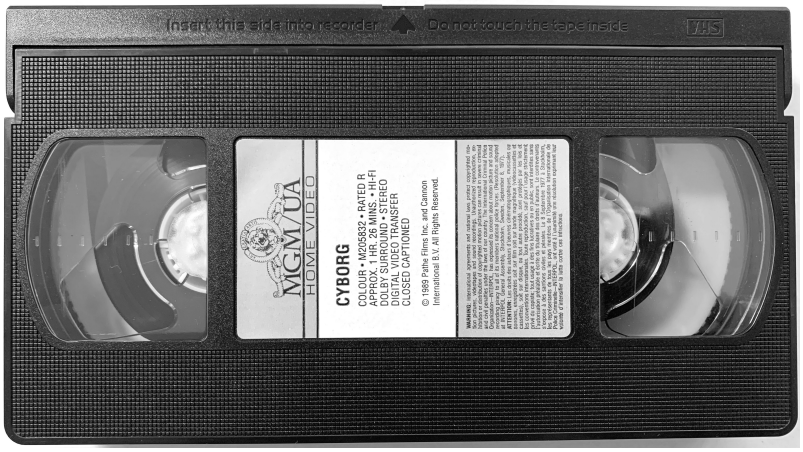

August 2020

For the past twenty years, anytime I felt lonely or insecure or anxious, I'd just go online and read something, play a game, or send someone a message. This year, I didn't have that option but I also haven't really felt too down. I had thought that being lonely/insecure/anxious came first and that the internet was a remedy. Now I'm wondering if the internet contributed to the negative feelings I thought it was relieving. In giving me easy and immediate access to stimuli and connections, I ended up feeling like I needed them all the time. They became a part of how I understood myself. Now that I've become less of a cyborg, I'm feeling more content and less like I'm always anticipating something.

It was a slow process: first getting off of social media (2010), then giving up WiFi in my apartment (2012), and this year avoiding the internet altogether. However, I've realized it's not sustainable for me to stay offline forever. As I learned from critical disability scholars, when a person's experience is misaligned with their world, this leads to friction. If I stay offline, this friction would eventually lead to insurmountable problems for me – professionally and personally. Even my goal of promoting more critical relationships to the internet will likely have to involve the internet at some point. However, this friction can be strategic. While I'm offline, I hope the friction I cause can help uncover some issues related to our neutral acceptance of the internet's growing importance. Causing friction is a sort of sabotage, and those who cause the friction, the saboteurs, are – according to Darin Barney – "those who are positioned to pull fine threads of deviation in order to exacerbate relations (exploitation, racism, sexism, etc.)..." By consciously withdrawing from the efficient conveniences of the internet, I'm causing problems that reveal structural issues. Trolling people to think about these issues isn't to suggest that the internet itself is the problem. But because the internet has become an increasingly central part of our world now, addressing its problems becomes more important too.

As I wrote about in January, one issue related to the online world that I have trouble reconciling with is the working conditions for people in the Global South who work in the industries of the "outernet," as Tiziana Terranova calls it – miners, factory workers, content moderators, e-scrap pickers, etc. When I started learning about this, my first instinct was to avoid the industry altogether. I told myself I had enough privilege and chutzpah to still thrive without taking advantage of the latest digital technologies. My second instinct – the one I've been grappling with since my initial anger and confusion subsided – was to work towards changes so that labour conditions improve and wealth disparity is reduced. Cancelling the industry doesn't necessarily help the people exploited within it. Learning from Jacques Derrida's analysis of Plato's *Pharmakon,* the internet and digital technologies may also be "that which, presenting itself as a poison, may turn out to be a cure." Although my year offline may seem to suggest otherwise, I'm excited to embrace the irony of using the internet to challenge itself and to explore issues posed by it. And not just in relation to the outernet, but also to our experiences online.

I was texting with my friend Jayne the other day about an article she'd just read. We had a funny little conversation that captures how I feel about using digital tools to rethink how we relate to digital tools:

Jayne: I was just reading a piece about Canadian mining and activism that was engaging with the argument that no one can say shit about extractive capitalism because we all have smartphones
Aron: Throw it out the window!! DO IT!
Jayne: Hahahah
Aron: jk...that'd be too easy.
Jayne: I'd just be one of those weird pretentious eco anarchists
Aron: I think there's something about using digital devices to help fight extractive capitalism that's hypocritical, but there's also something pragmatic about it. I think you told me that anarchists would say we can't use means that misalign with our goals, but I think that idea doesn't work in cases where a problem has become central to almost every possible means of addressing it.
Jayne: I mean I also think there's something in anarchist thought about doing what you can while acknowledging that capitalism actually doesn't allow us to live the way we want yet.

I don't think we can fully address issues related to the internet without using the internet. We need to learn about and work within online infrastructures in order to transform them. Avoiding the internet may seem like it makes change, and it may seem like a choice, but my actions alone aren't the change, and spending a year without internet isn't really a choice for most people I know. My offline project is a gesture or performance – it aims to provoke and bring attention to issues so that we can make changes together, slowly but surely. Any resolution that can be scaled and sustained needs to be collective and it must engage with the problems it's trying to solve – not simply reject them. I'm just as cynical about the possibility of a revolution happening as I am about the possibility of the status quo working.

So, if we can't have revolution or the status quo, what's next? How can we help things improve? What am I planning to do after my year offline? For grad school, I will be working with students over the next few years to undertake participatory arts-based projects (specifically making cellphone videos). We will explore the internet and how we can help make changes. Personally, I want to engage with the online world differently when I start using the internet again. I want to find alternatives to big tech – Facebook, Apple, Google, Amazon, and Microsoft. I want to cut down on the amount of time I spend on emails and other online modes of communication. Being offline doesn't seem to have been as much of a hindrance for work communications this year as I had expected it to be, and I'd rather not go back to checking my email on a regular basis next year. Similarly, I'm going to try not to do too many video calls when I'm back online – for work or socially. These are just a few initial ideas. I tried to come up with a more comprehensive list on the next page. Overall, most of the ideas I've included are about using the internet in moderation, and being critical and choosy about what platforms or functions we use online.

I came up with the ideas you're about to read by playing around with the manifesto genre. A manifesto is just a public declaration, but the genre has some proclivities that made it a helpful framework for brainstorming how we might use or relate to the internet differently. It allowed me to be bold and straight-forward in that cheesy, self-consciously idealistic way that only manifestos get away with. I was worried that thinking in the style of a manifesto may have even made me a bit preachy, but hopefully what I've come up with isn't too self-righteous or didactic. I haven't gone into too much detail (it's a manifesto, not a manual), but I've tried to be specific so that this can lead to more than just more talk. It would be really cool if some of you want to add to it, change it, share it, or even reject it, and no need to attribute it to me. This work only works if it's collaborative. Once you've had time to think about the manifesto, try CHALLENGE 7: *Make an intentional change in the way you use or relate to the internet.* It can be a small change, but do something! And please let me know what you try.

Remediate Manifesto

We will not accept the internet as it is.
    We will change and we will change it.
We will not give up privacy because "we have nothing to hide."
    We will learn how others are implicated in the ways our data is used.
We will not believe everything we read online, or dismiss it either.
    We will think about why who's posting what and where.
We will not trust algorithms as neutral or objective.
    We will demand transparency and better data.

We will not perform to an echo chamber.
    We will confuse our way out of filter bubbles.
We will not overlook prejudice online.
    We will complicate conversations.
We will not accept boys' clubs in Silicon Valley.
    We will call white supremacy by its name.
We will not "consent" to the terms and conditions of big tech monopolies.
    We will collaborate and seek out more marginal players.

We will not use search engines or cloud storage just because we can.
    We will find out where the information and files we access are stored – and how.
We will not turn away from the mining, manufacturing, and disposal of our phones and computers.
    We will remember that displacing labour does not replace it.
We will not shop on Amazon.
    We will never shop on Amazon!
We will not buy a new device as often as we do.
    We will acknowledge and try to overcome our hypocrisies.

We will not respond to work emails after work.
    We will leave our phone outside the bedroom.
We will not do extra work just because mobile technology makes it possible.
    We will keep aiming for balance even as we keep missing it.
We will not scroll infinitely or lose ourselves in hyperlink wormholes.
    We will forgive ourselves when we do.
We will not assume newer, faster, and more convenient is better.
    We will be patient.

For this month's recommendations, I'd like to discuss two other manifestos that are in dialogue with one another, despite being written almost 30 years apart. Donna Haraway's classic "Cyborg Manifesto" (1991) insists we're already "hybrids of machine and organism" and "living in a world of connections." With the growing use of the internet and mobile technologies, Haraway's ideas are only more potent. She writes, "we're inside of what we make and it's inside of us." We're cyborgs because we depend on digital tools that depend on us and each other in a world wide *net* of *inter*dependence.

Haraway's piece helped me think more about the value of relying on others, as I wrote about last month. But Haraway is often critiqued by critical disability scholars – like Alison Kafer, whose book I recommended in February. They're concerned that Haraway's manifesto could be read as saying that

disabled people can be cured of their disabilities and become independent by relying on digital tools. Instead of building disabled people into cyborgs, these scholars suggest that it's about building a world in which disabled people can be interdependent with others as they work towards well-being and justice. My friend Amelia responded to last month's letter suggesting that "maybe the internet makes us forget we are interdependent, that there is someone on the other end who we depend on. It's not obvious like asking a friend is – it's a hidden dependence, hidden labour." So what can we do to notice and improve the labour conditions of the outernet? Haraway writes about "modest witnessing," staying with the trouble and trying to tinker with issues to make them better. We don't need to avoid depending on hidden labour. We need to bring it into view and find ways to ensure it's less exploitative.

I first mentioned this second manifesto in my February letter. It's by critical disability scholars Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, and called the "Crip Technoscience Manifesto" (2019). In it, Hamraie and Fritsch follow Kafer and refuse to consider the cyborg as a symbol of a disabled body cured by technology. Instead they embrace the cyborg as a political practice that involves "the weaving of relational circuits between bodies, environments, and tools." Their cyborg doesn't only represent a body's connection with digital technologies. It's about interdependence more generally "as a political technology for materializing better worlds." We are already cyborgs with one another, and we can make the world better for everyone if we learn about, embrace, and improve these relational circuits.

In the manifesto, Hamraie and Fritsch engage Haraway's approach of questioning the powerful stories we tell ourselves and each other about technology and what it causes or facilitates. As I alluded to at the beginning of this letter, Hamraie and Fritsch advocate for "frictional access practices." These can include actions like taking a sledgehammer to sidewalks and pouring cement to make a curb cut, using Twitter and other digital media to challenge mainstream ideas about disabled people, or resisting assistive technologies. Frictional access practices do not "comply with demands to cure, fix, or eliminate disability." Turning disabled people into classic cyborgs assumes problems with individuals instead of challenging disabling structures or norms in society. Causing friction aims to find where social and collective changes can instead challenge power and privilege, agitating towards interdependence, and more inclusion and accessibility for all. Some disabling norms, like independence and productivity for example, may be important for many people, but in certain contexts they can be disabling even for those they seem to be helping. As we work towards things like well-being and justice, we have to think when independence and productivity can help us get there, or when we need the critical disability cyborg and frictional access practices to help us lean into interdependence and remain open to members of our communities who may not be productive in conventional ways.

I have relied a lot on both of these manifestos and the aims and strategies of my internetless project are building from the work of Haraway, Hamraie, Fritsch, Kafer, and many other feminist and disability scholars. Like I learned from frictional access practices, my offline year is attempting to cause friction that can expose issues related to the internet. Similar to the social model of disability, the solutions I am considering are based around advocating for more structural changes. And as with modest witnessing, I know I have to stay with the trouble. Once issues are out in the open, we can challenge them and tinker.

YT,
Aron Rosenberg

P.S. In two months, my October letter will be made up of questions I've been receiving about being offline, along with my responses. **If you have more questions, please mail them in.** Thank you!