April, 2020

Instead of writing a normal letter this month, I'd like to share some recent excerpts from my journal. I've heard the stories going around about all this magical extra time everyone has, but I don't buy it. Most people I know seem pretty overwhelmed and busy, even if just with sleeping and worrying. So, I'll keep it simple. No challenges. No recommendations. Just some thoughts I've been thinking as Covid-19 takes over our minds and society. If you're up for it, send me a letter to let me know what you've been thinking about.

YT,
Aron Rosenberg

March 22nd, 2020
I didn't want to risk taking the metro, so I went for a really big walk today to drop off a couple of assignments in my professors' mailboxes. I was surprised at how many people were out and about, even in groups. It was sunny and I guess people have nowhere else to be, but still, it seemed like people were too bunched up. As I made my way down the sidewalk, I gave people lots of room and only brushed up against another jacket-sleeve once. I sometimes waited on the side of the curb for people to pass, and I even crossed the street once when a big group was approaching. Everyone's a suspect. And a target to be avoided. It's strange to be so anxious but to be in this together with everyone else. I suppose because this is so unprecedented, it's that much more terrifying. Wisdom comes from experience, and no one has experienced this before.

March 23rd, 2020
My day-timer has become a bunch of scribbled out appointments, meetings, and reminders. I'm still busy with lots of work on the go, but mostly it's all independent and any meetings I did have were shuffled around, mostly into the online or, for me, telephonic world. Today is Monday and as I opened the new page in my agenda, it was all either crossed out or wrong. Normally, having so much empty space in my calendar would be relaxing, but not during Covid. I'm anxious. Plus, I feel like I have an unending workload despite the lack of meetings and appointments, and the more flexible deadlines.

March 24th, 2020
I went on a walk this evening with my friend Salima. We didn't touch but enjoyed each other's company and conversation in the snow. During our walk, we passed a phone/internet service box that was open, despite no service person being in the vicinity. Because it was

snowing and wet out, the wiring and mechanisms were getting wet. Salima was worried about everyone losing connection during their self-isolations so she closed the box. I wondered (jokingly) whether it might've been left open on purpose by mischievous anarchists who are trying to provoke a new global order by sabotaging our means of organizing ourselves; with everyone rushing online, they sneak out and leave service boxes open in the snow!! As we continued on, Salima told me about the Zoom calls she's been having for school and work. A month ago I hadn't heard of Zoom. Now it seems to be part of people's casual, everyday lingo. This morning a friend texted me, "let's have a call or Zoom later this week." Salima told me that she has very slow internet and that it's been even slower during this surge in use. Her experience on the Zoom calls has been pretty good, but she has found that she's always the one lagging. Salima always encourages more careful pacing, so I'm not surprised her glitchy internet feels the same way.

March 25th, 2020
James is at my place again today. He's doing work in the other room. He's been here most days since Covid took off. This morning though, he made a comment that upset me while we were listening to Baby Justin's daily address from Ottawa on the radio. As a 25-year-old, James has pretty much always had internet. Plus, he needs it for his PhD. Baby Justin was talking about travel restrictions and James said that if the government orders everyone to stay home, he'd have to go back to his place and stay there. Although it struck me as harsh at the time, I realize in retrospect how drastic it is to take away someone's internet, even if they have a bit of data. I may be used to living in an apartment without wifi, but for James—especially during Covid—it's not really surprising that it's starting to get to him.

March 26th, 2020
I got a note in the mail from a stranger in Montreal who had signed up for my monthly letters. They were interested in meeting to discuss a podcast they were planning to record that would consider technologies as extensions of the body and think about the internet as a gigantic nervous system. We made arrangements to meet which fell through due to Covid, so we planned a call instead. On the call, we ended up having a long and candid conversation that helped me think through the potential of the internet to provide meaningful connections between people. The person I was speaking with told me about a five year long-distance partnership they've had with a lover in Europe. They explained that they've often felt isolated from this person because of distance. However, in the isolation of Covid, they feel like all of their relationships are long distance (even their best friend who lives nearby) and so this long-distance relationship has gained some validity and feels more sustainable. I wonder if the way they are now seeing this relationship will be able to last past Covid? This keeps me bumping my head against the question of whether we can have corporeal, intimate interactions over the internet. And of course we can, and of course there's a difference, but maybe the degree of difference is getting smaller and smaller as we close the gap between online and in-person interactions—especially with all the digital creativity coming out of Covid. Right now, everything we do on the internet as a substitute for in-person interactions is liable to become much more permanent than a substitute, and

maybe that's not a bad thing. I just keep clinging to the idea that there's something better about in-person interactions and then I get worried about all the online precedents that are being set under quarantine. Rationally though, I know that in-person things could very well just be what I'm used to, a matter of preference.

March 27th, 2020
My friend told me about how exhausting group conference calls are for her, as she tries to fill in blanks and read the other person through their voice and screen. She explained that it feels like her brain has to do a bunch of extra work, especially if there's not a good facilitator. I suggested that as we're forced to do more classes and meetings online during Covid, maybe people will get better at this facilitation. She pointed out that people underestimate the value of facilitation and so don't take time to develop or include strong facilitators. "Too many people just think it's enough to get their point across without considering how to ensure there's potential for dialogue and meaningfully shared digital spaces." I appreciated hearing her take on this and, even as someone who loves facilitating in-person activities, I'm unsure whether I'd be a good facilitator online.

March 28th, 2020
Ariana wrote, "Interesting time for you to be disconnected from social media. How are you keeping up with the news on Corona?" Deb wrote, "Able to maintain your disconnect?" Junior asked, "Are you thinking of putting your project on hold? How are u keeping up with everything?" Dan wrote, "I was wondering how it would have been for you when the tides really flipped and we were all on the pulse of things via the internet." Leora wrote, "Must be crazy not to have internet during this time!!" My replies have all been about how being offline at the moment has had bad and good aspects; I'm sad I'm missing out on all the creative intimacies people are experimenting with over social media, but I'm glad I'm missing the hyped-up Covid coverage and all the pressure to reconnect with old friends.
...
In order to submit a group assignment for my Critical Disability Studies class, I had to get a jump drive (i.e. a usb stick) to my friend Horaţiu, so we met up at a park—social distancing style. I put the jump drive down on a picnic table and we left it there for a half hour while we chatted. When Hora picked it up, he used his cloth bag so that he wouldn't have to touch the drive. I heard that, on paper, the virus only lasts a few hours. Hora told me he'd heard that cloth also only holds onto it for a short time. We're unsure though how long it might last on a jump drive.

March 29th, 2020
I have chosen not to be online and am well supported to navigate the obstacles that being offline poses. People who rely on public infrastructures like libraries in order to use a computer and go online have absolutely no access to the internet right now. They must be struggling doubly to access supports, especially those that require people to submit forms over the internet.

March 30th, 2020

This afternoon I received a text message from a teacher friend, Johnny: "You picked the best year to evaluate the 'hyper-connected internet age.' On one hand, my life and my community life has really slowed down. On the other hand, I've never put in this much screen time before. So far, I'm happier than before (I'm embarrassed to say). Perhaps it's the mix of the fast-paced life and the abuse of screen time that leads to frustration and unhappiness." Johnny is making an important point that not all screen time is equal and that some uses are much easier to abuse and more likely to lead to negative outcomes. I was also interested in his point about how screen time might be a bigger issue when mixed with our regular fast-paced lives and that, perhaps during slower times, like Johnny's experience of Covid has been, the potential for devices to lead to problems is lower. I think that it's probably pretty context specific though. I can think of lots of conversations I've had with people recently about how their increased screentime during this pandemic has been getting aggravating. Maybe Johnny just hasn't hit his limit yet, or maybe his way of relating to the world is well served by his online habits. We're all different. Johnny said that he especially appreciates how well Zoom has been working for teaching music to his high school students remotely—albeit at a school where students all have their own devices and a quiet place to use the internet. He joked that he likes Zoom because of his love for Hollywood Squares and the Brady Bunch but then clarified that it's because Zoom has allowed really incredible interactions in his classes: "The introverts are comfortable enough to take risks and I have the ability to mute the extroverts if they step over the line." Although muting students seems like it's a bit much, Johnny's point about introverts reminded me that I don't get the whole picture when I imagine things only from my perspective as an extrovert.

As I get to the end of the third month of my year offline, and as Covid takes hold, I've been thinking about whether I feel like my life offline so far this year has been better, worse, or just different than how it might have been otherwise. It's hard to know, but even with the pandemic, I still feel like I appreciate being offline and the lifestyle and mindset it facilitates. I'm realizing though how much this is contingent on various privileges, and how much I need to contextualize such a judgment as being highly personal to me. So, let me rephrase that: after spending a quarter of the year offline, I feel that—AS an extroverted, non-disabled student, with supportive friends and family—I prefer being offline.

March 31st, 2020

Our department finally sent out an email about class registration. Within moments of this email being sent, I received three messages about it. (Thank you Jayne, Amelia, and Ellen!!) Registration opens tomorrow at 12:32 pm, and I had planned to just go in to talk to the registrar, but McGill's still closed. I sent my supervisor, Naomi, a text asking if she can talk to the registrar for me and she said she'll try. I explained that I had already chatted with him about this but she pointed out that things might be different now. "Covid stresses people out and frays their patience." If I'm not able to register through Naomi, I will lose my funding and get kicked out of McGill. It's ironically moments like these when I feel the most precarious that I wonder if my offline experiment may be a bit too self-indulgent.