



January 2020

An hour before midnight on New Year's Eve, I started to feel unsettled. I was at a house party with a few friends and a bunch of strangers. A group of us were playing two truths and a lie. I had hardly finished two beers but I began to get nauseous and my body felt light and tingly and weak. Suddenly, it was too hot inside the apartment and I noticed my breathing become shallower and incomplete. Some smiling dude I had just met was talking to me about all the places he had lived in Canada before moving to Montreal and I was trying to listen politely, but my mind was telling me to get outside. I thought I could hold out and make it until New Year's, but everything was too much; I excused myself and left. It was fifteen minutes before midnight. (I could have still checked my e-mail one last time...) As I walked home, the cold air felt fresh, but my clothes quickly began feeling prickly and wet. I heard fireworks but I didn't turn around to see them. I just kept thinking, I need to get home; I need to get home; I need to get inside my apartment. After what felt like an hour, I got back to my place, coughed until I threw up, and then lay in bed shivering, unable to get warm.

When I was a little kid, I used to get frustrated by my older brother for not paying attention to things. He must have been twelve or thirteen when he told me, "I don't read signs – there are too many of them." That was the year 1999. These days, with the amount of screens in our lives, most people's experiences of signs and things to read have changed dramatically. The internet can be so overstimulating that we end up having to filter out lots of what's coming our way (even some content we might not want to miss). Similar to how the Frankfurt School described what happens when people move from rural places to the city, to get by in such a digitally stimulating world, we are forced to experience things in toned-down shades of gray or without an engaged attention that might support more personal understandings. I'm hoping that through sending out these monthly letters as physical mail instead of digital ones-and-zeros, people will read them differently. But I know the rest of you are still living in the hyper-connected internet age, so I'll do my best to keep these letters short. Research suggests that when people read online, especially on a smartphone, the way they engage with the text is very different—less linear, more skimming, and less is retained. This could, of course, just be the research of conservatives trying to impossibly relive their good-old-days. However, without suggesting that one mode is better than the other, there is no question that there is a difference between reading on a device versus in print. A theorist named Nathan Snaza recently wrote about how even just changing from writing on clay to writing on papyrus had significant consequences for the way people wrote/read and the resulting content and understanding. In sharing my monthly updates on a piece of paper, I would love for you to consider how this changes your reading experience from a more conventional social media campaign update or e-mail from a friend. If you send me your thoughts on this, I'll try to include them in an upcoming mail-out.

Lots of people have been asking me how offline I'll be this year. I've been surprised at how many people think that offline things, like text-messaging, are online and that online things, like streaming services, are

offline. One of my favourite tech critics, Evgeny Morozov, writes about how arbitrary the distinction has become between online and offline worlds, especially for someone like me living in Canada in 2020. So much of my supposedly offline life relies on the internet. Even if I buy groceries with cash, I'm sure the store uses the internet in some stage of their operations. And though I'm not using the internet for my coursework or registration at McGill, I know the university relies on the internet in order for me to be a student. Defining what I mean by spending the year offline therefore is a bit of an arbitrary exercise. My rules for myself are based partially on avoiding the internet and partially on emulating what life might have been like before the internet. For the year, I cannot use the internet directly, and I cannot ask anyone to use the internet for me. However, I can rely on people who have jobs that existed before the internet but that now rely on the internet. For example, I can go to the bank to take out money, even though the bank uses the internet. Similarly, I can go to a travel agent to book a flight, even though the travel agent will need to use the internet. But I cannot ask my mom or friends to book flights or do things online for me, even if I ask indirectly in a shabbas goy kind of way.

Every month, I plan to include a challenge in my mail-out. This challenge is one of the ways I hope you will get involved, exploring your own online experience. The challenges will be small but they'll either be about making material changes to the ways we engage with the internet or they will be about bringing attention to certain aspects of our online lives. Plus, the monthly challenges will be more realistic than abstaining from internet use altogether. These challenges will all be things that I will try to maintain after my offline project ends. The first challenge has to do with considering when to use the internet and when to take on work ourselves. Although looking something up online doesn't seem to take much, internet searches rely on resources and energy—both human and environmental. CHALLENGE 1: *When you find yourself about to look something up online, first ask at least three people.* Besides just lowering the amount of resources we use, I am curious what other changes might accompany looking things up through people instead of the internet. How might this affect what facts and ideas we learn and retain? What does this change about how we interact with one another? And how do we handle information differently when we delay the usually-immediate gratification of fact retrieval?

In each mail-out, I also plan to include a monthly recommendation of a book or movie that somehow relates to the internet, or a lack of it. I recently finished *The Circle* by Dave Eggers and I'd be curious to hear what you all think of it. It's about a tech company like google that owns and controls pretty much everything and it considers how privacy and transparency might operate in such a world. Despite being a fairly simple story, the dilemmas faced by the characters and the decisions that they make are provocative. And, it's a Young Adult novel, so it's a fairly quick read.

For this first letter, I want to focus on something that I've been thinking a lot about over the past couple months, and it relates to this month's challenge. When we do something online instead of offline, like sending a social media post instead of a letter, the labour required to complete the task is not *replaced* by the internet but *displaced*; instead of involving the paper mill's labour of creating the paper, the post-office's labour of transporting the mail, and our labour of folding the paper into an envelope and walking to the mailbox, we now rely on the more out-of-sight labour of, for example, mining in the Congo, manufacturing in China, e-waste scrap-picking in Pakistan, and content moderation in the Philippines—on top of the programming of platforms and all that goes into providing internet service. The work involved in sending a letter is more inconvenient, laborious, and expensive for the user (although smartphones and internet

contracts aren't cheap), but the cost of displacing that labour to the internet relies on industries that are less well-regulated. (Think coltan mining in the Congo and toxic e-waste scrap-pickers, versus paper mills in Canada and the Canadian Postal Service, or think how most tech companies have outsourced content moderation jobs to countries where workers won't sue them for PTSD.) As Ruha Benjamin and Neil Postman (and others) have written about, the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies are unevenly distributed in ways that benefit some at the expense of others. Choosing convenient, easy, and cheap digital options often relies on inconvenient, difficult, and unrewarding labour elsewhere—either human or ecological, and often both. (For more, or for references, I wrote a paper about this that you can find on my website, www.aronr.com. Hopefully telling you about that while I'm offline doesn't break my rules...)

As a teacher, I feel like this concern is particularly urgent as classrooms become “paper-free” in order to supposedly become more ecologically responsible. It's hard to say whether the impact of a paper-free classroom is more or less problematic than a conventional one. But it's important to ask this question instead of assuming that using paper locally is more irresponsible than using all sorts of other resources in hidden and outsourced ways.

As I prepared for my year offline, many of my colleagues and friends were very supportive. At times though, I came up against challenges involving some people I work with and people organizing events I want to attend while offline. Unsurprisingly, not everyone is willing to do the work usually displaced by the internet. On the one hand, that's totally fair—people have their own commitments and schedules and it's selfish of me to just shake things up on them. On the other hand, we have settled into an awareness that treats digital tools as neutral and we may need a bit of shaking to remember the ways in which our digital conveniences impact others. Last month, I received an e-mail from someone organizing a conference I want to attend this summer, telling me I would not be able to present at the conference because “you cannot expect strangers around you to do the additional special work connected to the paper communication.” In my (perhaps a bit snarky) response, I said that my research is, in part, about “uncovering the under- or unpaid exploitative distributions of labour that facilitate our internet use. With your help registering for the conference offline, hopefully we can displace some of that problematic globalized labour, at least in a symbolic way that can bring attention to it.” I may be idealistic, but I do not really think spending a year offline will make direct material changes. Rather, the aim of my experiment is to share ideas in conversation with others (like you) so that we can rethink how we use the internet. Any meaningful changes will be slow and collective.

I want to hear from you! And not just because being offline is a bit lonely. Please mail me your thoughts—about what I've written or your own experience of the internet, about the monthly challenge or book review, or with your own recommendations. I hope to include as much content from you all in upcoming mail-outs as I do from myself. As well, please send me any questions you want me to respond to. And feel free to send creative things too—poems or doodles, even recipes, reviews, or jokes—that I can include in future mail-outs. Finally, if your address changes, please let me know.

Thanks for thinking with me and thank you for supporting this offline experiment. I'm looking forward to seeing where the year takes us.

YT,
Aron

P.S. Because I don't have content to include from any of you yet, and so have extra space this month, I've included a Yelp review below. Online reviews, after all, are a major way that the internet has changed how we behave as consumers. And sharing funny things from the internet is one of the things I'll miss most about being online. The restaurant being reviewed is in my old neighbourhood in Vancouver and I used to go there for brunch. (I can't remember the name of it. Maybe Jackalopes?) The woman who submitted the review has several other reviews on Yelp, but all the others are pretty standard. This one is her masterpiece. I found the screenshot of this review on my old computer:



Cheryl P.
Coquitlam, Canada
8 friends
16 reviews

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 5/25/2015

Mother of three from Coquitlam here - I decided to come to this restaurant because I am trying to connect more with my eldest son. Alex is a great kid, but he is really into the metal.

I read online that this establishment was a "dive" but in a good way? While the concept is foreign to me, I thought it would be great to step out of my comfort zone (hehe).

Anyway...from the moment we were seated at our table the service was very, very bad. The waitress seemed to think that we were a burden and not paying customers! The music was also very loud and quite distracting (very un-Christian, as well). The waitress seemed as if she was really busy as she frantically ran about the empty restaurant all the while ignoring me. When she brought me a re-fill of my soda, she all but threw it at the table. I would never be treated this way at Earls!

On top of it all, the food was not very good at all. The quality of chicken was poor, and the flavour was minimal. MOREOVER, when my son was eating his salad (The Big Princess Salad) he noticed a small worm crawling in the leafy greens. I urged him to stop, but he insisted that eating the insect was "metal" and continued on.

Needless to say, I will not be returning to this establishment.

Useful 9

Funny 62

Cool 5