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March 2020

*“My cellphone rang at 8:30 this morning, the robotic voice on the other line announcing that my train to New York had been cancelled. Would I be refunded automatically? Was my return trip cancelled as well? I couldn’t ask any questions because the call was automated. (...it probably was the internet calling.) I hung up and looked in the yellow pages for Greyhound’s number. As I was struggling to find it, my boyfriend (who was still lying in bed but following my small drama) had looked up the number on his phone and—without me asking him to—written it down on a post-it and passed it to me with, “I bet this is making you realize just how convenient the internet is?” He laughed. I didn’t.*

*And that was before I ran into the first major obstacle of my year offline: the woman on the phone from Greyhound told me that I couldn’t buy a ticket without an email address. Apparently, over the phone, Greyhound can still sell tickets (with a \$10 surcharge) but there’s no longer any way to pick them up; printing them through email is the only option. Even if I go into the station, I was told I would still be unable to buy a ticket. This seemed too ridiculous to be true; I had seen Greyhound booths at the bus station before. I hung up, and phoned the station directly (this time using a number from the yellow pages), but the call was forwarded to Greyhound. I spoke with a different person who told me the same thing: without internet, I could not take the bus. I still didn’t believe it though and thought I would just head over to the bus station and check for myself. But then I started to worry—if everyone else on my train also got an automated cancellation call at 8:30, then everyone else would be trying to buy bus tickets or flights (with the ease and speed of the internet), and soon everything might be booked. So, instead of taking the time to go to the bus station and try my offline luck, I phoned Air Canada, waited on the line for 45 minutes, and booked a \$278 one-way flight to NYC. My dad used to say that if you pay less, you pay twice. I guess this is one of those cases. The only reason I’m going to NYC is because flying from there to Berlin was so much cheaper than flying out of Montreal. Not so cheap though anymore... (Next time I’ll listen to you, Dad.)”*

That was an excerpt from the journal entry I wrote on Feb 21<sup>st</sup>, the day I finally started to accept that the internet can sometimes be pretty dang helpful, especially when it has become the only option for certain things—like buying Greyhound tickets apparently. I’m still looking forward to the positive elements of spending the rest of the year offline, but I’m also already looking ahead to next year and thinking about how I might be able to balance embracing the parts of the online experience that I value (like arranging

transportation, buying tickets, and sometimes looking at maps) while still resisting the more problematic elements. And if such a balance isn't possible, how can I advocate for change?

This month's challenge is meant to explore the internet's helpful navigation capabilities, and to consider whether there may be any unexpected value to refusing these tools.

*CHALLENGE 3: Next time you're going somewhere unfamiliar, do not use the internet to help you figure out how to get there* (no online maps or even Uber). Instead, ask for directions, use paper maps, or look at the maps posted around most cities at bus stops or train stations. And if you have time, send me a quick letter to let me know how it goes. Did anything unexpected happen? Was it doable? How frustrated did you get?

For my trip to Berlin this month, not having the internet wasn't too much of a problem. (...after I overcame the Greyhound ticket issue.) While traveling—except for navigation information and checking-in for flights—there isn't much I would normally use the internet for anyway. My friends who I was staying with (Jesse and David, and then Nadim) knew plenty of cool and tasty places to go. Plus, I had brought a map and a guidebook with me. Although Berlin seems pretty committed to a 90's aesthetic and social scene, there were still some moments where I was expected to use the internet. For example, to show I was a student for reduced admission at the Pergamon Museum, my McGill card didn't cut it and they wanted me to go online to prove my student status. Although the internet could've made it easier to get discounts, navigate the city, and stay connected to people back home, convenience isn't everything. I can imagine reasons why *not* being able to easily navigate might've compelled me to stumble around Berlin more organically, instead of relying on online hype for recommendations. Similarly, I can see how being connected to friends at home and sharing photos with them in real-time could have made it harder to dive into the trip and be present with my friends in Berlin. I know memories and photos are not mutually exclusive, but in the age of social media, there's something about a photo that changes memories. "The more we 'share,' the less we have," says my friend Deniz. At night clubs in Berlin, bouncers put stickers over your phone camera. It makes it so that people can be less guarded versions of themselves. David said he has noticed that this causes people to pull out their phones less in general when going out at night: no selfies, no holding your phone up to record, but also less scrolling, less texting; people are fully present on the dance floor.

When considering the value and problems of being hyper-connected on mobile devices, I often think of a little passage from Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It's from Chapter 12 and not really connected to the plot, but it has stuck with me. The excerpt describes the change felt in town when the first telephone is introduced:

*"...when someone from the town had the opportunity to test the crude reality of the telephone installed in the railroad station...even the most incredulous were upset. It was as if God had decided to put to the test every capacity for surprise and was keeping the inhabitants of Macondo in a permanent alternation between excitement and*

*disappointment, doubt and revelation, to such an extreme that no one knew for certain where the limits of reality lay.”*

Now we have this type of connectivity in each of our pockets and it's constant. The alternation between excitement and disappointment, doubt and revelation is so much more extreme and frequent that we can hardly process it, but it affects us. While I was in Berlin I didn't have a roaming plan, so I couldn't use my phone. I also wasn't online, so couldn't keep up with the news about the Coronavirus, the US primaries, the Wet'suwet'en protests, etc. This oriented my reality mostly around what I could sense—looking and listening to my surroundings, but also tasting and smelling (Berlin is a smelly city), and feeling. It was easier to be present and engaged without as much potential for also existing elsewhere. I think though that this difference is more a matter of degree than kind. I want to suggest *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as my book recommendation this month. It may not be about the internet itself, but it's about intergenerational changes and how—even with new technologies—changes follow patterns. Although the last twenty years (since the internet really took off) have seen a rapid pace of change with dramatic shifts in how we relate to one another, these changes are not new; they're constant. In zooming out, as Márquez' book compels us to do, we feel the weight of change while also noticing how today's changes are less novel than they may seem; though changes can be a matter of life and death, love and heartbreak, or creativity and loss, they are ongoing and normal. We may experience reality differently with our on-call digital assistants/pocket-portals to other worlds, but even before the first telephone appeared at the train station, we could still daydream and worry; even before our cellphones had maps to help us avoid getting lost, we could still get lost in other worlds. In Berlin, even offline and without my phone, I still found myself imagining what life might've been like behind the wall or in WWII. I also spent lots of my trip thinking about things and people back home. Reality has always been somewhat virtual. (And the virtual is certainly real.) Change makes things different, but the future is made with the same minds and materials of the past. This year offline has been a big change, but I'm still living the same life and it's really not that different.

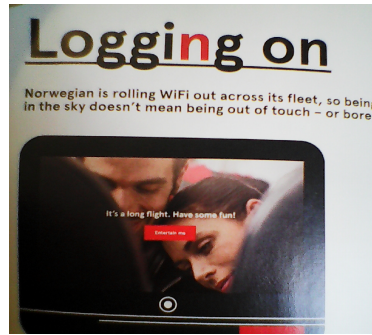
If you have time this month, send me a letter to let me know how the challenge goes, or how you think life changes and doesn't change with the potential of constant connectivity in our pockets. Have you figured out ways to balance being connected online with connecting in-person? Why is it so unthinkable to leave our phone at home or in our bags sometimes? Can we change these expectations? How? Also, I'm saving my piece about data for next month's letter, so please mail me if you have any thoughts about that. Finally, if your address changes or if you somehow missed a month's letter, please let me know!

YT,  
Aron

N.B. I've included some photos on the next page from my trip to Berlin, captured on my Nokia TA-1036. (I miss my old flip phone, but at least this one has Snake on it.)



A self-portrait at the Konig Gallery



Free wi-fi on the plane? One of the last remaining respites from connectivity has been conquered. But hey, now you can respond to emails while in flight!



Someone turned this old record player into a planter. Now that's what I call an innovative technology!



Well before Instagram, these "Kaiser Panoramas" used 3D technologies and a spinning mechanism to showcase the latest photos to the public. You just sit and stare as photos cycle in an unending scroll. (As seen at Berlin's Technik museum.)



This is my friend Jesse in front of one of the few remaining sections of the Berlin Wall.



A sticker in Kreuzberg, by my friend Nadim's place



This was a newspaper headline I saw in New York on my way back from Berlin. The Corona scare seems a lot less pressing without the internet and social media.



I wonder if this sticker's about all the resources that are used for Instagram (the energy, server farms/data centres, smartphones themselves, etc.), or if it's about the way that Instagram users have been flocking to and destroying beautiful nature spots, or if it's about something else. Let me know if you have any thoughts.