This month is my postal AMA (Ask Me Anything). I really enjoyed thinking through all your questions. Thank you to everyone who sent one in! I've included ten of my favourites here, seven of which were mailed in, two were shared in person, and one over the phone:

Doug: It has been a long time since I consulted the Funk and Wagnall's encyclopedia, which apparently ceased publication in 1997. What are you doing for the most up-to-date research?
Aron: I haven't had much access to the most up-to-date research this year, especially because libraries have been closed due to Covid. I've bought and been gifted some new books but the only new articles I've read were shared with me over USB sticks – and I've only let people share things that they already had downloaded. (I'm not allowing myself to ask people to find or download new research for me online.) Despite only having a few new pieces to engage with, I've found that I'm still managing to learn a lot that's new to me, or that complicates my understandings. Because I know I can't go out and access as much new content, I have to work with what I have or what I can find. This gives me more time to engage deeply with thinkers and their ideas instead of rushing through and collecting citations. I've been surprised at how much I'm learning about the internet from old texts about computers and changing technologies (see my response to Kory's question on the next page, for example). Not having such easy access to the most up-to-date research has been a helpful change of pace, but it isn't sustainable – at least not without a lot of help.

Alix: How are you listening to new music this year?
Aron: I hadn't been, especially while record stores were closed for Covid. Recently though, I went to some of my favourite music shops and got the new Fiona Apple album, an old Antony and the Johnsons CD, Brian Eno's *Before and After Science*, Tyler the Creator's latest release, and a record by Hangedup – a viola/percussion duo from here in Montreal. I've also gotten a couple albums in the mail recently. My friend Kelsey sent me the new Bright Eyes CD and my friend and ex-student Matt sent me Beverly Glenn-Copeland's *Keyboard Fantasies.* I love having physical copies of music and movies instead of just renting things from streaming services. It makes them easier to share – although hardly anyone has CD or DVD players anymore, and even less have VCR's. I also like how these collections end up being like scrapbooks on our shelves that decorate the apartment with a cozy clutter. James and I have been devouring some classics on VHS this summer. Most recently we re-watched *Touch of Evil, The Searchers,* and *Do The Right Thing.* Watching them again, I wondered how much they've contributed to how I think about race, corrupt police forces, and colonial violence – amongst other things. Now they go back up on the shelf, leaving a bit of themselves with us and taking a bit of us with them.

Jayne and Kate: Have you ever thought about our collective demise at the hands of machines à la *Terminator*?
Aron: See last month's letter.

Lana: My partner and I explored the idea of the analog social bubble you've created with your mailing list and your letters. How is it similar or different to social media bubbles?
Aron: Such a fun comparison to think about! How is it similar? Well, all 250 of us must have some things in common, like an interest in thinking about how we relate to the internet and to each other through the internet. So in the sense that I'm preaching to the choir, our mailing list bubble is like a social media one. However, we're a more ideologically diverse group than you might expect, and I really hope I'm not just telling you all things you already know and agree with. Another similarity between the two bubbles is that, like social media platforms, I'm getting feedback from many of you and adjusting my mail-outs to appeal to the group. The difference though is that I would need a lot more data on each of you (and I would have to do a lot more work) to personalize each letter like a social media algorithm can. I think the biggest difference though between social media and me is our goals. Social media algorithms are trying to keep you engaged, keep you clicking, keep you consuming, keep you buying, and keep big tech in power. Plus their strategies are often covert and psychologically sophisticated. My goal is to encourage more conscientious relationships with the internet and digital technologies. And my strategies are out in the open. I'm not trying to establish phony social norms, plant subliminal cues, or exploit your vulnerabilities. I'm just trying to share information and opinions to promote reflection on how we can affect change in relation to the internet. Social media bubbles encourage apathy and tribalism. My aim is to remind us of our agency – individually and collectively – and of how we're all connected, on and offline.

Kory: You write about the social impacts of the internet. Are your arguments against globalization and trade or the technology?
Aron: You're not the first person to ask whether my issues with the outernet (or the human and material components that go into operating the internet) might really be issues with the exploitation that drives globalized capitalism. In Canada, industries related to the internet account for the largest sector of research and development spending in our economy. With that in mind, thinking about the internet and digital technologies must include a consideration of how they fit into global systems of capital and trade. In a new article that my friend Christian shared with me, Kevin Leander and Sarah Burriss point out that – because of the internet – our lives are "ever more mediated by tools and agents that are produced and maintained by corporations." So, although many of the issues related to the online world may be related to problems that predate the internet, they become more serious and more personal as more of our lives are mediated through digital tools and websites owned or operated by corporations.

The impacts of the internet relate to the economic backdrop of our digital experiences but they are often directly tied to specific technologies. In the 80's Langdon Winner explained how a digital technology's "operating requirements…simply will not work unless human behavior changes to suit its form and process. Hence, the very act of using the kinds of machines, techniques, and systems available to us generates patterns of activities and expectations." I don't think Winner is suggesting that technologies will always cause or determine certain social consequences, but rather – as Bruno Latour wrote in the 90's – they "might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, [or] render possible" certain activities or behaviours. My arguments are therefore not against digital technologies, but their uncritical adoption. Looking into how they might be organizing or coordinating us and others can help us navigate online spaces and work towards a better internet and world.

James: Without the internet in your life, how do you make time for distractions?
Aron: I don't need to. Even without the internet, distractions are already too present in our lives. The internet just kicks it up a notch. My issue isn't with distractions themselves, but the expectation of being distracted. Getting a text or a phone call is distracting in a different way than waiting for one. And with the internet in our pockets, the potential distractions are endless. I've read that people in my demographic check their phones about 150 times a day on average. This doesn't mean that we're receiving 150 messages or notifications a day. Rather, because the potential to get a message is always lurking, we end up constantly on guard, checking our phones like they're slot machines – hoping that this time something exciting will pop up. Because we're always waiting for something (anything!), it becomes more difficult to be present or to engage critically and creatively. When distractions do arise, we deal with them and move on. But while we're waiting for distractions, there's no moving on.

Dani: Do you get more frustrated this year when friends check their phones in your presence? Or do you notice more patience?
Aron: I wish I could say I've been more patient. (I think James wishes that too.) My continued frustration is based on a couple things, but mostly it's just me being selfish; I want my friends' full attention when I'm hanging out with them. The other reason I get frustrated is because it seems like most of the times when people check their phones, it's unnecessary like I described in the previous response, or it's a social anxiety defense. I've spoken with lots of people about Instagram and I keep hearing users explain that they don't mean to open the app when they pull out their phone, but that it just seems to happen. I've also been guilty of using my phone compulsively and pulling it out to fill space when I'm anxious. I'm working on leaving it in my pocket if I'm with friends, or – if I need to have it out – explaining that I'm expecting a message or call. It's frustrating enough when I'm hanging out with someone and they need to use their phone for something, but it's even worse to hang out with people who are just haphazardly scrolling through their phones without really trying to do anything in particular. Maybe if someone's alone, this way of using their phone can be enjoyable and relaxing. However, even then, I feel like it's important that it's not the only way they experience downtime.

Smartphones can support certain kinds of downtime, but there's a particular downtime they don't work well with, a downtime that has been quietly disappearing lately. This is the downtime when we're not engaging in any new inputs or external stimuli, the practice of being with our own thoughts thinking their own thoughts. This kind of downtime is one of the main ways I process things, letting my ideas and mind settle. I practice this downtime in transit, on walks, before I fall asleep, and throughout the day when I find time to stop and sit. I don't experience this downtime when I read, watch screens, text people, listen to music or the radio, and definitely not while socializing. I've asked a few friends if they have any of this kind of downtime and many don't. Do you? With the internet available all the time, it's easy to spend a lot of time listening to or watching things, setting or responding to reminders and notifications, messaging people, checking emails, using social media, and looking stuff up and reading. Research on stress, anxiety, and depression in young people is often focused on screen-time, especially on social networking sites. As these mental health challenges become more common and serious – both in general these days and with Covid – we need to hold onto some of the secret, silent practices that have kept us grounded for so long. Now that we have the potential to fill all the spaces in our lives with digital distractions, we need to actively pursue this downtime. I think it's something that we rely on, whether we're aware of it or not. It could just be me though. Maybe we can use this challenge to find out? CHALLENGE 8: *When you find yourself pulling out your phone unnecessarily, try to give yourself some of this kind of downtime instead.* After you've had a few chances to try this challenge, I'd love to hear what you notice – if anything.

Hersie: Do you think your experience offline would be different if there wasn't a pandemic?
Aron: Definitely! If it wasn't for Covid, I would have had more opportunities to explore offline life. In the past few months, internetless interactions have all but disappeared. I don't think it's too conspiratorial to suggest that this year represents the beginning of mandatory internet use. We no longer have the choice of opting out, unless we also opt out of accessing what we want and need. With the changes we've seen because of the pandemic – for remote work, online school, internet shopping, even eating out now with QR codes instead of paper menus – there's no turning back. This year has therefore become about how we can make this transition more intentional, equitable, and responsible.

What I've learnt this year is very different than what I might have learnt otherwise, but the world I'm researching is similarly different. This offline experiment is part of my preparations to do research with high school students and teachers on their experiences with the internet. Inquiring around the role digital tools play in students' lives is a very different question in light of Covid. Through my reflections this year and the feedback I've been receiving from many of you (including these questions), I hope to be able to facilitate these inquiries in more meaningful directions.

Davey: You write in your letters about your year offline being less difficult than anticipated. How do you think your experience might have been different if you hadn't met James in January? (My friend Libby sent me an almost identical question a few weeks later.)
Aron: James and I chatted about this and he joked that, speaking as an epidemiologist, our relationship has certainly been a "confounder." I've thought of four ways in which meeting James has confounded what may otherwise have been the relationship between avoiding the internet and my experience of being offline:
1. After I wrote in my August letter that I've been feeling less lonely and insecure this year, I realized it was a bit misleading to give so much credit to the internet, or a lack of it. Having James in my life has also been a hugely significant factor. Thanks Davey and Libby for asking this and giving me a chance to come clean!
2. If I hadn't met James in January, I would have had more time to explore what it looks like to date without the internet. This may have been an interesting part of my offline year research, but I'll choose the relationship over the research every time.
3. Having had constant company during the pandemic has made it much more possible to get through all the distancing without feeling too isolated and without wanting to give up on my project and go online. Partners and the internet can fulfill similar roles in our lives, but the internet's less cuddly.
4. Logistically, in terms of finding out – for example – if restaurants are open, or whether it's going to rain, this year *might* have been helped by James if he didn't so enjoy thwarting my attempts to have him look up these kinds of things for me. I say something about how frustrating it would be if we get to the restaurant and find it closed and he says, "Yeah it would be. Is their number in the phone book?" Or I wonder aloud (at him) whether I need to take an umbrella and he asks, "What did the radio say?" I'm glad he's playing along and, though it's frustrating, I appreciate the friction.

Faza: What 8 letter word can have a letter taken away and still make a word, can have another letter taken away and still make a word, and so on until there is only one letter left?
Aron: I struggled with this, but James got an answer in minutes. I'll leave this unanswered so you can try it. There are a few possible solutions. And as Faza jokingly told me, don't cheat and check online!

YT,
Aron