used and how it may impact others.
- **Frictional:** I will try to make changes by resisting or refusing certain parts of the internet in ways that might bring attention to the more problematic aspects of my digital life.

The final challenge of the year invites you to continue this project after my time offline ends. **CHALLENGE 10: Challenge someone you know to make a change in the way they relate to the internet.** For this to work, try to support the person you challenge with background information and motivation. Be specific and follow up. Changing how we use the internet and how the internet works will be slow and must be collective, but it's possible. Don't get me wrong – I'm not optimistic we'll be able to tame big tech. However, we won't improve things at all if we don't try. (Thanks Gretzky!)

There are easier ways to make change and develop different habits than spending a year without the internet. For starters, re-try some of the ten monthly challenges (enclosed), especially the more recent ones which focus on making intentional, self-aware choices. Beyond adjusting our personal digital habits, we also need to find ways to insert ourselves into change-making processes so that we can advocate for structural or systemic reform: activism, community organizing, education, etc. Right now, I'm trying to do this through things like this letter-writing project, my PhD research, and volunteering with community organizations. If you don't know where to look, ask three people...or the internet can help you learn about grassroots efforts in your area to organize with marginalized communities, to encourage critical education or art-making, to work for data justice and the regulation of big tech, or to challenge exploitative labour conditions and environmental degradation.

My junior high Drama teacher, Mrs. McKay, used to say that a play is never any better than its audience. I think a letter is also no better than its audience, especially if it's aiming to support collective change. Thank you all for being such generous recipients this year!! Thank you to everyone who sent in reflections. I so appreciated getting letters and packages in the mail and received over 200 this year from many of you! It helped make the project collaborative and it kept me feeling connected despite being offline. Some stats: Out of the over 250 people on my mailing list, 1 in 3 of you replied to my letters by mail at least once, 1 in 4 of you changed your address at least once, 1 in 5 of you live outside Canada, and 1 in 6 of you are people I don't know personally or at all. (If you're in that group, I'd still love to hear how you found out about my project and whether you're up to anything that might relate.)

Thank You...

- Thank you to **Canada Post** and the postal workers in other countries who helped deliver my letters. Since January, I've mailed out over 3300 letters. Although there have been several unexplained delays and a couple dozen return-to-senders, I only know of two real issues. One was a card I sent to my friend Julia in upstate New York when I heard she was pregnant. It never arrived and was never returned. The second issue was just last month with one of my November letters. The address label must have fallen off in transit, so it got returned to me with just a return address on it. Somebody didn't get their November letter!!! If it was you (or if you missed *any* of the letters) please let me know, and I'll resend them.
- Thank you **Giselle, Lisa, Hersie, and Roberta** for signing up for my letters this year through mail. It felt very appropriate. Thank you **Roberta** also for shipping me all those envelopes and stationery. Thank you **Carol** and **Norm** for the printer cartridges. Thank you **Ellen** and **Vanessa** for the printer paper. All of these supplies have come in very handy this year, as the five of you generously anticipated.
- Thank you **Amélie** for the idea to use the dino graphic at the top of my monthly letters. Thank you **Westley** for the creative drawing you sent me to use for the July letter.
- Thank you **Mom** and **Dad** for the emotional and financial support that allowed me to take on the slightly reckless challenge of spending a year offline.

- Thank you **Horațiu, Luka,** and **Salima** for helping revise some of my early letters. Thank you **Horațiu, Luka, Nacho, Vince, Jill, Davey,** and **Jayne** for helping fold letters and stuff envelopes those first couple months before Covid kept us apart. Also, thank you **Hora** for telling me – way back in 2017 – about the amount of energy used in a Google search. I had so much fun provoking people with the idea, I decided to make a PhD out of it.
- Thank you **James** for taking over from my friends once Covid hit and helping edit, fold, stuff, address, and stamp the letters. I appreciate you more than you even imagine! With your help this year, we managed to displace at least a bit of the hidden labour underlying the internet.
- Thank you **Talia, Kory,** and **James** for helping with tech support for my Jan 1st live-stream.
- Thank you to everyone who sent me stamps or donations to help pay for postage.
- Thank you also to all my supportive colleagues and friends at McGill.
- And thank you to anyone I forgot to thank!!!

I missed a lot online this year including Baby Shark, ‘Karen,’ ‘doom scrolling,’ and banana bread. I’ve never heard the real Baby Shark song but James’ rendition always makes me smile. The term ‘Karen’ seemed to get popular this summer around the time J.K. Rowling published that essay about why she’s no longer relevant. ‘Doom scrolling’ trended hard more recently in relation to the US election but I imagine it got started during Covid when all people could do was read about the pandemic. And I guess I didn’t miss out on banana bread; James and I made plenty. I may have been out of touch with some viral trends this year, but I gained a lot from being offline. To end my final letter, enjoy a click-bait-style list that brings together the **TOP 9** lessons from my year without internet:

1. The internet is **Mandatory** for us now. For many, it has been for a long time. Even offline, I relied on it. It’s not essential in all the ways we might believe, but there are certain things we need it for. Especially with Covid, there aren’t always other options – even for someone willing and able to go through a lot of hassles. Yet, lots of communities who are expected to be online still lack access to adequate connections or digital devices. And there are situations where people can’t use screens (i.e. concussions or parole conditions). If the internet’s essential, we have to ensure everyone can access it and that our online lives don’t negatively impact others.
2. Despite feeling like I don’t have a choice over whether I use the internet, I do have some choice in how I use and relate to online spaces. We have **Agency** and can support systemic changes if we’re intentional, frictional, and working collectively. As things become more automated, computers don’t *gain* agency, but we lose some. It’s harder to navigate the increasingly complex technical coordination of our internet experiences. We can begin to reclaim agency though as we learn about how we fit into the techno-economic systems mediating and managing our lives.
3. The internet can let us feel independent even when we depend on it *if* we forget all the people behind the screen, generating and supporting the tech and the content. The internet doesn’t exist without others and internet dependence is a kind of **Interdependence**. Without a screen in the way this year, I became more aware of how I rely on others. This made me more appreciative of the people I am interdependent with personally. However, I also realized how often internet interdependence is imbalanced when we consider a more global context.
4. We all know that **Lots of Data** is being gathered on us as we use the internet, but many of us appreciate the personalized experience this facilitates. However, we don’t get something for nothing, and the affordances and costs of the internet are unevenly distributed amongst users.

The data being gathered on us becomes part of giant data sets used to coordinate people – by big companies or the government. This works well for some people, but at the expense of many others. Advertisers, insurance companies, and state agencies have more opportunities for organizing or orienting the most vulnerable of us in potentially exploitative ways.

5. From conflict minerals to sweatshops to planned obsolescence to e-scrap, the virtual is very real. Much of the **Materiality** of the internet is out of sight in outsourced labour or remote servers, but what we do online has massive impacts. We rely on exploitative labour practices and industrial processes – often outsourced to the Global South – that make our digital technologies possible by causing irreversible damage to the environment. This year, instead of Google searches, I talked to friends. Instead of shared cloud storage, I shared USB sticks. Instead of social media, I sent mail. Being offline reminded me that though we need the internet for certain things, it's still possible to avoid using it for everything. By taking on some of the work we often displace digitally, I didn't make much of a difference. Together, I think we can.
6. We need and often lack **Alternatives** to big tech options for our digital devices and the online platforms or services we use. Many of the issues associated with digital technologies are only possible because five or so big tech companies have a monopoly-like share of the market.
7. **Inconvenience** this year has helped me understand the value of time, of taking time, and of connecting to the processes that organize my life. As I stumbled around without online conveniences, sometimes I discovered things I appreciated and sometimes I got frustrated. However, I felt less like I had to conform to a preconceived notion of myself curated in an online profile or to the terms set for me by the mediators of my internet experiences.
8. This year has helped me rethink my **Life Pace**. I had more downtime and felt less distracted, less like I was always anticipating something. This made it easier to be present with others and content with myself. Developing offline practices this year included rethinking how I prioritize things; I tried to schedule my time based on what I value and not just what was urgent. I realize this is tied to the privilege I have that made it possible for me to spend a year offline, but the importance of rethinking life pace shouldn't be restricted to grad students who are gaming the system to take a holiday from the internet for a year. We'd all benefit from a bit more time.
9. I discovered the pleasures of sending and receiving **Mail** this year. In the future, I'm going to **Mail** things instead of emailing them when I can. There's something about sharing a physical object, even if it's just a piece of paper. I also found the pace of letters much more gentle and forgiving than email. Before this year, I always thought of sending things in the mail as a bit of a hassle. I was surprised to discover that if you have envelopes and stamps at home, sending a letter is just as easy as sending an email, maybe easier. And you get to go for a walk!

YT,

Aron Rosenberg

P.S. I'd still love to be your pen pal next year if you'd like to keep this conversation going. Send me a letter! (You can also follow me on Twitter @OsherL but I won't post much or follow you back.)